

CORGI

IN A VAIN
SHADOW

JAMES
HARDLEY
CHASE

1987



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In a Vain Shadow
James Hadley Chase
1951

chapter one

Bodyguard required. Ex-Commando preferred. Must be under thirty; strong and active. Good prospects and pay for the right man. Apply in own handwriting, giving details of past and present employment and war record. First-class references essential. Box 1411.

Netta said, 'I would like another gin if you could drag yourself away from that paper for a moment.'

'I can't. Be a good girt and help yourself. It's your gin anyway. Make yourself at home with it, and don't bother me just now. I'm busy.'

And I was too. I was wondering what the good prospects and pay meant. I was wondering who wanted a bodyguard, and why. Not the kind of ad you'd see in a London paper once in a lifetime.

Good pay and prospects. Well, I could do with some good prospects for a change, and I could do with some money.

It's a funny thing, but now I came to think of it, I couldn't remember when I didn't want money. With me, money sticks the way water sticks in a muslin bag.

A month ago I won two hundred pounds: a hundred to one shot on a white-nosed beauty that had left the rest of the field standing. But that was thirty days ago. I now had five pounds, a few shillings and my health and strength between me and the poorhouse. Thirty days. That's spending at the rate of six pounds a day. It makes you feel good. It makes you feel on top of the world, and that's the way I like to feel.

Since I came out of the Army I had been on the switchback. Down one month; up the next. After tomorrow I'd be broke again. I hadn't told Netta. She'd find that out for herself fast enough. She had a nose for calamities, and I knew what she would do when she found out. She would open her purse and pour the contents into my lap; chequebook and all.

I've done some pretty rum things in my life, but so far I haven't lived on a woman: and I didn't intend to start now.

The trouble with Netta was she wanted me to live on her.

She was dimwitted enough to think she would be throwing a hook into me if I were dependent on her for money. It gave her sleepless nights every time I rustled a pound note. She imagined I was going to walk out on her. She didn't understand the less money I had the less chance she had of keeping me with her. That was something she couldn't get into her lovely, thick skull.

A nice girl. Netta, but not subtle. She thinks the way to a man's heart is through the bedroom door. She's nice to look at, dresses well, and owns a luxury flat in Lannox Street, off Piccadilly. She makes thirty pounds a week modelling dresses for Livinsky, the photographer. She's tall and blonde and gentle, and crazy about animals. But she fusses. She wants to get married: preferably to me. She keeps telling me she loves me; not once a day, but every other minute, and do I love her? She thinks I play around with other girls, and she sulks at the wrong moment. She wants to give me money, to buy me shirts, shoes, ties and cigarettes. I've lived in her flat for three months now; two months and thirty days too long.

So this ad looked like a chance to move out. I had a feeling about it. I had a hunch I had only to write a letter and the job would be mine. I would be creating a record too. I had never applied for a job in my life. The jobs I have had were either offered to me or fell into my lap; like the time I was

admiring a Rolls-Royce in Bond Street, and the owner told me she'd pay me five pounds a week and all just to drive it. She didn't say what else went with the job, and when I found out I quit. Making a fuss of a woman of fifty-five who looks like something Epstein thought up isn't my idea of fun.

Then there was the time a School of Motoring instructor asked me to deputize for him. It wasn't until I had an hour with a long-legged blonde, driving around the park that I discovered the possibilities of such a job. I might have been still at it now if I hadn't misjudged a pupil with a Jane Russell outline who raised Cain about me with the company.

I've done a lot of odd things in my life. In the four years following my discharge from the Army I've been a bookmaker's clerk, a motorcar salesman, and an all-in wrestler. For two nightmare weeks I was the guy who walks behind the dogs at the White City with a dustpan and brush. I've been a starter at the speedway, a marker in a billiard saloon and a lot of other things, but I have never been a bodyguard. Thinking about it, it seemed to me I had missed my vocation. If there is one thing I'm better at than another it's guarding bodies, especially if it's a body like Netta's.

I have all the qualifications for a bodyguard. I am big and tough. I have had a Commando training. I have a right hand punch that can knock down a horse; I know; I've done it. And I'm quick on my feet. Besides, in this country, I didn't imagine a bodyguard would be overworked. People don't go around shooting and stabbing at the drop of a hat. Even some of our worst politicians have bodyguards who haven't had a moment's excitement in years. If the pay was my idea of good pay it might be worth the effort to write that letter 'Frankie, darling, what are you thinking about? You haven't said a word for hours.'

'I'm giving you a chance. I'm being considerate. Isn't that what you said I should be? Isn't that the word?'

'But, darling, you don't have to sit silent all the evening, do you? Something's worrying you. It's no good saying it isn't. I know the signs.'

'What signs?'

'Well, you're scowling for one thing, and you're biting your nails. I do wish you wouldn't bite your nails. I don't want to nag, Frankie, but it isn't a very nice habit, and it spoils the look of your hands.'

'So because I'm scowling and spoiling the look of my hands you think I'm worried. Is that it?'

'I know you're worried, darling.'

'Woman's instinct as well, huh?'

'You don't have to be cynical, Frankie. I don't know what's the matter with you these past days. You haven't been a bit kind to me. You've snapped me up whenever I've made a remark. You don't do things for me as you used to. I love you so much, darling. You know that, don't you?'

For the nine hundred and ninety-ninth time this day she tells me she loves me.

'So you don't know what's the matter with me? You're smart enough to know I'm worried, but you don't know why I'm cynical, unkind and snappy? You're slipping, baby. You're a sign reader, aren't you? Well, the sign's on the wall big enough for someone a lot dumber than you to read.'

She put her gin and Dubonnet down on the table and lit a cigarette. Her long, slim fingers were unsteady.

'Don't let's quarrel, Frankie. We're always quarrelling these days. All right, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I mentioned it. I'll get you some supper. I managed to get a steak for you. You'll like that, won't you?'

'I'm not quarrelling, and thank you for the steak. Don't think I don't appreciate what you do for me. I do. I think you're a pretty nice girl. I think you're a lovely girl.'

She was watching me the way you watch a strange dog that stands in your path and snarls at you.

‘Frankie... please...’

‘You want to know what’s worrying me? I’ll tell you. I’ve been meaning to tell you ever since this morning. I’m broke again. What do you think of that? I’ve got five quid and a few shillings, and that’s the lot. So I’m going to get me a job. This job...here; in the paper.’

I handed her the paper.

‘The one with a cross against it. I’ll read it to you if the words are too difficult for you.’

She read the ad with her hips resting against the table and one finger fiddling with a curl at the back of her neck.

I waited for her reaction. It was a long time coming. She put the paper down on the table and stared at her shoes in a surprised sort of way as if she were startled to find she was wearing shoes and not a pair of elastic-sided boots.

‘Well, say something,’ I said impatiently. ‘Don’t you think that’s right up my alley?’

‘Don’t answer it, Frankie. It might be dangerous. It’s silly too. If it’s not dangerous who wants a bodyguard?’

‘Well, it might be a movie star. Imagine guarding someone like Betty Grable.’

‘Betty Grable is in Hollywood.’

‘All right, Margaret Lockwood then. I’m not fussy. Or Anna Neagle. Or Valli. I’d take a cut in salary to guard Valli.’

‘You’re just being nasty. I know. You want me to be jealous. You know as well as I do it’s nothing to do with a movie star. It’s something crooked. It must be.’

Every so often that tiny white cell she calls her brain startles me.

‘What makes you think it’s crooked?’

‘Why should anyone want a private bodyguard? What are the police for?’

‘You know sometimes I am forced to the conclusion that you’re a lot smarter than you look. Give me a drink, and sit down. I want to talk to you.’

‘Frankie, darling, must you be so unkind? Must you say such hurtful things?’

‘Give me a drink and shut up. And don’t tell me you love me again. I’m sick to death of hearing that phrase. Just give me a drink and sit down.’

She gave me a gin and Dubonnet and sat down; ‘But don’t you want your supper, Frankie? It’s nearly half-past eight.’

‘I don’t care if it’s half past twelve. Will you just sit quiet and listen? I know it’s a lot to ask, but if you take hold of yourself and exert some will-power, you should be able to keep quiet for five minutes.’

She sat still, looking at me the way a child looks after you’ve boxed its ears.

‘That was a very smart thing you said just now. Whoever this is advertising for a bodyguard is a crook. That’s the way I see it too. That’s why I want the job. It’s time I made some money. Not a hundred here and a hundred there. Not that kind of money. But big money, I could point out to you men who are walking up and down Piccadilly worth tens of thousands. Men who have been smart enough to think up a racket and play it for all it’s worth. Men who don’t bother about income tax. Men who have more ready money in their pockets than I have ever seen, let alone handled. That’s the kind of money I’m going after, and I have a hunch this ad. will take me to it.’

‘But, Frankie...’

‘I know. There’s nothing you can say I haven’t heard before. There’s nothing anyone can say. I’ve kicked around and have been kicked around long enough. Half whatever I’ve earned has been taken away to pay for a lot of mistakes made by this lousy Government. Every pound I’ve earned I’ve had to cough up nine shillings tax. The only way I’ve ever made solid money is by backing a horse or a dog, and over four years I’ve lost more than I’ve made. Unless I get out on the springboard, the only way to make money is to win it in a football pool, and I’m not such a sucker as to grow old trying to win money on a long chance like that.

‘Do you know what sticks in my throat? That makes me want to throw up every time I open a newspaper? I’ll tell you. It’s reading every damned day of the week of some Jew or Dago who’s come to this country and made a fortune out of us. Look at that fella who lived in Park Lane. There wasn’t a damned thing he wanted he didn’t have. Even the boys who take the money and run this country were fawning over him. And when he skipped he owed over twenty thousand pounds to the tax collector but if I’m a month late sending in my returns, they send me a threatening letter.

‘And that other fella who skipped with two hundred and fifty thousand. What about him? You wouldn’t think anyone could make all that money out of a hen; but he did. He was smart! Well, all right, from now on I’m going to be smart too. All I want is an in, and something tells me that ad will give me an in. Don’t think you’re the only one who can read signs.’

‘Frankie. dear, please listen to me. This is silly. You know it’s silly. You don’t want to get muddled up with the police. You’re just being reckless. I know you’ve had a bad time, but’s it’s going to be a lot worse for you if you’re going to do something silly and reckless. A racketeer never gets anywhere. They may have a run for their money, and then in the end they get caught. Frankie...please...’

‘Did those two guys I was telling you about get caught? Do you think they are smarter than I am? All right, suppose I do have to skip? What’s wrong with Tel Aviv? What’s wrong with Paris or New York or Moscow? What’s wrong with any of those places if you have two hundred and fifty thousand tucked up your stays? Answer that one! And let me tell you something, baby, I’ve got such an itch for that kind of money, I’d stop at nothing to get it. Do you hear? Nothing! I’d even take murder in my stride for money like that!’

I hadn’t meant to say that. It jumped out of me; a thought that had been tucked away in my subconscious mind for a long, long time. It was out now. No longer subconscious.

chapter two

Three days later what I was waiting for arrived.

Around nine o'clock, Netta brought in the breakfast tray.

Propped up against the toast were three letters. She put the tray on the bedside table, and began to fiddle with a circular, trying to pretend she wasn't aching to know who had written to me.

Two of the envelopes contained bills. The third carried a two penny-half penny stamp. As I usually have only penny stamps on my letters I guessed this must be the answer to my application for the bodyguard job.

From the way Netta was fidgeting she guessed it was too.

I made believe I was in no hurry to open the letter. I looked at the bills: three pounds for petrol; three pounds, four and eight for gin.

I showed the gin bill to Netta.

'I have it on good authority gin has an adverse effect on the inner workings of a woman. Two bottles of gin this week, baby.'

'Don't be silly, darling, you drank most of it yourself.'

'Did I? So you're counting the drinks I drink now. What are you doing - keeping a dossier on me?'

'Well, for heaven's sake, what have I said wrong now?'

'I haven't the time to tell you, but I promise I'll tell you what you say right if it ever happens. Would it be too much to ask you to pour out the coffee before it gets cold? And try not to slop it in the saucer as you did yesterday I don't know why it is but I hate a cup that drips over me. Come to think of it, maybe it's because my father was a drip. That's psychology, baby. You can trace everything back to childhood if you try hard enough. I believe I could get a line on you if I dug into your past, and I don't think I should have to use anything bigger than a teaspoon.'

'You haven't opened your letter, darling.'

'Would you like to open it for me.'

She reached out, but stopped herself just in time. She hadn't lived with me for three months for nothing. Even for her the penny drops at times. She saved herself a slap on the wrist.

'I'm not interested in your letter. You know, Frankie...'

'Yes, I know. I'm not kind. I'm snappy. I say hurtful things. But in spite of it all, you love me.'

'If you're going to be horrid...'

'Look at your nice catalogue and choose yourself a dress. I shan't pay for it but choose it. It'll give you something to do.'

While she was looking at the catalogue I drank some coffee and then opened the letter. It didn't take me long to read: nicely typed, to the point, cheapish paper and a spidery signature only a bank clerk could read.

'Do you remember the other night I showed you an advert? Some guy wanting a bodyguard?'

As if she hadn't been thinking and worrying about that ad every hour of the day.

She said cautiously, 'Yes. Did you answer it?'

'You know very well I answered it. When you went to bed with the sulks I composed a masterpiece and posted it that very night. This is the answer. I admit it is a little disappointing. It hasn't the smell of money I was expecting. The paper isn't handmade and the letter heading isn't from

a die: two certain signs of money. But on the other hand it's straightforward and to the point. I have to present myself for an interview at twelve o'clock this morning, and I'm to bring my references clutched in my hot little hand.'

'Have you any, darling?'

'Have I any - what?'

'References.'

'No, unless you would like to write me one. You could always say you found me very tough and unkind. Would you like to do that for me? I'll guide your hand if you're nervous about your handwriting.'

'You're not going, are you, Frankie?'

'Certainly, I'm going. This may be my big chance in life. Every door is a door of opportunity. None but the brave deserve the fair. Besides, they call themselves Modern Enterprises, and I'm modern and enterprising if nothing else.'

'Frankie...'

'Now, what?'

'You sounded awfully reckless that night. It's been worrying me.'

'I am awfully reckless even this morning.'

'But you said some very wicked and silly things. I just want you to tell me you didn't mean them. You didn't, did you?'

'Would you like to take the tray away? If there's one thing I dislike more than a dripping cup it's the ruins of a meal. Maybe it's because my aunt was a ruin. I remember hearing my fattier say so when I was just beginning to walk. People should be very careful what they say in front of children. You are still a bit of a child, aren't you, Netta?'

The relief on her face was painful to see.

'You were only fooling then, Frankie? Oh, darling, I was so worried. That talk of murder. It made my blood run cold.'

'Take the tray away and come back. I'll change your temperature for you.'

Modern Enterprises had offices on the fourth floor of a dilapidated building in Wardour Street. There was no lift, the lobby smelt like a chicken house and the banister rail left a black mark on my forefinger and thumb.

I toiled up the four flights of stone stairs and discovered the offices at the end of a dimly lit corridor.

By now I was angry. This wasn't the kind of set-up I had expected. The higher I climbed the farther away the dream of big money receded. I began to wonder if this was a hoax, and if it was I made up my mind to leave the mark of my knuckles on the joker's mouth.

I didn't bother to knock, but turned the handle and walked in. Even when I was inside there was nothing to reassure me this wasn't a joke.

The room was small and dirty and mean; There was a steel filing cabinet by the uncurtained window, a mat on the dusty bare boards, a rickety desk in the middle of the room and an electric bowl fire on the windowsill.

At the desk sat a woman: a fat, ugly Jewess who might have been twenty or forty, and who was as sexless as an octopus, and as unattractive as a sinkful of unwashed dishes.

She wore a black satin dress, gasping at the seams, and her eyes looked like small, unripe gooseberries behind the thick lenses of her horn-rimmed spectacles.

I took heart. There was something about her that told me she was smart and nimble and as sharp as a razor. The difference between her and Netta was the difference between a tiger and a kitten. If her boss was anything like her, he would do. I reminded myself that appearances meant nothing to Jews.

They can work in a cellar and go home in a Rolls-Royce, and think nothing of it. There still might be a chance of finding what I was looking for; even a door into a dump like this could be a door of opportunity.

I dropped the letter on her desk, 'It's twelve, and I'm here.'

She held the letter about six inches from her hooked little nose and stared at it as if she had never seen it before. Then she peered at me and pointed a fat dirty finger to a chair. As she did so I caught the flash of a diamond.

'Sit down. I'll see if Mr. Sarek will see you.'

I was surprised. I expected her to talk like Arthur Kober's Gross family. She looked like a refugee from the Gross family; but apart from a whining intonation and an accent you could hang your hat on, she spoke as well as I did.

I sat down.

She wasn't in a hurry to break the news I had arrived. First she cast up a row of figures in a big ledger that looked as phoney as no doubt it was. Then she re-read the letter I had given her and looked me over again. I had a feeling she was counting the small change in my pockets and the hairs on my chest: that kind of look.

Then she pushed herself of the chair and walked across the room to another door. She opened it and went in.

I've seen some fat women in my time, but she was in a class of her own: hard, thick fat like the back of a prize pig.

From behind she looked like a keg of beer on legs, and the funny thing was her feet were small enough to fit in my band, feet Netta would have raved about.

I waited and listened, but didn't hear anything not even a murmur of voices, and I wondered. I was no longer fooled by the sordid room. I was beginning to smell money. Although I had only a quick look at it, and although she wore it with the stone turned inwards, I had seen the fat woman's ring. I know something about diamonds. The diamond she was trying to hide was worth three to four hundred pounds. She didn't pick that up in the gutter and it wasn't on her engagement finger.

It could have been a gift for services rendered or for keeping her mouth shut or something like that. The kind of gift a racketeer might make: a racketeer who could afford to indulge in whims like sordid rooms or hiring himself a bodyguard.

The smell of money was getting stronger every second.

When I'm happy I whistle, and that's what I was doing now: whistling.

The hands of my watch showed twenty minutes past twelve when she came out of the inner room.

'Mr. Sarek will see you now. Will you go in?'

I had spent a little time making up my mind what I should wear for this interview. Netta had said I should wear my blue herringbone worsted, but although she knows how to dress herself, I don't let

her think she can dress me. I finally decided on a pair of brown whipcord slacks and a light navy-blue sweater that came high up at the neck. I didn't wear anything under it, and I knew it showed off my muscles the way nothing else could show them off and when I take the trouble to flex them they're something to see.

I walked into the inner room, not making a sound, with that lithe, springy stride athletes put on when they see a pretty girl coming they want to impress. Going in there I must have looked a cross between Freddie Mills stalking his man and Scarface Muni meeting the rival mob.

The inner room was no better than the outer one. If anything it wasn't so luxurious. For one thing, it didn't have an electric bowl fire on the windowsill. But the desk was just as rickety, the mat on the bare boards just as threadbare, and the dust just as dusty.

Seated behind the desk was a small dark-complexioned man in an overcoat that stopped me dead in my tracks.

I've never seen such a coat. It was unbelievable. It reminded me of the kind of suit Max Miller used to wear on the stage of the Holborn Empire when I was a kid. It was fawn colour with dazzling red lines forming three-inch squares, and if that wasn't horrible enough, there were emerald-green flaps to the pockets.

The first thought that jumped into my mind was this little man was crazy. That would explain the ad. in the paper and the coat. No one but a madman would be seen dead in a coat like that. I began to wonder how I could get out of the room and away without having a scene. If there's one thing that really scares me it's someone crazy in the head.

'Come in, Mr. Mitchell,' the little man said. He had the same whining intonation and accent as the fat woman. 'You don't like the coat, hey? I don't either. Come in and sit down. I tell you about it while you light a cigarette.'

That sounded sane enough, but I wasn't entirely convinced. I pulled up a cane-bottom chair and sat down, keeping the desk between me and the coat.

'I been in this office for three year,' he said, picking his nose with his little finger, 'in three years, eight overcoats belonging to me have been stolen. Is a lot, hey? So I buy this one. No one steals this one; maybe it last me a lifetime, is something no one would want, hey? I don't like it myself, but I catch cold easily, and to go home without a coat is dangerous.'

He took out a soiled handkerchief and polished his hooked nose.

'And another thing; is good for business. People take trouble to find out who I am. I'm known up and down Wardour Street as the man with the coat. Is good business, Mr. Mitchell.'

'It's got to be good business to wear a coat like that.'

The small mouth curved up in a sly smile.

'We foreigners have an advantage. We are not self-conscious.'

'Yes.'

Now I was convinced he wasn't crazy. I studied him as he was studying me. What sort of Jew he was I didn't know. If there's such a thing as a Turkish Jew, maybe he was that. He was very dark, and there seemed nothing to his face but his nose. It was a parrot's face. His eyes seemed to cling to the sides of the enormous, hooked nose. His tight, lipless mouth was just a continuation of his nostrils. Above the hook of the nose was a bulging forehead. He was bald, and a frizz of black hair grew just above his bat-like ears and down into his collar.

He was about as ugly as they come, but once you noticed the small, black eyes you forgot about the

ugliness What I saw in those eyes impressed me. They were the eyes of a man who could build an empire, make a million, cut his mother's throat and then weep for her. Now I was sure the dirty, bare little room was a front. It couldn't be anything else. A man with those kind of eyes wouldn't work in a dump like this unless he had a reason for it. Those eyes and the fat woman's diamond told me I'd come to the right place. I wasn't wasting my time: this was the in I was looking for.

I had smoked two cigarettes: not his, mine. He had asked a lot of questions, checked over the details I had given him in my letter. There was nothing about his face to tell me how the interview was going. Every now and then I rolled my muscles.

They were what he was buying. I thought he should see them.

Suddenly: 'Mr. Mitchell, you don't mention you have been in prison.'

Just for a moment he had me. A sucker punch.

'Well, who advertises a thing like that? It's not good for business.'

'You killed a man and a woman when drunk and driving a car?'

'That's how it happened. The brakes were on the blink, anyway. It could have happened to anyone.'

'People who drink make me nervous.'

'They make me nervous too. That was four years ago, I've learned sense since then.'

'People I employ have to be on the wagon, Mr. Mitchell.'

'Count me in. I swore of it when I came out.'

The little black eyes searched my face. If there's one thing I can do better than most people it's to tell a convincing lie. My face didn't help him.

'In that case...'

Well, I was three-quarters there. I could sense it, and when he asked for references I felt I could be frank with him.

'I could get you references, Mr. Sarek, but they wouldn't mean anything. You want a bodyguard. I have never been a bodyguard. No one could tell you if I was suitable or unsuitable. You must judge that for yourself.'

'I'm interested to find out if you are honest, conscientious and reliable.'

'They would tell you I am, but that still wouldn't mean anything. Those things you have to find out for yourself.'

He studied me for about ninety seconds.

'Maybe you're right, Mr. Mitchell.'

So I was in. I knew it. It now depended if I wanted to work for him. Now was the time for him to trot out the details about the good prospects and pay. It all depended on that.

'For a reason which I go into later, I need someone like you to go with me on my business trips. The hours will be long. I thought ten pounds a week and everything found might be acceptable. I am not prepared to bargain.'

'You said prospects.'

The beady eyes glittered.

'It's something we can discuss when we know each other better. Certainly there are prospects for the right man. I tell you at the end of the month if I think you qualify.'

'I'm looking forward to the end of the month.'

The fat woman came in just then with a handful of letters.

She slid them across the desk towards Sarek.

‘Emmie, this is Frank Mitchell. He is going to work for me. Mr. Mitchell, this is Miss Pearl.’

If I had known what she was going to do to me in the very near future I might have been a lot more polite. But I didn’t know.

I gave her a race-discriminating sneer and let it go at that.

chapter three

Did you get it?’

‘Of course I got it. You don’t think I would bother to go nil the way down to Wardour Street, unless I was sure I was doing to get it, do you? Now, look, baby, don’t worry me just now I have to pack.’

‘Pack?’

‘That’s right. Put clothes and things in a bag: pack.’

‘You’re going to leave here then?’

‘That’s right. I’m going to leave.’

She trailed after me into the bedroom, looking as happy as little Eva on the icefield.

‘I’ll miss you, Frankie.’

‘That makes two of us. Still, this kind of thing happens every day. I’ll be along to worry you from time to time. This isn’t goodbye, baby, just au revoir, and in case you don’t know, that’s French for I’ll see you again soon. Now, take it easy and don’t get in my way.’

She sat on the edge of the most uncomfortable chair in the room and folded her hands in her lap.

‘I won’t get in the way, but I could pack for you if you like.’

‘I’ve seen the way you pack. No thanks. You leave this to me.’ A long pause, then: ‘What was he like, Frankie?’

‘A small Jew. Without his clothes he would pass for a vulture. He wears a comic overcoat: the kind of coat a clown wears at the circus. He says people steal his overcoats, so he wears this one to stop anyone stealing it. If someone did steal it they would have to be colour blind or crazy.’

‘But why does he want a bodyguard?’

I took from the wardrobe my two suits and laid them on the bed. From under the dressing table I collected my three pairs of shoes.

‘You wouldn’t like to get me a drink, would you? Make it a stiff one. I’m supposed to be on the wagon, and maybe it’ll be the last I get tonight.’

She fetched me a double whisky with a teaspoonful of water floating on top of it, the way I like my whisky. As she handed the glass to me I saw she was trembling.

‘Don’t bear down on it. This had to happen. You couldn’t expect me to live here forever, could you?’

‘People do live together forever.’

‘Who do you think I am - Darby?’

‘Frankie, if its money you want. I - I’ve saved. You can have it all. It’s no use to me without you.’

‘We won’t go over that again.’

‘But must you go? Couldn’t you stay here, and - and guard him during the day?’

‘This is a day and night job. Someone’s writing him threatening letters.’

‘Then why doesn’t he go to the police?’

‘His sort of people never go to the police.’

‘Does he know who’s writing the letters?’

‘Of course he doesn’t. He’s had three. Whoever it is writing them isn’t very smart. The typewriter he or she used has the letters e and d out of alignment. That’s a machine that could be traced. The notepaper is unusual too: a blue, deckle-edged sheet, the kind women use. You know, when he

showed me the notes I thought they might have come from his secretary.'

'He has a secretary?'

'Certainly, he has a secretary. Just to show him I keep my eyes open and my brain polished I told him he might do worse than suspect her. He nearly flipped his lid. When he could speak he said he trusted her more than anyone; they were practically partners; she had been with him ten years: ever since she was fourteen, and I wasn't to say anything against her or I could quit then and there. It still could be her, but if he doesn't want it to be her, then it's no skin of my nose.'

'What she like, Frankie?' Elaborately casual.

'She's a Jewess.'

'Some Jewesses can be very attractive.'

'She is. The dark, passionate kind: and what a figure! I've never seen anything like it.'

'Is it as good as mine?'

'Don't be silly; I said figure. Something you can get hold of voluptuous.'

'Oh.'

I laid the two suits in my suitcase, and then began wrapping my shoes in paper.

'What does this man do, Frankie?'

'He's a merchant: buys and sells anything that's in demand. Suppose you want a dozen pairs of nylons. He goes along to someone who has them, buys them, sells them to you and pockets the profit. It's a nice business to be in. All you need know is who has the stuff and who wants it. Simple, isn't it?'

'But why is he being threatened?'

'He thinks a competitor wants to get him out of the way. There's not a lot of scope in this game. The more there are in it, the less the share-out. Because he is a little guy, and nervous, he thinks they are picking on him. That's his idea, but I don't believe it. I think there's more to it than that. There's something childish about the letters. The first one said: "If you have a god, prepare to meet him." The second one: "You have not long to live." That sort of junk you can't kid me one of these jackals would write tripe like that. If they were going to write a threatening letter they'd damn well make it threatening. The funny thing is in spite of the spinelessness of the threats Sarek is scared.'

'Is that his name?'

'Yes. Henry Sarek. He has a country house outside Chesham. That's where I'm going tonight.'

'You mean you're going to stay there: as far away as Chesham?'

'It's not far: thirty-two miles from here. You make it sound as if it's in Scotland.'

'But do you have to stay with him?'

'I'm to go around with him, stay in his house, hang around the office, drive the car. Ten pounds and all found.'

'But, Frankie, darling, it's like being a servant.'

'What's wrong with being a servant?'

'But it'll lead nowhere. Look. Frankie, do be sensible. Why don't you put some capital into a business, and give yourself a chance? You know I'll lend you the money. And - and you could stay here. It needn't cost you anything until you get on your feet.'

'One of these days someone is going to say "yes" to that offer, and you're going to lose all your money. But that someone's not going to be me. Don't think I'm not grateful, I am. But I'm still too young to have a ring in my nose.'

'You say the beastliest things...'

'I do, don't I? Well, that's that I think. Where's my rucksack?'

'I'll get it darling.'

While she was in the other room, I finished the whisky, strapped and locked the suitcase and put on a light overcoat.

I knew the next few minutes were going to be difficult. She wouldn't let me go without a scene. It surprised me she hadn't started one already.

She came in with the rucksack.

'Chuck it on the bed.'

'Frankie, would you like this?'

She offered me a photograph of herself.

'Have I got X-ray eyes or aren't you wearing any clothes?'

'I had it taken specially for you.'

She had written in her babyish scrawl: Waiting for you always, darling. All my love. Netta, in white ink across the bottom part of the picture. The sort of dumb, sloppy message she would write.

'Well, thanks, it'll keep your memory fresh.'

'That's what I thought.'

I had to open the suitcase again, but I did it because she was watching me, otherwise I would have poked the photograph under the mattress. Instead, I put it in the suitcase and strapped the case up again.

'It won't be crushed, will it?'

She was a lot more worried about its fate than I was, 'It'll be fine.'

I lugged the suitcase and the rucksack into the sitting room.

'Well, this is it, baby.'

'Yes.'

I put the suitcase and rucksack on the floor by the door.

'I'll be seeing you in a few days. Whenever Sarek goes over to Paris I get days off. So it won't be long before I'm cluttering up this flat again.'

'I'll miss you, Frankie.'

'Yes: me too.'

If I wasn't careful we'd both be weeping over each other in a minute.

'Well...'

I put my arms round her and patted her.

'I'll give you a ring.'

'Frankie...'

Here it comes, I thought.

'So long, Netta. I'd better run. No point in prolonging the agony.'

'Frankie... I'll come with you to the station. Say you'll let me come. Let me have just a little longer with you.'

The one-track mind at it again.

'Well, all right. But hurry up.'

'You - you don't sound very enthusiastic.'

'But I am.'

‘Give me two minutes, darling.’

‘I’ll give you one.’

She went swiftly into the bedroom.

The moment she was out of sight I opened the front door, grabbed up the suitcase and rucksack and bolted for the stairs.

I arrived back at Sarek’s office at six.

Emmie Pearl was still typing. Make no mistake about it, she may have been fat and ugly but she could type. Her fat little fingers flew over the keyboard and the machine rattled like a Sten-gun in full blast.

I dumped my suitcase and rucksack on the floor and made for Sarek’s office.

She stopped typing.

‘He’s busy. Sit down and wait.’

I thought now was the time for her to find out I took orders only from Sarek. I didn’t even pause, let alone look at her but rapped on Sarek’s door and pushed it open.

The room was full of cigarette and cigar smoke. Two men sat facing Sarek on the desk was a small heap of diamonds.

The two men jumped to their feet. One was a little fellow with a face like a fox. The other was big and husky. His face was red, and his nose looked as if something very hard had hit it at one time, and he had never bothered to piece it together again.

He started to throw a punch at me. He wasn’t slow, but then he wasn’t fast. His fist came in a half-circle with all his weight behind it, and if it had landed I shouldn’t have had much face left.

I swayed inside the arc of its flight, grabbed his wrist as his momentum threw him forward, wedged my shoulder under his armpit, pulled down on his arm and heaved.

He went sailing over Sarek’s head and landed on the end of his spine in the middle of the floor with a thud that shook the building.

I looked at Sarek.

‘Better tell your friends not to throw punches at me: I don’t like it.’

The diamonds were no longer to be seen.

The car was a 1938 Austin 16, and looked as if it had been driven regularly through a hedge of brambles, left out all night, and cleaned about once a year.

Sarek had given me the ignition key and asked me to bring it round to the office building. He seemed anxious to get me out of the way before his husky friend recovered his breath.

I looked in disgust at the car. I hoped I should have had something worth driving, and I was still more disgusted when I found the springs were broken in the seats and the engine took about five minutes to fire.

But in spite of the mean little office and the even meaner car I was still convinced Sarek had money. For some reason he was pretending to be an unsuccessful businessman. Before long I hoped to find out that reason. He couldn’t be all that unsuccessful if he could pay me ten pounds a week. Besides, I hadn’t forgotten Emmie’s diamond and the diamonds I had seen on his desk.

I drove down Wardour Street and parked before the entrance to his office. It was getting on for half past six, and the light was going. In another ten minutes or so it would be lighting up time.

He came out of the building, wrapped up in his awful overcoat and took his seat beside me.

‘You know the way?’

‘Watford Bypass to King’s Langley, and then through Chipperfield and Bovington to Chesham.’

‘Is as good as the Amersham road. All right, go that way.’

The traffic was heavy all along Piccadilly, and I had trouble with the car. Every time I stopped in a traffic block the engine stalled, and by the time I was half way down Piccadilly I was hated by all the bus and taxi drivers going my way.

‘What you want is a new car.’

‘Is all right. Is nothing wrong with it.’

By the time I reached Marble Arch I wanted to drive the damned thing into a wall.

‘Will you be using it tomorrow? I’d like to give it some attention.’

‘Saturday, hey? Tomorrow we use it. Is not as bad as all that.’

It wasn’t once I got clear of the traffic. It even managed to get up to thirty-three miles an hour on the Watford Bypass with the accelerator flat on the boards.

‘You know it might be quicker for you to travel by train.’

‘Is quick enough for me.’

Driving along the broad arterial road with everything including lorries overtaking me, nearly sent me crazy.

‘Did you ever have her decarbonized?’

‘The car you have on the brain. Is all right with me; is nothing the matter with it.’

It was while we were crawling up the steep hill out of King’s Langley to Chipperfield, he said suddenly, ‘You handled Lehmann very well. It pleased me very much. Is a pretty dangerous man to throw about.’

‘He’s not much. He hasn’t learned to hit straight.’

‘He should not have tried to hit you, but he was startled. Is your fault. You had no business to come into my office after Emmie had told you to keep out. But there was no harm done. They talk about you. It will get around. Lehmann has a bad reputation in the district.’

‘While we’re on the subject, let’s get this straight. I don’t take orders from women, and that goes for Miss Pearl too.’

‘Now, look here, Mitchell, I pay you well. You do what I say.’

‘I’ll do what you say, but I won’t take orders from a woman. I mean that. I’d rather quit.’

He didn’t say anything. I kept driving. That little demonstration of speed and strength had impressed him the way nothing else could impress him. I was sure he wouldn’t let me quit that easy.

‘Well, all right, I speak to Emmie. Maybe you have a little trouble with my wife.’

So he had a wife. I wondered if she were built along the same lines as Emmie. I thought it probable she was.

‘You say nothing about Lehmann to my wife. Fights make her nervous; you understand? And say nothing to her what I pay you.’

‘I certainly won’t.’

‘She may ask you. She do not believe these notes mean anything. She say is a practical joke. I have not told her I get a bodyguard. If she asks you, tell her I pay you two pound a week; you understand?’

So it was like that. Either he didn’t want his wife to know he had money or else he was afraid of her. This interested me.

We were driving along the twisty road, leading from Bovington Airport when he said, ‘I do not want you to gossip about my business, Mitchell. Maybe you won’t, but unintentionally you might say

something or someone might ask you. Say nothing. Maybe you see things going on in the office that may surprise you, but forget them. I don't pay you ten pounds a week to drive a car. I expect you to keep your mouth shut.'

'I'll keep it shut.'

The headlights of the car picked out a white farm gate.

'Is it.'

I got out of the car and opened the gate.

It was too dark to see the house. No lights were showing.

I stood for a moment looking around. There was no sign of any other houses; no lights, just the dim outline of trees against the dark sky, and a loose gravel drive strangely white in the car's headlights.

I drove through the gateway, got out again and shut the gate. 'The garage is there. Put it away and come in.'

He walked of into the darkness.

As I turned the car, the headlights picked out the house.

They also picked out the awful colours of Sarek's coat as he unlocked the front door.

As far as I could see it was - smallish house, two storeys, white cast, Georgian and ugly.

By the time I had manoeuvred the Austin into the garage, lights were showing, through the chinks in the curtains and came through the open front door.

I didn't hurry, guessing Sarek was breaking the news of my arrival to his wife. I thought she might need a little time to acclimatize herself to the idea.

I was getting used to the darkness now, and could make out the outlines of a barn and other farm buildings opposite the house. They formed the letter L: the barn representing the long leg, the other buildings the short one. The garage was to the left of the gate and away from the house.

I picked up my suitcase and stung the rucksack over my shoulder and walked towards the open front door. Beyond the doorway was a square-shaped hall furnished with a small table, a Windsor chair, a row of hooks for hats and coats and coconut matting on the floor.

As I stood hesitating in the doorway, Sarek came out of a room nearby. There was a funny embarrassed little grin on his face and his eyes were irritable.

'You come up now and see your room.'

'Right.'

I followed him up a flight of stairs, also covered with coconut matting and down a passage. I counted four doors before he paused before a door at the far end of the passage and facing the stairs.

'Is not a bad room.'

Bad wasn't the word. It was small. There was an iron bedstead by the window, a pine chest-of-drawers, more coconut matting on the floor and a cane-bottom chair.

'You believe in the Spartan life, Mr. Sarek.'

He gave me a quick, dubious look.

'Is not all right?'

'It'll do until something better shows up.'

'I want you to be comfortable here: and happy.'

'That's nice to know.'

He fidgeted, rubbing his forefinger along the side of his nose.

'She don't want you to have the other room.'

‘Is that so much better?’

‘Is the guest room.’

‘This is the skivvy’s room?’

‘Well, is the maid’s room.’

‘Forget it, Mr. Sarek. Why should I care? I don’t want to make trouble.’

His dark, parrot’s face lit up.

‘She will get used to you. You know what women are. I should have warned her. Once she is used to you, she like you. Give her time, Mitchell.’

I thought of the warm, comfortable bedroom I slept in last night with its soft lights, electric fire and sheepskin rugs.

‘Let’s hope she won’t take too long about it.’

I grinned to take the curse of it, but I could see he didn’t like it.

‘I talk to her. Don’t worry.’

I went over and poked the bed. It was about as soft and as comfortable as the bed they give you in the Scrubs.

‘Where do I wash?’

‘I show you.’

He took me out into the passage.

‘Is Mrs. Sarek’s room. The one opposite is mine. The one next door to Mrs. Sarek’s room is the guest room. The bathroom’s the first door down the passage.’

‘I’ll guess I’ll wash up.’

‘Dinner will be ready in ten minutes.’

‘Do I eat in the kitchen?’

He didn’t like this as I intended him not to like it.

‘You eat with us.’

‘Better ask Mrs. Sarek first.’

‘I don’t like it when you talk like that.’

‘I just don’t want to be in the way.’

He gave me a long worried stare and went off down the passage. I waited until he was out of sight, then went to the guest room door, turned on the light and had a look around. I wanted to see what I was missing.

It wasn’t anything to rave about, but streets ahead of the room he had given me. At least the bed looked comfortable.

There was running water and a toilet basin and the furniture was something you could live with if you weren’t too fussy.

I laid a bet with myself. I’d be sleeping in there tomorrow night.

chapter four

When I entered the dining room and saw the long refectory table I knew for certain I was with the money. It only needed this lavish display of food and glittering silver to clinch it. Maybe a Jew doesn't care how he dresses or lives, but if he can help it, he will never neglect his belly.

The table was groaning with good things to eat.

Sarek paused in his task of carving a chicken that looked like a small turkey.

'Sit down. You like chicken all right?'

'I like anything, and that certainly looks good to me.'

'My wife she is a fine cook.'

'She must be.'

I dragged my eyes away from the chicken and looked around. The room was long and narrow and shabbily furnished.

A pile of blazing logs burned in the big open fireplace, either side of which stood two well-worn easy chairs. The inevitable coconut matting covered the floor.

'Sit down then.'

'Anywhere?'

He pointed with his carving knife.

The table was set for three. The third place, mid-way between the head and end of the table, had been laid as if under protest. The knife and fork, and spoon and fork and the serviette had been dumped there in a heap as if whoever had put them there had intended me to know I wasn't wanted.

'Here?'

'Is right.' He saw me looking at the dumped cutlery. 'The wife she was a little rushed.'

As I sat down he handed me a plate. He had said he wanted me to be happy. From the look of the plate he meant it. He had given me enough for two starving men.

'Looks good.'

He beamed. I could see food was very close to his heart.

'One of fifty. I get them cheap. Three bob a dozen, day-olds. The wife she rear them on hot-water bottles.'

'You mean you've more like this one?'

'Fifty. We got geese too. You like goose?'

'I certainly do.'

He was thoroughly enjoying himself, and when he looked as he was looking now I almost forgot he was a Jew.

'Nothing like goose. Maybe we have goose for Saturday dinner, hey? We eat well here.'

'Best dinner I've seen in years.'

Then the door opened and she came in.

I've often thought about that moment. I have had all kinds of moments: good, bad, exciting, funny and happy moments.

But this moment was like none of the others. It was the moment, making anything else that's ever happened to me as colourless and dull as a cold in the head. One look at her was enough. Just one quick look turned my insides to stone and filled my head and chest with blood.

As bad as that. Just to look at her was like walking into a sucker punch; like turning on a lamp and getting 200 volts up your arm. One moment I was about to enjoy a chicken dinner without a thought of a woman in my head, and the next, when I saw her, I was seething inside like an animal.

Except for her shape and her eyes, she really wasn't much to get excited about. She was small, compact and a copper head. I've never seen such hair: real copper colour; thick and wavy and silky. She had big green eyes, a thin, rather pinched face and a sallow complexion. Her mouth was soft looking and her lips thick. There were dark smudges under her eyes that could have meant anything. She had on a green sweater and black slacks. The slacks were dusty and the sweater grubby.

Six out of seven men would have passed her by without a second glance, but I had to be the seventh. There was something she had that touched of the thing in me and set me on fire. I can't put it better than that. There isn't any better way of putting it. Just one look at her and I was a dead duck.

I knew it and didn't care. I knew she was fatal too, and didn't care about that either. And when I watched her move to the end of the table and saw the roll of her hips and the gentle lift of her breasts my mouth went dry and I felt physically sick. That chicken dinner suddenly became the most nauseating thing I have ever had to look at.

'Do you play chess, Mitchell?'

The meal was somehow over, and she had gone into the kitchen to wash up. She hadn't said a word during the meal.

When Sarek had introduced me she had given me a black, stony stare and hadn't looked my way for the rest of the meal. Sarek was too interested in his food to notice anything odd about her behaviour, or mine for that matter. He didn't seem to expect anyone to talk. He took his food seriously, and for his size, it was surprising how much he ate.

He didn't even notice that I scarcely touched my food. I couldn't. I wanted a double whisky more than anything else in the world - more than anything, except her. As soon as Sarek had finished gorging himself, she got up and began clearing the table.

It was then that Sarek asked me if I played chess.

'I've played a bit.'

'I like chess. When I lived in Cairo I play every night with my father. I try to teach Rita but is no good. She has not the brain for chess. Is smart and clever, but no good at chess. You have to have a special brain: she has not got it.'

That was her name - Rita.

'Well, you can't be good at everything.'

He was looking hopefully at me.

'We have a game, hey? Nothing serious, you understand. I have not played chess for months.'

'All right.'

He beamed at me, rubbing his small brown hands.

'Not much to do in the country after dark. Chess is the best game in the world.'

If she had been my wife I wouldn't have said there wasn't much to do in the country after dark. Nor would I have let her remain in the kitchen alone for two seconds.

He set up a card table in front of the fire.

'Won't Mrs. Sarek want to sit here?'

'Is all right. You know what women are. She fuss in the kitchen, then she go to bed early. She read in bed: trash. All women read trash.' He chuckled as he crossed the room to a cupboard. 'Paper-

backed books she reads; love stories. Is very romantic.'

But not with you, I thought. I bet she's not very romantic with you.

He produced a set of hand-carved, ivory chessmen and an ivory board. It was the most impressive set of chessmen I had ever seen.

'Nice set.'

'Is beautiful set.' He handed me the Queen. 'Fourteenth century work by Pisano. My father he found them in Italy. He give them to me. He want me to give them to my son. He felt very strong about it, but what can I do? I have no son.' He began to set out the pieces on the board, his thick eyebrows knitted in a frown. 'Not yet, in a little while; next year. Is what she says, but what is the use of a son to me if I am too old to enjoy him?'

I went over to the window, pulled aside the curtain and looked into the darkness, scared he would see the rush of blood that had risen to my neck and face. To hear him talk like that gave me a feeling I had never had before: a feeling of rage that was suffocating.

'Let us begin. Come and sit down.'

I heard the door open and I turned.

She stood just inside the room, looking at Sarek. Her pointed chin jutted out aggressively. Every line of her was aggressive as if she had screwed herself up in anger over something she had been brooding about for a long time.

'There's no coal. Do I have to lug coal when there are two men in the house?'

Her voice was low pitched and hard and angry.

Sarek frowned at her.

'You must not worry me now, dear. I play chess!'

'I'll get it.'

I started across the room.

Sarek gaped at me, but I took no notice of him.

'Show me where it is and I'll get it.'

She didn't look at me, but turned and went out of the room. I followed her.

'Mitchell...'

I didn't pause nor look round. I wouldn't have stopped if he had been pointing a gun at me.

I followed her into the kitchen: a barn of a place, chilly and not over clean. The washed crockery was piled on the table. A soiled dishcloth lay on the floor by the sink, where she had dropped it.

She pointed to two coalscuttles. I picked them up.

'I suppose I'd better come with you. It's dark out there.'

'Tell me. I'll find it.'

It was like talking to someone in a dream: the words meant nothing. I just wanted to grab her, 'I'll show you.'

She opened the back door and went out into the darkness.

I followed the sound of her footsteps, scarcely breathing, the pulse each side of my temples pounding.

She opened a door and turned on a light.

'You can find your way back, can't you?'

I put the two scuttles down.

'Yes.'

As she turned I reached out and caught hold of her wrist. She showed no surprise, but looked at me with the same blank, stony stare, wrenched her wrist free and walked away, neither fast nor slow; as if it hadn't happened.

I clenched my fist, trying to imprison the feet of her flesh that I imagined was still on my hand. I stared into the darkness, listening to her footfalls, bewildered by the suddenness of this thing: unable to explain it, hating Sarek and hating myself.

I remained still for several minutes, then I took hold of myself and shovelled the coal into the scuttles. I turned out the light, picked up the scuttles and groped my way back to the house.

She had left the back door open and the light from the kitchen lamp came out into the dark yard.

She wasn't in the kitchen.

I put the two scuttles down by the boiler, washed my hands in the sink, turned to the door.

On the dresser was a bottle of whisky. I picked it up, jerked out the cork and took a long pull from the bottle. I drank until the neat spirit burned my mouth and throat, then I rammed the cork back and put the bottle where I had found it.

'Checkmate.'

I pushed back my chair and somehow hitched on a smile.

'Well, I asked for it. Thanks' anyway, for the game. I'm sorry I put up such a rotten show.'

He began rearranging the pieces.

'Is all right. You play a good game. I was very surprised when you open with the Steinitz gambit. Ah! I thought, is a chess player. Steinitz make a very difficult game. But then poof! You no longer think of the game. Your mind go far away. You play automatic. Is no good for chess. What is it you think about, hey?'

I wondered what he would say if I told him.

'I wasn't in the mood; that's all; I play a fair game when I'm in the mood, but it was no good tonight.'

'It was no good.'

I looked furtively at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was twenty minutes past nine.

'Well, I guess I'll take a walk around the house.'

'A walk? What for do you want to walk round the house?'

'I'm your bodyguard, aren't I? I'm going to have a look around before turning in.'

His little eyes opened wide.

'You think is danger - here?'

'I don't know.' I lit a cigarette and tossed the match into the fireplace. 'I'm not even convinced you're in danger anywhere, but so long as you think you are and so long as you pay me I'm not taking any chances.'

That seemed to please him.

'Have a look around then. Is a good torch in the kitchen. Maybe when you get back we play more chess, hey?'

'I'd just as soon go to bed I'm not in the mood for chess.'

'All right. Go to bed. You read in bed?'

'No I don't read much.'

'Mrs. Sarek read all the time. Read trash.' He scowled into the fire. 'Love stories. You read love stories perhaps?'

‘I don’t need to. I can get a woman when I want one.’

That jumped out before I could stop it. He looked up quickly, his brows coming down, his face darkening.

‘What was that you say?’

‘Oh, nothing.’

There was a cold wind blowing when I stepped into the darkness; no moon, and I could feel a damp mist against my face. I swung the beam of the torch to light up the brick path that led away from the house towards the farm buildings. I was glad to get out into the open. Another ten minutes inside that house would have sent me crazy.

I walked down the path, crossed the lawn that felt soft and squelchy under my feet, turned by the barn wall to face the house.

A light burned in the right upper room. I could see the pattern on the ceiling, but nothing else. The curtains weren’t drawn. I knew she was up there.

I could also see into the room I had just left. Sarek was sitting motionless before the fire, his great, bulging forehead supported on his head. I watched him for a moment. He didn’t move.

I turned the beam of the torch on the barn wall, moved a few paces until I came to the barn door, pushed it open and went in.

At the far end of the barn was a wooden ladder that led to the loft. I crossed the earth floor, skirted some bales of straw, avoided a stack of sawn logs and climbed the ladder.

There was a door in the loft through which hay could be pitched direct from the cart. I examined the hinges. They were rusty. The door hadn’t been opened in years.

I shoved my shoulder against it, felt it move, shoved again, forcing it open about four inches. That was wide enough to see through.

From that level I could look right into her room. It was big.

A double bed stood against the wall, facing the door. There was an old-fashioned wardrobe facing me: the kind with a full-length mirror, cupboards and drawers. By the window stood a dressing table.

She was sitting before the dressing table, brushing her hair. She had on a green silk dressing gown. A cigarette hung from her soft, full mouth.

I knelt on one knee on the dusty floor of the loft and watched her. Every movement she made, the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed, the spiral of her cigarette smoke, the glitter of light in the copper colour hair, the triangle of white flesh that showed above the V-neck of the dressing gown fascinated me the way a rabbit is fascinated by a snake.

She brushed her hair for perhaps five minutes. It could have been longer or shorter. Kneeling there in the darkness I had no sense of time. I could have stayed watching her all night and through the next day. Then she put down the brush, swung around on the stool so her back was to me.

Sarek had come in. I looked hastily at the downstairs room.

The light was still burning. Probably he had just come up to say goodnight.

He stood in the doorway, talking. He was scowling, and every now and then he made an angry gesture with his hands.

I guessed he was talking about me.

She sat motionless, her hands gripped between her knees and let him talk. I would have given a lot to have heard what he was saying.

Suddenly his anger seemed to go away and he became ingratiating. He came over to her, and put

his thin, brown hand on her shoulder. Just to see him touch her brought me out in a sweat. I leaned forward, gripping the side of the doorway, not missing a thing.

She pulled away from his hand and stood up. He continued to talk, his smile fixed, imploring her to do something. But she wouldn't play. She didn't argue with him. She said nothing, fixing her green, stony eyes on his face contemptuously, and when he came too close she moved out of his reach.

He gave up suddenly, scowling again, and as quickly and as silently as he had come, went out, leaving the door open.

She remained looking at the door for some moments, then she stubbed out her cigarette, shut the door and locked it. She came to the window and looked out.

I drew back into the shadows and watched her. I had a sudden suspicion that she knew I was up there in the loft, watching her. And when she jerked down the blind with a quick, savage movement, I was sure of it.

chapter five

The next three days more or less conformed to pattern. Each morning at eight o'clock I drove Sarek to Wardour Street. Each evening at six o'clock I drove him back to Four Winds. During the day I sat around in the outer office or drove him to the East End where he did business. In the evenings I played chess with him, patrolled the farm buildings, locked up and went to bed.

I still slept in the maid's room. I had made no effort to get out of it. I knew she didn't want me in the house, and I knew it would be dangerous to complain about the room. She might use my grouse as an excuse to get rid of me. She had enough on Sarek to force him to sack me if she could go to him with a real grievance, and she was looking for that grievance the way a cat hunts a mouse.

Since that first night when I had touched her I kept her at arm's length. She did everything she could to provoke me.

I got in the coals, chopped the wood, fed the chickens, locked them up at night, lit the fires and cleaned the windows. I did these chores because she told me to, knowing she would take a tale to Sarek if I refused.

If she had told me to pump out the cesspit I would have done it. There was nothing I wouldn't have done to remain in that house within sight of her. Sooner or later I was going to have her. I was sure of that. No one could want anything as much as I wanted her and not get it in the long run. It was just a matter of waiting for the right opportunity, and then going bald-headed for it.

I puzzled Sarek. When he caught me cleaning windows at seven o'clock in the morning he looked as if he thought I had gone crazy.

'She tell you to do that?'

'She said they wanted cleaning. They do. I got bored with staying in bed so I thought I'd clean them.'

He scratched his baldhead, puzzled and embarrassed.

'You don't have to do that unless you want to, Mitchell. I hired you for a bodyguard, not a servant.'

But I wasn't fooled for a moment. She had only to go to him and tell him I had been rude to her and out I'd go. A man who needed a son as badly as Sarek did couldn't afford to be on the wrong side of his wife for long. And make no mistake about it, he wanted a son as badly as I wanted his wife. The only difference between us was he talked about his son-to-be whenever he wasn't talking business or playing chess, while I had to keep my mouth shut. No other difference. Both our desires centred on her, and as far as I could see, she didn't give a damn for either of us.

Each night, after I had walked around the farm. Making believe I was checking on marauders I'd go up into the loft and look at her window. But she was on to that move, and kept the blind drawn, but even her shadow passing to and fro on the blind set my blood racing and turned my mouth dry. I had to go up there even though I knew I shouldn't see anything but her shadow.

During those three days I got to know Sarek. He wasn't such a bad little guy once you got beyond his looks, and he was as smart and as bright as they come. He had three things continually on his mind: a son, money, and chess, in that order.

I didn't get the chance to find out exactly what his business was. He always left me outside in the car, but I could make a near guess. He was continually going to little shops or offices in the East End and coming away with a parcel or sometimes a couple of suitcases which he would dump in the back

of the car and take around to other little shops or offices in the West End. Black market stuff or stolen stuff. He knew where to find it and whom to sell it to. I ached to find out how much money was involved, but as with Rita, it was a matter of patience. Sooner or later I would gain his confidence and then it was up to me to make use of it. In the meantime I memorized addresses and names and faces, butting in whenever I could, joining in street-corner conversations when he was gossiping to his friends, trying to get known so when the time came I would be already half-accepted. Then there was Emmie. Thinking back I can see now I played my cards badly with Emmie. I know now she was crazy about Sarek, and there was nothing she wouldn't have done for him. She was as worried as he was about the threatening letters, and had encouraged him to hire himself a bodyguard.

The scene had been set for me if I hadn't been such a blind fool and stepped out of turn from the beginning. If I had been courteous to her, treated her like a human being, she would have been strong for me, and I could have handled her when the time came when I had to handle her or go under.

Instead, I treated her as I saw her: a fat, hideous little Jewess, who had weak eyes and a spotty complexion. I didn't make any pretence that that sight of her turned my stomach.

I scarcely spoke a word to her, and when I did I pointedly looked away from her so I shouldn't be unnecessarily sickened by the sight of her face.

So she did what anyone would have done after being treated like that: she hated me with everything she had: a vicious, spiteful angry hatred, full of patience for the time to get even, and that's about the most dangerous type of hatred to come up against.

But I was so smug, so sure of myself, I didn't care. All I could think of was Rita and Sarek's money. To me, Emmie was a joke: and not even a good joke at that.

If I was in bad with Emmie I was going great guns with Sarek. By now I had my feelings about Rita under control. I could sit in the same room with her without feeling I wanted to walk across the ceiling, and I could get my mind on to chess.

I had learned chess from a Russian who had once drawn three games and won one against Alekhine. I had run into him at a Prisoner of War Camp in Germany, and he and I spent five hours a day for eighteen months playing chess.

Sarek was no slouch either, and the battles we had in the evening were tournament stuff.

Whenever she went to bed early I beat him. But so long as she remained in the room, some of my mind was on her, and he beat me. But he reckoned I was the most stylish player he had ever met, and those nightly games cemented his liking for me as nothing else could.

And another thing pleased him. He was expecting another threatening letter. He had received one every Thursday morning for the past month, but this Thursday it didn't turn up. That put him right on top of the world, for those letters scared him more than he admitted.

'They take a look at you, Mitchell. You scare them off.'

And that began to worry me. If he didn't receive any more threatening letters he might begin to think he was paying out ten pounds a week for nothing. Even a nightly game of chess doesn't rate at ten pounds a week. I couldn't imagine him feeding and paying me to sit around his office and home, doing nothing once he got over his scare. Maybe he did like me, but not to that extent.

Then on the fourth day, a Friday, the opportunity I had been waiting for turned up.

I had driven Sarek to Shoreditch where he had collected a parcel, and we were on our way back to the West End when he said suddenly, 'Tomorrow I go to Paris. Maybe I stay a week; maybe two weeks. Is not necessary for you to come.'

And I thought this was the payoff. I couldn't imagine him handing me ten pounds a week for two weeks while he was in Paris.

'So what do I do?'

'Is nothing for you to do except look after the house. But maybe you don't care to do that?'

The thought he might be feel enough to leave me in the house alone with her sent the blood pounding in my temples.

'How about Mrs. Sarek? Can't she look after it?'

'She come with me.'

I should have known he wouldn't have been that much of a fool.

'You mean you want me to hang around, feed the chickens and keep burglars away?'

'Is right. Two years my wife has not been away. All the time the chickens tie her to the house: you understand? I promise her the next time I go to Paris she come with me. So long as the chickens are fed I don't care what you do. Maybe you keep the house nice, hey? You have the car. You go for drives, but get back before is dark. Keep the foxes away from my chickens. You understand?'

'Well, all right. But isn't there anything else I can do? How about your business? Can't I do something for you there?'

He gave me a quick, sly look, and shook his head.

'You look after the chickens. My business is very, very personal. Is nothing you can do. Emmie can handle it.'

'Just thought I'd offer.'

'Is all right.'

There wasn't much for me to do that afternoon. I sat in the outer office, smoking cigarettes and reading the Evening Standard until I knew lumps of it by heart.

Sarek and Emmie shut themselves up in the inner office and stayed there until closing time.

Once or twice I put my ear against the door panel, but apart from a continuous murmur of voices I didn't hear anything worth hearing. All the same I knew Sarek was giving that fat little horror the lowdown on his racket, and it infuriated me she was getting it and not me. But there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn't expect him to take me into his confidence when he had known me only for four days.

Already I was beginning to wonder if I wouldn't work it so that he accepted me as a son instead of pipe dreaming about a son I felt in my bones she would never give him. I was twenty-seven, and he must have been sixty. If ever anyone deserved that chess set, I did, and given the chance I could prove to him I was no fool when it came to working a racket.

But that kind of set up needed time and patience. He liked me already. But liking me and making me his heir were things poles apart. What I had to do was to stick with him until the penny dropped, if it ever dropped, and sticking to him wasn't going to be all that easy.

They came out of the inner office around six-thirty. He had wrapped himself in his awful overcoat and was smoking a cigar.

She looked like the cat that had swallowed the canary, and gave me a smirking look of triumph that made me want to sink my list into her fat face.

'Okay. Now we go!'

I stood up.

'If there's anything I can do up here during the day, perhaps Miss Pearl will let me know.'

They exchanged glances while I stood there trying to look as if I had nothing up my sleeve.

She shook her head.

That was when I realized just how badly I had played my cards. If I had sucked up to her, treated her with a little politeness at the beginning, she might have given me an in but, instead, she shook her fat, greasy head, and I was as far away from the money as I was when I first sat in the outer office waiting for an interview.

‘Is all right. Emmie can manage.’

I followed him down the stairs, across the pavement to the car.

I had worked on the car. There had been a lot of things wrong with it. Oil seeped up the camshaft and leaked into the distributor head for one thing, and there was a sticking valve for another. The plugs hadn’t been touched since he bought it, and the engine had as much compression as a milk pudding.

I fixed the valve, fitted a washer at the back of the camshaft, bought a new set of plugs and scraped the carbon of the distributor head points. I could beat her up to seventy now with a little in hand, but I didn’t tell him that, I kept her at a sedate fifty, and he thought I was a miracle worker.

As I swung the car on to the Watford Bypass, I said, ‘A woman’s all right up to a point, but when it comes to hard graft, give me a man every time.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Maybe I shouldn’t have said that. I was voicing my thoughts, but since you ask me, I’ll tell you. You have a business to look after. I don’t know what you do, you do well. All right. You have to go to Paris. That leaves your business wide open until you get back. I should have thought a man with your experience would have felt happier to leave a smart man in charge rather than a smart woman. A woman is all right for certain things. Maybe I have old-fashioned ideas. To me a woman’s place is in the home. I wouldn’t be too happy to leave my business in the hands of a woman, no matter how capable she is.’

He put his small brown hand across his mouth to stop a spluttering laugh.

‘You don’t like Emmie, hey? I know. I watch you. I tell you something. She’s smart. Make no mistake about that. I know her for ten years. Every year she get smarter. I don’t know any man who is as smart as she is. I am smart too, but I am not one-tenth as smart as Emmie. Is true. You go by looks. I don’t. I go by brain. Her brain is worth three of mine and ten of yours. No hard feeling. Is the truth.’

And I had been sucker enough to think I might call him ‘father’.

‘It’s your business, Mr. Sarek.’

‘Yes.’

The next morning I drove them down to the airport to catch the ten o’clock plane. He wore the awful coat, and clutched a briefcase against his chest as if he suspected someone was going to steal it. She wore a tweed coat and skirt, and had a fur coat draped over her arm.

This was the first time I had seen her out of slacks and sweater, and for a moment I didn’t recognize her. My eyes went to her legs: Marlene Dietrich legs; long, slim and lovely: a crime to hide them in slacks.

She had given me instructions how to feed the chickens, and had shown me where the poultry food was kept. When she talked to me it was as if she were talking to a wax dummy; she didn’t look at me, her eyes were stony, and her face indifferent. I wanted to grab her and shake some life into her, and she knew it.

Neither of them said a word to each other all the way to the airport. They sat at the back, and every now and then I caught a glimpse of her face in the driving mirror. Her eyes were stony and her mouth sullen.

Sarek talked to me about the chess game we played the previous night. She had been upstairs all the evening, packing, and I had given him the hiding of his life. That's what I liked about Sarek. Even when he had a hiding, he didn't mind, and kept praising my end game and comparing my style with that of his father.

While I listened to his chatter I wondered how she liked being seen with him in that coat. I knew when he got out of the car everyone would gape at him. I had had some of that myself. Most people, seeing him, imagined he was a music-hall turn, while others, to judge from their expressions, thought he was cracked. It made me hot under the collar to be with him.

I wondered how she would react. Something told me she wouldn't care. It would take more than a comic coat to ruffle her. I swung the car into the park and we got out.

'I'll take the bags.'

While I was getting the two suitcases out of the car boot, Sarek went into the reception hall.

'You haven't much time.'

She was lighting a cigarette, and gave me a quick look out of the corners of her eyes.

'That's my worry, isn't it?'

'Yes. I was just making conversation.'

'When we are away, don't take a woman into my home.'

I felt the blood rush into my face. She had put her finger on the thought that had been milling around in my mind as soon as I knew I'd have the house to myself.

'Who said I was going to?'

The stony, green eyes never left my face.

'I just happen to know your type. And while we're talking, look for another job. I don't want you around when I get back.'

I hadn't any answer to this direct attack. I just stood goggling at her, a fixed grin on my face.

Then Sarek came back with a tall blonde in the uniform of an airhostess.

'Is all ready. Miss Robinson arranges everything. Miss Robinson, this is my wife.' Sarek rubbed his hands, beaming from ear to ear. He looked like a mischievous clown. 'Rita, Miss Robinson looks after me for two years now. Every time I fly is here to fix things. Is a fine fixer. Is a very kind girl.'

Rita gave Miss Robinson a thin smile. She said in a flat, hard voice she was glad to meet her.

'I think you should take your seats,' Miss Robinson said.

She seemed a little flustered. 'You have only five minutes. I've put magazines and papers in your places. Miss Joyce will look after you on the trip. I've spoken to her.'

'You see, she fix everything. All right, we go. You manage those bags all right, Mitchell?'

'Yes.'

I had recovered by now. She had socked one in under my guard, and it had shaken me, but she wouldn't do that again so easily.

She and Sarek went on ahead. Miss Robinson and I followed them.

People were gaping now. In the thin autumn sunlight that coat looked terrible.

Rita went straight to her seat, but Sarek fussed around until the luggage was on board, then he shook hands with Miss Robinson. My eyes were sharp enough to see what looked like a five-pound

note pass hands.

‘Okay. Have a good time, Mitchell. I let you know when I return. Watch those foxes.’

They ran the staircase away and slammed the door.

Miss Robinson and I stood side by side watching the plane take off.

When it was rising above the hangars I turned to look at her. She had a fresh complexion and rimless spectacles. Pretty enough, if you like the girl-guide type to go around with. You had only to look at her to know she had as much experience of men as Mary’s Little Lamb. But if she was clean, white and a possible twenty-one, she was no slouch when it came to picking up five-pound notes.

‘Great little guy,’ I said and gave her a wide, frank boy-scout smile.

‘Oh, yes. He really is a remarkable man.’

‘But that coat...’

She laughed; a nice, fresh laugh that meant nothing except a laugh.

‘I wouldn’t know him without it. At first I thought it was terrible, but now ... well, I thought it suits him.’

‘He gave you quite a buildup to his wife.’

‘Oh, he’s kind. I like doing things for him. He travels a lot with us.’

I’d do a lot for him too at five pounds a throw.

I looked her over again, wondering if she might help pass an evening, but decided against it. Why bother to work all that hard when I had Netta?

‘Well, I better be getting back. I’m looking after his chickens.’

‘Oh, are you?’

‘That’s right. His wife used to look after them. Maybe she thinks she’d better see if he’s got any chickens in Paris.’

The reaction was instantaneous.

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

She walked away towards the reception hall her back stiff with angry indignation.

I made my way back to the car.

chapter six

After they had left for Paris I had planned to drive on to London, pick Netta up and take her back to the farm for company; but I didn't do it. The fact she had guessed that was what I was going to do turned the plan sour.

'I just happen to know your type.'

That infuriated me more than any other thing she could have thrown at me. Well, I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of proving herself right. There were other ways for me to pass my time she would like a lot less than having a woman in her home.

I drove back to Four Winds in a cold, vicious fury. I was sure, somewhere in the house I'd find something that would give me a line on her, and I was going to find it. They had lived there for three years, and in that time things accumulate: letters, bits of their past, documents, things like that that might give me something to work on.

I had at least a week on my own in the house: seven days in which to search, hunt and ferret. There had to be something hidden there that would give me a hold on her. That was all I wanted - some little thing with which to nail her.

It was odd returning to the empty house. After I had put the car away and locked the garage, I opened the front door and stood in the hall, listening.

There was nothing of Sarek in the atmosphere of the house, but it was uncanny how much of herself she had left behind.

It wouldn't have surprised me to see her coming down the stairs or to hear her footsteps overhead or her hard, sullen voice. I could even smell the perfume she wore; a faint smell of musk that always moved before her like an advance guard.

I went from room to room on the ground floor, then mounted the stairs, looked into the bathroom, Sarek's room, the guest room and even my room. I left her room to the last.

When I turned the handle I found the door locked.

For a moment I wondered if she was in there. I even rapped sharply, then knowing she couldn't be in there, that she was by now within a few miles of Paris, I went downstairs again.

On my way from the airport I had bought a bottle of whisky, a bottle of gin and a bottle of Dubonnet. The whisky had cost me seventy-five shillings, but I hadn't had a drink for three days, and I didn't intend to stint myself.

I poured myself out three inches of whisky, lit a cigarette and sat down before the empty grate in the sitting room.

Why had she locked her door? Had she guessed I would search her room? She was no fool. Was there something in there she didn't want me to see? I had examined the lock. Without damaging the door I knew I couldn't get in. It was a mortice lock, old, stiff with dirt and rust, and no pick, even if I could use one, would have shifted the catch.

There was the window.

I finished my drink and went outside and stood on the wet lawn, looking up at the house. I could see the casement window of her room was fastened by a catch. That wouldn't be easy to open, but I might force out the screws with a chisel.

That was possible, but I would have to be very careful not to bruise the wood.

Although the house stood at the end of a lonely, winding lane, and there were no other houses within sight, the house itself wasn't screened, and anyone coming up the lane could see me as I worked on the window.

Few people came up the lane, not more than three or four a day: odd labourers going home from a farm and using the lane as a short cut to the village. Two or three tradesmen's vans passed the house, too.

If I was seen on a ladder trying to force the window they might stop to find out what I was doing. They might even tell Sarek when he came home.

The safest way would be to wait until it was dark, but doing a job like that in the dark wasn't easy. I would have to watch the window frame carefully when I put pressure on the chisel. I couldn't risk leaving marks nor could I hold a torch and work on the catch at the same time.

I returned to the house and prepared myself a scratch meal.

While I ate I wandered around the dining room, wondering how best to tackle the job. I was going to get into her room. Why had she locked the door if there wasn't something to conceal?

I finally decided to make believe I was cleaning the windows.

If anyone spotted me up there on the ladder I had a legitimate excuse for being there.

I fetched a bucket of water, a wash-leather and a chisel.

I found a thin strip of wood that I could use to guard the window frame. Then I set the ladder against the guttering and climbed up to the window. I hung the bucket from one of the ladder rungs, took a quick look down the lane and then examined the window. The wood looked pretty rotten and the catch none too strong.

It took me less than a minute to prise out the screws. The catch fell off and dropped on the carpet. I got my fingernails under the window ledge and pulled the window open.

Then, a little late, I again glanced over my shoulder and looked down the lane. A man in a mackintosh and a black slouch hat was standing by the gate, watching me. He gave me such a start I nearly fell of the ladder. But somehow I managed to give him a casual stare, and then looked away. I slipped the chisel into my pocket, keeping it concealed by my body. Then I fished out the wash-leather from the bucket and began to wipe over the window.

I felt a trickle of sweat run down the back of my neck. I didn't know who he was: probably the village vicar. I didn't know if he knew her. If he did, he was almost certain to tell her he had seen me up at her window, and she would make enough of that to turn Sarek against me.

I heard a crunching sound below me and glanced down.

He had opened the gate and was coming up the short drive, still looking at me, a puzzled frown on his thin, gaunt face.

He was a tall, grey-haired man, with a long, bony nose that looked as if it enjoyed poking itself into other people's business. I suspended operations, hung on to the top rung of the ladder and looked down at him. By now he was standing at the foot of the ladder, peering shortsightedly up at me. I was right about him being the vicar. I spotted his dog collar.

I got in the first word.

'Did you want to see Mrs. Sarek? I'm afraid she's away.'

'What are you doing up there, young man?'

'Cleaning the window.'

'You were opening it just now. I saw you.'

‘That’s right. I’m going to clean the inside. Mrs. Sarek asked me to do the windows.’

‘It looked to me as if you were forcing the window open.’

The kind of meddler who didn’t miss anything.

I gave him my wide boy scout smile.

‘Well, I was. The wood’s swollen by the rain and I didn’t want to climb down and go upstairs and open it from the inside. Did you think I was a burglar?’

He looked surprised and a little embarrassed, and gave one of those rich, juicy laughs clergymen cultivate.

‘Well, I wouldn’t say that. But I haven’t seen you before, and you’re up there at the window . . .’

I climbed down the ladder and faced him, still with the wide, friendly smile.

‘I haven’t been here long. I’m Mr. Sarek’s chauffeur. He and Mrs. Sarek are having a week in Paris. I’ve been left to look after the chickens.’

I could see he was still uncertain of me, but his suspicions were receding.

‘I was about to make myself a cup of tea. Maybe you’ll join me?’

The lingering suspicion vanished, and his face brightened.

I had offered him the thing he had come for: the universal bond between clergymen and parishioners. I couldn’t be a burglar if I was going to give him tea.

‘Now, that’s very kind of you...’

I led into the dining room and sat him down. I could have strangled him and shoved him down the old well at the back of the house, but I had to be on the right side of him. I didn’t know how well he knew her, and what he would tell her.

While I waited for the water to boil, he talked. He unfolded, the story of his narrow, dreary life with tender and loving detail. He told me about his early struggles in South Africa about his ill health, what his bishop said, what the wife of his bishop said, and of course, what he said himself.

He had a quiet soft voice that was as unstoppable as the Niagara Falls. I gave him his tea and sat on the edge of the table, and waited for him to stop. I didn’t listen to a quarter of what he said, but it didn’t matter because he didn’t seem to expect me to say anything. It was the most devastating and persistent monologue I have ever encountered, and as dull and boring as anything I have ever had to listen to. He sat there from half past two to twenty minutes to five, talking ceaselessly about himself.

I could have stopped him, but only if I had been rude, and I wasn’t taking any chances of him complaining about me. So I had to sit there and take it. Nothing would have pleased me more than to smash the teapot over his flat, sleek head: nothing less would have been adequate.

Finally I could stand it no longer.

‘Sorry to interrupt you, but I’ll have to feed the chickens The light’s going.’

He paused in mid-stride, his mouth hanging open, then looked blankly out of the window.

‘Bless my soul, is it as late as that?’

He had been so engrossed with the sound of his own voice he had completely lost count of time.

‘Well, I must be getting along. My wife will be wondering where I’ve got to.’

I got him to the door before he could start another story.

‘Perhaps you would tell Mrs. Sarek I looked in? I have tried so often to meet her. Whenever I’ve called I could get no answer.’

I could have hit him then. I don’t know how I kept the exasperated fury out of my face. He didn’t even know her!

Whenever she had seen the damned old driveller coming she had dived into the house and kept out of sight. And I had put up with him for two hours because I thought he knew her!

‘Perhaps during the week you would care to come down to the vicarage. We could have another interesting little chat. I have some photos of the African Veld that are really worth seeing.’

‘I keep pretty busy. You’d better wait until Mrs. Sarek comes back before you call again. I’m not being paid to talk to callers. Mr. Sarek wouldn’t like it.’

He looked startled.

‘Well, perhaps one evening...’

‘I’m busy in the evenings too. Good night.’

I shut the door in his face.

It wasn’t until eight o’clock that evening when it was dark that I climbed the ladder again and entered her room. It wasn’t quite so large as it had looked from the loft doorway. It was a little shabbier, the furniture was scratched, a thin film of dust covered the wardrobe mirror, and there were bits of fluff on the floor. It was an unloved, uncared for room.

Maybe she wanted something prettier and more modem, and couldn’t be bothered with it. The smell of musk and her own faint and peculiar body odour hung in the stuffy, close atmosphere.

The top of the dressing table was littered with pots of cream, half-empty bottles of perfume, a bottle of T.C.P. and a wad of cotton wool. On the chest of drawers was an ashtray crammed with cigarette butts, smeared with lipstick.

I glanced under the bed. Several pairs of shoes lay anyhow in the dust, as if she had kicked them off when going to bed and had forgotten them.

As I lit a cigarette I noticed my hand was unsteady. I don’t know why it was but the untidiness and her personal things lying in full view strangely excited me: as if she was in the room herself, standing before me, naked.

I went over to the dressing table and pulled open the drawers. I found nothing except the kind of junk any woman would keep in her dressing table drawers: powder puffs, compacts, more lipstick, handkerchiefs, a pair of fancy garters, a hairnet, and stuff like that.

I missed nothing, disturbing the jumble of things as little as possible. I closed the drawers and stood back, aware suddenly of my face in the mirror. I looked queer: there was a red flush on my face, my eyes were over-bright and my forehead was shiny with sweat beads.

‘You’ve got it bad, haven’t you? A real case, and you know it, and she knows it too.’

Handling her stuff, breathing the air in which she slept had me talking to myself. I was ready to walk up the wall and across the ceiling. I went over to the wardrobe, a little unsteady at the knees and opened the doors.

There were a number of frocks, coats and skirts, and summer dresses banging on hooks the length of the wardrobe.

At the far end of the row were three costumes: short white tunics covered with sequins and trunks to match. White kid, sequin-covered knee boots stood in the corner of the wardrobe.

I lifted down one of the costumes to examine it: the kind of costume a professional ice skater might wear, but when I looked at the boots I knew she hadn’t worn this outfit for skating.

The costumes puzzled me. Had she been on the stage?

The maker’s tab on the neckband of the tunic told me the outfit had been made in Cairo. I remembered Sarek telling me he lived in Cairo. Probably that was where they had met.

I put the costume back and continued my search. I didn't hurry for I had to be careful not to disturb anything. Every article I handled I put back exactly as I found it. It took time, but I did it.

In one of the drawers of the wardrobe I found a wooden box, its lid secured by a length of black ribbon.

I carried the box to the light, and opened it. It was crammed with letters and photographs; almost the first photograph I looked at was of her in the sequin tunic and high boots.

A tall, broad-shouldered man in a white-silk shirt and black-Spanish trousers was balancing her on his hand. She was standing upright, both her feet gripped in his hand, her arms folded. It was remarkable balancing trick, and a still more remarkable feat of strength.

There were other pictures, taken, apparently in a nightclub, showing she was an expert gymnast and acrobat.

Her partner just stood around and let her climb over him. He was a handsome hunk of beef, as good-looking as a movie star and as strong as a bull. I had no idea what she weighed then, but from the look of her she had the same curves and solid hips as she had now.

Nine and a half stone would have been a conservative guess, and to hold that weight at arm's length meant strength. Big and tough as I am, I knew I couldn't have done it.

I put the box aside. The letters would make interesting reading when I was in bed. I had already taken my sheets into the guest room and made up the bed. I could be uncomfortable if I had to, but while she was away I was going to pamper myself.

I spent over two hours going through the drawers in the wardrobe and the chest that stood by the door. I found nothing to explain why she had locked the door. The answer might lie in the box of letters, but I didn't think so. They weren't hidden.

If she had anything to hide I knew she would make a job of it.

I took off the lock on the door and went downstairs, fetched up the bottle of whisky and the breast of a cold chicken and continued the hunt.

I searched everywhere, even unmade the bed, took off the mattress and handled every inch of it. I worked from the window, covering the floor, the wall and the furniture, and I finally found what I was looking for behind the wardrobe. Hanging on a hook, out of sight and almost out of reach was a portable typewriter in a worn leather case. I fished it out and took off the lid.

Even without the blue, deckle-edged notepaper that was clipped in the lid of the case I knew by the letters e and d that were so obviously out of alignment that this was the machine on which the threatening letters to Sarek had been written, and it followed that she must be the writer.

I sat back on my heels and grinned at myself in the dusty wardrobe mirror.

I had her now.

I had her just where I wanted her.

chapter seven

After four days of living in that lonely house I got sick of my own company. I spent most of the time going through the hundreds of letters I had found in the box. The bulk of them were from men admirers. I was surprised to come across letters from two men whose names were, at one time, quite often in the press: a fellow with a title and an M.P. They didn't offer marriage; the best they could do was a flat and a regular income and, of course, an occasional visit when they weren't tied up with their wives or their business.

It was pretty obvious from all these letters that just before the war she must have been the rage of Cairo. One of the last letters in the box was from Sarek. It wasn't dated, but the postmark showed it had been written on 3rd September, 1939. It interested me because it appeared to be the only letter he wrote to her. or at least, the only letter of his she kept.

Chirie,

I can see nothing but danger and trouble ahead of us. It is impossible to remain here much longer: a week at the outside. It is time for you to decide what you are going to do. At the moment I have enough money for both of us. Together we can drop out of sight and begin a new life. For the moment Paris is safe enough, but later it may be possible to go to America. I must know immediately. You can be sure of my love. In haste.

Henry

He had probably written that to her when he realized war was inevitable. But why, with so many offers of marriage and hundreds of men to choose from, had she picked a little vulture like Sarek?

I returned the letter to the box. There were no other letters from Sarek, but I did find a long, angry letter from her stage partner, Boris Daumier, dated 31st August, 1939, accusing her of sleeping with other men, of ruining their act, of continually insulting him. It was the high-pitch hysterical squealing of a man maddened beyond endurance. Pages of it, and towards the end the fury petered out and he grovelled, appealing to her to remember their love for each other, reminding her of the happy days and nights they had shared together in the past, begging her to put other men out of her life and return to him.

It made me feel sick to read it. I knew how that big slob must have suffered, but at least he had had some nights with her. I hadn't.

I now knew something about her; not much, but something to work on. When it came to a showdown I felt pretty sure I could handle her.

Why was she writing these threatening notes to Sarek? What was the point of it? She wasn't the type to play practical jokes. There was a motive: I was sure of that. For some reason she wanted to throw a scare into Sarek. Somehow I was going to find out that reason.

I had taken the lock on her door to Chesham and had a key fitted. Then I repaired the window catch, screwed on the lock, and locked it from the outside. It gave me an extraordinary feeling of power to have a key to her room.

Now I had her where I wanted her, I got bored waiting her return. I was tempted to phone for Netta, but the risk was too obvious. With a menace like that vicar around, it would be asking for trouble to bring Netta to the house, and besides, now I was sure of Rita, Netta had lost a lot of her attraction.

On the sixth day I took the car and drove to London. It was a Thursday: the day the threatening

letter was due to turn up. I had an idea it wouldn't turn up, but I had to be sure.

I parked the car outside the Wardour Street office, climbed the stairs and pushed open the office door.

Emmie was typing away as if her life depended on it, not as I expected, lording it in his room, but still behind her own rickety, shabby little desk.

She looked up and her gooseberry eyes hardened. She looked a sight. Her pasty skin was blotched with spots, and she had a little red sore at the corner of her mouth.

'Hello,' I said, and somehow managed to smile at her. 'Thought I'd look you up. The house is as dead as a dodo.'

'I'm busy.'

'Well, that's fine. Business must be good.'

'I don't want you in the office, Mitchell.'

I had made up my mind to win her over. I had thought a lot about her since I had been alone in Four Winds. I knew my only chance to get her on my side was to tackle her when Sarek was out of the way. She was too powerful to have as an enemy, but if I could get on the right side of her I might still get the in I wanted.

'If I'm in the way I'll shove off, but I'd be glad to give you a helping hand if you would like me to.'

'I don't want your help.'

Although it turned me sick to my stomach I leaned on the desk and smiled into her ghastly fat face.

'Come on. Miss Pearl, let's bury the hatchet... All right, I know I started off on the wrong foot. Well, I'm sorry and I apologize. You're smart, I don't need to be told that, although Sarek did tell me. Why don't we get together? I'm willing if you are.' Being that close to her was like sticking your nose into a slum house.

She stared at me, her eyes watchful, her mouth set.

'I'm busy.'

Keeping that smile on my face was about the hardest thing I've ever done.

'Look, you and I both admire Mr. Sarek. We both work for him. What's the point in...?'

'I'm busy.'

I wanted to spit in her fat, hideous face, but somehow I still managed to smile at her.

'Well, all right, perhaps when you're not so busy.' I straightened. It was a relief to get away from her. 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

'You can get out.'

I knew the smile was growing dim at the edges.

'That's easy. But surely there's something else?'

She gave me a bleak, spiteful stare and then began typing again.

I could have murdered her then. I could have taken that greasy, fat skull between my hands and hammered it against the typewriter.

I lit a cigarette to give my voice a chance to steady up.

'Any more threatening letters come in?'

She paused in her typing.

'No, and when Mr. Sarek returns I am going to advise him to pay you off. You're getting too much for doing nothing, anyway.'

That made two of them gunning for me. I had one where I wanted her, but I knew I'd never nail this

fat little horror to the mast. White-hot fury boiled up inside me, but I still managed a grin: a little crooked perhaps, but a grin.

‘Better look after that sore on your mouth. It might spread and spoil your beauty.’

Well, at least I hurt her. I saw her flinch. Still grinning, I went out and shut the door gently behind me.

When I returned to Four Winds I went up to her room, collected the typewriter and carried it into the guest room. I set it down on the bedside table, took off the lid and threaded a sheet of the blue, deckle-edged paper into the machine.

If she had decided to send him no more threatening letters then I’d take on the job. And I’d send him a threatening letter to remember: not the junk she had been sending. I’d give him such a scare he wouldn’t let me out of his sight; a scare that even fat Emmie couldn’t talk him out of Rita would know who had written the note, but that didn’t worry me. There was nothing she could do about it without giving herself away. And besides, I wanted her to know I had found the typewriter. It would be a nice way to break the news.

For some minutes I sat thinking, then thumped out the note with one finger.

You have had three warnings. This is the last. From now on you won’t be safe. Sometime, somewhere, we will kill you. It won’t be quick and sudden. You will know all about it, and we will soften you, you rat, before we do it.

That ought to throw a scare into him. I couldn’t see Emmie persuading him to sack me after getting a note like that.

I hoped I would be there when he read it. His face would be worth seeing. But the best sight of all would be Rita’s face when he showed the note to her. If that didn’t give her a jolt then nothing would.

On Monday I had a telegram saying he and Mrs. Sarek would arrive at eight forty-five. Would I be at the airport to drive them home?

I would be there all right.

Miss Robinson, looking fresh and clear eyed and clean minded, gave me a cool stare when I walked into the reception hall.

‘Remember me? Mr. Sarek’s coming in on the 8:45 plane. Is it on schedule?’

She remembered her manners enough to give me a distant nod.

‘Good evening. I have heard from Mr. Sarek. Yes, it’ll be on time.’

‘He’ll be glad to see you looking so pretty.’

‘The plane is due now. If you’ll wait here, I’ll let him know where you are.’

She swept away, her back stiff.

My charm didn’t seem to be registering well these days.

After a while I heard a plane come in and I strolled to the door. Minutes ticked by, then I saw Miss Robinson and Sarek.

Behind them came Rita and a man in uniform carrying the baggage.

I went out to meet them.

‘Hello, there, did you have a good trip?’

He brushed me aside as querulous as a wet hen.

‘I have a bad cold. Where is the car? Do I have to walk all night?’

Miss Robinson was holding his arm, making soft, soothing noises at him. One look at his white, pinched face and the angry irritation in his little black eyes told me this was the moment to make an

impression.

‘Get him inside while I fetch the car. He looks ill.’ I didn’t even pause to look at Rita. I wanted to, but the situation called for speed. I raced back to the car park and brought the car round to the reception hall entrance in four seconds flat.

‘Right, let’s get him in. He’d better travel in front. It’s warmer and not so draughty.’

Between us. Miss Robinson and I practically earned the little squirt to the car. Luckily I had brought a rug to cover the radiator and I wrapped him up in it as if he was a pneumonia case. Miss Robinson didn’t seem to like the way I took charge. She pushed me aside and leaned into the car.

‘Are you quite comfortable now, Mr. Sarek? If you’re not warm enough I can easily get you another rug.’

‘Is all right. I want to get home.’ Not quite so querulous, but still very sorry for himself. And he was so sorry for himself he forgot to tip her.

While we were fussing over him Rita got in the back. She tipped the man with the baggage, closed her purse with an impatient click and leaned back on the broken springs to stare out of the window.

I slid under the wheel.

‘I’ll keep the window shut if you think it’ll be too cold for you.’

‘Close it and get going. I want to go to bed. I am ill, you understand? Is on my chest.’

‘Oh shut up about your chest!’

I turned my head to hide a grin. I bet she had had a rare time with him coming over. Her voice sounded exasperated.

‘Is all right for you to say shut up! Is easy to talk that way when you are not ill For three days I can’t breathe. Is my chest. And when do I sleep? Three nights I lie awake. And all you say is shut up!’

I was watching her in the driving mirror. She started to say something, then stopped herself. Instead, she lit a cigarette and stared sullenly out of the window.

‘How did you catch cold, Mr. Sarek?’

‘Never mind. You get me home. Who cares whether I die or not? Don’t talk. I don’t want to listen.’

And he made it sound as if he hated my guts. When I looked into the mirror again there was a bitter, triumphant little smile on her lips.

She hadn’t been wasting any time.

He wanted a fire in his room and a hot water bottle.

While I was lighting the fire he said, ‘You better look out for another job, Mitchell. I lose money on this trip. I can’t afford to pay you for doing nothing.’

I sat back on my heels and looked at him.

‘But don’t you want someone to guard you, Mr. Sarek? Of course, I know I don’t appear to do much for what I’m getting, but it’s like paying an insurance premium. If anything did happen, then you’d be glad to have me around.’

He couldn’t meet my eyes.

‘Is practical joke. Mrs. Sarek is right. Three weeks and no more threats. Is waste of money. I can’t afford it.’

Wait until tomorrow, old pal, I thought. You’ll be singing a different tune tomorrow.

‘Well, all right. If you really want me to go I’ll look for something else. When do you think?’

‘In a week.’

I cleared up the hearth, then stirred the blazing coal with the poker.

'I'll certainly miss those games of chess.'

Even that one didn't pay a dividend.

'Put out the light. I want to rest.'

All right, you little vulture, I thought, if that's how you feel about it. Just wait until tomorrow. You won't be so cocky tomorrow.

I turned out the light.

'If there's anything you want, Mr. Sarek, rap on the wall. I sleep very lightly.'

I was going to make it easy for him to change his mind in the morning.

He grunted: not even a word of thanks.

'I want to rest.'

'I'll see you're not disturbed, Mr. Sarek.'

As I shut the door behind me I saw her coming up the stairs.

I was oozing soft soap by now. I tried a little on her just for the hell of it.

'If you'd rather not cook tonight, Mrs. Sarek. I'll prepare the supper.'

She looked past me, her face sullen.

'I don't want any supper. I'm going to bed.'

'I told him if he wanted anything to call me tonight. I thought you wouldn't want to be disturbed after your journey.'

She looked at me then. I managed to keep a straight face.

'You're trying very hard, aren't you? Did he tell you he didn't want you after this week?'

'Yes; he mentioned it. But he's not well. I didn't pay much attention.'

An angry flush stained her face.

'Well, you're going just the same!'

I grinned at her.

'Don't bet on it, Mrs. Sarek.'

I went on down the stairs whistling softly, knowing she was staring blankly after me.

The telephone rang at nine o'clock the next morning. She was out in the paddock collecting the eggs, so I answered it.

'I want to speak to Mr. Sarek.'

I didn't have to be told who owned that whining voice.

'Is that Miss Pearl?'

'Yes. I want to speak to Mr. Sarek at once.'

'Mr. Sarek's in bed. He has a bad cold.'

'Can't he come to the 'phone? It is very important.'

'Mr. Sarek's in bed. He has a bad cold. Are you deaf or is this one of your off days?'

'Don't talk that way to me!'

'I'd just as soon not talk to you at all. Do you want to give him a message?'

'Tell him I'm coming down to see him.'

'Don't do that, please! I'll have to meet you at that station.'

'Tell him I'm catching the nine forty-five train.'

She slammed down the receiver.

The note had arrived and she had read it. There could be no other reason for her to leave the office and come scuttling down here.

I went up to Sarek's room, rapped on the door and entered. He was huddled up in bed, looking very sorry for himself. He had me up three times in the night, to get him a drink, to give him some Aspro and to make up the fire: in that order. He still looked as querulous as a wet hen.

'Can't you leave me alone? I am trying to sleep. What is it? What do you want?'

'Miss Pearl just phoned. She says she's coming down right away.'

That startled him. He half sat up, a look of alarm in his eyes, 'Coming here?'

'So she says. What do you want me to do? Fetch her or let her take a taxi?'

'Go and meet her. Bring her back quick. Does she say why she is coming?'

'She said it was very important, but she didn't say why.'

'Go and meet her then.'

I went to my room, slipped on a coat and ran down the stairs. Rita was coming up the path to the house as I opened the front door.

'Where are you going?'

'The little Pearl is on her way down. I'm meeting her at the station.'

Her face tightened. She pushed past me and went up the stairs.

I had had an idea there was no love lost between her and Emmie. Now I was certain of it.

Emmie came out of the station, clutching a briefcase under her arm. She had on a rabbit-skin coat and a black hat with a pheasant's feather sticking out of it. She looked ugly enough to be in the Chamber of Horrors.

'Good morning. Miss Pearl. I hope you had a pleasant journey.'

She gave me a cold, hard stare and got into the car. I slammed the door, went around to the other side of the car and slid under the wheel.

'That's a pretty hat you're wearing. Did you shoot the pheasant or fall on it?'

She turned purple.

'You think you're pretty smart, don't you?'

'Oh, I don't know. I suppose I get along one way or the other.' I weaved the car through the bottleneck in the Broadway and hooted a bus out of my way. 'Not as smart as you. Miss Pearl, but in my own little way and my own little sphere I get along all right.'

'I hate you, Mitchell. If I can do you harm. I'm going to do it.'

Her voice squeaked with rage and spite.

'Probably you won't get the chance. Sarek's given me the sack. I'm off at the end of the week. You'll miss me, won't you?'

I saw her fat, grubby hands clench into fists, and I grinned.

I knew she had read that note, and I knew she had a pretty shrewd idea how Sarek would react. I knew too it had been a temptation to destroy the note and not tell him about it so she would be sure of getting rid of me. If she hadn't been gooey about him, she might have destroyed it, but she didn't dare. He had to see it. He had to take precautions, even if it meant keeping me to guard him.

Writing that note was the smartest thing I had done up to now.

When Rita opened the front door and let Emmie in, I went to the barn and chopped wood for a couple of hours, taking it nice and easy and not exerting myself.

Although I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall and listened in to the commotion, I decided it would be better to keep out of the way. When Sarek wanted me - and I knew he would want me all right - he could send for me.

Those two would try to persuade him to get rid of me and find someone else to guard him. But I felt pretty sure I had played my cards right and nothing they could say would make him change his mind, once he decided he still had to have a guard. He wasn't likely to forget how I handled Lehmann. He would remember the games of chess we had played together, and how well I had looked after him in the night. He would be smart enough to know it wouldn't be easy to get someone as fast and as strong and as tough as I was, and combine chess and service as well.

I wasn't surprised when, around noon, the local taxi turned up. I kept out of sight, but I didn't miss a thing.

Emmie came out of the house. She looked ill and defeated. Her face was swollen and her eyes red with crying: even her feather had gone limp.

I watched her get in the taxi. I knew I had beaten her.

Sarek was so scared he wouldn't let me drive her to the station.

That much was obvious. I was willing to bet that from now on he was going to stick to me closer than my shadow.

Ten minutes or so after the taxi had gone I heard a step behind me. I shouldered the axe and turned. She was within a few feet of me. She was pale, but she didn't look defeated, and there was a glitter in her eyes I didn't like.

'He wants you.'

She spoke breathlessly as if she had been running.

We looked at each other for about three seconds, then she turned and walked out of the bam. There was something about the way she walked and the way she held herself that made me think of a wild cat.

I dropped the axe and took out my handkerchief to wipe my face. I wasn't quite so sure of her now. I had expected her to say something. That three-second look had sent a chill up my spine.

I went up the stairs and found him propped up in bed, his face shiny with sweat, and there was panic in his little black eyes. He seemed to have shrivelled, and his lips were trembling.

His fingers picked at the blanket. I had meant to throw a scare into him, but this was more than a scare. I had ripped him wide open.

'What's wrong, Mr. Sarek?'

'Frank...'

That was better. That was much more like it.

'What's upset you, Mr. Sarek?'

'Read it...'

He tried to pick up the note that lay on the bedside table but his hand shook so he only succeeded in knocking it on the floor. I bent and picked it up. It made pretty good reading.

'When did you get this?'

'Emmie brought it. You stay with me, Frank. You understand?'

I could have made him crawl, but that wouldn't have helped me in the long run.

'Well of course, Mr. Sarek. You leave this to me. Just take it easy. No one's going to get near you.'

'You're sure you can handle them, Frank?'

'Certainly I can handle them. Don't worry about it. If they really mean business they wouldn't write these cockeyed notes. They're trying to scare you. With me around you're as safe as the King of England - safer.'

He licked his thin lips, but the panic in his eyes receded.

‘They want me to get rid of you. She keeps on and on about you. Is why I talk the way I talk last night. Is nothing. You understand? You forget about it, hey?’

‘That’s all right, Mr. Sarek. I knew you weren’t feeling well. As long as I’m of use to you I’ll be glad to stay.’

‘You stick by me.’

He stuck out his thin, trembling claw.

‘You won’t regret it, Frank.’

I shook hands with him.

I wished Rita had been there to have seen us.

I had been asleep for perhaps an hour when I woke up with a start. The room was as black as pitch. There wasn’t a sound, but I could smell her. The smell of musk was right by me.

My heart began to pound as I reached for the light switch.

‘Don’t turn on the light.’

‘What do you want?’

We whispered at each other through the darkness.

‘You wrote that letter, didn’t you?’

I tried to grin, but it didn’t come off.

‘Who else do you think wrote it?’

‘Why did you do it?’

‘I want to stay here. You shouldn’t have ganged up on me.’

‘Why do you want to stay here?’

I was having trouble with my breathing. Knowing she was within reach gave me a feeling of suffocation.

‘You know why. Ever since I first saw you I’ve wanted you. You know that. That’s why I wrote it. What are you going to do about it? Do you want me to tell him you wrote the other notes?’

Silence.

‘Well, do you?’

Silence.

I turned on the light. Sweat was running down my face, into my eyes, making them smart.

She had gone.

chapter eight

I scarcely slept that night. I was in two minds to follow her to her room and have it out with her, but I farked it. Although I knew I had her cornered, something warned me to be careful and cautious how I moved in to collect the payoff. She wasn't the ordinary run of women. She was special, and needed special treatment.

I lay awake most of the night, thinking about her; and when I did doze of I dreamed about her: a dream that brought me upright in bed with my heart hammering and my hair damp with sweat.

I was thankful when it was time to get up. With Sarek out of the way in bed I would be able to tackle her. I would make her tell me why she had been sending those threatening letters, and let her know if she wanted me to keep quiet about them she would have to be a lot more friendly than she had been. But that idea was exploded when I walked into his room just after seven o'clock, expecting to find him still grizzling in bed. But he wasn't. He was up and dressed. He looked pretty ill; his skin was yellowish, and his little black eyes were sunken and had dark smudges under them.

Like me, he hadn't slept much.

'Should you be up?'

'How can I lie in bed? I can't rest. Is too much on my mind.'

'With that cold you should be in bed.'

'I sit downstairs. Is too lonely up here.'

And I had thought I was going to have a free hand with him safely out of the way in bed. I could have strangled him.

As it turned out it was even worse than I had imagined.

Every time I tried to sneak into the kitchen to find her and tell her to meet me in the barn, he either yelled to me to come back or came running after me. He stuck to me like a flypaper until I nearly went nuts.

She kept out of my way, and I only saw her at meals. It seemed the understanding that no one talked at meals. She never did. In the beginning I tried to make conversation with Sarek, but he was too busy with his food to do more than grunt, so I let it go, and we raced through our meals in silence.

When he wasn't looking my way I managed to give her a quick glance. She was as pokerfaced and stony eyed as ever, and met my eyes with her usual sullen indifference.

I've never spent such a day, and the thought that tomorrow would be as bad, that I should have him trailing after me wherever I went made me fit to walk up a wall.

Around five o'clock, I pulled the curtains and turned on the lights in the sitting room. Sarek was sitting before the blazing log fire, miserably polishing his great hooked nose and snivelling to himself 'Well, I think I'll have a walk round, Mr. Sarek. Just to make sure everything's locked up.'

'Make sure the barn door is fastened.'

'I will.'

I scarcely believed my ears. He was actually letting me out of his sight without a fuss.

'Frank...'

I paused at the door.

'Yes?'

'Can you use a gun?'

‘Certainly, I can use a gun. What of it?’

‘A revolver?’

‘Any damn thing that fires. Why?’

He crawled out of his chair and went over to the writing desk. From the bottom drawer he produced a .38 Colt revolver which he handed to me.

‘Is loaded.’

‘I don’t want this.’

‘Is better to have it. All right, maybe you don’t have to use it, but is a good thing to have, anyway.’

‘Have you a permit for it?’

‘No, but does not matter. Is all right.’

‘It isn’t all right if I shoot someone with it.’

‘Is not necessary to shoot anyone. Is only necessary to point it at them or if very bad, fire into the air.’

I turned the gun over in my hand. I have a weakness for guns. I like handling them. At one time I was a pretty useful shot. ‘Well, okay, if it makes you happy.’ I shoved the gun in my hip pocket. ‘I’ll have a look round.’

As I opened the door, he said ‘Tell Mrs. Sarek to come here. I don’t want to be left alone.’

‘She’s busy in the kitchen.’

It was an effort to get the words out.

‘I don’t care what she’s doing. I said tell her to come here.’

‘I’ll tell her.’

I went down the dark passage to the kitchen, choking with rage. Was I never to get her alone for five minutes?

She was preparing supper, a bored, sullen expression on her face.

‘He wants you.’

She looked at me and smiled. It was the first time she had ever smiled at me, but it gave me no joy. It was a mocking, jeering little smile that sent the blood to my face.

‘You are having bad luck, aren’t you?’

‘Tonight. Do you hear? Come to my room tonight or I’ll tell him. I’m fed up with this. If you don’t come, I’ll tell him.’

She laughed.

‘I don’t think he’ll let me come. Now you’ve scared him out of his wits, he’s decided to sleep with me.’

I caught hold of her wrist, digging my nails into her flesh.

‘You’ve got to manage somehow...’

‘Careful,’ she said, and leaned against me. ‘He’s coming.’

I just had time to step away from her when he came in.

‘I won’t be left alone. Every sound I hear frightens me. Go and look round. Is what I pay you for.’

‘I’m going.’

I went out into the darkness, feeling the touch of her breast still against my arm and the soft, cool feel of her flesh in my hand.

What a fool I had been to have sent that note, I saw now how smart she was. She had gauged his cowardice. Her notes that I thought were tripe were just strong enough to make him jittery, but mine, I

had been so proud of, had turned him into an uncontrollable pest.

So he was going to sleep with her. It made me sick to think of it. I knew there would be no sleep for me that night.

I went into the barn with her jeering little laugh still ringing in my ears.

The next morning began on the same lines as the previous morning. Sarek got up about seven o'clock and clung around me, never leaving me for a moment.

After an almost sleepless night, my nerves were ragged, and it was as much as I could do not to hit him. And to make it worse I knew she thought the situation was funny. Whenever she came into the room and found us together, her jeering little smile was like a flick of a whip.

Then just after ten o'clock, the telephone bell rang. I knew who it was, and when he told me Emmie was on her way down I suddenly felt ten years younger.

'Shall I meet her?'

'Is all right. I told her to take a taxi.'

I was grinning now. They would shut themselves up in the sitting room for at least a couple of hours, and I'd be free to tackle her.

She was in the room when Emmie rang and I looked at her. It was my turn to jeer at her now. She didn't meet my eyes, and the sullen look of indifference had returned to her face.

This was going to be the show down, and she knew it.

Emmie arrived around noon. It was the longest morning I have ever lived through. I never thought I would be glad to see that squat, fat figure, but I was. I could have cheered when I saw her squeezing herself through the door of the taxi, showing her legs that had no more shape to them than tree stumps.

I had gone into the barn to chop wood, leaving Sarek with Rita, and I watched the taxi's arrival from the barn door.

As soon as she had waddled into the house I slung down the axe. I'd give them five minutes to settle down to business, then I'd go and find Rita.

I lit a cigarette with a hand that shook like a leaf, and looked through the doorway at the house, counting the uneven beats of my heart.

I caught a glimpse of Sarek through the window. He was pulling up a chair to the fire. Then Emmie came into view for a moment as she crossed the room to join him.

I couldn't wait another second. Throwing the cigarette away, I started towards the barn door.

She was in the doorway, facing me.

How she got there I didn't know or care. There she was, in her grey sweater and slacks, her hands on her hips, looking at me.

For perhaps four or five seconds we stood motionless, like a couple of waxworks. There was in expression in her eyes I had never seen before. There was no jeer in her smile either.

'Were you coming to me?'

'You know I was.'

My voice sounded as if I was being strangled.

'Don't look like that. It's all right, Frank. Before it just wasn't safe.'

I wasn't aware she had moved close to me; suddenly her face was within six inches of mine.

I grabbed her.

I felt her fingers at the back of my neck, pulling my head down. My mouth covered hers. Her hands slid from my head to my shoulders, her fingers like hooks digging into my back muscles. I felt her

breath against the back of my throat.

We stayed like that for maybe a minute, then I swung her off her feet and carried her over to the pile of hay in the darkest corner of the barn.

‘The door... shut it, Frank.’

‘To hell with the door...’

I dropped her on the hay and I melted over her.

‘No! Don’t be a fool! She might come out here.’

‘To hell with her!’

‘See what they’re doing.’

I walked across the uneven floor of the barn to the door, and leaned against the barn doorway and looked towards the house. Through the lower window I could see the sunlight reflecting on Sarek’s baldhead. He was still there, before the fire. ‘It’s all right. They’re still talking.’

‘Stay there and watch them. If he saw us together. . .’

‘What’s got into you? This is a pretty sudden change, isn’t it? I thought you couldn’t stand the sight of me.’

I heard her quiet laugh and turned my head to look at her. She was lying half-hidden in the hay, her arms above her head one leg drawn up.

‘I fell for you the moment I saw you. I like big men.’

‘I don’t believe it! Not after the way you’ve been treating me. You’ve driven me crazy.’

‘I’m glad. I like men to go crazy about me. But it wasn’t all that.’

‘Then what was it?’

‘When I saw the look in your eyes when we first met I knew this thing was going to happen; and I wanted it to happen. But I know him a lot better than you do. He’s insanely jealous. You wouldn’t have remained here three minutes if he thought you meant anything to me. Not three seconds. But it’s all right now: all right so long as we’re careful. He’s sure I haven’t any time for you. I’ve told him over and over again to get rid of you. He hasn’t an idea this could have happened.’

‘You damned near talked him into getting rid of me. If I hadn’t thrown a scare into him . . .’

‘I had to do it. It was a risk I had to run. But if he had told you to go I would have sent him another note. Only you did it for me.’

‘You’re some actress. I still don’t believe it.’

‘Did you believe just now?’

‘Yes, I believed that all right. That wasn’t faked.’

‘Well then... don’t be so suspicious.’

‘You made me suffer.’

‘I’ve made up for it, haven’t I?’

‘Not yet; but it’s helped.’

Again she laughed.

‘The next time he goes to Paris I’m staying here - with you. You’ll believe it then?’

My heart began to pound again.

‘When’s he going?’

‘I don’t know. He usually goes every month.’

‘He’s just been. Do you mean I have to keep away from you for a month? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?’

‘There’s another way out of it.’

‘What’s that?’

‘We can kill him, Frank.’

The battered little milk van came rushing up the narrow lane. A hand came out of the van window and placed two-pint bottles of milk on the top of the gate. Then the van reversed, swung in a half-circle, and stormed down the lane again.

The only time that milkman bothered to get out of his van was when he came to collect his money: no other time.

‘What was that? What did you say?’

‘We can kill him, Frank.’

I turned to stare at her. All I could see was the white column of her throat as she lay staring up at the dusty rafters, and the points of her breasts, hard against the soft wool of her sweater.

‘What kind of crazy talk is that?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I was offering you another solution. I don’t suppose I was serious.’

‘You’d better not be serious!’

‘No?’

‘No!’

She raised her arm and looked at her wristwatch.

‘I must go in. I haven’t started the lunch yet.’

She scrambled to her feet, and began brushing the wisps of hay of her trousers.

‘Brush me down at the back, Frank.’

I went over and slapped the dust and hay from her legs, ‘Ow, you’re hurting!’

I jerked her to me.

‘They hang you for murder. Had you forgotten?’

‘Who’s talking about murder?’

‘Then what are you driving at?’

‘I’m not driving at anything. Perhaps his cold will get worse and he’ll die that way. It would be nice if he did die, wouldn’t it? Then you wouldn’t have to sleep in that little room and I wouldn’t have to give him a son.’

‘Shut up!’

I took her by her shoulders and shook her.

‘Shut up about that!’

Her eyes looked like emeralds in the half-light.

‘You don’t like the idea, Frank? Nor do I.’

She pulled away from me and went out of the barn.

Around bedtime he startled me by saying he was going to the office the next day.

‘I can’t afford to neglect my business. With you, I’ll be all right, hey?’

‘You’ll be all right.’

‘You’ll take the gun?’

‘Yes.’

He nodded, still a little fearful, but I could see he had made up his mind or that Emmie had made it up for him.

‘Well, is all right then. I go to bed now.’

‘I’ll take a look round. I won’t be long in following you.’

‘Good night.’

I waited until he had gone up the stairs, then I slipped on my duffel coat and went out into the darkness. The air was crisply cold and the wind easterly. There was no moon, but the black sky was pinpointed with stars.

I groped my way to the barn and up into the loft. As soon as I pushed open the loft door I saw she hadn’t pulled down the blind. I sat on the floor, looking into her room, a tight feeling in my throat, and my heart pounding.

She was sitting before her dressing table, in the green silk wrap over an oyster-white nightdress.

I watched her brush her hair for five minutes, then the door opened and Sarek came in. He was wearing his dressing gown and pyjamas, and over his arm he carried his awful overcoat. He hung the coat on a hook behind the door, took off his dressing gown and got into bed.

She didn’t look round, but continued to brush her hair. I could see him speaking to her, frowning, pointing to the window.

She gave an impatient little shrug and came to the window.

We looked at each other across the dark space. I knew she couldn’t see me, but I knew she knew I was there.

I watched her pull down the blind. I saw her shadow move towards the bed, then the light went out and I was looking at nothing, feeling the pain of frustration and jealousy enter into me like the slow thrust of a sword.

For the next seven days I had no chance of being alone with her. Sarek and I went to the office every day and returned in the evening. He wouldn’t let me out of his sight except when I went to lock up the chickens and take the last look round, and then he’d only let me go if she stayed with him.

Every night she left the blind up, and I watched her prepare for bed. And when Sarek joined her, the last thing she did before pulling down the blind was to look towards the bam.

By the end of the seventh day I wasn’t sure if I was in my right mind.

‘We can kill him, Frank.’

I had never ceased to think about that. At first I thought she had been joking, then I decided she had been serious, and it worried me. But at the end of the seventh day I was wanting to kill him myself.

Watching him night after night in her room, put a kink in my brain.

‘We can kill him, Frank.’

It meant nothing to me now - nothing. As if she had said we’d kill a cockerel for dinner: not as much.

On the tenth night I nearly did kill him.

I was up there in the loft, watching her undress when he came into the room. She didn’t look at him or pay him any attention, and he stood watching her for a moment. Then he reached out and touched her.

I had the gun in my hand. I was aiming at him, swearing aloud, raving like a madman, the gun sight steady as a rock, my finger taking up the trigger slack. Then she moved between the gun sight and his head and I dropped the gun with a shudder to the floor.

I had nearly murdered him. If she hadn’t moved at that moment I would have shot him: as close to murder as that.

On the way to the office the next morning, he told me casually that tomorrow he would catch the ten

o'clock plane to Paris.

chapter nine

It was just after seven and I was lighting the fire when he came in. One look at his face told me something had happened. He was beaming: I don't think I have seen anyone look as happy as he did, and I gaped at him.

'Mrs. Sarek she is sick this morning.'

My mouth went dry.

'You mean she is ill?'

He patted me on the shoulder. If possible his grin seemed to widen. I could see every tooth in his head.

'No; not ill; is sick, you understand? Very sick. Is first sign, hey? Sick in the morning is good, hey?'

I didn't say anything: I couldn't.

He took out his handkerchief and polished his great, hooked nose. It gave him also the opportunity to wipe his eyes.

He was nearly blubbering.

'Is what I pray for. I wait three year for this. Is my son coming.'

I turned my back squarely on him and poked the fire. If he had seen my face, he would have known the set-up. I felt bad enough to faint. But he was far too busy being happy to notice anything wrong with me.

'Is too sick to fly this morning. She want to stay here. Is understandable. I'll be back in three, four days.'

I felt the blood return to my face. She had told me she would stay the next time he went to Paris. Maybe the sickness was a blind. I hoped so.

'Well, you won't want me around here, Mr. Sarek. I'll spend a few days in London unless you want me with you in Paris.'

He beamed at me.

'Is right. You take a few days of. Have a good time. I never ask you, Frank. You got a girl, hey?'

'Well, yes. She'll be glad to see me.'

'You get married soon?'

I shook my head.

'I'm not the marrying type.'

He patted my shoulder.

'You think about marriage, Frank. Is good to have a son.'

I grinned at him. There wasn't much heart in it.

'I'd rather have a rich father.'

While I was supposed to be getting the car out of the garage, I heard him phoning Emmie. He was telling her about his son, and from the way he talked she wasn't over-excited.

'I feel it,' he said saying aggressively. 'Is a son coming. I know. Is no good you saying things like that. I don't listen. I know, I tell you.'

I had hoped to sneak up the stairs and find out if it had happened or if she was fooling him, but I didn't get the chance.

The sitting room looked on to the stairs, and the door was open while he telephoned.

I went out and got the car.

After a while he came down the path, wrapped in his comic coat, grinning from ear to ear. He climbed in, beside me, and we started off.

All the way to the airport he talked about his son-to-be, what he was going to do with him, where he was going to educate him, and a lot of stuff like that that nearly drove me nuts.

‘Don’t count your chicken, Mr. Sarek. Maybe you’ll get a girl.’

‘Is son. I know is son. Don’t talk to me about girls. Is unlucky.’

Miss Robinson was there to welcome him, and of course he had to tell her.

‘Excuse me, Mr. Sarek, but if you don’t want me any longer I’ll get off. You’re in good company.’

‘Is all right. You get off.’

He went right on talking to Miss Robinson.

I heard her say, ‘I’m terribly glad for you, Mr. Sarek. I know how you want a boy. I do wish you luck: you and Mrs. Sarek.’

And she really made it sound as if she meant it.

I returned to the car and headed back to Four Winds. On Western Avenue I beat the old creak up to seventy-three. It bounced about the road like a crazy kangaroo, but I kept it at it: I wanted to get back, and get back fast.

When I reached the house I shoved the car into the garage and locked the door. I wasn’t supposed to go back, and I wasn’t taking any chances of a tradesman seeing me and talking. Then I unlocked the front door and walked into the sitting room.

She was kneeling before the fire, still in her dressing gown. She looked over her shoulder at me and smiled. There were shadowy smudges under her eyes, and her face was pale, but there was nothing wrong with her smile.

‘Were you sick?’

‘I was sick all right. I ate soap.’

I grabbed her and hauled her to her feet, ‘Then it isn’t true?’

‘Do you think I’d carry a child of his?’

‘But he thinks it’s coming. He’s acting like a crazy man telling everyone. He’s even told that air hostess.’

‘How was I to know the fool would jump to that conclusion? I had to be ill or he would have made me go with him.’

‘Did you have to be sick?’

‘You don’t know him like I do. He has to have proof. A headache or a pain wouldn’t have done.’

I suddenly saw how funny it was and began to laugh.

‘He’s certainly made a fool of himself all right.’

She watched me with an odd look in her eyes.

‘I shouldn’t have thought you would find it funny.’

‘Well, isn’t it? He’s going to get the shock of his life when nothing happens.’

‘Do you think he’ll ever admit he was wrong?’

I grinned at her.

‘What else can he do about it?’

‘Make certain he isn’t wrong.’

That wiped the grin of my face.

‘It takes two to make a job of that.’

‘Does it? I’m not so sure. I’ve had my own way for three years. I have a feeling it’s his turn now.’

‘Now, look here...’

‘I mean it, Frank. You don’t know what he’s like, and now he’s told everyone, he’ll get his way - unless we can find a way out.’

‘There is one. Pack up and come away with me - now. How do you like that for an idea?’

Her eyes widened.

‘And what do we do for money?’

I felt as if I’d suddenly walked into a wall. I hadn’t thought about money; all I was thinking about was owning her.

‘I can get a job. Don’t worry your head about money. I’ll get all the money you’ll want.’

‘Will you?’ The emerald eyes glittered. ‘Well, go ahead and get it, then come and tell me. I’ve had one dose of living on air. I’m not having another.’

‘You don’t call this living, do you? Stuck here in this lonely hole? You’re no better off than a skivvy. I could do better for you than this tomorrow.’

‘Then go ahead and do it. But don’t expect me to leave here until I’m sure you’re not fooling yourself - or me.’

I started to say something, but she put her hand on my mouth.

‘It’s no good, Frank. Let’s begin again, and this time don’t let’s bluff. You know as well as I do you wouldn’t be doing a job like this if you could get anything better. What does he pay you - ten pounds? How do you think we could live as I want to live on ten pounds a week? We couldn’t.’

‘Well, all right, let’s begin again. It’s your turn to make a suggestion. What do we do?’

She flopped down on the settee, and her silk wrap fell open to the knees.

As I moved towards her, she said quietly, ‘What do we do, Frank? We kill him. There isn’t any other way.’

‘Let’s get this straight. You’ve got to cut that kind of talk right out with me. I’m not as soft in the head as all that. They hang you for murder. I’m not all that tired of life.’

‘They won’t know. They won’t even suspect us.’

I went over to the sideboard, hoisted up a bottle of Scotch, poured out two big slugs and carried them to the settee.

‘They always know.’

She took the whisky.

‘Not the way I’ve planned it.’

‘So you’ve already planned it? All right, tell me, and I’ll tell you where it goes wrong.’

‘It won’t go wrong.’

‘Go ahead and tell me.’

‘If you think it’s a good idea, will you help me, Frank?’

‘It won’t be a good idea, but tell me, and I’ll show you why it isn’t a good idea, and you’ll thank me because I’ll have saved your lovely neck for you.’

The green eyes suddenly glittered, and the soft, full mouth tightened.

‘You think I’m a fool, don’t you?’

‘Nothing like it, but a safe murder has got to be good, and I don’t think any woman can make it as good as it has to be, nor do I think any woman can stand up to the grilling from the police when they

start in on her. You or any other woman.'

'That sounds as if you think you could do better.'

'Never mind what it sounds like. Tell me your idea. Let's have a look at it.'

For a moment or so she hesitated.

'You know that milkman leaves the milk on the gate.'

'All right, hold it! Don't tell me anymore. You've said enough. The milk on the gate: so that's it. Now I know exactly what your idea is, and it won't do. It won't even start to do.'

'How do you know?' She was leaning forward, staring at me, her face suddenly white and set.

'Because it sticks out a mile. Listen, I'll tell you. To start off with, it doesn't look bad. I admit that; it doesn't look bad at all. The milk is left on the gate every morning where anyone could tamper with it. All they have to do is to squirt poison through the cardboard cap with a hypodermic. That's the way you would do it because you have a hypodermic. I've seen it in the bathroom. Now, another thing I've noticed: you never have milk with your morning coffee, but he does. So it would be safe for you to poison his milk, and look wide-eyed with horror when the police arrive. You could also assure them you never have milk with your coffee, and they might believe it. But your only witness who'd support your story would be dead, and that is the beginning of your troubles.'

'You're just picking holes in the idea. I don't see what's wrong with it.'

'There's everything wrong with it. Now I know why you've been sending him threatening letters. You think that'll give you an alibi. You think those notes will make the police think someone wants him out of the way, and after writing a number of notes, poisons him. Do you really think they'd believe it?'

She drank the whisky in two quick gulps, as if she needed it. Her hand was shaking.

'Why shouldn't they believe it?'

'Because they've been trained never to believe anything that's put before them. They may seem to believe it, but you can bet your sweet life they won't do more than consider it as a possibility. First, they'll start digging, and make no mistake about it, those boys dig deep. They'll examine the letters. They'll find they've been written on blue, deckle-edged notepaper, and that'll start them thinking. Can you imagine any of Sarek's competitors using such paper? The moment I saw the colour and the pretty edges I knew a woman had written those notes, and they'd know it too. Then they'd hunt for the typewriter, and unless you've thought of a better hiding place than behind your wardrobe they'd find it, and that out-of-alignment e and d would clinch it. But if they didn't find the typewriter they would still know it was a woman because seventy-five murderers out of every hundred who use poison are women. And one more thing, poison can be traced. Where did you get yours?'

'I've had it for years.' She was sullen now. 'I couldn't be traced.'

'That's what you think. There are dozens of murderers rotting in unknown graves who've said exactly that little thing. Once they had the idea it was you, they'd work on you. And don't think it would be fun, because it wouldn't. You'd be wondering all the time if they knew more than they said. You would be wondering if they had traced the blue notepaper or the typewriter or the poison. You'd begin to lose your nerve, and they'd keep after you. Maybe you wouldn't give yourself away, but if I was around, you wouldn't need to give yourself away. They would only have to take one look at me and one look at you and the motive's there, staring them straight in the face. Then they'd really go to town on you and on me too: and how long do you think we'd stick it? A day, two days - a week? I wonder. Maybe we wouldn't stick it a day...'

I stopped talking to stare at her.

‘Now, wait a minute, just why do you want to murder him? Come on, spill it. Why do you want him dead?’

‘You’ve taken a long time to get around to that, haven’t you?’

‘That’s right - I have. I’ve been thinking all the time you wanted him out of the way so you and I could hook up, but I’ve been kidding myself, haven’t I? It isn’t that at all, is it? It can’t be.’

Her soft, full lips came off her teeth in a smile that meant nothing.

‘You had already started to murder him in your mind long before you ever saw me. You had written four of those notes before I appeared on the scene.’ I was bending over her, my voice loud, my face congested. ‘What’s the idea? What haven’t you told me?’

She put her hand on my arm.

‘You are an added incentive now, Frank, but not the incentive.’

‘All right; all right: let’s have it. Why do you want to get rid of him?’

‘I want the money.’

I stepped away from her, stiffening.

‘What money?’

‘His money, of course. He’s an undischarged bankrupt. He has to live like this or they’ll make him pay his debts,. He can’t spend his money so he’s hidden it until he can.’

So I had been right all along. I knew there had to be money after I had seen fat Emmie and her diamond; the shabby little office and the table creaking with good food.

‘How much?’

‘Are you interested, Frank?’

I grabbed her, jerked her to her feet and shook her.

‘How much?’

‘About a hundred and fifty thousand; probably a little more.’ And then I remembered what I had said to Netta.

‘I’ve got such an itch for that kind of money I’d stop at nothing. Do you hear? Nothing! I’d take even murder in my stride...’

A hundred and fifty thousand!

I felt a chill run up my spine.

chapter ten

She was lying flat on her back, along the length of the settee, staring up at the ceiling. The thin sunlight coming through the mist lit up the tints in her copper-coloured hair and deepened the shadows under her eyes. Just to look at her made concentration a feat of endurance and will power.

‘What are you thinking about?’ She adjusted the wrap to hide her legs. I came over from the window and stood at the foot of the settee, facing her. We stared at each other.

‘One thing at a time. How do you know he’s got this money?’

‘I’ve seen it. About twenty-five thousand in five-pound notes and the rest in small diamonds.’

Just to think of it made me breathless ‘Diamonds, eh?’

‘They could be sold, couldn’t they, Frank?’

‘They could be sold. They pay well for diamonds in America. Would you like to go to America?’

‘I’d love it.’

I sat beside her.

‘A hundred and fifty thousand: that’s a lot of money. Are you sure it’s as much as that?’

‘It’s probably more now.’

‘How in the world did he get so much money?’

‘Do you think he works for nothing? Everything he touches turns to money. When he first came here he started up as merchant. He got credit, made thousands with other people’s money and then went bankrupt. That gave him the start ‘he wanted. Then he moved into the car racket, bought and sold cars during the shortage and cleaned up more thousands. He’s working the currency racket now. Why do you think he’s always going to Paris? He’s a genius at making money.’

‘Where does he keep the stuff?’

‘Where I can get it when he’s dead.’

That was my cue to look at her. She looked right back at me.

‘That doesn’t tell me where he keeps it, does it.’

‘No one is going to know that. I’ll tell you fast enough when he’s dead, but not before.’

I smiled at her, but the edges of the smile were a little faded. ‘That doesn’t sound as if you trusted me.’

‘Is anyone to be trusted with that much money?’

‘We are not talking about anyone: we’re talking about me.’

Again we stared at each other.

‘I’ll tell you when he’s dead.’

‘So that means I have to trust you.’

‘Will that be so hard?’

I got up and poured myself another drink. There was a tight feeling in my chest: a feeling of excitement.

‘What’s to stop us taking the money now and hooking it?’

‘Don’t you think I should have done that months ago if it was possible?’

‘I should have thought so. He couldn’t do anything about it. If that money comes from the black market, he wouldn’t dare complain to the police. What’s stopping you? If you know where it is, all we have to do is lift it and blow. We can do it right now.’

'It isn't possible.'

'But why?'

'You can take it from me, it isn't. Do you think I'd be such a reckless fool as to think of killing him if I could get the money any other way?'

'Don't keep saying it isn't possible. Tell me why. Don't make such a damned mystery out of it.'

She reached for a cigarette, lit it and tossed the match into the fireplace.

'I happen to know him. The whole of his mean little life is tied up in that money. If I disappeared with it he would tell the police. You don't think he would, but I know he would. He would rather go to prison than let me get away with it. And I'm not going to be hunted by the police. When I get that money I intend to enjoy it.'

I studied her. Her green eyes were as expressionless as a stonewall.

'If you and I are going to get along together, you may as well get this straight. I'm smart. I was given a brain and I use it. I'm not boasting. I'm stating a fact. I was born smart. You're lying. You know damn well he wouldn't slick the police on you. He isn't that much of a fool. To be caught with all those diamonds would put him behind bars for years. Of course he wouldn't tell the police, and you know it as well as I do.'

'Don't be too smart, Frank.'

'I can't help myself. On the face of it all you have to do is take the money and disappear. It wouldn't be difficult and it would appear to be a lot safer than murdering him. But you can't do it that way. Now, why? I'll tell you. You can't do it because he's got something on you: something you don't want anyone - including me - and particularly the police to know. You know if you took his money he would get even by talking, and you'd be in the cart: not for stealing his money, but for something you've done already. That's a little more like it, isn't it?'

'Is it? If you're so smart, why ask me?'

'Don't get angry about it. We're going to work together and you've got to get this into your smart little head: I'm going to help you, and if you want my help you've got to trust me.'

She didn't say anything.

'I'll tell you something else. When I was hunting for that typewriter I came across a box of letters in your wardrobe drawer. They told me quite a lot about you. You had hundreds of offers of marriage from men who must have been a damn sight easier to live with than a little vulture like Sarek. You could have had the pick of any of them, but you had to choose him. That puzzled me. Why did a girl with your looks and shape throw herself away on a little honor like Sarek? I know now. He had something on you, and you didn't dare refuse him. That's why you're still with him now. That's why you know, sooner or later, you'll have to give him a child. That's why you know if you steal his hoard he'll give you away, and that's why you want to murder him: to stop his mouth once and for all!'

She sat up, her wrap falling open, her fists clenched, her face as white as a fresh fall of snow.

'Something like that, Frank. Now what are you going to do about it?'

'There are two things I can do. I can walk out of this house and leave you to poison him. If I do that, they'll hang you as sure as God made little apples. And I wouldn't like them to do that to you, Rita. You're too lovely to hang. If I don't do that; if I stay, then we'll have to trust each other. I don't want to know what he's got on you. But I do want to know where he's hidden his hoard. And when you've told me that, I'll have to think of a way to kill him. How much will you pay me to make a safe job of it: a guaranteed job?'

She lay still for some seconds while her eyes searched my face. 'How much do you want?'

'All of it and you too to spend it with.'

'You're sure about me?'

'I'm sure all right.'

'It's in the barn, Frank. I don't know where exactly. It's buried somewhere. We would have to hunt for it.'

'How do you know it's there?'

'When we first came here, he shut himself in there with a spade. It must be there.'

'How about my terms?'

'It would be safe, Frank?'

'It's got to be safe. If I can't think of a safe plan I'm not going to touch it. My neck is worth more to me than a hundred and fifty thousand. It'll be safe all right if I do it.'

'Have it all then, Frank, and me too; only make it safe.'

Later, when she had dressed, we went out to the barn.

'Somewhere here, you think?'

'I'm sure of it.'

I looked around. The place was full of the kind of things you put in barns. There was a heap of hay, a number of bales of straw, a great pile of wood logs, a pile of coal, a couple of chicken houses, a motor mower and rolls of wire netting. There wasn't a great deal of free floor space.

'When did that coal and wood come: before he shut himself in here or after?'

'After.'

'Then it could be under either of those stacks.'

'Yes.'

I dug my heel into the earth floor. It was as hard as concrete.

'He only had a spade?'

She wasn't missing one move I made.

'Well, he might have had a pick-axe. I forget.'

He would have to have a pickaxe to dig a hole in that ground, but I didn't say so. There wasn't a pickaxe in the tool shed, but I didn't remind her of that either.

I was certain she was lying. The money wasn't in the barn.

I hadn't thought it was likely when she told me, but now I was sure of it. He wouldn't bury it where it could get covered by a couple of tons of coal or wood. He hadn't the stamina to shift loads like that, and besides, if he wanted it in a hurry he had to be sure he could get it in a hurry.

All this had blown up a little too rapidly for me. I needed time to think about it, and until I had time to think about it I would let her kid herself I was believing her lies. I even pulled over some of the logs, pretending to examine the ground.

'Don't do that. If he thinks for a moment we've been looking, he'll move it.'

'That's right.'

I stood back.

'There's a lot of stuff to be shifted out of here before we can get a good look at the floor: a week's hard work.'

'We'll have plenty of time - when he's gone.'

Getting rid of him was all she was worrying about. 'Yes. Well, all right. If you're sure he's buried

it here there's nothing we can do until we can clear the place. Come on, let's have a drink.'

As she moved with me to the door. I went on, 'You are sure about it aren't you?'

'He shut himself up for a couple of hours in here. He had tools with him. When he came out there was soil on his shoes and he looked tired. He had been burying something. What else could it be?'

'It certainly looks like it. You didn't see him take anything in with him; besides the tools, I mean?'

For a fraction of a second she hesitated 'I can't be sure, but I think he had something bulky under his coat.'

I hid a grin. Her lies were as convincing as a politician's smile.

Rain ran down the bedroom window and the wind slammed against the side of the house and shook the yew trees, making them creak.

I lay full length on the bed, a cigarette burning between my fingers while my mind grappled with the problem.

After lunch I had told her I was going to give the situation a little thought and I wanted to be alone.

'The sooner the better, Frank.'

'I know, but I'm not rushing into anything. I've told you: it's got to be foolproof or I don't touch it.'

'Think about it.'

Well, I was thinking about it.

I had to decide whether or not she was lying about the money. I knew for certain Sarek had a hold on her, and she wanted to shut his mouth for good, but I had only her word that he had this money. Was she dangling the money before me as a bait to kill him for her? That was what I had to decide.

Assuming he had the money, where was it hidden? I was certain it wasn't in the barn. Where else could it be? In the house? I had already searched the place carefully when they had been in Paris, and had found nothing except the typewriter and her letters. It didn't seem likely he would hide all that money in the house where she might come on it accidentally.

Where else then? In his office? That was possible, but he had no safe, and was he likely to leave it there when the building was empty during the night and might catch fire? Would he take that risk? I wouldn't, and he was a lot more cautious than I. Was Emmie looking after it? I didn't think so. Rita had been right when she said no one was to be trusted with an amount as big as that. In the car? No, that wouldn't be safe either. Cars have accidents. Where else then?

I lit another cigarette and scowled up at the ceiling. What evidence had I that would convince me, no matter where it was hidden, that he owned all that money? It wasn't impossible. He was a racketeer, and worked in the black market. He would need large sums in cash for his business transactions. The racketeers I had read about in the newspapers had sums of money as large as the sum Rita said he had. It wasn't impossible to believe.

She had said the bulk of it was in small diamonds. I had seen a heap of small diamonds on his desk. Then there was Emmie's diamond ring. Not entirely convincing, but convincing enough.

Suppose there was only half that sum? Seventy-five thousand. I could do a lot with seventy-five thousand. I could do a lot with even half that amount. Suppose she was exaggerating to make sure I had a real incentive to kill him?

Suppose he was only a small-time racketeer and had say fifteen thousand? Even if it was only five thousand and I could lay my hands on it, it would be a hundred per cent profit with no risk.

I was now beginning to get the pictures in my mind.

There had to be some money. I was sure of that. It might be five thousand or a hundred and fifty

thousand. However much it was, it was there for the taking. He hadn't anything on me, and he couldn't explain to the police. Whatever it was, it would be money for jam.

But if I wanted her as well as the money, then I was heading for trouble. I would have to kill him to get her. I thought about her. She was good, satisfying, and exciting; as a woman she was in a class of her own. But I wasn't all that weak in the head to risk my neck for a woman. I certainly wasn't going to kill him for her. I would kid her along until I got my hands on his money, then I would ditch her.

Kidding her along wasn't going to be easy. I really had to believe I was going to kill him. I had to think up a foolproof, watertight method that would convince her I meant business.

And when I had convinced her, I had somehow to force Sarek to get his money out of hiding so I could grab it, and when I had grabbed it, I had to ditch her and that wouldn't be easy at all. She was dangerous. A woman who planned to kill her husband was always dangerous. I had to remember that.

I closed my eyes and bent my brain to the problem.

'You've been a long time.'

The room was in darkness. The only light came from the fire. She was sitting on the settee, her hands gripped between her knees, her shoulders hunched. She still wore the sweater and slacks, and her hair hung over her face. The long wait had rubbed her nerves raw.

'Do you think you can work out a thing like this in two minutes?'

'Have you worked it out?'

'I think so.'

She looked up: the firelight showed me a tense, hard face and eyes that were suspicious and alert.

'Sit down and tell me.'

'I want a drink. I've been tying my brains into knots.'

She got up and went over to the sideboard.

'Better put on the light.'

'I can see all right.'

She came back with the whisky bottle and two glasses.

'It hasn't been fun sitting here, waiting.'

'I don't suppose it has.'

I poured two stiff drinks, gave her one and sat down in the easy chair opposite her.

'I think I've got it.'

'You mean it's safe?'

'I said I wouldn't touch it if it wasn't safe, didn't I? All right, now you tell me if you think it's safe or not. I say it is.'

'Tell me.'

'He's going to disappear. Not a mysterious disappearances He'll have a convincing reason for going. He's got to have a convincing reason. As far as I know there are only three people in the world who would care if he vanished without reason: you and I and Emmie. You and I don't count, but Emmie does. If we're going to get away with this, Emmie's got to be sure he's one on his own free will and gone for good. Do you see that?'

'Yes.'

'If Emmie suspects for one moment he has been murdered or has run into trouble, she'll go to the police. Be sure of that. She would rather blow the lid of his racket than spend the rest of her days wondering if he was dead. Is that right?'

‘Yes.’

‘Now, get this straight. The police don’t act unless a body is found or a report is received that someone is missing under suspicious circumstances. Then, and only then, do they make inquiries. If no body is found and no report is received, no action is taken. If we handle this right, no action will be taken, and that’s why it’s safe. Do you follow that? There’s not going to be any risk of being questioned by the police, because the police just won’t enter into it. But to keep them out of it we’ve got to convince Emmie he’s gone away for good of his own free will.’ She was leaning forward now, staring at me, and I could hear her heavy breathing.

‘How do we do that?’

‘I’ll convince her. But there’s something I’ve got to do first, more important than convincing Emmie.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I’ve got to make him unearth the money.’ I saw her stiffen.

‘Why do that? We know where it is. Get rid of him and we can find it ourselves.’

‘Can we? Suppose it isn’t there? Do you think I’m going to kill him without knowing for certain that were getting the money? Do you think I’m that much of a fool? Do you think I’m going to risk my neck because you fancy he had something bulky under his coat? Oh, no, he’s going to unearth the money. I’m going to be damned sure he has it on him when I put my hands on his throat.’

She didn’t like this, as I knew she wouldn’t like it, but there was nothing she could do about it.

‘You’ll never make him do it.’

‘You don’t think so? Well, I do. Perhaps I know a little more about human behaviour than you do. The whole of his mean little life is tied up with that money. You said that; I didn’t. Suppose he has hidden it in the bam, and suppose the barn catches fire, isn’t he going to rush in there, without thinking you and I are watching him, and isn’t he going to rescue those diamonds and all that paper money before they burn? Isn’t he?’

She had to lick her lips before she could speak.

‘You wouldn’t be so mad as to set fire to the barn? People would come. The fire brigade would come.’

I laughed at her. I was really enjoying myself.

‘You’re absolutely right. I wouldn’t set fire to the barn. I don’t need to. I’ll tell you why. I don’t need to because I’m damned sure the money isn’t in the barn!’

She turned red, then white.

‘It is!’

‘You think it is, but I’m willing to bet everything I own it isn’t. And I’m willing to bet too he went in there with the spade to fool you into thinking that’s where he was hiding it. What do you think of that?’

I didn’t believe he had ever gone into the barn with a spade, but I had to give her a way out.

‘Yes; he might have done that.’

She hated giving up her story, but she had told her lies so badly, she had no alternative.

‘If it isn’t in the barn then you don’t know where it is, any more than I do. You don’t, do you?’

She looked away.

‘If it isn’t there, then I don’t.’

‘All right. Then neither of us knows where it is. We might search until we’re black in the face and

never find it. But if he suddenly decides to leave this country for good, wouldn't he take the money and diamonds with him? Of course he would. He wouldn't leave them here. He'd take them out of their hiding place and smuggle them out with him, and, that's when we'll move in.'

'You mean that's when we kill him?'

I looked into the stony green eyes.

'That's when we kill him.'

We sat facing each other in silence for perhaps half a minute. I was watching her, and she was watching me.

'I see.'

'Is that all you have to say?'

'He'll have the money on him so all we have to do is to take it. That's it, isn't it.'

'Go on.'

She frowned.

'What do you mean?'

I reached forward and put my hand on her knee. I was grinning. I couldn't help it. She had as much brain for this kind of job as Netta, if you can call what Netta had a brain.

'Well, pick holes in it as I picked holes in your idea.'

'It sounds good to me, Frank.'

'Think about it. If you don't start picking holes in it, you can bet your sweet life Emmie will.'

She was floundering now.

'Well, what do you do with the body?'

'That's better. Now you're using your brain. Never mind about the body. I've got that tied up. Anything else?'

'It sounds perfect if you really can hide the body, Frank.'

'Does it? Think again. Have you forgotten Emmie's crazy about him? They've worked together for ten years. They're like partners. Doesn't that mean anything?'

'What are you getting at now?'

'I said this had to be safe, didn't I? Not safe for a week or a month, but safe for as long as you and I live. And how long do you think we'll be safe if she doesn't hear from him after he's supposed to have gone? Do you think she's going to let him walk out of her life like that? She'll be convinced he's going because he'll tell her so, but if she doesn't hear from him after a few days she'll begin to wonder, and after a few more days she'll get excited. In less than a month she'll be sure something's happened to him and she'll go to the police. The trouble with her is she's positive he can't do without her. She wouldn't believe he would walk out and leave her flat. She wouldn't, would she?'

'That's right. She does think he can't do without her, and I don't think he can.'

'But she would believe he's left her flat if she found out he had gone off with a woman. That's the only set-up that would convince her. If he ditched you and her for another woman, she'd believe it.'

'What other woman?'

'After she thinks he's gone, you're going to see her. You're going to show her a letter you've found and a photographs. You're going to call him every name you can think of for leaving you and her for another woman. And you've got to make it sound convincing. The letter and the photograph will help, but it's up to you to swing it so she believes in them.'

'What letter and photograph?'

I reached behind me.

‘Remember he wrote this to you? It hasn’t your name on it and it isn’t dated. It’s tailor-made for the job,’ and I handed her his letter I had found in the box in her wardrobe drawer.

‘Go on, read it aloud, and see if it isn’t tailor-made.’

She read it aloud and it sounded wonderful.

Cherie,

I can see nothing but danger and trouble ahead of us. It is impossible to remain here much longer: a week at the outside. It is time for you to decide what you are going to do. At the moment I have enough money for both of us. Together we can drop out of sight and begin a new life. For the moment Paris is safe enough, but later it may be possible to go to America. I must know immediately. You can be sure of my love. In haste.

Henry.

From the look in her eyes she thought it sounded wonderful too.

‘I’d forgotten this. He wrote it...’

‘Never mind why or when he wrote it. Forget you ever had it. That’s the letter you found.’ I screwed it up in my fist, crushing and crumpling it. ‘You found it in the wastepaper basket. Probably he decided not to write to her, but ‘phone her instead. But that’s the letter you’ve got to make Emmie believe.’

I tossed Netta’s photo into her lap: the photo of her in her birthday suit with the crummy message in white ink: Waiting for you always, my darling. All my love, Netta. ‘And that’s the girl he’s gone off with. That’s believable, isn’t it? A man would go off with a lush piece like her, wouldn’t he? Even Emmie would believe that.’

She stared at the photograph, blood rising to her face.

‘Who’s this?’

I grinned at her.

‘His girlfriend. And if you can look the way you’re looking now when you show her to Emmie, we’re in.’

She jumped to her feet, her eyes glittering.

‘Someone you know, I suppose?’

‘That’s right.’

‘And she’s still waiting, is she?’

I took the photograph out of her hand.

‘It’ll be a long, long wait.’

‘Are you in love with her?’

‘What’s the matter with you? What are you looking like that for?’

She grabbed me by the front of my shirt.

‘If I thought you were cheating...’

I broke her hold and gave her a shove that stretched her flat on the settee. She lay there glaring at me, as furious and as vicious as a wild cat.

‘Do I snivel about your boyfriends? Do I work myself up over your he-man, Boris, who whined because you played around with other men? Do I?’ I was bellowing at her now. ‘I took you as I found you, and you’ll damn well take me as you find me!’

We glared at each other for seconds, then with a sullen, angry shrug she reached for a cigarette.

‘Well, all right, as long as you don’t see her now.’

I adjusted my tie. She had nearly strangled me.

‘And cut out the rough stuff or you’ll get hurt. I don’t like women shoving me around. Now if you’ve got over your brainstorm, will you get your mind back to business?’

‘That’s one thing I won’t stand for, Frank. If you cheat on me...’

‘Oh, shut up! I’m not cheating on you. Forget it.’

‘Well, don’t.’

I took a turn round the room until she calmed down.

‘Is that photo coupled with the letter enough to convince her he’s bolted with a woman?’

She looked sullenly at me.

‘I think so.’

‘That’s not good enough. You’ve got to be sure. Can you convince her? If you can’t, we don’t go ahead. It wouldn’t be safe. She’s got to be convinced.’

She drew in a deep breath.

‘I’ll convince her.’

The rain had stopped, but the night was pitch dark and damp, and the ground squelched under our feet. I held her arm.

In my other hand I carried an electric torch.

We walked round the back of the house, along the path to the old well under the yew trees.

I handed her the torch.

‘Keep the light steady.’

I knelt and lifted off the zinc cover. A dank smell came up from the mouth of the well.

‘That’s where he is going. There’s over a hundred foot of water down there. With no one to look for him; no one thinking anything’s happened to him, there couldn’t be a better or safer place.’

She came closer and peered over my shoulder. The beam of the torch lit up the black, still water. Green slime clung to the old, brick walls. A frog swam into the darkness, flashing its legs, to get away from the light.

She leaned against me, shivering.

‘Let’s go in, Frank.’

‘That’s where he is going. I’ll wire stones to him. He’ll never come up.’

She turned away.

‘I’m going in.’

I grinned in the darkness.

I had her dangling on the hook. I knew it. I could feel it.

She believed every word I was saying.

chapter eleven

Among the tricks I learned when serving with the Commandos was to make an effective booby-trap, and it crossed my mind that such a booby trap could be used to sock the fear of death into Sarek.

Now I had convinced her I was going to murder him, I had to pretend to put the first move of the plan into operation, and the first move was to frighten him so badly he would want to run for his life.

So the following morning I decided to go to London and collect for my booby-trap a gadget I had lifted from the Army stores before getting my ticket. This gadget was used extensively during the war to hand out death by remote control, and I had snaffled it, as I had snaffled a lot of other bits of Army property, as a souvenir of the best years of my life.

I remembered this gadget was in a suitcase of junk I had left with Netta, and the thought of seeing Netta again excited me. An hour or two of her company would make a quiet change from Rita's sultry violence.

I was sitting before the fire, thinking about Netta in the way men think about women, while I waited for Rita to finish making the bed, when the telephone bell rang. With my mind still on Netta I automatically picked up the receiver and said.

'Hello.'

Except for the faint humming on the line I heard nothing for a second or so, then Emmie's voice said 'Is that Mitchell?'

All right, I admit it. The sound of that whining voice stopped my heart for a second. It congealed my blood too.

I was supposed to be miles away from Four Winds, and yet here I was at nine o'clock in the morning, having obviously spent the night in the house alone with Sarek's wife, and answering the telephone with Emmie of all people on the line. I could see my whole plan blowing up in my face.

'Hello? Is that you, Mitchell?'

My brain went scurrying around in my skull like a frightened mouse. I couldn't think. I couldn't speak. I couldn't even move. I was in such a panic I could scarcely breathe.

'Hello? Hello?'

Rita came flying into the room. One look at my white, sweating face told her what was happening.

'Tell her it's a wrong number, you fool!' she hissed at me.

'What number do you want?'

I didn't recognize my voice; it sounded like the croak of a frog.

'Topham 229. Is that you, Mitchell?'

'Sorry, wrong number,' and I hung up.

'You fool! You stupid fool!'

'All right, all right. Don't shout at me!'

'If she tells him...'

'Oh, shut up! She couldn't have recognized my voice.'

The bell rang again.

She pushed me away and picked up the receiver. I'll say this for her: she was as steady and as cool as a block of ice.

'Hello? Yes, Mrs. Sarek speaking. Oh, hello. Miss Pearl. Oh is he? I'd better meet him then. Yes, I

will.'

We looked at each other while the whining voice droned on.

'Who? Mitchell? Why, no. I haven't seen him since Henry went away. No, I can't tell you. Yes. Thanks for letting me know.'

She hung up.

'You careless fool! You talk about making it safe, and the first chance you get of slipping up, you slip up. How could you be so stupid as to answer the phone? If she tells him, he'll clear you out of here in seconds, and then what will we do?'

I was getting my nerve back now.

'She won't tell him. Now, shut up about it. Is he coming back?'

'He'll be on the nine forty-five plane. I've got to meet him.'

I went over to the sideboard and poured myself out a whisky. I was still feeling wobbly in the legs.

'Tonight?'

'Yes.'

I swallowed the whisky at a gulp.

'What did she say about me?'

'She wanted to know if I had seen you. She wants to let you know he's coming back, but she doesn't know where to find you.'

'Think she smells a rat?'

'How do I know? If this is the way you're going to handle it...'

'Shut up about it! It won't happen again.'

'It'd better not. I thought you had more nerve than that.'

'My nerve's all right. She caught me on the wrong foot.'

'Do you think I'm blind? You looked like a frightened rabbit.'

'Never mind how I looked. Now, let it alone. I've had enough of it, so shut up about it.'

She went to the window, stiff with rage, I was still sweating, but the whisky was beginning to hit me and the wobble went out of my legs.

'I'm going up to London right away. I'll look in and see Emmie. I'll know if she's smelt a rat, and I'll handle her. Besides, I've got to be the one to drive him home.'

She turned.

'What are you collecting?'

'A little gadget that'll scare the life out of him. The less you know about it the better.'

She watched me closely, her green eyes alert.

'And where are you collecting it from?'

I put a dumb look on my face. I knew what she was thinking.

'A bloke who's keeping my old junk for me - why?'

'It wouldn't be Netta, would it?'

I shook my head.

'No, it's not Netta. Get her out of your mind the way I've got Boris out of mine. I haven't seen her for years and I don't want to see her again. Satisfied?'

We studied each other for a moment or so. If I'm not good at anything else I'm good at lying. I saw the suspicion leave her eyes. 'I can't believe he's coming back.'

'You will when you see him, and don't forget, from now on I'm going to work on him. Don't be

surprised at anything that happens.’

‘So long as you make a good job of it, Frank.’

I climbed the four flights of stairs, keeping my hand off the banister rail. Before I reached the door I heard the typewriter rattling away like a machine-gun.

I put my head around the door and smiled at her.

‘Hello, Pearl of Great Price, how are you?’

She stopped typing and started as if someone had stuck a pin in her fat hide, her gooseberry eyes behind the thick lenses bulged.

‘I thought I’d better look in to see if there was any news of him.’

‘I’ve been trying to find you.’

I entered the office, closed the door and leaned my back against it.

‘Well, that’s nice. You don’t mean you’re beginning to care, surely?’

A faint red spread over fat, spotty face.

‘Did Mrs. Sarek tell you?’

‘Did she tell me - what?’

I watched the quick change of expression, and grinned.

‘You were there this morning, weren’t you?’

I was ready for her this time.

‘Where’s there?’

‘It was you who answered the telephone. I recognized your voice.’

‘Would you mind explaining what you are drivelling about?’

The red turned to crimson.

‘You were at Four Winds this morning.’

‘Was I? Now that’s interesting. I had an idea I was in a flat in Lannox Street. What time this morning?’

She was watching me the way a cat watches a mouser ‘Nine o’clock.’

‘Oddly enough I was in bed with a beautiful blonde at nine this morning. What makes you think I was at Four Winds, or are you just trying to make mischief?’

She stared at me and I stared right back at her. She didn’t get a blink out of me.

‘Mr. Sarek is coming back tonight on the nine forty-five plane.’

‘Look, my spotty friend, you’ve just hinted in your grubby little way that I’ve been sleeping with Mrs. Sarek. I don’t give a damn what goes on in your cesspit of a mind, but I’m sure Mr. Sarek would. If you don’t withdraw that remark of yours and apologize at once, I shall tell him what you said and I’ll tell Mrs. Sarek too, and then they can take it up with you.’

She sat glaring at me, looking like an infuriated pig.

‘I - I didn’t mean it.’

‘Then be careful what you’re saying. Did I hear you say you’re sorry.’

She gulped twice, and her face went the colour of an overripe plum, but she said it.

‘I’m sorry.’

I was loving every second of this. She had given me the fright of my life, at least, I was getting my own back. I had her over a barrel, and she knew it.

‘That’s fine. The next time you get those ideas in that thing you call your mind, keep them to yourself.’

She didn't say anything, but the hate on her face was something to see.

'So he's coming back tonight, is he? That's fine. I'll be there to meet him.'

Still she said nothing.

I gave her a jeering little grin and opened the door.

'Well, so long. Pearl of Great Price, it has been a beautiful experience seeing you again.'

Still grinning, I sauntered into the corridor, leaving the door open. When I was halfway down the stairs, I heard the door slam.

I arrived at Netta's flat in Lannox Street a few minutes after eleven. I didn't expect to find her up and she wasn't. She answered the door in a silk wrap over a pair of crimson pyjamas. Even without makeup she looked good enough to eat.

'Oh! Frankie, darling!'

'I said I'd be haunting you before long, didn't I?'

I closed the door with my heel and grabbed her. 'Oh, Frankie! This is wonderful! Do be careful, darling, you're hurting me a little.'

I carried her into her bedroom and dumped her on the bed. Then I sat on the bed beside her and ran my fingers through her short, golden curls, 'Well, how's it been, baby? Did you miss me?'

'I missed you terribly. Why did you run off like that? It wasn't very nice, was it?'

'You didn't want to see me in tears, did you? I was scared I'd break down if I didn't get away from you fast.'

Her big blue eyes widened; just for a moment she believed it, then she made a face at me.

'You were horrid, and you know it. A girl doesn't like being treated that way.'

'I'll remember next time; if there is a next time.'

'Have you come to - to stay, Frankie?'

'A couple of hours; no more. I'm a busy man these days, baby.'

'Oh. I was hoping...' She checked herself. 'Are you getting on all right? You're not getting into trouble, are you, Frankie?'

I wondered how she would have looked if I had told her the kind of trouble I was getting into.

'I was all wrong about Sarek. I told you I thought he was a crook, but he isn't. He's a genuine, one hundred percent diamond merchant. Now, what do you think of that?'

'Diamonds?'

'That's right. The reason why he wants a bodyguard is because he's always carrying diamonds around with him: diamonds worth thousands.'

Her eyes widened.

'But I thought he had threatening letters.'

'He was kidding. He had to make some excuse for hiring me. He couldn't tell me about the diamonds until he knew he could trust me. So he made up that tripe about the letters. Now he and I are almost partners. He just wants me around to guard the diamonds.'

'I've read about people like that. They deal in Hatton Garden, don't they?'

Who said she was a dope?

I patted her under the chin.

'That's pretty smart, baby, you mean you read that all on your own: big words and all?'

'Oh, Frankie, don't start being nasty again.'

'I was only kidding. That's exactly what he does do.'

‘And I suppose that’s why he wears that awful coat you were telling me about. He keeps the diamonds hidden in the coat, knowing no one would steal it. Is that it?’

I stared at her, feeling a tingle creep up my spine.

‘What was that?’

‘Why, I only said... What’s the matter, Frankie? Don’t look like that. I’m sorry if I-’

‘Shut up!’

I got up and went to the window, turning my back on her so she shouldn’t see my face.

He keeps the diamonds hidden in the coat, knowing no one would steal it.

And I had been racking my brain for hours wondering where he kept them. For hours! And Netta the brainless, the pinhead, the girl who could scarcely read drops it into my lap without any more brain effort than a sneeze. What a thickheaded, dimwitted fool I was! I should have been on to that coat the moment I had seen him in it. He had practically told me that was where he hid his diamonds when we first met.

‘Frankie, darling, what’s the matter?’

‘Hold everything; just keep quiet a moment.’

I still didn’t turn. I was scared she would see what was going on in my mind. I was so excited I began to shake.

Now I knew! In that awful coat all the time! That was why he even took it to bed with him. Now I came to think of it, he never let it out of his sight. And no wonder: that coat was worth thousands, if Rita wasn’t lying. Why, even I would wear a coat like that if it was worth all that money.

I got myself under control, turned and went to her.

She was still lying on the bed; her big blue eyes were worried and she looked up at me, not knowing if I was going to hit her or kiss her.

‘I don’t know what I’ve said wrong but I’m sorry Frankie...’

‘What are you sorry about?’ I caught hold of her and shook her. ‘Why should you be sorry?’

‘Don’t be angry with me, Frankie.’

‘Angry? You’re the loveliest, cleverest, brightest, most perfect woman in the world!’

‘Oh, Frankie!’

I raised my head and squinted at the bedside clock. The hands showed a quarter to three.

Netta stirred, opened her eyes and smiled at me.

‘Hey! Shake a leg, will you? I’m hungry. Look at the time.’

‘I’ll get you something, darling. I wish I’d known you were coming. I would have got you a steak. There’s some cold chicken. I could heat it up in a wine sauce if you would like that.’

‘Sounds swell. Go and heat it up, and hurry.’

I watched her scramble into her wrap and bolt into the kitchen.

I couldn’t imagine Rita jumping to it at the word of command. There was a lot to be said having a girl like Netta around. She was completely unselfish, aching to do things for me, looked good, and although when I was broke she could be tiresome, I didn’t think she would be when I was in the money.

And I was going to be in the money! I was certain of that now. The coat clinched it. It was so obvious I could have kicked myself for never tumbling to it. He had to pay cash wherever he went. Therefore he had to carry big sums around with him.

He did more than that. He carried his diamonds around with him as well.

The smell of cooking was sending me frantic.

When I went into the kitchen I found her making a dry martini, the way I like dry martinis: three-quarters gin, a dash of French vermouth, a squeeze of lemon and ice. She had filled a pint cocktail shaker and as I came in she gave it to me.

‘Shake it, darling, while I serve up.’

I shook it and poured.

‘Netta.’

She looked up, surprised. I don’t usually call her that: it was generally baby or dopey or pinhead or something like that.

‘How would you like to go to America?’

‘America?’

‘With me, I mean.’

She turned red, then white.

‘With you? America? Oh, darling, I’d love it! I’d love it more than anything else in the world. You - you don’t mean it, do you?’

I caught hold of her.

‘And another thing: how would you like to marry me?’

‘Oh, Frankie...’

I finally levered her arms off my neck.

‘Steady on; you’re strangling me.’

‘Frankie, you wouldn’t say that if you didn’t mean it, would you?’

‘I mean it all right. Now listen, Sarek and I are doing a deal together. If it comes off I’ll be in the money. I introduced him to a fella who wants his diamonds, and he’s going to pay me commission. This is a big deal, and if it comes off, I’ll be really in the money: thousands. Then we’ll get married and go and look at America. How do you like that?’

She looked anxiously at me.

‘It’s honest, isn’t it, Frankie?’

‘Of course it is, pinhead!’

‘But suppose it doesn’t come off?’

‘It will.’

‘Couldn’t we get married even if it doesn’t come off? I - I wouldn’t mind not having a lot of money or even going to America. I’d - I’d rather have you.’

I have her a little shake.

‘It’s going to come off. Make no mistake about that. It’s damn well got to come off!’

chapter twelve

As I pulled up outside the farm gate, she came running out of the house to open it. It was a few minutes after five o'clock, and the light was going. There was a smell of rain in the air and heavy black clouds were building up in the west and moving slowly across the sky.

'Did you see her?'

I got out of the car and slammed the door.

'Yes; and I made her eat her words. I wish you could have seen her ugly face. I made her apologize.'

She was looking closely at me, peering at my face.

'You've been long enough.'

'The fella I had to see was out. I had to hang around for three hours. I nearly went nuts.'

I was feeling very sure of myself. I had spent ten minutes in the Charing Cross lavatory checking up that there was no lipstick or powder on me. I couldn't afford to make a slip now.

'I have a job to do.'

She followed me into the bam, and while I collected the tool chest and some lengths of wood, she stood by me, watching.

'What are you going to do?'

'You'll see.'

I cut two three-foot lengths of wood and joined them together at right angles, making a little shelf. Then I bored two holes close together in the upright length of the wood.

'Nip inside and get the gun, will you? It's in the bottom drawer of the desk. Don't throw it about: it's loaded.'

While she fetched the gun I screwed the gadget I had brought with me to the upright piece of wood. It was a neat little thing: something like a Meccano clockwork motor, only bigger.

She returned with the gun and gave it to me. I slid out the clip and jacked the slug out of the breech.

'What are you going to do with it?'

'I'll show you. You see this gadget? It runs by clockwork. It can either be started by a clock, setting the dial here or it can be started by vibration by setting the dial in the opposite direction. This hook will pull the pin out of Mills bomb or the trigger of a gun. It's simple enough. Suppose you walked in here when it was set; your footfalls would set the machine working and the bomb would go off. We used this in house-to-house fighting. If things got too hot, all we had to do was to set the time machine and get out. Then every two or three minutes the mechanism would pull at the trigger of a gun and the Hun thought we were still there.'

She was listening to all this impatiently.

'But what are you going to do with it now?'

'We three are going to be together in the front room, then suddenly a gun goes off and the window gets smashed. Don't you think that'll scare the daylights out of him? And he won't suspect us either. But if I was outside, when the shot was fired then he might suspect us. That's why I've brought this gadget. It'll give me an alibi.'

'But one of us might get hit.'

'I'll take damn good care we don't.'

‘It sounds dangerous, Frank. Can’t you use a blank?’

‘The window must be smashed. I’ll fix it the gunfires high. It’ll be all right’

‘If it hit him...’

‘It’s not going to hit him, so shut up!’

‘If it hits him, that’ll bring the police, Frank. I don’t like this. Can’t you think of another way of scaring him?’

‘It’s not going to hit him! I know how to handle this. He’ll be sitting down when it goes off. It’ll miss him and you and me by four feet. That’s a safe margin, isn’t it?’

‘How do you know he’ll be sitting down?’

I felt the blood rush into my face.

‘Because he’ll be playing chess with me! Now, shut up belly aching!’

I fastened the wooden shelf to the wall of the barn by a bolt and butterfly screw. I made certain I could get the bolt out quickly. After the shooting I would have to hide the booby-trap fast, although I was pretty certain he’d be so shattered he wouldn’t dare come out to investigate. But in case he did come out I had to be sure I could get the thing off the wall and hidden in seconds. I put the gun on the shelf. It was pointing directly at the sitting room window.

‘Go in there and turn on the light and stand still in the middle of the room. I want to make sure it’s aimed high enough.’

‘It’s not loaded, is it?’

‘Of course it isn’t. Didn’t you see me unload it?’

‘Let me see the cartridges.’

I swung round to stare at her. Her face was stony and expressionless.

‘You saw me take them out, didn’t you?’

‘Let me see them.’

Even then I didn’t tumble to what she was getting at. I took the slugs out of my pocket and showed them to her.

‘Seven; does that satisfy you?’

‘No. Let me look at the gun.’

‘What the hell’s on your mind?’

‘Nothing; I just don’t want to meet with an accident. If I’m going to stand there and let you aim the gun at me I want to be sure I’m not going to get shot.’

I tried to grin, but it didn’t come off. I felt a cold prickle run up my spine.

‘Sounds as if you expect me to murder you.’

The green eyes were cold and steady.

‘I’ll take damn good care you don’t!’

He came running down the tarmac, the tails of his comic coat flapping in the wind, one hand holding his big black slouch hat firmly on his head, his bag clutched in the other.

Miss Robinson trotted at his heels.

I moved out of the shadows to greet him.

‘Mrs. Sarek, she is all right, hey?’

'She seems all right. I only saw her for a moment when I collected the car. How's the cold?'

'Is all right.'

He looked happy, and his beaming smile threatened to split his face in half.

'All the time I think of my son.'

So he was going to start that all over again. I had forgotten about his son.

'Good trip?'

'Is all right. We go home quick, hey? Is Mrs. Sarek I want to see.'

I took his bag as he climbed into the car. The coat flapped against my arm. The feel of it sent my heart racing.

'I hope we'll see you soon, Mr. Sarek.'

Miss Robinson was leaning through the window. I wanted to haul off and plant my shoe in the back of her lap.

'Is possible. Maybe at the end of the month.'

Don't count on it. Miss Robinson, I thought as I slid under the wheel. Don't count on it for one moment.

She was clutching a brown paper parcel under her arm.

'I hope Mrs. Sarek is doing fine,' she said. 'And thanks again for the...'

'Is all right.'

He cut her off short. He knew I was listening I let in the clutch and drove towards the gates.

'Is home quick, hey?'

'I'd like a word first.'

I pulled into the shadows and stopped.

'Is something wrong?'

'I don't know. Ever since you've been away I've been tailed by two tough-looking characters.'

In the light of the dashlight, his face looked suddenly fine-drawn and white. The little beady eyes shifted.

'What do they want?'

'I don't know. Something, or they wouldn't follow me wherever I go. Two big, heavily built men. One wears a cap and the other a grey slouch hat. They're in trench coats. Dark, swarthy-looking guys, tough-looking.'

I had him going now. He began to shake.

'What do you think they want - me?'

'I don't know. I don't want to frighten you, Mr. Sarek, but it did cross my mind they were looking for you. If they are after me, they would have started on me by now. I have given them every chance, but they've kept clear, just tailed along.' He looked fearfully over his shoulder.

'Is too lonely at the farm. Maybe I move into London: get a flat or something.'

'Don't let them stampede you. I'm keeping my eyes open. They're not going to lay their hands on you until they've dealt with me.'

He wiped the sweat of his forehead.

'Can you handle them, Frank?'

'You bet I can handle them.'

Ten minutes later, I said. 'There's a car behind us. Have a look.'

There was a car. It couldn't very well be anywhere else but behind us. I was sitting in the middle

of the road and it couldn't get past. I wanted to keep him on the go. The big black shape swung round in his seat and stared through the rear window as I trod on the accelerator. The Austin surged forward, creaking in every bone. The headlights of the car behind lit up the inside of our car.

'Squat on the floor! If they think I'm on my own they may pass us.'

He scrambled out of his seat on to the floorboards like a frightened hen going home to roost. Grinning, I put my hand on his hat and shoved his head down.

The car behind blasted its horn. I slowed, pulled over to the left and watched it surge past. A girl was driving. A girl and a man sat at the back. They all glared at me.

I still kept my hand on Sarek's head so he couldn't see anything.

'Hold it! Don't move.'

He crouched there like a corpse.

'Okay, they've gone.' I let him up. 'Those two guys again; the one in the cap and the other one.'

I could hear his heavy breathing, could feel him shaking, and could smell him sweating.

It was so easy I nearly laughed aloud.

'You get inside and keep out of sight, Mr. Sarek. I'm going to walk down the lane for a checkup.'

He scuttled indoors and slammed the front door.

I put the car away, took a long pull from the bottle of whisky I kept hidden in the garage, and then went for a slow stroll down the lane.

When I had given them time to greet each other, and for her to listen to all his worries, I went in.

He was sitting before the fire, still looking green, and sipping whisky. She stood near him, watching him with her stony, hard expression.

'Did Mr. Sarek tell you about our excitement?'

She looked at me.

'I don't believe it. He's frightened of his own shadow.'

'You don't know what you talk about!' He sounded cross.

'I shouldn't have come back so soon. We move out of here, Rita.'

'I don't want to go!'

'Is all right for you, but for me - do you want to see me dead? Is too lonely out here.'

'I think Mr. Sarek's right...'

'I didn't ask you!'

She walked out of the room and slammed the door.

'Perhaps you'd better hang on a little longer, Mr. Sarek. You don't want to upset her. Women are a little touchy when they're in her condition. You'll be all right here with me. Give her a little time to get used to the idea.'

He looked pathetically at me.

'You're a good man, Frank. I don't want anything to go wrong with my son. If you think it upset her, I stay.'

'You'll be all right with me.'

He said he would sleep with her that night.

I was up in the loft watching through her window when he came into her room, carrying the overcoat over his arm. I watched him hang it on the hook behind the door before he got into bed.

I made a discovery that startled me. I could look at those two together now without a qualm. Those few days I had spent with her alone had cured me; like sticking a knife into an abscess and draining it.

clean. And another thing: I was nervous of her, and you don't get the urge for a woman if you feel that way about her. That little scene we had about the gun had warned me I would have to watch her. She didn't trust me an inch, and that meant I couldn't trust her.

Anyway, my mind now was fully occupied with the coat.

I couldn't make up my mind whether to wait until they were asleep and then sneak into the room and grab it or hang on a little longer and follow my original plan.

If I had been absolutely sure the diamonds were hidden in the coat I would have grabbed it there and then, but I wasn't sure. I was willing to bet on it, but betting on a thing isn't being sure of it. If I took the coat and the diamonds weren't hidden in it, I was sunk. I wouldn't get a second chance. I had to be sure.

Around two o'clock in the morning I got out of bed and pulled my trousers over my pyjama trousers and a sweater over my pyjama jacket. I put on a pair of shoes, collected the gun and the flashlight and walked quietly to their room.

I opened the door and slid in, shielding the light of the torch with my fingers.

She woke immediately and half sat up.

'All right; lie down,' I whispered. She lay down, watching me bend over Sarek. He was sleeping heavily, his mouth open, his dark parrot's face repulsive on the pillow, I put my hand on his shoulder and shook him. He woke with a start that nearly threw him out of bed.

'What is it? Who is it?'

'It's all right. It's Frank.'

She sat up then. I could see the points of her breasts through her thin nightdress. They didn't even give me a buzz.

'What is it?'

'I'm going out. I wanted to warn you. There's a man creeping about out there.'

His breath whistled through his nose, 'You see him, hey?'

'Yes. He was near the barn. You take it easy. I'm going after him.'

'No!' He grabbed my arm. 'You stay here. Is your job to keep near me. Lock the door! No one goes out there.'

He was shaking so much he made the bed rattle.

'I might catch him, and then we'd know who's behind all this. Better let me go.'

'No! Stay here! Lock the door! Do what I say!'

I locked the door, grinning in the darkness. I wondered what she was thinking. Then I crossed over to the window and peered out. I stayed like that for some minutes. The silence in the room made me think of a tomb.

'Well, there's no sign of him now.'

I moved away from the window and came over to the bed. 'Better not put the light on yet.'

'Is mad to stay here. We sell the place and go.'

I didn't say anything. I was edging towards the door. My hands touched the coat. I began going over it, pressing the cloth between my fingers, hoping to feel something hard 'What are you doing, Frank?'

I moved away from the coat, my heart jumping into my mouth.

'I thought I heard something.'

'Sit by the window and watch.'

I sat by the window. I could see her head on the pillow and his baldhead outlined against the wall

as he half sat up.

I pretended to look out of the window.

We remained like that for the rest of the night.

chapter thirteen

He wouldn't show his nose outside the house the next morning, but crouched over the fire in the sitting room with the curtains drawn and the electric light on.

I was beginning to wonder if my booby trap was going to be needed after all. Another night like last night might crack him wide open.

I sat opposite him, smoking, pretending to be worried, and listening to the frightened thoughts that poured out of him in a continuous stream.

'I don't see a way out of this, Mr. Sarek,' I said, when I could get a word in edge-ways. 'If you don't face them, they'll ruin you. The only way to stop them is to trap them into the open so I can get at them. Sitting here behind drawn blinds isn't going to get you anywhere. You can't hide here indefinitely, and it doesn't look as if they'll get tired of waiting.'

He licked his thin lips.

'Is better to wait. I don't take risks.'

'Well, it's your business, but it seems to me we could wait here for weeks, and you still wouldn't be sure they don't start something as soon as you go back to your office.'

'Then maybe I'd better go away.'

I had been waiting patiently for the past hour for him to say that.

'How do you mean? Where would you go?'

'Leave this country for good. I have all the money I want. I live in Paris. Is what I want: my son and a little peace.'

'I suppose that is the way out, but you're letting them beat you.'

He scowled at me.

'I don't care. I can't worry, worry, worry, like this. Is no good. It make me ill. Is better perhaps for me to go. I make money in Paris too.'

'Yes, it might be an idea. I can see that.'

He thought about it for some minutes.

'Is what I do. We sell the house and go.'

'Don't rush at it. Maybe Mrs. Sarek won't agree.'

'I have enough. No sleep last night; threats all the time, now men watching the house. Is not worth it. We go.'

'Why go to Paris? What's the matter with America? You could make a lot of money in New York.'

He looked a little startled.

'Is idea. But Paris first. Maybe I go to America when my son come. Is good idea.'

I smoked on, watching him turn the idea over in his mind.

He sat for a long time, brooding. I could see by the changing expressions on his face the idea was getting hold of him, and when he suddenly got up and went over to the telephone I knew he had made up his mind.

'I'll have a look around outside while you're phoning.'

'Tell Mrs. Sarek, Miss Pearl come down for lunch.'

So he was going to break the news to fat Emmie. I wondered what she would have to say.

I went into the kitchen and closed the door.

‘Well?’

‘It’s practically in the bag. He’s going to get out.’

‘Did he say so?’

‘He not only said so, but he’s getting Emmie down here to break the news to her.’

‘She could talk him out of it.’

‘She could, but I’ll see she doesn’t. I’ve still got a trick left. A gun shot would settle it.’

‘I don’t like that, Frank.’

‘I won’t use it unless I have to. Go and see him and work on him before Emmie comes down. Try and get the thing settled, and don’t forget, when he does go, he’s got to go alone. Insist that you sell the house and the furniture. He’ll want Emmie to do it, but you’ve got to have an excuse for not going with him. You understand that, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

She moved close to me, looking up at me.

‘Kiss me, Frank.’

I don’t want to. It was hard to believe but she was almost repulsive to me now.

‘Better go to him. He’ll need talking to.’

She raised her face, so I kissed her. I had no alternative unless I showed my hand. Her lips felt hard and dry against mine. There was no more buzz to that kiss than if I had kissed the lips of my grandmother.

She pushed away, holding me by my arms.

‘Still sure you want me as well as the money, Frank?’

‘You bet I’m sure.’

She touched my cheek, smiling, her eyes like stones.

‘You’d better be sure, Frank.’

Emmie arrived in the local taxi just before noon. I watched her climb out of the taxi from my bedroom window. There was a set, hard expression on her face, and she hurried up the path as if she were spoiling for a fight.

Rita came in as I turned to the door.

‘It’s going to be all right.’

‘I hope so. She’s just come. Did you fix it with him?’

‘It didn’t need much fixing. He said he was going and I let him persuade me. I told him I couldn’t take the risk of any kind of strain in my condition. I said the best thing was for him to go over there, find a flat, and when everything was ready for me, to send for me. In the meantime I’d sell the house and furniture.’

‘And he fell for it?’

‘I’ve only to say the child might suffer, and he’d fall for anything.’

‘When’s he going?’

‘He talks about the end of the week.’

We looked at each other.

‘We haven’t very long then. We’ll know in a day or so if the money’s here or in London. If he doesn’t go to London then it must be here.’

‘Yes.’

‘When are you going to do it, Frank?’

‘The moment I’m sure he has the money. Maybe we’ll have to wait until he’s packed and ready to leave the house.’

‘Suppose Emmie comes down to see him off?’

‘We’ll have to chance that. She can’t get down before ten in the morning. We’ll do it before she comes, and tell her he’s gone.’

‘I hope she doesn’t come.’

‘Yes.’

There was a shock waiting for us when he and Emmie came into the dining room for lunch. One look at Emmie’s fat face told me she had talked him out of going.

He had got a little of his colour back, and his hands were steady, and the hunted look had gone out of his eyes. I couldn’t imagine what she had said to him, but whatever it was, it had worked the trick.

‘I stay after all.’

I couldn’t trust myself to speak, nor did I dare look at Rita.

The silence that followed was heavy enough to sink a cruiser.

‘To give up everything just because some man is seen in the garden is ridiculous,’ Emmie said, sitting down. ‘It’s not as if Mr. Sarek isn’t being properly protected. Mitchell has said over and over again he can look after him, and if he can’t, then we must get someone who can.’

‘Is right. You can handle it, hey, Frank?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s not as if anything has happened,’ Emmie went on, speaking directly to Rita ‘I pointed out that to Mr. Sarek. Whoever’s behind this is bluffing. Mr. Sarek would be playing right into their hands if he left. I’m sure that’s what they want him to do.’

‘Is right. If they see I don’t go, they drop it.’

Rita said coldly, ‘I wish you would make up your mind, Henry. You either stay or you don’t. I find this very unsettling.’

‘I stay.’

After lunch they went back together into the sitting room.

Sarek said they had more business to discuss. That left me alone with Rita.

‘It’s the gun or nothing now.’

‘I still don’t like it, Frank.’

‘I don’t give a damn whether you like it or not! I’m going to fix the gun now. As soon as it’s dark it goes off.’

‘Wait until she goes.’

‘No. I’m going to scare that fat bitch into a jelly. She’s been too smug all along; now she’s going to be convinced. She’s going to be right there when the gun goes off.’

‘We didn’t plan it that way.’

‘Never mind how we planned it. This is the way we’re going to do it now.’

‘You’re sure it’s safe? If anything happened...’

‘Oh, shut up!’

They were still in the sitting room when the light began to fade, and the washed-out autumn sun went down behind a ridge of black clouds. I had gone out to fetch the car from the garage. Sarek had asked Rita to drive Emmie to the station.

He wouldn’t let me go. He still wasn’t taking chances.

As I left the house Rita went into the sitting room to tell them I was getting the car. Her job was to keep them talking, and away from the window until I got back.

When I had parked the car in front of the house, I slipped into the barn and set the clockwork engine going. I timed it to start a minute or so after I had returned to the house. I was still boiling with rage, and it flashed through my mind that while I was about it, I might as well make a proper job of scaring those two. So I switched on the repeater: the way I had fixed it now, the whole of the magazine of the gun would be emptied into the room: seven slugs. If that didn't shake Sarek out of his skin and give fat Emmie a heart attack, nothing would.

I raced back to the house, paused outside the sitting room door, counting the seconds. I didn't dare risk going in there until the first shot went off. I might walk into the slug. I could hear them talking. Rita was saying something about the railway timetable and the winter train service. I hoped she had got them away from the window.

Then there was a bang! and the crash of breaking glass, followed by a wild scream from Emmie. I flung open the door.

'Down on the floor - quick! I bawled.

I had one brief glimpse of them, standing by the fire, Sarek and Emmie were clutching each other, then I snapped off the light. I went down on my hands and knees myself and began to crawl towards them.

The gun went off again. The slug ripped through the top of the settee and ploughed into the floor. That wasn't the way I had planned it but it was easy to guess what had happened.

The recoil of the gun had jerked the gun loose from its fastening, and the barrel had dropped, so the gun now fired into the floor instead of the ceiling. I cursed myself for being too clever. If I had left it at one shot the effect would have been perfect.

'Get down against the wall away from the window,' I yelled above Emmie's squeals, and scrambled wildly across the floor.

They were all down on hands and knees now, crouching in a heap against the wall.

The gun went off again; more glass fell out of the window; splinters flew from the coffee table. Sarek gave a high-pitched yap; the sound a dog makes when you tread on it, and began flopping about on the floor.

'You fool!' Rita suddenly screamed out of the darkness. 'You stupid blasted fool!'

She sounded mad with rage and fear, and I threw myself at her, sweating blood, knowing she had more to say.

She said it: 'I told you not to-'

I reached her, my hand closed over her mouth and I shook her until her teeth rattled. She tried to bite my hand, but I dug my fingers into her cheek so she couldn't move her jaw.

The gun went off again, and the slug sang past our heads.

She hit me in the chest, trying to get free. I knew she was ready to blow her top; I could feel the rage in her. If she got free I don't know what she would say, so I shoved her backwards and slammed her head against the wall, stunning her.

'He's hit!'

Emmie this time. She had suddenly stopped squealing.

'He's bleeding. Quick! Help me!'

I could just make out her fat figure in the dim light of the fire. She was kneeling, her hands on

something in the dark.

‘Get down!’ I shouted, wriggled over to her and shoved her flat.

She hit out, her fingers hooked. She ripped a chunk out of my neck.

‘Let me go! He’s bleeding! He’s dying!’

I was fit to walk up a wall now. If I had killed him, we were sunk. I had to stop that gun, and hide it. Nothing else mattered. There were three more shots to come. I rolled clear of her, plunged madly for the door as the gun went off again.

Plaster fell on my head as I wrenched the door open.

Emmie was still screaming for help as I stumbled into the hall and out into the garden. As I reached the barn door the gun went off again. The flash half blinded me. I charged in, groped with sweat-slippery hands, found the safety catch and pushed it on. Then, working like a madman, I unscrewed the bolt, got the thing off the wall, wrenched the gun free and hid the wooden shelf and the gadget in a pile of hay.

The barn reeked of cordite. I stood for a moment, trying to catch my breath. I was cold and breathless with panic. Was he dead?

I went back to the house as fast as my buckling legs would take me.

I stood in the doorway, looking into the room. Someone had turned on the light. Rita half lay, half sat against the wall, her face was grey-white and her eyes glazed. She still looked only half-conscious. Sarek lay in the middle of the room, his face a mask of blood. There was blood everywhere; on the carpet, the wall, the settee and all over Emmie.

I went over to him. I was cold with fear that he was dead.

I knelt beside him and touched his hand. Blood ran from a deep gash in the side of his face; pink bubbles formed at the end of his hooked nose. At least he was still breathing.

Emmie was trying to stop the bleeding with a dirty handkerchief. I shoved her bloodstained hand away.

‘You’ll infect it with that filthy rag. Let him alone!’

I was beginning to get control of myself. If he wasn’t hit anywhere else, then he wouldn’t die. I unbuttoned his coat and slid my hand inside his shirt. His chest felt emaciated and hairy under my hand. His heart was going like a clock.

For a moment or so I knelt there, breathing heavily, sick with relief. He wasn’t going to die. The slug must have smashed through the coffee table and a wood splinter had caught him in the face. Sheer funk had made him faint.

‘Don’t touch him!’

I got unsteadily to my feet and ran up the stairs to the bathroom. I was down again in seconds with bandages, a bowl of water and iodine.

Emmie was sobbing now, hiding her fat face in her bloodstained hands. She looked like something out of the Grand Guignol.

Rita had crawled over to Sarek and was staring at him, ‘Take it easy.’

I caught hold of her, lifted her and put her on the settee.

My nerves were sticking out a mile. I was scared yellow she would go off the deep end again in front of Emmie. But she didn’t. She looked at me, her eyes glittering with fear and rage, but she kept her mouth shut. That was all I cared about; she could be as furious as she liked so long as she didn’t start yelling.

As I began to wash the blood of his face, he opened his eyes. We looked at each other. I tried a grin, but it didn't come of. 'Is that the way you handle them, Frank?'

chapter fourteen

Around six o'clock I couldn't stand the atmosphere in the house a moment longer. So for something better to do I went out to the garage and drank half what was left in the bottle of Scotch.

Sarek and Emmie were again together in the sitting room.

Rita was somewhere upstairs. The tension in the house was as tight as a banjo string. I didn't know which way the cat was going to jump, but at least, Emmie was now convinced someone was gunning for Sarek.

As soon as I had stopped the bleeding and had bandaged the gash in his face and he had recovered sufficiently to speak, he said he wanted to talk to Emmie.

I cleared out, muttering I would take a turn round the house to make sure no one was still lurking there. The three of them watched me go. Not one of them had a good thought for me. I knew that by the way they looked at me, and I didn't give a damn.

After I had walked around in the damp darkness for a while, I sneaked back into the house and tried to hear what Sarek was talking to Emmie about, but both of them had reduced whispering to a fine art, and I didn't even hear a mutter.

I hung around in the hall for half an hour or so, then I got fed up with waiting and went out to the garage for a drink. I was lighting a cigarette when I saw something moving towards me, 'Who's that?'

'I hope you are proud of yourself.'

'You can talk. You practically gave us away!'

She came out of the darkness and moved into the light of the car's side lamps I had turned on, 'You fool! I told you not to use the gun. Now, look what you've done. You might have killed him.'

'Well, I didn't. Now, shut up about it. I scared them both, didn't I? I bet he's not going to stay now.'

'He isn't; He's going on the ten o'clock plane.'

'Tonight?'

'Yes tonight.'

She was breathing heavily, and I didn't like the way she kept edging towards me.

'That's what we want, isn't it?'

'I could kill you!'

The rage in her voice set my nerves jumping.

'Take it easy. What's the matter?'

I moved away from her; into the darkness of the garage.

'You would let that gun off when Emmie was there, you brainless, obstinate fool! Now she's making all the arrangements. She's telephoned the airport. That air hostess woman is expecting him.'

That was her headache, not mine. But I could understand why she was in such a rage. If Miss Robinson knew he was leaving, there would be no chance of murdering him. I had forgotten Miss Robinson when I had made my plan. She could easily have been the spanner in the works.

'Then we've had it. If she's expecting him, she'll see him on to the plane. We're sunk.'

'You don't have to tell me that. And you're the clever fool who's done it!'

'How was I to know?'

She was still coming. I suddenly caught a glimpse of something that glittered in her hand.

I grabbed at her wrist.

‘What the hell are you up to?’

She went for me: her free hand was coming in gasps of rage. I grabbed her other wrist and slammed her against the wall. She spat in my face as she fought me. It was as much as I could do to hold her. I twisted her wrist until the knife fell on the ground and I kicked it away.

‘I’ll kill you, you smug, brainless ape!’

I jerked her forward and banged her against the wall, hard, driving the breath out of her body.

‘Shut up or I’ll give you something to remember me by!’

I felt her sag at the knees and I stepped away from her.

‘I did the best I could. It just didn’t work out. Now forget it. There’s not a thing we can do.’

If he was really going for good he must have the diamonds and the money in the house.

It seemed to me the shooting had worked out a lot better than I had at first thought. It had put a certain stop to murdering him, and it gave me the chance I had been waiting for. I had to be careful I could still make a slip, but at least I could be sure that when he walked out of the house whatever money he owned would be hidden in that coat, and I was going to get it if I had to hold him and Emmie and Rita up at the point of a gun.

As I reached the house I heard a car drive up. It was the local taxi. Emmie came down the path, brushing past me, without looking at me, and got in. I watched the taxi back out, and then go grinding away down the lane in bottom gear. I wondered where she was going.

I went into the house and pushed open the sitting room door. He was lying on the settee, a rug over him, his hands jumping and twitching under the rug like a couple of playful kittens.

‘I can’t say how sorry I am...’

‘Where’s the gun, Frank?’

His voice was as shaky as his hands.

I wondered if Emmie had had a suspicion of what actually had happened and had put him up to it. But I wasn’t so easily caught. I had cleaned and oiled the gun and reloaded it. I had done that the moment I got away from them. He was about an hour too late.

I gave the gun to him.

He must have been doubtful for he sniffed at the barrel, took out the clip and checked the cartridges. Then to my surprise, he dropped the gun into his pocket.

‘So you don’t even fire it, Frank?’

‘I know how you must feel, Mr. Sarek. But when I got out there he had gone.’

‘I might just as well have no bodyguard.’

‘I didn’t think they’d try to shoot you.’

He didn’t say anything.

‘If you think it’s my fault...’

‘Never mind. Is no good making excuses. I give you twenty pounds: that squares us, hey?’

‘I don’t want it. I didn’t earn it. I feel pretty bad about this, Mr. Sarek.’

He held out twenty one-pound notes.

‘Is what I owe you. I don’t need you anymore. Take it.’

‘I’m not taking it. I didn’t earn it, so to hell with it. I’m damned sorry you’re sore with me, Mr. Sarek. I know I talked big, but I didn’t expect them to take pot shots at you. No one could have prevented that.’

I could tell by the way he began to relax that he liked the idea of keeping the twenty pounds, as I knew he would like it. 'You better have it!

'No.'

He put the money into his pocket.

'Well, you did go after him, I say that for you?'

He looked like nothing I've seen on this earth, lying there before the fire. The only thing you could see of his face was one beady black eye. The rest of his face was hidden by bandages. At least I had made a good job of that.

'I suppose, after this, you're going, Mr. Sarek?'

I took out my cigarette case and offered him one. He took it, had trouble in finding his mouth, but succeeded after lifting one of the bandage folds.

'Yes; even Emmie want me to go now. She fix for me to catch the ten o'clock plane.'

I sat opposite him.

'Perhaps it would be safer to wait until daylight.'

'I go tonight.'

'I'll go with you to the airport.'

'Is all right. Mrs. Sarek drives the car.'

That didn't sound as if Emmie would be with them.

'That's a lonely drive. Anything could happen. I'll sit at the back with the gun.'

He hesitated.

'You sit at the back, but I have the gun.'

'Please yourself...'

At least I was going with him.

While Rita and he were upstairs packing, the telephone bell rang. I answered it.

'Is Mr. Sarek there? This is Miss Robinson.'

'He's busy. Can I take a message?'

'Would you tell him the ten o'clock plane is delayed? It won't take off until ten twenty. I know he hates being kept waiting.'

She was certainly trying to earn her last five-pound note.

'I'll tell him,' and I hung up.

But I wasn't going to tell him. I had had enough of waiting. I couldn't touch him until he left the house. Once he put a foot outside I could take him. I would know then for certain he had the money on him.

Rita came in. Her face was chalk-white and her eyes sunken.

'Who was that?'

'Miss Robinson. She says the plane's due of at nine forty instead of ten. You'd better tell him to hurry.'

She gave me a long suspicious stare and went out. I waited a moment, then slipped into the hall. I heard her tell him.

While I waited I checked over my plan. First the gun. That was essential. He would probably have it in his coat pocket.

The thing to do would be to say casually, 'May I examine the gun for a moment? We don't want it to jam.' If it was said casually enough he might hand it over without thinking: if he didn't, then I'd

have to hit him. The moment he began to fall I had to turn on her. She was strong, quick and dangerous. I wouldn't have to give her a second in which to recover. A solid punch on the side of her head should stun her long enough for me to get his coat off and search him. Then all I had to do was get into the car and vamoose. Once I was clear of the place there was nothing he could do to me: nor she either.

I was sweating now with excitement and nerves. I wished they would hurry up.

Then I heard a step on the stairs. She was coming down.

'We'll have to get a move on.'

She didn't say anything. She was wearing a fur coat, no hat and blue slacks.

'Is he coming...?'

I broke off. She had the gun in her hand. I felt a prickle run up my spine.

'What have you got that for?'

She gave me a hard, curious look.

'He can't see very well, so I said I'd carry the gun. He wants you to drive.'

'Maybe I had better have the gun.'

She pointed the gun at me in an absent-minded way as if she wasn't aware what she was doing. But that fooled neither of us.

'I'm keeping it!'

He came down the stairs and joined us.

'We go. You go first, Mitchell, and see if it is all right.'

'I was saying perhaps I had better have the gun. Mr. Sarek.'

'She want it.'

Well, that was that.

I went first. I didn't like the way she handled the gun.

Something told me she wouldn't need a lot of persuasion to shoot me.

The set-up had gone sour.

All the way along the broad, dark stretch of the arterial road I wondered. Did she guess what I was up to? Or was the whole thing a coincidence I hadn't distinguished myself, so they weren't taking chances with me? No more to it than they thought I was a dimwitted boaster who had failed to make good. I couldn't see how I was going to get round this new development, and I was sick with rage and frustration.

He sat beside me, and the sleeve of his coat rested against my arm. She sat immediately behind me, and I knew she had the gun in her lap. No chance of pulling up and going for him, although the road was dark and lonely, and if she hadn't had the gun it would have been easy.

Ahead of me I could see the airport lights. We had an hour before his plane took off. Well, anything could happen in an hour. I pulled up outside the reception hall.

'Get Miss Robinson.'

'You mean you want her out here?'

'Yes.'

I got out of the car and went inside. Miss Robinson was leaning over the counter talking in her girl-guide way to a fat, elderly man who looked as if he was worth a million pounds.

She was quite a bright girl when it came to picking the boys with the money.

I went up to the counter.

‘When you have a minute. Miss Robinson.’

The fat character scowled at me, but I had disrupted what looked like the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

‘I better not keep you, my dear.’

‘I’ll bring you your things, Mr. Oppenheimer, as soon as they arrive.’

He took himself off, but not before he had given me another scowl.

‘That’s a nice smooth line you hand out. Do you ever try it on the younger generation or is it strictly reserved for the old and moneyed?’

She went a nice shade of pink.

‘Is Mr. Sarek here?’

‘He’s right outside. Mrs. Sarek’s here too, so don’t be too gushing.’

She swept past me, her head high, her face scarlet. I trailed after her.

The sight of Sarek’s bandaged face shook her to her heels.

In that coat and black hat, he looked like something from a horror film.

‘Oh, Mr. Sarek, I’m so sorry. Are you in pain?’

‘Is all right.’ He sounded impatient. ‘I don’t want to be stared at, you understand? Take me to the plane at once. Mrs. Sarek, she will attend to the details.’

She started telling him he was much too early.

‘You have forty minutes to wait.’

‘Forty minutes. Is impossible!’ He flew into a rage. ‘What do you mean - forty minutes!’

‘But I phoned. Mr.-Mr.-’ She floundered.

‘Mitchell is the name. I know you phoned, but you said the plane would be twenty minutes early. Just because you happen to be a little off your usual bright beam, don’t try and push it off on to me!’

She was so astonished she could only open and shut her mouth without making a sound.

‘He’s lying,’ Rita said.

That’s what I hoped she would say.

‘That about does it!’ I said angrily. ‘All right, the whole bunch of you can go to hell! So long Mr. Sarek. You don’t need me anymore. You’ll be safe enough here. I’m going. I’ve better things to do than to listen to your wife calling me a liar,’ and without giving him a chance to say anything, and without looking at Rita I walked off towards the entrance gates.

I stood in the darkness and watched them. Miss Robinson was doing most of the talking. Rita still sat in the car. Sarek had got out. He kept waving his hands; he was almost dancing with rage.

It was pretty obvious Miss Robinson was trying to persuade him to go into the waiting hall, but he wouldn’t go. I didn’t blame him either. With the bandages and in that coat he would have started a riot.

Finally Rita got out of the car and slid under the steering wheel. Sarek got in beside her Miss Robinson went inside the reception building. There was a long wait, then Miss Robinson came out again and gave him some papers. She pointed to a distant plane standing under arc lights some five hundred yards away.

They talked some more, then Rita drove the car along the runway, towards the aircraft.

I moved out of the darkness and walked after them.

She parked the car near a hangar, about fifty yards from the aircraft. There was no one about, and I wondered if I could get near enough to start something. But she had parked the car under a light, and

she would see me before I could reach the car.

I had still twenty-five minutes before the plane took off.

I got as close as I could and waited. Minutes ticked by, then Sarek suddenly got out of the car. I began to sweat, and my heart started to thump. He walked a few yards away from the car and looked to right and left, then he came back and said something to Rita.

I began to move slowly and silently towards them.

Finally he walked towards the hangar. Rita got out of the car and watched him. I kept moving, judging the distance, making sure I could cut him off the moment he reached the heavy shadows of the hangar.

He kept looking to right and left, but I knew he couldn't see much because of the bandage. I was sure he wouldn't spot me as I edged towards him. He reached the hangar. I was there, waiting. He paused within a yard of me, facing the hangar, not seeing me, and looked away from me.

I knew exactly what I was going to do. I had to stop him from yelling, and I had to be sure Rita hadn't given him the gun.

As he began to unbutton his coat I took two short silent steps forward and was on him before he knew what was happening. He turned sharply, his breath coming out between clenched teeth in a frightened little hiss. My hand shot out and I had him by the throat. My left hand clamped down on his right wrist.

My fingers dug into his windpipe, cutting the air from his lungs. I had only to hold him like that for a few seconds and he'd lose consciousness. The Army had taught me how to put a man out by pressure on his windpipe, and I was confident I wouldn't hurt him. But I hadn't reckoned with his unexpected strength.

The moment my fingers sank into his windpipe he seemed to go off his head. His free hand whipped up and found my face. His fingernails tried to claw me, but I jerked back in time.

He kicked out, twisting away from me. It was like trying to hold an eel. I let go of his right wrist and grabbed his throat with both hands, slamming him against the wall. For three or four seconds he kicked, clawed at the air and struggled. His shoe caught me below the knee. The more he struggled the greater the pressure I put on his neck. I was getting into a panic. He should have been unconscious seconds ago. Apart from my breathing there wasn't a sound to tell Rita what was happening.

Then suddenly I felt something give under my fingers and heard a soft snick! That made my hair stand on end: the unmistakable sound a small bone makes when it breaks.

Sarek suddenly went limp. His unexpected weight threw me forward. I let go of him and stepped back, my heart freezing.

He slid gently to the ground and lay in a heap at my feet.

'What have you done?'

Rita was standing at my side.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. I knew what I had done all right.

She bent over him while I waited.

There was a long silence while my blood curdled and my flesh began to creep.

Then she said it.

'You've killed him, Frank.'

chapter fifteen

This was murder!

Not something to be read about in a newspaper while wondering how long it would be before the killer was caught.

Not an unknown individual who is hunted day and night, and finally taken to a police station with a coat thrown over his head. Not an impersonal sensation you forget almost as soon as you toss the paper aside. Not the remote thing that meant nothing; so little, in fact, that I once said I would take it in my stride. This was happening to me. This was real. Something I had done that no power on earth could undo: something I would have to pay for with my life.

Murder!

Something that turned me cold with a sick, horrible fear.

Something that would be with me for the rest of my life. From now on I wouldn't have one second of peace. Any noise, any sudden movement, any voice calling me; a step outside my door, a shadow in the street, a creating stair would set my heart pounding and my legs running in a desperate attempt to escape. It would be me they would hunt, and when they caught me, I knew nothing would convince them I hadn't meant to kill him. Not the cleverest, smartest counsel in the world would convince them of that.

'Frank!'

'Get away from me!'

'Here; drink this.'

She put a leather-bound flask into my hand.

'It's brandy. Don't lose your head, Frank. I'm going to help you.' The mouth of the flask rattled against my teeth. I took a long drink. The spirit ran down my chin and into my collar.

'Listen, Frank we can still do it. Get hold of yourself. We can still beat them.'

A picture of her swam into my mind: the green, glittering eyes, the sullen, stony face and the undefeated spirit behind the mask. If there was a way out, she would find it. She and nobody else.

I grabbed hold of her.

'I didn't mean to do it, Rita.'

'Do you think they'd believe you? It's done, and he's dead.'

'What am I going to do? I'm sunk! They'll be waiting on the plane for him, and when he doesn't show up, they'll look for him.'

'I'm going in his place. It's the only way out, Frank. If I wear his coat and those bandages, they won't know the difference. We're the same size, and they know the coat. They've seen it dozens of times. They won't be looking at me; they'll be looking at the coat!'

'They'll spot your voice.'

'I won't speak. Wait here. You mustn't be seen. I'll get the car. Get his coat off Frank.'

The paralysing fear that had gripped me began to recede.

This could be the way out: with any luck, it was the way out.

I moved into the darkness and knelt in the damp grass where he lay. I couldn't see him. I didn't want to see him.

Sweat ran down my face and into my eyes as I groped for him.

My hands touched the sleeve of his coat. I had to steel myself to undo the buttons. I got it of him somehow. He was like a limp doll.

I had the coat now and I stood up. I had killed him for the coat and now I had it, I didn't even bother to put my hands in the pockets. The fear of being caught and hanged had purged the thought of the money and the diamonds out of my mind. If the diamonds had been lying in the grass I wouldn't have picked them up. There was no room in my mind for anything else except the frantic clamour to escape the penalty of killing him.

She backed the car into the shadow of the hangar and pulled up with the rear bumper a couple of feet from me.

She had an electric torch in her hand as she got out of the car.

'Time's running out, Frank!'

She went over and knelt beside him. I held the torch, shielding the light with my fingers. I watched her pull of his hat and unwind the bandage from his face. There was a patch of blood on the bandage where he had bled a little from the mouth. When the tail of the bandage stuck to his lips she jerked it free, brutally, pulling his mouth out of shape. It made me feel sick to watch her. Every movement she made was confident, swift and ruthless.

'All right. Help me get him into the boot.'

She dragged him by his Does across the grass towards the car. I gripped his coat collar, and together we hoisted him into the boot.

He was small, but not small enough. His legs and arms hung out, making him look like a puppet without wires.

She pushed me aside and crammed his legs in, shoving them up to his chin as callously as if she was handling a sack of potatoes. She wedged his arms up behind his head. 'Give me the light!'

She snatched the torch out of my hand, and flung the beam on his dead face. For a couple of seconds, she stared at him, then she slammed the boot shut.

'At last, he's dead!'

The triumph in her voice made my blood run cold.

The whole of the ghastly operation hadn't taken more than three minutes, but time was running out. From where we stood we could see shadowy figures coming from the reception hall, and moving towards the aircraft.

'Give me his hat and coat. Hurry!'

She began to roll up the bandage.

'You'll have to do it. Get the bloodstained bit at the back.'

She snatched the hat and coat from me and gave me the roll of bandage.

It sickened me that she could endure the feel of the bloodwet bandage against her neck.

'Make it tighter! Let me finish it.'

At last it was done. I watched her strip of her fur coat.

She tucked her hair inside the hat and pulled on his coat. It reached almost to the cuffs of her black slacks, and looking at her I knew at once, provided she didn't have to speak, no one would tell her from Sarek.

'Will I do? Will they spot me?'

'You look like him. Yes, you look just like him.'

'If I can get away with it, we'll beat them, Frank. Now, listen, go back to the house. Follow our

plan. Drop him down the well. Are you listening?’

‘Yes.’

But I was thinking if they didn’t spot her I was safe. I was sure of it now: safer than I would have been if I had followed put my original plan. Safer because I hadn’t taken the Robinson woman into account, and she could have been the spanner in the works. Now she would swear he had left on the plane.

If only they didn’t spot her!

‘I’ll come straight back tonight. I’ll telephone you as soon as I get to Paris. Wait for my call. It’s going to be all right.’

‘How about Robinson?’

‘It’s all right. He said goodbye to here She promised to tell the airhostess to leave him alone and not worry him. They have reserved a seat up in front so no one can look at him. If I can get into the plane without being spotted I’m all right.’

‘How about getting back?’

‘I’ll manage. I have my passport. It’s going to be all right, Frank.’

I grabbed her arms.

‘It’s got to be all right!’

‘Be careful how you drive back. If you had an accident...’

‘I’ll watch it. You’d better get off. Look, the girl’s there now with her checking list. Get off now.’

‘Get rid of him the way we said. Don’t forget my coat. Can you manage, Frank?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry about the way I behaved. Now he’s dead I feel different.’

‘You’d better get off.’

‘Kiss me, Frank.’

I kissed the side of her neck.

She was saving my life, wasn’t she?

The passengers were getting into the aircraft now, moving up the stairway; the women first, the men politely hanging back. The girl checking them in had a word to say to most of them.

I waited, scarcely breathing, my fists clenched, my heart hammering.

Rita walked towards the aircraft without hurrying. From a distance she looked exactly like Sarek: she even managed to walk like him.

The airhostess glanced up as she reached the stairway. I held my breath. Would she notice anything? Would she stop her? Rita didn’t pause. The girl made a tick with her pencil and looked away. She had obviously been warned not to stare. Rita went on up the stairway and disappeared into the aircraft.

She had done it!

I thought I couldn’t have lived through a worse moment, but a couple of seconds later I knew different.

A car came out of the darkness and swung to a skidding halt before the reception hall entrance. A fat, dumpy figure climbed out.

I would have known who it was without seeing the crumpled pheasant’s feather and the rabbit-skin coat. It was Emmie!

I looked towards the aircraft. The stairway was still in position. A passenger was talking to the

checking girl, waving his hands and pointing to his papers. Two uniformed men stood either side of the stairway, waiting to wheel it away.

Emmie was about four hundred yards from them. An official came out of the reception hall and she ran up to him.

Her movements were flustered. She caught hold of his arm.

Somehow I had to stop her reaching the aircraft. I was as good as hanged if she got to it before I could head her off. I ran as I had never run before.

The official turned and pointed to the distant aircraft. She began to run towards it, her short, fat legs taking her along at a slow jog-trot.

I increased my speed, racing over the wet grass. She heard me coming and looked back over her shoulder. I reached her, caught hold of her arm and swung her round, 'Miss Pearl! What are you doing here?'

Her hat was over her eyes. There was a bruise under her left eye, and in one fat hand she clutched a long, thick envelope.

'Let me go!'

I hung on to her.

'He's on board. You've missed him! She's taking off now.'

The engines started up as I spoke, roared for a moment, and then throttled back. The two men began to wheel the stairway away.

'Let me go! I've got to give him this!'

She waved the envelope in my face and tried to wrench herself free.

'You'll never do it. Here, give it to me. I'll get it to him!'

I snatched the envelope out of her hand, shoved it down inside my coat and ran towards the aircraft.

The air hostess was closing the door when she saw me.

I waved to her and put on a terrific spurt. She waited. I came panting up.

'Is Mr. Oppenheimer on board?'

The girl stared at me.

'Not on this plane, sir,' and slammed the door in my face.

One of the uniformed men ran up to me and waved me away. The engines roared and the aircraft began to move. I could see the bandaged face looking at me through the front window.

Emmie came panting up. She was so breathless she couldn't speak.

'He's got it,' I yelled above the noise of the engines. 'Look, there he is, up at the front.'

The bandaged face was still looking in our direction as the aircraft moved off down the runway; a hand waved, then we turned away as the slipstream struck us.

I stopped at a pub in Amersham and bought two bottles of gin. I knew I would never bring myself to open the car boot unless I was roaring drunk. I had got over my first panic, but I knew I would get the shakes again when I opened the boot and saw him. I had to go through with it, but I couldn't go through with it sober.

At least I had fooled Emmie. Luck had been on my side.

On her way to the airfield her taxi had rammed another car and she had been shot of her seat on to the floor. The smash had shaken her, and she wasn't her usual sharp suspicious self.

But once she got over her panic of nearly missing the plane, she began to ask questions. She wanted

to know where Rita was. I told her we had been early, and Rita hadn't waited.

I knew she was capable of checking with Miss Robinson so I told her Sarek had been angry with me for getting them to the airport forty minutes too soon and I had walked out on him.

'But I hung around because I wanted to be sure he was all right. I feel pretty bad I made such a rotten job of guarding him.' She looked at me through the thick lenses of her spectacles: a quizzing, curious look.

'Are you going to London?'

'I'm meeting a girlfriend in Amersham. The London bus leaves in a few minutes. You get it over there.'

She thanked me. All the time her weak little eyes probed my face.

'Well so long, I don't suppose I'll see you again.'

'I don't suppose you will.'

'I'll give Mrs. Sarek a ring tomorrow. I'd like to know if he arrived safely.'

'Why shouldn't he?'

'No reason at all. But there's no harm in showing a little interest, is there? I liked him.'

'I don't think he would like you bothering Mrs. Sarek.'

'I think I've told you before. I couldn't care less what you think.'

I walked off, leaving her to stare after me.

That's how we parted. She hating me and I hating her.

But I had fooled her. I was sure of that, and I felt pretty certain I could keep her fooled.

Four Winds looked sinister and lonely as I swung the car through the gate. The time by the dashboard clock was fifteen minutes past eleven. In another twenty minutes she would have landed in Paris. In another quarter of an hour she would be phoning me.

I left the car before the front door and carried the two bottles of gin into the house. I gave myself three inches of neat spirit before I even took my coat off. Then I lit a cigarette and sat down before the electric fire. My nerves were still jumpy, and I had a sick, empty feeling inside. I wasn't going to touch him until after she had phoned. When I started on him I had to make a job of it. I couldn't risk having to leave him to answer the telephone.

I remembered the envelope I had snatched from Emmie, and was suddenly curious to see what was inside it. I got up and took it from the inside pocket of my overcoat and carried it back to the fire.

The envelope contained a flat, wooden box about nine inches long, something like a wooden pencil box kids take to school. I opened it. Inside was a dagger: quite a small thing, almost a toy, but its point looked as sharp as a needle.

There was a piece of chamois-leather wrapped round the handle, but what made me stare was the brown-red smear on the blade.

I didn't touch it, but looked at it, puzzled, wondering what it meant.

Then I looked inside the envelope. Pushed right down at the bottom was a scrap of paper. I fished it out. It was a cutting from a newspaper. In the centre of the two-column spread was the picture of Boris Daumier balancing Rita on his hand: the same picture I had found in the box in her wardrobe drawer.

The cutting was a report of a murder: Boris Daumier's murder. He had been stabbed to death in his flat in Cairo after a quarrel with his partner, Rita Kersh, as they called her. There was no doubt that she had killed him. As many as three people from the opposite flat had actually seen her stab

Daumier. Up to the time of going to press, no trace of her had been found, and the newspaper seemed to think someone had smuggled her out of the city.

No wonder she had been so anxious to get rid of Sarek.

Obviously he had engineered her escape, and so long as he lived she was in his power. A word from him, and she would be arrested for murder.

I wondered if she knew he had the dagger. He had probably protected the handle of the dagger with the chamois-leather to preserve her fingerprints. After thinking about it I decided she couldn't know he had it, otherwise she wouldn't have dared plan to murder him.

Well, I knew and I had the dagger now. If she had something on me, at least I had something on her. The balance of power was about even.

Around ten to twelve the telephone bell rang.

'Frank?'

'Yes. All right?'

'Not a hitch. I'll be back by half-past one Will you meet me?' I took out my handkerchief and wiped my face and neck.

'I'll be there.'

'And Frank ... have you done it?'

'Not yet. I was waiting for your call.'

'Well, do it!'

'As soon as you're hung up'

'Make a job of it, Frank.'

'Yes.'

I replaced the receiver, reached for a cigarette and lit it. I had only to get rid of him and I was safe. It was unbelievable.

I sat for a moment, breathing gently, letting the gin fumes rise to my head, and swimming away with them.

I had a drink, I had another.

'Well, I'd better put you away, old boy.' I said aloud. 'There won't be any chess where you're going.'

I stood up and walked to the door. My legs were unsteady and the ground seemed to give under my feet.

'Nobody would say you were sober; not even your worst enemy.'

I started for the front door, but changed my mind and had another drink. That finished the bottle. There was a hot, burning pain in my chest that bothered me. I lit another cigarette while I looked round the room. I couldn't find any excuse to remain in the room any longer so I picked my way carefully to the barn. I knew exactly what I wanted. Among the junk in the barn was a whetstone, about a couple of feet in diameter with a hole in the centre. It was made for the job.

I had a lot of bother handling it. It must have weighed over a hundredweight. I had to get the garden barrow to shift it from the barn around the back of the house to the well.

It was a pretty dark night; no moon and only a few dim stars. The cold east wind blew my hair into my eyes and flapped my coat against my legs, but I didn't feel cold. I had worked through a bottle of gin, and I had lost the sense of feeling.

I dumped the whetstone by the wall and took the barrow around to the front of the house where I

had left the car.

Before I opened the car boot, I stood for several minutes, listening. It is only when you make a conscious effort at listening that you realize the country at night isn't as silent as you think it is. I heard a sudden whirring of a pigeon's wings in a nearby tree, a distant barking of a dog, the tap-tap-tap of a chicken's beak against the walls of the hen house and the faint and distant squeal of a rabbit caught probably by a stoat.

I should have liked to have stood listening for the rest of the night, but I made the effort and opened the boot.

It was too dark to see him, and I didn't want to see him.

I groped into the darkness and my hand touched his face.

Drunk as I was, that shook me. I started back, collided with the barrow and went sprawling on the gravel.

For some moments I half lay, half sat, staring at the back of the car, feeling the hairs on my neck rising. This was going to be even worse than I imagined. I got up unsteadily, hesitated, then tinned on the electric torch I had in my pocket.

I didn't look at his face, but grabbed him by his coat and waistcoat and tried to lug him out. He was as stiff as a board and I couldn't shift him.

I got hold of his legs and puffed until my sinews creaked.

Then I saw his knee caps were wedged against the top of the boot, and that was the reason he wouldn't move. I managed to hook a tyre lever out from under him and wrench his knees free. After that it was easy.

I hauled him into the wheel barrow and carted him around to the back of the house. I knew if I stopped now I would never start again.

I had to leave him by the well while I went to the tool shed for a roll of wire and secateurs.

I kept telling myself it would soon be over. And once I had him down there I would be safe. That thought kept me going.

I collected the wire and the secateurs and went back to the well head. Then I really worked fast. I got him up on the wall of the well. I bound the wire round his waist, his thighs and his ankles. To the other end of the wire I fastened the whetstone.

Then I gently lowered him into the water and tipped the whetstone in after him.

chapter sixteen

She paused outside the gates of the airport and looked to right and left. I waved from the car window, and she crossed the road, walking quickly towards me. She had his overcoat over her arm, carefully folded inside out.

‘Let me in. I’m freezing.’

And she was too. Her face was blue with the cold.

‘You’d better drive. I’m higher than a kite. I don’t know how I got here.’

‘Is it all right, Frank?’

‘You bet it’s all right. He’s down among the dead men in a wet and watery grave.’

She slid under the steering wheel and draped his coat over her legs.

‘I’m cold! People must have thought I was cracked not to have put on the coat.’

‘Did you have any trouble?’

‘It was easy. The air hostess fixed everything. I didn’t even have to show his passport. They saw the coat and waved me through. They all know him, of course. I went to a nearby hotel and put the call through to you. Then in the darkness of the phone booth I took off his hat and bandages, put them in the pockets of the coat, folded it inside out, and went back to the airport. There was a plane leaving almost at once. It was half-empty at that time. I bought a ticket and here I am.’

‘Pretty good.’

‘I hadn’t a chance to get rid of the coat. I was scared they would want to examine it at this end, but they didn’t.’

‘We’d have looked pretty silly if you had got rid of it. It’s got his money in it.’

I hadn’t meant to say that, but I was so tight it slipped out before I could stop it.

‘I was so scared I didn’t think about the money.’

‘I know. That’s how I felt. I’ve got over it now.’

‘Did you search him, Frank?’

‘Search him? No. It was as much as I could do to get him down the well. He looked awful.’

‘You fool! He probably had a money belt.’

‘I bet he didn’t. I bet it’s all in the coat.’

‘If it isn’t...’

‘Here, give it to me. Let me see.’

‘We’ll wait until we get back.’

‘Wasn’t there anything in the pockets?’

‘Do you think he’d carry diamonds in the pockets? Use your head Frank. Are you sure he’s down there for good?’

‘Unless that whetstone can float. That’s what’s keeping him down.’

‘I wish you had searched him.’

I wished I had too.

As we drove through Chesham High Street she said, ‘What happened to Emmie? What did she want?’

‘She came to say goodbye. She gave me the fright of my life. Talk about luck! Her taxi hit another car and she got held up, otherwise she would have been on the spot when I – I...’

‘You were crazy to have done it, Frank. Why did you do it?’

‘I couldn’t stand the thought of all that money slipping through my fingers. I didn’t mean to kill him. I was going to grab the coat and bolt.’

‘And what about me?’

‘I had that planned. I was going to give you your share later.’

I looked at her out of the corners of my eyes. She was staring straight ahead her mouth set and her eyes half closed ‘Well, that’s nice to know, Frank.’

‘I am not kidding.’

Another long silence, then she asked, ‘What did Emmie give you, Frank?’

I was ready for that one.

‘She didn’t give me anything. She had some papers to give him. I snatched them out of her hand and ran on ahead to stop her seeing you. I couldn’t give them to the air hostess because she would have come to you with them and might have spotted you, so I made believe I wanted a word with a passenger who I knew wasn’t on the plane. It fooled Emmie all right.’

‘What were the papers, Frank?’

‘Just records. Names and addresses. Stuff like that. When I made sure there was no money I dropped them down the well.’

‘I see.’

I wished I knew whether she thought I was lying.

‘Frank’

‘Hello.’

‘I’m glad he’s dead.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry we quarrelled.’

‘Forget it.’

‘I did help you, didn’t I? If I hadn’t had that brain wave. If I hadn’t taken his place . . .’

‘I know. You don’t have to draw a map.’

‘Would you have done the same for me, Frank?’

I thought of the dagger.

‘You bet I would.’

‘It’s easy to say, isn’t it, Frank?’

The hands of the clock on the mantelpiece showed two forty-five. She had pulled the curtains and lit the table lamp.

The coat lay on the settee.

‘All right, now let’s see what we’ve got.’

I stood over her as she examined the coat. Her hands paused suddenly above the breast pocket.

‘Something here, Frank.’

I pushed her away. Through the thickness of the cloth I could feel something soft and lumpy.

‘Get a razor blade.’

‘Get it yourself.’

Neither of us trusted the other a yard from that coat. I took out my pocketknife and cut into the cloth.

‘Fivers!’

We spread them out on the table: a hundred brand-new five-pound notes.

'I don't like this stuff. They keep a record of it.'

'I'll have it if you don't want it.'

I grinned at her.

'I don't dislike it all that bad. Come on, I want the diamonds.'

We spent half an hour on the coat but we didn't find anything else.

'All right, all right, don't get excited. Let's go over it again; carefully this time.'

We sat side by side on the settee, the coat over our knees, and we went over it inch by inch, feeling in every corner, pressing the cloth between our fingers but still we found nothing.

We looked at each other.

'All right, I've acted this little scene long enough. You'd better hand them over, Rita.'

Every muscle in her body went rigid.

'What do you mean?'

'What I say. You don't think you're kidding me do you? You've had this coat for over six hours. Don't tell me you haven't been over it. As they're not in the coat now, it means you've already found them. So hand them over.'

Her face was a study of cold vicious fury and suspicion.

'And I suppose I'm to believe you didn't search him, you rotten thief! You've got them! That's it! You found them, didn't you? Well? you're not going to cheat. . .'

'Hand them over, Rita, or I'll take them of you!'

She pushed the coat aside and stood up. I stood up too.

'Don't make a fuss. Hand them over!'

'I haven't got them.'

She grinned casually and picked up her handbag. I grabbed her wrist, twisted it behind her, screwed the bag out of her hand and kicked it under the table.

For a minute or two we fought like a couple of animals.

Although she was strong I was that much stronger, and I got her down on the floor and knelt on her.

'Are you going to let me search you or do I have to bang your head on the floor?'

'All right, damn you, search me!'

I didn't find the diamonds. I went through her bag, put the gun in my hip pocket and threw the bag on the floor.

'It's beginning to dawn on me there aren't any diamonds.'

Her face was white, and her eyes glittering, 'How do I know you haven't got them?'

'Because I wouldn't be here if I had them. If I had found them I would have skipped, wouldn't I? Use your head!'

She pulled on her sweater, ran her fingers through her dishevelled hair and sat down on the settee. She began to go over the coat again, this time with feverish fingers.

'You're wasting time. You cooked up that story about the diamonds, didn't you? You wanted him dead. And don't think I don't know why. I do. I know all about you.'

She looked up.

'What do you mean?'

'Never mind what I mean. You've tricked me into killing him, haven't you? There never were any diamonds. You just threw out the bait and I swallowed it.'

'You're drunk, Frank.'

‘But not all that drunk.’

‘You’re talking nonsense. I know he had the diamonds. I saw them.’

‘I don’t have to believe you, do I?’

She picked up the hundred five-pound notes.

‘All right. If that’s how you feel about it. Take these and clear out.’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘Take these and call it quits. I’ll find the diamonds if I have to get him out of the well, and when I’ve found them I’ll stick to them.’

I stared at her.

‘What the hell is this?’

‘Take the money and get out, and don’t come back.’

‘And you keep the diamonds if you find them; is that it?’

‘You say there aren’t any diamonds. All right, I’ll buy your share of mythical diamonds with my half share of this money. I’m willing to gamble on it.’

I picked up the bottle of gin. I had a drink.

‘Do you think I’m risking my neck for five-hundred pounds?’

‘If, as you say, there are no diamonds, then you’ve already risked your neck for five hundred pounds.’

I snatched the money out of her hand, counted out fifty of the notes and offered them to her.

‘That’s your share. I’m staying until I’m sure the diamonds aren’t hidden here. You’re not going to gyp me out of a hundred-thousand worth of diamonds. You and nobody else.’

‘I don’t want the money, Frank.’ She was smiling, and when she smiled that way she could set fire to a saint. ‘You said you wanted the money and me, didn’t you, Frank? Well, here’s the money.’ She moved towards me. ‘And here am I.’

She had gone when I woke up, but I could hear her moving about downstairs, humming to herself.

I had a clapper inside my head that went bang-bang-bang, and a mouth like the bottom of a parrot’s cage. I had certainly been drunk last night.

I looked at the time. It was half-past nine, and the bright winter sun came through the blind, striking across my eyes and making me feel like hell.

I rolled over, wincing to the clapper inside my head.

After a while she came in carrying a tray.

‘So you’re awake.’

‘I feel like something the cat brought in.’

‘You were pretty drunk last night, Frank.’

‘I’ll say I was. What’s that - coffee?’

‘Hot and strong. I’ve got to feed the chickens. It’s late, Frank.’

She put the tray on the table by my side.

‘Come back when you’re through. We’ve got things to talk about.’

‘I’ll come. Do you want a cigarette?’

‘My case is over on the dressing table.’

She gave it to me.

‘Pretty good service.’

She smiled; a quick, bright smile that didn’t seem to mean very much.

‘When I like a man I look after him.’

I wondered if she had ever said that to Boris. She had certainly put him out of his misery.

After she had gone and I had drunk a couple of cups of black coffee the pain in my head went away and I was able to do a little thinking.

Now Sarek was safely at the bottom of the well I had lost that horrible sick feeling of fear. I now had no more feelings about killing him than if I had been to a gangster movie and seen someone shot to death on the screen: that’s how real it was to me. I was sure no one would find him down there. If ever the police became suspicious and began to look for him, there was positive proof he had gone to Paris, and it would be in Paris they would search for him, not down the well.

I still had Emmie to reckon with, but I felt pretty confident that if I followed my original plan, she wouldn’t become suspicious.

I wasn’t worrying about Sarek half as much as I was worrying about the diamonds. Had they been in the coat and had she found them? I didn’t think so. I had gone over that coat very carefully, and the stitching was intact. They would have been sewn in the coat. He wouldn’t have dared put them in a pocket. Had he been wearing them in a belt next to his skin? Again I couldn’t believe that. He never knew when the customs officials would descend on him. He was a regular traveller and they would be certain, sooner or later, to search him. Then again I couldn’t believe he would leave the country without them. It looked as if I would have to fish him out of the well, and the thought of doing that made me sweat. But how else could I be sure he hadn’t hidden them somewhere on his body or in his clothes?

I cursed myself for being such a squeamish fool not to have gone over him before dropping him down the well. How was I to get him up? There was a hundred foot of water down there. It would be a hell of a job.

I was glad when Rita came in and stopped me thinking.

‘Sit down and listen; we’ve got to take care of Emmie.’

She sat on the side of the bed and looked at me; her green eyes alert.

‘Go up to London this morning. Show her the letter and the photograph. Tell her you found the photo behind his chest of drawers and the letter in the wastepaper basket. You’ve got to convince her, Rita. Everything depends on it. If she takes it badly, as I’m willing to bet she will, then tackle her. Try to find out if he had any money. If she gets in a flap she may talk. We may even get a line on the diamonds.’

‘I’ll do it, Frank.’

I watched her drive down the lane to catch the ten fifty-three to London. As soon as the sound of the car engine had died away I started on the coat again.

I got a razor blade and opened the seams. I took the lining out. I opened the flaps of the pockets. I took the whole coat to pieces. I went through the shoulder padding. I cut up the cuffs but I didn’t find a thing.

I went over it again; inch by inch, cutting, ripping and cursing the coat. There were no diamonds, no money, nothing hidden in the damn thing.

For some minutes I sat and stared at it. My plan for taking Netta to America was as dim and faded as last year’s snow. I had killed him for practically nothing. Maybe he wasn’t worth more than five-hundred pounds we had found on him. Maybe I had invested him with a wealth he had never known, and now would never know. I had killed him for two hundred and fifty pounds, or five hundred if I

cared to take her as well: and I didn't want her. I wanted Netta and luxury and America. If I had my hands on his throat now he wouldn't have died so easily. I was fit to walk up a wall I bundled what was left of the coat together and carried it to the bam, wrapped the bits and pieces around the handle of a fourteen-pound sledge hammer and fixed it tight with wire, then I carried the bundle to the well and dropped it in.

It went down quickly and smoothly with scarcely a ripple.

I leaned forward, looking at the black surface of the water. The frog darted into the shadows. The green slime on the walls moved uneasily.

It crossed my mind he would probably be glad to have the coat with him. It would be pretty lonely down there.

She got back just after four o'clock The moment I heard the car I ran out to open the gate.

There was a hard, set expression on her face I didn't like.

'What happened?'

'I don't know. Let's get inside. I'll tell you about it.'

We went inside and closed the front door.

'Did you convince her?'

'I think so.'

'Didn't I tell you you had to be damn sure about that?'

'She's no fool, Frank. The way she looked at me...'

'I know. You don't have to tell me. She wouldn't trust her own mother Well, come on, come on, what happened?'

'I put on a good act, Frank. I know it was good. I even cried. I gave her the letter and the photograph. She went white. She looked awful. She's hideous enough as it is, but when she read that letter she looked so horrible I felt sick.'

'But did she believe it?'

'Not at first. She didn't say so, but after she had got over the shock I could tell she thought I was lying. I told her to phone the hotel he's staying at.'

'And did she?'

'Yes. They told her they were expecting him, but he hadn't booked in. Then I think she began to believe it. I called him names. I said I hadn't any money. I said I'd wasted the best years of my life on him.'

'Never mind what you said. What did she say?'

'That's what's worrying me, Frank. She didn't say anything. She sat there like a fat pig, staring out of the window. She let me rave on, but she didn't say a damn thing.'

'Well, what happened?'

'I asked her if she had any of his money, and she said she hadn't. I asked her what I was going to do. She gave me an awful little smile. 'Wait a little while', she said, 'we may hear from him'. I said I was sure we would never hear from him again. 'We may', she said, and I had a feeling she felt he would get into touch with her. It was as you said, Frank, she can't believe he can do without her. She's going to wait. But when she doesn't hear anything from him, then perhaps she'll open up. I have a feeling that's what is going to happen. We'll have to wait, Frank.'

'You don't think she was suspicious?'

'I'm sure she wasn't. She thinks he's left me, but she won't believe he's left her.'

‘But she will, Rita, she will.’

chapter seventeen

We waited a week. It was the longest week I have lived through. It rained most of the time, and a blustering west wind moaned continuously round the house. There wasn't much to do except sit in front of the fire and listen to the radio, and wait.

Rita wanted me to search the bam, but I wouldn't do it.

I wasn't going to shift all that coal and wood just for the fun of it. I was positive the diamonds weren't in the bam. Then she wanted me to get him out of the well, and I wouldn't do that either. The thought of fishing for him in that depth of water in the rain and the wind gave me the jitters, and besides, I had a horror of seeing him again; Everything now depended on Emmie. I was sure she would talk once she was convinced he had walked out on her. She would know about the diamonds - if there were any diamonds and she would know if he had them on him or not. I wasn't going through the ghastly business of getting him out unless I was certain the diamonds were on him.

So we waited.

Rita wasn't much company. She was nervy and sharp tempered, and then so was I. We got on together the way a bad-tempered cat gets on with a bad-tempered dog. We were continually flying up at each other, and there were days when we scarcely exchanged a word.

I was scared to go out. It would have been fatal to our plans if Emmie learned I was living alone with Rita. Every time I heard a car drive up or the crunch of feet on the gravel I dived upstairs, in case it was Emmie. By the end of the week I was about as fed up as I could be.

To add to our troubles we were running short of money.

We had agreed it wouldn't be safe to spend the five-pound notes we had found in the coat until we were sure Emmie hadn't kept a record of the numbers. For all we knew she might have gone already to the police and told them Sarek had disappeared. If we spent the fivers and they were spotted it would be a complete give-away.

Rita had about six pounds, and I had the twenty pounds Sarek was going to give me, and which I had found in his suitcase. But both of us were drinking pretty heavily and the money was going fast.

At the end of the eighth day we had only two pounds left. I was sick of being cooped up, sick of Rita and completely and utterly sick of myself.

I sprang it on her after supper.

'I'm going to London tomorrow.'

She was lighting a cigarette, and I saw the flame of the match swerve as if someone had jogged her arm. She looked at me.

'Why?'

'I want to raise some money. In another couple of days we'll be flat broke.'

'How are you going to do that?'

'A chap owes me fifty quid. I'm going to collect it.'

She didn't attempt to conceal her suspicion.

'You'll be back tonight, of course?'

'I hope so. If he isn't in I might be delayed. Anyway, I'll give you a ring.'

'Frank...'

'Now what is it?'

'You know what I said about cheating?'

'Oh, shut up! What's the matter with you? I suppose you imagine I'm going to meet some girl.'

'You'd be sorry if you did.'

'Oh, forget it. You make me tired. What about your fat pal: Boris? What happened to him?'

She flicked the cigarette into the fire.

'What makes you ask?'

'I just want to be sure he isn't within reach. You're always imagining I have a girl up my sleeve, why shouldn't I imagine you have Boris up yours?'

Without looking at me, she said, 'He's dead.'

'And I suppose I'm expected to believe that, am I?'

'He died six or seven years ago in Cairo.'

'What happened to him? Did you poison him?'

'What do you mean?'

There was an alert, scared look in her eyes.

I grinned at her.

'I was kidding. Don't tell me you did poison him.'

'Don't talk like a fool!'

'All right, all right. You needn't look like Lady Macbeth.'

'Oh, shut up.'

To walk down Piccadilly, to look into the lush windows of shops like Fortnum and Mason, to see the smart women in their winter furs, to smell petrol fumes again and hear the rumbling of the traffic was pretty nice after the still, quiet, dangerous atmosphere of Four Winds.

I went into a pub in Jermyn Street and had three double whiskies and read the midday Standard. I had plenty of time, and I was going to enjoy myself. But I had to have money. All I had was a ten-shilling note when I left the pub and walked down Lannox Street.

Netta's flat was over an antique dealer's shop. I arrived at three minutes past noon.

There was a little delay before she opened the door. She was wearing a wool twin set in pale blue and a black shirt. Her blonde, curly hair was done up with blue ribbon. She looked as cute as a Varga drawing.

'Does Miss Netta Garsten live here?'

'Frankie! Oh, Frankie; darling!'

'Well, how are you, baby?'

'Oh, come in, Frankie. I've been waiting and waiting. Why don't you write or telephone or something?'

She hung on to my arm as if she was afraid I'd run away, and led me into the sitting room.

'I've been pretty busy. I meant to write, but you know how it is. Anyway, here I am. And if you are a very good girl I'm going to stay the night.'

'I'm always a good girl, Frankie.'

I sat down and she sat on my lap and put her arms round my neck and rested her face against mine.

'What have you been up to, darling?'

I wasn't going to tell her I had murdered a man and had thrown him down a well. That was something I wasn't going to tell her.

'I've lost my job, Netta.'

‘Oh, Frankie . . .’

‘There’s nothing to worry about. It’s just one of those things. Sarek’s gone to Paris, and he doesn’t want a bodyguard anymore, so for the moment I’m high and dry.’

‘That deal you were telling me about, Frankie ... didn’t it come off?’

‘Well, no, but it’s still cooking. Sarek’s in Paris to complete the deal. As soon as it goes through I’ll get the money. It’s just a matter of waiting.’

She looked at me, her blue eyes wide.

‘But can you trust him, Frankie? Will he give you the money?’

‘Of course he will. It was his idea to cut me in. I don’t suppose I’ll have to wait more than a month. Then we’ll go.’

‘You really mean we’ll go?’

‘Well, yes. I’m not saying it’s as safe a bet as I had thought, but I don’t think there’s much doubt that we will go eventually.’

‘Frankie...’

‘Hello.’

‘I don’t want you to worry about it. If things don’t work out right, it doesn’t matter about going to America. But we will get married, won’t we?’

‘We’ll get married, and we’ll go to America too.’

‘When, Frankie? I mean when shall we get married?’

‘Oh, in a little while. Don’t be so anxious. We’re as good as married now, aren’t we?’

‘Why, no, Frankie. I haven’t seen you for nearly a fortnight. I - I want you to live here with me.’

‘Just give me time, baby. It’ll all work out.’

‘Are you going to stay here until the deal goes through?’

‘I’d like to, but there are things I have to do. I have a little job in Manchester that might come to something. I’m going up there tomorrow.’

‘What kind of job, Frankie?’

‘Just a job. Something you wouldn’t understand. Business.’

She stroked my face.

‘I wish you didn’t look so worried, Frankie.’

‘I’m not worried. Well, perhaps I am Netta, I don’t like asking you thing you this but if I could borrow a little money of you I’d be grateful.’

She sat up so she could look right at me.

‘Why, darling, of course. You know you have only to ask. I’ve always wanted to help you, but you never would let me.’

‘I’m pretty short right now, but I’ll be getting something soon. I’ll pay you back, Netta, at the end of the month.’

‘How much do you want, darling? Would a tenner do? I have a tenner in my bag.’

‘Well, I thought a little more than that. Would fifty cripple you?’

She looked startled.

‘I’d have to get it out of the bank.’

‘You could do that, couldn’t you?’ I tried to make a joke of it, but I wasn’t feeling particularly proud of myself. ‘Or won’t your bank manager let you have so much out at a time?’

‘It’s all right, Frankie. Of course you can have it.’

'I wouldn't mind having it now.'

She got off my lap.

'Let's go to the bank right away. Frankie. Then we'll have lunch out and come back here. Would you like that?'

'That sounds fine. We might take in a movie tonight.'

She sat down to write the cheque.

'Frankie...'

'Hello.'

'You've never mentioned her. What is Mrs. Sarek like?'

I looked at the top of the blonde head and wondered. She appeared engrossed in making out the cheque, but I wasn't fooled. She had been thinking about Mrs. Sarek ever since I had landed the job.

'I suppose she's all right. She makes Sarek a good wife.'

'Is she pretty, Frankie?'

'I suppose she was twenty years ago. I wouldn't know. She might have been.'

'Oh, she's old then?'

'She's in the prime of life, baby: about fifty, and she has a mole on her chin with three cute little hairs sticking out of it. She plays a good game of chess, and she can talk about intellectual things. Sarek seems to like her.'

She blotted the cheque and then stared at me.

'Is it true about the mole, Frankie?'

'Why, yes. Lots of people have them. They're very useful.'

'Are they? Why?'

'Well, if you get run over your next of kin can identify you by them for one thing, and your husband can be sure other men won't run after you for another!'

'I've got a mole, Frankie.'

'I know, but it's a very nice mole.'

I slid the cheque off the table and folded it carefully 'Let's have lunch.'

We went to see a Gregory Peck film at the Empire Cinema, Leicester Square. Netta had a crush on Gregory Peck.

She said he looked like me. She cried towards the end of the film, and rested her head on my shoulder, and when she came out she said she thought it was a lovely film and she could see it again.

'Not with me you won't. Now, come on, let's have a drink.'

Looking at that hunk of manhood has given me an inferiority complex.

'But he's like you in lots of ways, darling. The way he walks and the way he does his hair.'

'Better not tell him, baby, he mightn't like it.'

We went to a pub in Charing Cross Road and had some beer. I always start with beer when I'm heading for a thick night. Beer; then gin, then whisky, and back to beer again.

I had two pints to Netta's half, and then we went to another pub in Cambridge Circus and had a couple of gins.

'Do you ever see anything of his secretary - what was her name: Miss Pearl?'

I wasn't expecting that. I had forgotten Emmie. I had even forgotten Sarek, and that idle, silly remark brought them into my mind again and spoiled my drink.

'Look, baby, will you cut this drivel out? Don't think you're being clever. You're not. You're

being pinheaded, and I don't like pinheads. You are saying as plainly as if you used the actual words that you are jealous of Miss Pearl and you're jealous of Mrs. Sarek. Well, don't be. They both mean as much to me as that cat over there: less.'

'I'm sorry, Frankie. I was just making conversation. I was - honest.'

'Well, if that's your idea of conversation, don't make it. Think about Gregory Peck or let me do the talking.'

It took three gins in a row to get me into a good temper again, but at the back of my mind, whenever there was a lull in drinking or we were walking to another pub, I found myself thinking of Sarek.

'Let's eat, Frankie; I'm getting tight.'

'All right. Where shall we go?'

'I know a place. It's at the top of Athen Street. I know the manager.'

'Does that mean he'll give us something not on the menu?'

'Oh, yes. He'll give us steaks.'

He gave us steaks. It was the best dinner I have had since before the war. We had oysters too, and a vintage claret that was worth every shilling they charged for it.

I was having a good time. Netta was having a good time too. She talked about what she was going to buy for her trousseau and what we would do in New York.

'I want to drive in an open taxi down Broadway with you, Frankie, and see all the lights. I want to go to the movies and the theatres and dance at the Stork Club. Do you think we'll be able to go to the Stork Club?'

I didn't hear a word. I sat as still as a stone man with a piece of steak on the end of my fork, and a creepy cold, shuddery feeling going up my spine.

Emmie Pearl had walked in. She was wearing the hat with the crumpled pheasant's feather and the rabbit-skin coat.

With her was a short, fat Jew in a black coat and striped trousers. He was built on the same lines as Emmie and looked like her, only uglier. He could have been her brother. He had to be her brother. No man except her brother would be seen out with her.

'What's the matter, Frankie?'

'Nothing.'

'You've gone white.'

'Shut up!'

Emmie and her brother sat down about fifteen yards from our table. I had my back to her, but I could see her in the mirror. Netta faced her.

'Frankie, darling ..'

'Leave me alone, can't you? I'm feeling sick. I'll be all right if you'll get on with your meal and leave me alone.'

'Have a brandy, Frankie.'

'Oh, for God's sake, shut up'

Emmie was looking round the restaurant while her brother was ordering the meal. She looked in our direction, glanced at Netta, and then her gaze wandered to another woman at the table next to ours. I was beginning to hope she hadn't recognized Netta, when her eyes suddenly swivelled back and a puzzled expression came on her fat face.

I felt a trickle of sweat run down my face. If she recognized Netta as the girl in the photograph: the

girl who was supposed to have gone off with Sarek, I would be in a hell of a mess.

A waiter passed, and Netta caught his sleeve.

‘A large brandy, please, and quickly.’

‘I don’t want it!’

‘But, darling you look terrible.’

The waiter must have thought so too, for he came back at once with the brandy. I swallowed it. It was like drinking water.

‘Let’s get out of here.’

I knew it was dangerous to move, but I was frightened Emmie would recognize me and come over. She was eating now, the puzzled expression still on her face, but her interest centred on her food.

‘Let me have a bill, waiter.’

‘Is there anything wrong, M’sieur?’

‘No. I’m not feeling well.’

He gave me the bill and I paid.

I didn’t have to pass her. She was behind me. All I had to do was to get up and walk out. I took Netta’s arm and we walked out, but I felt I was being watched all the way. I didn’t dare look round. I wanted to, but didn’t dare. What a mad fool I had been to have taken Netta out. What a madder fool I had been to have used her photograph. She was a model. Her picture appeared in hundreds of periodicals. She had a well-known face. I must have been right out of my mind to have palmed that photograph of on Emmie as the picture of the girl who had run away with Sarek. I was in such a panic out there in the darkness, I nearly threw up.

‘Frankie, whatever is the matter?’

‘Just leave me alone, will you?’

I was thinking that was how people got themselves hanged: making a stupid slip like that. But maybe Emmie hadn’t recognized Netta as the girl in the photograph. I tried to remember the photograph. Netta hadn’t been wearing any clothes, neither had she worn a hat and her hair was down to her shoulders. She was always changing her hair style. Tonight she was wearing a beaver-fur coat and a hat and her hair was rolled up. Perhaps I was getting into a panic for nothing.

A taxi crawled by and Netta stopped it.

She had to support me as I got in. The taxi driver didn’t get down and help. He stared sightlessly down the long dark street ahead of him and didn’t say anything. He didn’t seem to think much of either of us.

For the first time since it happened I dreamed about Sarek.

I dreamed he and I were playing chess. We were sitting in the moonlight, cross-legged on the top of the well. The chess board lay on the zinc well cover between us. He was wearing the awful coat and it was soaking wet, but he didn’t seem to mind.

He was also wearing the bandage round his face, and he looked very horrible in the Bright light of the moon.

I was beating him at long range: a queen, a castle and a bishop. I had only one move to make, but before I could make the move there came a sudden muffled knocking under the well cover.

‘Take no notice,’ Sarek said. ‘Is only the frog. He wants to get out.’

The knocking got louder and louder until the chessmen began to jump about the board. I felt the cover of the well lift a little and then slam back, lift again and suddenly I lost my balance and toppled

over, cringing with fear, and shouting, 'Don't let him out! Don't let him out!'

And I found myself sitting up in bed, hearing the bang-bang-bang of my heart against my side and sound of my voice in my ears.

The light was on and Netta was hanging on to my arm.

'Frankie, darling! Oh, Frankie, what is the matter?'

I dropped back on the pillow. Sweat was running off me.

The awful pounding of my heart frightened me.

'I was dreaming: a nightmare. Turn out the light. I shouldn't have drunk that beer.'

'You're sure you're all right?'

'Turn out the light!'

She turned out the light and put her arms round me. I was glad to feel her close to me.

'You sounded so frightened, Frankie. There's nothing wrong, is there? Nothing worrying you?'

'I was dreaming, I tell you.'

'Go to sleep, darling. You won't dream if I hold you.'

I didn't go to sleep. I was afraid to.

chapter eighteen

Slowly I climbed the four flights of stairs, pausing several times on the way up to get back my breath I seemed very short of breath this morning, and my heart was racing.

I knew I shouldn't be going to see her. I knew I was making a dangerous mistake, but murder breeds mistakes. I had already made so many, one more or less wasn't going to make much difference. Besides, I couldn't keep away from her. I had to know if she had recognized Netta I wouldn't sleep nor rest nor stop worrying nor lose the empty, sick feeling I had until I knew one way or the other.

I had made up my mind, if she showed the slightest suspicion or gave the slightest hint she knew the girl in the photograph was Netta, I would bolt. I would clear out with Netta, using her money to get us out. I would be gone long before Emmie could tell the police: at least, I hoped I would.

The typewriter wasn't going as I walked softly down the long passage. I wondered if she was there, behind the frosted-panelled door listening to the sound of the traffic and the aircraft circling overhead, and waiting for Sarek to ring her.

I gripped the door handle with moist fingers, turned it and pushed the door open.

She was there, sitting alone by the electric stove, staring out of the window. She wore her rabbit-skin coat, and her tiny feet hung a few inches from the floor.

Her battered desk was dusty and bare. The well-worn cover was on the typewriter. Modern Enterprises had come to a standstill. There was no work to do, no letters to write, no telephone to answer: no nothing.

She looked round and stared at me.

'So you're still here. I wondered if you would be. How are you?'

'What do you want?'

I was watching her. Nothing showed on the ugly, fat face; even the weak little eyes were without expression. I moved farther into the room and closed the door.

An idea was growing at the back of my mind to murder her. There was only one other office on this floor, and it was at the far end of the passage. I could kill her and leave her in Sarek's room, and she might not be found for weeks. I wish I had killed her now, but at that moment I was squeamish about sinking my hands in her greasy fat throat. So instead of walking up to her and strangling her as I should have done, I watched her like the fool I was, and tried to match my wits against hers.

'I thought I'd look you up for old time's sake. I was passing, and I wondered if you had any news of him. Didn't I see you out last night with your boyfriend?'

There was no change of expression.

'You may have done.'

'Didn't you see me? I smiled at you.'

'No, I didn't see you.'

Was she lying? I had no way of telling: the blank, fat face told me nothing. But I had a feeling she hadn't spotted Netta. Surely it was impossible for her not to have shown a spark of triumph, suspicion or hatred if she had known, I began to breathe more easily,

'Well, you looked as if you were having a good time. Was that your brother?'

'It's none of your business who it was.'

‘What a lovely nature you have. You can’t let bygones be bygones, can you?’ I looked pointedly at the desk. ‘So it’s true then?’

‘What’s true?’

‘I ran into Mrs. Sarek the other day. She told me he had skipped with a woman. I didn’t believe it.’

‘It’s not your business.’

Well, at least, she didn’t deny it.

‘I suppose it isn’t.’ I sat on the edge of the desk and lit a cigarette, ‘But after all I did work here. I have a certain interest.’

She continued to look blankly at me and said nothing.

‘Can’t be much fun for you sitting here alone. What are you living on or did he provide for you?’

Her thick lips tightened.

‘He didn’t provide for me; now you can get out.’

‘You mean to tell me after working for him for ten years, he’s left you high and dry? Well, I’ll be damned! I wasn’t surprised when Mrs. Sarek told me he’d left her without a bean, but you well, you’re different.’

She suddenly became watchful.

‘What do you mean? Why am I different?’

‘Didn’t you know? They had a row before he left. I heard them yelling at each other. He found out she wasn’t going to have a kid after all. He was livid, and she told him she didn’t intend ever having a child. It’s my bet that’s why he left her. He wanted a son more than anything else in the world. Maybe this other girl’s going to give him one.’

She was sitting forward on the edge of her chair now, staring at me.

‘He didn’t tell me. Why wouldn’t she have a child?’

‘How do I know? Some women don’t like children. Some are scared to have them. I haven’t the foggiest idea. Maybe she hated him. All I can tell you is I heard her say she wasn’t having a child. She was yelling at the top of her voice.’

She looked away, half turning to the window so I couldn’t see her face, but I saw her hands clench into fists.

‘But you weren’t really expecting to see him again, were you?’

‘Yes; I was.’

‘Well, I hope you won’t be disappointed. Perhaps he’ll send you a little donation.’

She didn’t say anything nor did she look round.

‘I told Mrs. Sarek I didn’t think he had any money. After all he was just a small-time chiseller, wasn’t he?’

That flicked her on the raw as I hoped it would. She turned, her weak eyes glittering.

‘That’s where you’re wrong. He had a lot of money.’

‘I wonder. Depends on what you call a lot of money.’

‘Standards differ. How much did he have?’

‘That’s not your business!’

‘You see what I mean? Just a cheap little crook. He had so little, even you can’t boast about it.’

Her face turned red and her fat chin began to tremble.

‘He had more than you’re ever likely to have!’

‘That’s not saying a fat lot. I have plenty of time. I bet he hadn’t more than a couple of hundred.’

‘He had more than fifty thousand pounds! And he promised me ten thousand for all I’ve done for him, and I’ve done so much. He couldn’t have made all that money if it wasn’t for me.’ She began to snivel. ‘Ten thousand! And I haven’t a penny of it!’

‘Well, don’t get excited. He couldn’t have smuggled all that money out of the country. You know where it is, don’t you? Why don’t you pinch some of it?’

She was crying now, her handkerchief hiding her face.

‘He took it with him! It was in diamonds! Now, get out!’

I had trouble in controlling my breathing. I had trouble too in controlling my voice. This was it. A little more pressure, and I’d have what I wanted.

‘You don’t kid me. He wouldn’t dare take diamonds out of the country. He’s scared of his own shadow. They’re watching for boys like him, and he knows it. He’d get fifteen years if they caught him. He wouldn’t have the guts!’

‘So you think he was a spineless fool like you?’ she squeaked, jumping up. She looked horrible. Her fat face was red and moist, tears squirted out of her eyes and ran down her cheeks. ‘For years he’s carried hundreds of diamonds to Paris. He hid them in the buttons of his coat.’

My heart turned over, and I felt the blood drain out of my face. The one place I hadn’t checked and they had to be there!

In the buttons of the coat! I remembered them now: big, thick buttons, six down the front, six inside, four on each sleeve.

‘Well, that’s pretty smart.’

My voice sounded as if it was coming out of a long tunnel.

‘And he was smart! Now, get out! I don’t want you coming here anymore! Get out and stay out!’

‘Well all right, if that’s how you feel.’ I opened the door. ‘Anyway, good luck, Emmie, something tells me you’ll need it.’

She kept her face hidden in her handkerchief, and she was still snivelling as I walked down the passage to the head of the stairs.

I went into a pub in Shaftesbury Avenue and bought myself a double whisky. I was still shaky from the shock, and I wanted to steady myself, and think.

I would have to work fast. I would need some sort of grapple and a hundred foot or so of line. I would have to get Rita out of the house. I would have to fish up the coat, get the buttons of and sew them on my own overcoat. Then I would have to phone for a taxi to come out and pick me up and take me to the station. I would have to bustle Netta into getting ready, and I would have to fix air passages for her and me to New York.

It was unbelievable luck that Emmie had blurted it out as she had done. But I had been convinced all along that once she was sure Sarek had gone for good she would let the cat out of the bag. And that yam I had told her about Rita refusing to give him a child had clinched it in her mind. It had supplied the motive for him going off with another woman.

I cursed myself for dropping the coat down the well before examining the buttons. But with the grapple I should be able to get it up again. It would be easier to fish up Lie coat than get Rita away from the house. I would have to be very careful how I did that.

I decided to have a word with Netta right away, and went over to a phone booth and called her.

‘It’s Frank ...’

‘Why, darling...’

‘Let me do the talking. I think this deal’s in the bag. Now, listen, Netta, I want you to fix air passages for us to New York. Get them just as soon as you can. If we can leave the day after tomorrow that would be fine I want to be of in two or three days.’

I heard her catch her breath.

‘But darling ...’

‘Just do what I say, and don’t let’s have any back-chat.’

‘But, Frankie, we can’t possibly go in two or three days. I have my flat to let. There’re a hundred and one things I have to do. I have four appointments this week I can’t possibly break!’

‘That’s too bad. Looks as if I shall have to go on my own, it’s up to you, Netta. I’m going before the end of the week, and if you can’t come, then you’ll have to stay behind.’

‘But darling...’

‘That’s the way it is.’

‘I’m coming with you whatever happens.’

‘Then get cracking. Never mind the flat. To hell with your appointments. I thought you wanted to marry me.’

‘All right, darling, I’ll manage somehow.’

‘Get the tickets and I’ll pay you back. I’ll phone you some time tomorrow and see how you’ve got on. If you can’t get an air passage, then we’ll go by sea. Whatever happens we leave before the end of the week.’

‘Frank, nothing’s happened, has it? I mean you - you’re not in any trouble?’

I grinned fixedly at the mouthpiece. Trouble was an understatement.

‘Don’t fuss. There’s nothing the matter; only when I make up my mind to do a thing, I like to get on with it.’

‘But it all seems such a - a rush...’

‘Look, do you want to come with me or don’t you?’

‘Oh, of course I do, Frankie.’

‘Well, do what I say and shut up, will you? I’m in a hurry. I’ll phone you tomorrow,’ and I hung up.

I got back to Four Winds soon after three o’clock. She didn’t come out to open the gate, and she didn’t show herself when I had driven the car into the garage.

It was my fault. I had forgotten to telephone her. She was bound to be suspicious and angry.

I opened the front door and walked into the sitting room.

She was lolling on the settee, staring into the fire, her face as hard as granite.

‘I wondered if you came back.’

‘All right, now don’t let’s start fighting. I tried to phone you, but I was out of luck. It’s a funny thing but when you want to use the phone in London you can never find a booth or if you find one, someone’s using it.’

‘Don’t make it worse by lying.’

‘I’m not lying. Don’t be so damned touchy.’ I took off my overcoat, tossed it on the back of a chair and sat down opposite her. ‘I’ve been trying to raise money. All right, I know I should have phoned you, and I’m sorry I didn’t. I’ve been pretty busy and worried, and whenever I remembered to phone you, I couldn’t reach a telephone.’

‘Does all this mean you didn’t get the money?’

‘No, I didn’t. The fella I went to see was away. I hung around his place nearly half the night. I went

again this morning, but he still hadn't shown up. I think he knows what I'm after and is keeping out of my way.'

'So you've come back with nothing?'

'Yes.'

She gave me a cold, sneering little smile.

'You couldn't have been very nice to her if she turned you down.'

'Now, cut that out! That's all you think of. We're in a mess, can't you see that?'

She swung her legs of the settee and jumped up.

'You're a dirty, rotten cheat!'

I wanted to hit her, but I knew that wasn't the way to play it.

'For God's sake, Rita, be sensible. I know what you're thinking. Nothing like that happened. I swear it. I spent all yesterday and today hunting for money!'

'And all night as well?'

'All right, if that's how you feel, then go to hell. I'm not going to talk anymore.'

She stood glaring at me, but I met her eyes and after a moment or so she must have realized this wasn't getting her anywhere.

'If ever I find out ...'

'I know; I know. I heard you the last time. What are we going to do for money?'

'We'll have to cash those fivers. You should have taken them to London with you.'

'Oh, no, we don't do that. That's the last thing we do. I want to be absolutely certain Emmie doesn't know the numbers of those notes before we put them into circulations. They could hang us.'

'Then get him out of the well and see if the diamonds are on him. What's to stop you doing that?'

'I'm not touching him unless I'm certain they are on him. Use your imagination. It would be a hell of a job to get him up. Now, listen, Rita, you can find out about the diamonds.'

'I can?'

'Yes; you can see Emmie. Go to her tomorrow. Tell her the tale. Tell her you haven't a penny - ask her what you're to do. Ask her if Sarek left her any money. Try to borrow from her. She may talk. Tell her you saw him put the fivers in his coat and does she know anything about them.'

She stared at me for a long and uncomfortable moment.

'Well, yes, I suppose I'd better do that.'

Later in the evening I went up to my bedroom to get my last packet of cigarettes. When I opened the drawer I saw at a glance she had been searching among my things. I opened other drawers. They had all been disturbed. I stood for a moment staring round the room, a chilly feeling of uneasiness creeping over me. Then I locked the door, went over to the bed and pulled the bedclothes away and lifted the corner of the mattress.

I had hidden the dagger in the mattress: the dagger with which she had killed Boris. I pushed my hand into the slit I had made and groped about in the horsehair. I groped feverishly...

But it had gone.

chapter nineteen

I hoped she would catch the eight fifty-five, but she didn't. She said the eleven-fifteen was quite early enough. She intended to go straight to the office and return immediately after she had talked to Emmie. There was no point, she said, in getting there too early.

I ached for her to go. I would need every minute I could get alone to fish up that coat. It might take me hours, and I was seething with impatience and a kind of sick terror, although I concealed it from her.

She certainly was in no hurry to go. She fed the chickens and cleaned out the geese. She made the bed and dusted the sitting room. She washed up the breakfast things. The hands of my watch crawled on, and my impatience mounted.

'If you're going to catch that train, you'll have to buck up.'

'You seem very anxious for me to go.' She paused as she rinsed out the coffee pot and gave me a cold, searching stare.

'I have an hour yet.'

'I am anxious. I don't make any bones about it. If Emmie...'

'Go away and don't fidget me.'

I went into the barn and chopped wood. I had to do something or I'd have gone crazy. I kept having to wipe cold sweat of my hands and face, and there was an awful cringing sensation inside me. I couldn't keep my mind of Sarek, rotting under a hundred foot of water. Suppose the grapple caught him, instead of the coat?

Around twenty to eleven she came out of the house, dressed in her fur coat over black slacks. Her copper-coloured hair was done up in a green scarf. I suppose she looked pretty good: whenever she dressed herself up she looked good, but I was beyond all that now. I was frightened of her, and you don't want to sleep with a woman who frightens you.. All I wanted was to see her drive away, and to know I had seen the last of her.

I came out of the barn to open the farm gate.

'I'll probably catch the two forty-five back.'

That barely gave me five hours.

'Make a job of it, Rita. Make her talk.'

She pressed the starter and the engine fired.

'I'll make a job of it.' She gave me a jeering little smile.

'Don't get into mischief while I'm away.'

Somehow I managed to grin.

'Fat chance I have of getting into mischief here.'

'There's the milkman and the baker to come. You'd better take a small loaf.'

I felt the muscles in my face stiffen, but she wasn't looking at me. I had forgotten the milkman and the baker. The milkman came around eleven-thirty and the baker about two.

'Okay. Well, good luck, Rita, and so long.'

So long, with any luck, forever.

'Goodbye, Frank.'

And goodbye, with any luck, forever.

She drove rapidly down the lane. I stood listening, as she shifted the gear lever through the gate to top. When the hum of the engine died away I ran to the barn where I had hidden the grapple I had brought down with me from London.

I had half an hour before the milkman was due. I could make a start. I took the grapple and the coil of thin cord round the back of the house to the well. I hadn't been near the well since it had happened. For some moments I stood looking at it, feeling cold and sick and frightened.

I kept wondering how he looked down there under all that water, and then it crossed my mind that he might have broken loose from the whetstone and had floated to the surface. I wondered, with growing terror, if, when I took off the cover, I'd find him there on the surface.

I dumped the grapple and cord down beside the well and raised the cover. My fingers were slippery with sweat and I was shaking like a leaf as the cover came off. A dreadful fetid smell came out of the well as I lowered the cover to the ground: a smell that turned my stomach and drove the blood out of my face. Holding my breath I edged forward and peered down into the dank opening. The water was as still as glass, reflecting in its blackness the boughs of the overhanging yew tree; floating in the water was the frog. It lay on its back, its yellowish belly blown up the size of a cricket ball, its arms and legs stiff in death.

The frog frightened me almost as much as if it had been Sarek. Even in death it seemed to me to be acting as a sentinel; guarding the dead man at the bottom of the well.

I had to get it out. I couldn't use the grapple with that horror floating before me, and the thought of touching it sickened me.

I returned to the house. I had to have a drink. I knew I was wasting precious time, but I had to have a drink if I was going through with this job.

I found two inches of gin left in the bottle, and I drank it neat. It didn't touch me. I raked around in the cupboard and found another bottle of gin with about half an inch of liquor in it. I drank that. My hands were shaking and my heart was pounding so violently, I could scarcely breathe.

I fetched a long-handled mop from the kitchen, and as I was about to open the back door I heard the milkman drive up.

I waited, continually wiping my face and hands, and breathing in short, quick gasps. When I heard him drive away, I went down to the gate and collected the milk. Then I started round to the back of the house again, carrying the mop.

I knelt on the wall of the well and pushed the mop head gently into the water. The frog floated away. I tried to trap it in the woollen strands of the mop, but every time I got near it the movement of the mop in the water sent it farther into the darkness.

I waited for it to come into sight again, but it didn't. The smell from the well nauseated me, and stirring the water with the mop seemed to make it worse. I decided to leave the frog where it was. So long as I couldn't see it, I could manage.

I hoisted up the grapple. The tips of the hooks were as sharp as needles. There were five of them, separated by two short steel rods. I fastened one end of the line to the ring in the grapple and gently lowered it into the water. It was heavy and went down as fast as I could pay out the line.

'Hello, there; what are you up to?'

The whole of my body recoiled in a shuddering start. I let go of the line. I was so frightened I couldn't even bring myself to see who it was.

'What an awful smell. I say, something ought to be done about that, you know.'

Slowly I turned my head without moving my body and looked over my shoulder; not breathing and as cold as ice. He was standing a few yards from me; the clerical collar looked very white in the thin winter sunshine; his long, inquisitive nose a little red from the wind.

‘I hope I didn’t startle you. I rang the front-door bell, but no one answered.’

I didn’t say anything; I couldn’t. My mouth was dry, and my tongue curled back like a strip of dry leather.

‘Have you lost anything down there?’

I had to say something. I opened and shut my mouth, opened it again and managed to get out: ‘Yes’.

‘You ought to be careful, you know. That smell’s dangerous. You could get typhoid from water like that. Perhaps I can help you?’

‘It’s all right.’

He was beginning to look uneasy. He didn’t seem to like my stillness.

‘There’s nothing the matter, is there?’

I stood up.

‘No; you startled me.’

‘Yes I’m afraid I did. I’m very sorry; it was stupid of me. I didn’t really expect to find you here. Now about this water. I shouldn’t be surprised if someone hadn’t drowned a dog in there. I remember when I was in Nairobi a horse fell down a well. Of course, it was a much bigger well than this. I was there at the time. The poor brute trod on the well cover and it broke. I shall never forget seeing it go down. And oddly enough a friend of mine had a similar experience in Patagonia. Only he told me they got the horse up; although of course they had to put it to sleep.’

I just stood there like a dummy, half-suffocated by the banging of my heart, and unable to think; my mind blank with panic.

He joined me at the well and peered into the water.

‘Bless my soul, there’s a frog in there; what an enormous brute. Is this your line?’

Before I could stop him he had taken hold of it and given it a quick jerk.

‘Hello! I seemed to have hooked something. Gracious me! It’s a tremendous weight.’

I took the line out of his hand. The touch of my cold, wet skin must have startled him, for he took a quick step away from me.

‘What do you want?’

My voice sounded as inhuman as the voice of a ventriloquist’s dummy.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘What do you want? I’m busy. Can’t you see I’m busy?’

‘Well, yes, you certainly look busy. What have you lost down there? That’s heavy, you know. Shall I help you haul it up?’

‘No, I can do it. It’s a sack of potatoes. Just tell me what you want.’

‘Well, I wanted to see Mrs. Sarek.’

‘She and Mr. Sarek are in Paris.’

‘Are they? I thought I saw her in the village this morning in the car.’

‘She was on her way.’

‘How nice to be in Paris in the winter. I remember my late bishop telling me...’

‘I don’t want to hear what your bishop told you. I’m busy.’

‘Oh. Well, of course, I mustn’t keep you.’

‘Goodbye. I’ll tell Mrs. Sarek you called.’

‘I wish you would. I seem so unlucky never to find her in. Actually I wanted to ask her if she would care to give a little donation towards our organ fund. We are trying...’

I took out a pound note and thrust it into his hand.

‘Here, take this, and let me get on with my work.’

‘It’s extraordinarily kind of you. Perhaps you would like to come down and see the organ. I would be very happy to explain just what we intend to do. We shall want...’

‘I can’t waste any more time talking. I’m sorry. Goodbye.’

I tried to keep the snarl out of my voice, but I didn’t quite succeed.

‘But surely there’s no need to - to shout at me?’

‘Oh, get out!’

‘My dear young man.’

‘For Christ’s sake, get out!’

I was about to hit him, and he must have realized it, for he went white. He walked quickly away, his shoulders hunched, and he didn’t look back.

I followed him to the gate and watched him down the lane. He looked old and frightened.

As soon as he was out of sight I began to tremble. I had sweated right through my clothes.

The grapple was held fast. The damned interfering old fool had sunk the hooks into something that wouldn’t move. I had been gently trying to disengage the hooks for the past hour, and now I was getting frantic. I began to jerk at the cord, which cut into my fingers, but there was no upward movement.

Had the hooks found him?

I wiped the sweat out of my eyes, and pulled again. Still no movement, so I exerted pressure, and hauled, throwing my weight on to the line. Something moved this time. There was a slight upward movement, not much, and I was now certain he was on the hooks. The weight couldn’t have been the coat.

It was much too heavy, and suddenly I let the cord go slack.

I couldn’t pull him up. I couldn’t see his face again.

I sat on the wall of the well for some time, wondering what to do. Somehow I had to work the hooks out of him and try again. I jerked on the cord, hoping to disengage the hooks, but they must have been well set into him. The quickest thing to do was to haul him up and get the hooks out of him when he was up, but I wasn’t going to do that. I’d rather the diamonds stayed down there than do that.

I took hold of the cord again and gave it a hard, savage jerk. I kept doing that, cursing under my breath; jerking and pulling, sinking the hooks deeper and deeper into him, hoping they would cut right through him.

I don’t know how long I kept that up: probably for over half an hour. I stood with my foot braced against the wall of the well, and in a frenzy of desperation, jerked, pulled and dragged. Then suddenly the hooks were free. I felt them tear loose reluctantly. I shuddered to imagine what could be on them. They must have torn right through him.

But I had to keep on. I swung the grapple away from him, very gently guiding it along the bottom of the well, feeling for a new strike, every muscle in my body tense, and my breath rasping the back of my throat.

Then suddenly the grapple touched something. Tentatively I tried to swing it forward: the cord

moved, but not the grapple. I gave the cord a little jerk; the hooks caught and held.

I jerked harder and felt the hooks sink into something. Was this the coat? I pulled. The grapple began to rise; the cord taut. I kept pulling, steadily and slowly. It took some minutes. The wet cord lay in coils at my feet as I kept hauling it in. I was leaning forward now, staring into the swirling water, waiting and watching for the grapple to break the surface.

Another ten yards of cord came in, then I saw it. Just below the surface of the water was the coat.

The hands of the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to five minutes to two. The buttons lay on the table: twelve big ones and eight small ones. The bits and pieces of the coat lay in a soggy, stinking mess in the hearth.

I was practically at the end of my tether. My teeth were chattering, and my hands shook so I couldn't light the cigarette that jumped and bobbed between my lips.

I had only another two hours before she returned. There was still much to do, but before anything else, I had to see the diamonds.

I bent over the table and stared at the buttons. I picked up one, but my hands were so unsteady I could scarcely hold it.

I went across to the sideboard and took up a pair of nutcrackers. Carefully I guided the button into the jaws of the nutcrackers and squeezed, but the button jumped out and went rolling under the table.

Muttering to myself, I dropped on hands and knees and searched for it; found it and put it on the table again.

Once more I guided it into the jaws of the nutcrackers and holding it tightly in the palm of my hand, crushed it. The shattering bits of the button stuck to my sweating hand. I stared at them: there were no diamonds.

I picked up another button and crushed that; still no diamonds. With growing fury and fear I went on crushing buttons until there were none left.

A pile of broken bone lay on the table, but no diamonds: not one solitary diamond to reward me for the awful hours I had spent in getting up the coat.

I had to get out, and get out fast now. Emmie had played me for the sucker I was. I could see that now. She must have known something had happened to Sarek. What other reason had she for telling me the diamonds were in the buttons except to trap me into producing the coat: for she must have guessed where the coat was, Sarek would be too.

I hadn't a moment to waste. Any second she might turn up here with the police.

I ran up the stairs and began to fling my things into my suitcase. I would have to risk cashing those five-pound notes.

So long as I was out of the country before they were traced it didn't matter. I had to cash them. I had no other money.

I was feverishly strapping up the suitcase when I heard a board creak behind me, I swung round.

Rita stood in the doorway. She smiled at me: an awful little smile that flickered at the corners of her mouth. In her right hand she held Sarek's gun: the sight was centred on my chest.

'Hello, Frank.'

I couldn't think of anything to say. I wanted to say something, but I just couldn't think of anything to say that would stop her killing me. And she was going to kill me: I could see that in her green, glittering eyes.

'Don't move. I want to talk to you. She had you properly fooled, Frank. I couldn't resist watching

you fish up the coat. Did she tell you they were in the buttons? And you thought you were going to get them and leave me flat, didn't you? You ought to have known Emmie better than that, and you ought to have known me better than to think I'd let you get away. I knew you were up to something. You were so anxious for me to go, weren't you? I left the car at the bottom of the lane and came back to see what you were up to. I could have saved you the trouble of getting the coat, but I thought you might as well amuse yourself while you could.'

'Look, Rita ...'

'Just keep quiet, Frank, and don't move. I've got the diamonds. Do you hear? I've got them. I found them last night in your mattress. They were hidden in the handle of the dagger. It's my dagger. I knew the handle unscrewed and there was a hollow tube in it where diamonds could be hidden, but I didn't want you to know about the dagger, Frank. I hoped I would get it before you did.'

I ran my tongue over my dry lips.

'Well, that lets me out, Rita. You're entitled to keep them. I - I won't bother you anymore.'

'No; you won't bother me anymore, Frank, because you're going to join him at the bottom of the well. That's why I came back. I might have let you off if you hadn't kept the knife. I killed him because he held the knife over me, and that's what you were going to do, wasn't it? You're going to join him, Frank...'

There came a sudden loud rat-tat on the back door.

Rita started and looked over her shoulder.

I jumped forward and smashed the gun out of her hand and grabbed her. She kicked, bit and clawed; holding her was like holding a wild cat. For a moment or so we fought like a couple of savage animals. She got one hand free and reached behind her. I tried to catch her wrist as she stabbed at me with the dagger. The blade ripped through my sleeve and I felt a sharp pain in my arm. I gave her a violent shove and sent her reeling across the room.

We stood looking at each other. Blood ran down inside my sleeve and dripped from my fingers to the floor.

'It's my turn now, Rita. That was the baker. Had you forgotten him? Well, this is it. You weren't clever enough.'

I began to move slowly towards her. She waited for me; the knife held a little in front of her; her green eyes glittering dangerously.

I started suddenly to the right and as she stabbed at me, I swerved and caught her wrist. I twisted her arm, spinning her round and drove my knee into her back. The knife fell to the floor and I kicked it away. She doubled up, pulling me forward, but I was ready for that. I fell flat on top of her, still keeping my grip on her wrist, and we both sprawled on the floor.

She kicked and struggled, but I pinned her. It was like holding down a writhing snake. I released her wrist and turned her so she was on her back, and before she could grab me I forced her arms flat and knelt on them.

She must have realized she had left it too late. I saw fear jump into her eyes and she opened her mouth to scream. I shifted my hands to her throat and nipped the cry back.

I grinned at her.

'You won't be lonely down there, Rita. There's the frog and your husband. You'll be in good company.'

Her face was blue and her tongue showed between her teeth. She wasn't pretty anymore; I dug my

fingers into her throat; my thumbs jammed into her windpipe.

There came a sudden thudding sound of footsteps on the stairs and the door burst open.

I threw myself off her towards the gun, but a foot stamped down hard on my wrist.

The cold little room was suddenly full of policemen.

We sat side by side on the settee. Two policemen stood quietly behind. A plain-clothes officer stood before the fire.

Emmie cried by the window, her fat, spotty face sodden with tears.

Neither of us had spoken a word. We were waiting for them to get him out of the well. There could be no charge against us until they had got him up. So we waited.

Minutes dragged by. No one spoke. Only the busy ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the crackling of the fire disturbed the silence.

On the table lay the dagger, and beside it were eight of the finest diamonds I had ever seen. I had killed a man for them; staked my life on them, and now I hadn't given them a second glance.

Emmie's quiet sobbing worried me. She had begun to cry after she had identified the coat, and she just kept on crying.

More minutes dragged by. I heard someone shouting in the garden. The plain-clothes officer moved uneasily. There was a long, heavy silence, and then the door opened quietly and a police constable came in. He looked sick and white.

'Could you come a moment, sit?'

The plain-clothes officer followed him out of the room.

I knew then the wait was nearly over.

THE END