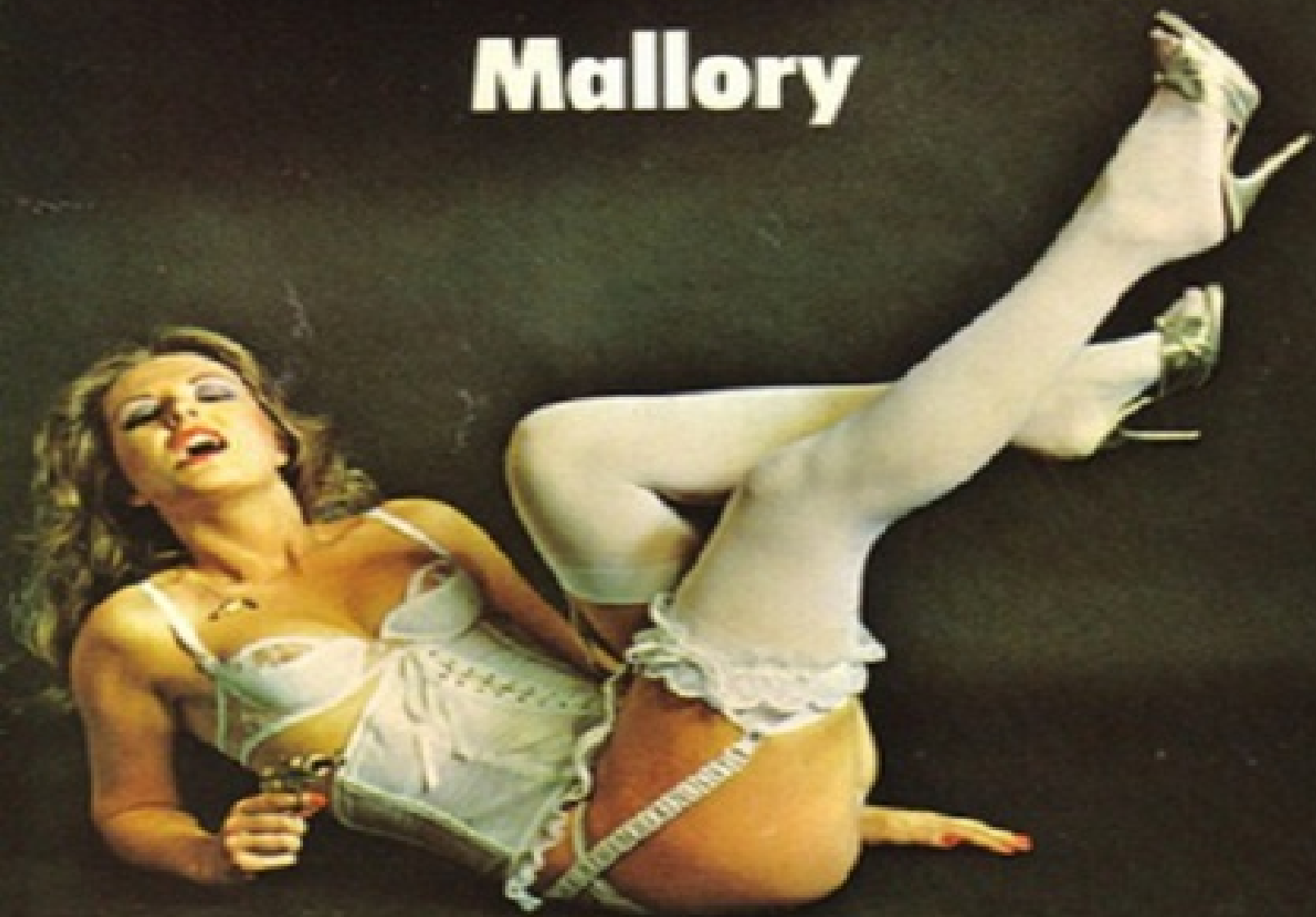


CORGI

JAMES HADLEY CHASE

Mallory



Mallory

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1950

chapter one

I

It was long past midnight and a cold drizzle was falling from a black spongy sky as Corridon walked along Old Compton Street, his hands thrust into the big pockets of his trench coat, his wide-brimmed slouch hat pulled down over his eyes.

In this small section of Soho the streets were deserted; the usual loafers driven indoors by the rain that had been falling since early dusk.

At the corner of Old Compton Street and Frith Street Corridon paused to light a cigarette. As he shielded the match flame from the rain-soaked wind he listened for the pursuing footfalls, but heard nothing, and when he glanced over his shoulder there was only the street stretching away from him into wet, empty darkness. He flicked the match into the gutter and increasing his pace began to walk along Frith Street.

For the past twenty-four hours he had been aware that two or three people, suddenly and for no apparent reason, had been following him wherever he went.

It wasn't a new experience. In the past, the police had shadowed him. During the war, when he had been one of the 'in-and-out' boys, the Gestapo had hunted him. By now he had acquired an unerring instinct for knowing when he was being shadowed. He could think of no reason why anyone should be interested enough in him to follow him about like this. Admittedly he made enemies easily. Already there were a few who wanted to get even with him, but he made no secret of where he lived, and they could get at him easily enough without stalking him like this hour after hour. The situation puzzled and intrigued him.

Now that he was certain his imagination wasn't playing him tricks, he had come out on this wet night with the intention of cornering one of them and finding out what they were playing at, but so far he hadn't succeeded. It was getting on for one o'clock; he had turned and doubled back, hidden and waited, hoping to wear them down, to catch them off guard, but they had remained as elusive and as invisible as ghosts. But he had infinite patience. Sooner or later one of them would make a slip.

The Amethyst Club was nearby; down an alley off Frith Street. He decided to go there and let them wait for him in the rain. He might catch a glimpse of one of them from an upper window of the club. Anyway, a wait in the rain might blunt their enthusiasm.

II

The Amethyst Club, typical of the many shady clubs in Soho that offered sanctuary when there were too many policemen in the district and where you could get a drink at any hour of the day or night, was situated at the end of a dark cul-de-sac. At one time the premises had been used for storing wine, but now it was decorated in strident yellow and red distemper, furnished with glass-topped tables and basket chairs and the walls hung with dusty mirrors. At the far end of the room, behind an S-shaped bar, stood Zani: dark, immense, oily and cruel.

Zani owned the Amethyst Club. He had also a finger in most of the crooked pies manufactured in Soho. Nearly as broad as he was tall, with dark negroid features, he reminded Corridon of some horror from a freak show. His Savile Row suit, the immaculate white shirt, the hand-painted tie, and the big diamond ring on the little finger of his left hand, were as out of place on him as a top hat on a baboon.

There were about a score of men and women in the club.

They looked up sharply as Corridon came down the stairs that led from the entrance hall to the main room and bar, peering at him suspiciously through the haze of tobacco smoke, their loud hum of talk dying down. The military cut of his trench coat, his massive shoulders and the way he held himself made them uneasy. They saw at a glance that he wasn't one of themselves, nor was he of the police, and they stared at him with furtive curiosity, trying to place him.

Corridon ignored the mild sensation caused by his entrance and went over to the bar.

'I heard you were back,' Zani said, extending a fat, damp hand, 'but I didn't believe it. What do you want to come back for? If I could get out of this lousy country I'd get out and stay out.'

'That'd be no loss,' Corridon said, ignoring the outstretched hand. 'I'll have a Scotch if it won't poison me.' He pulled up a stool and sat down.

Away in a corner a skinny little man in a red and white check shirt, and a pair of dirty grey flannels, was playing the piano with impressive skill.

'You won't be poisoned by any stuff you drink here,' Zani said, his smile stiffening. 'Nothing but the best. Here, try that,' and he pushed a bottle and glass across the counter.

While Corridon was pouring a drink, Zani went on, 'I heard you were in the States.'

'That's right, but the food was too rich so I quit.'

Zani dropped one eyelid and smiled knowingly.

‘I heard different. They have some pretty tough coppers over there, haven’t they?’

Corridon stared at his whisky, then glanced up, his eyes hard.

‘One of these days someone’s going to shut that big trap of yours with a broken bottle - it could be me.’

Zani’s smile vanished.

‘I was only kidding. Your trip hasn’t sweetened your temper, has it?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with my temper. Keep your jokes for the mugs who like them. I don’t.’

There was an uneasy pause, then Zani said, ‘Well, how are things? Busy?’

‘So, so,’ Corridon returned guardedly. ‘Anyone been asking for me?’

‘No; you’ve been away a long time. People forget easily.’

Zani regarded Corridon with sly curiosity. ‘What are you going to do now you’re back?’

‘That’s my business. The less you know about me the less you can tell your copper pals. Rawlins hasn’t been in, has he? Asking about me, I mean?’

‘He’s always in and out,’ Zani said, lifting his fat shoulders apologetically. ‘But he hasn’t mentioned you. He’s been promoted since you’ve been away. Detective-Sergeant now, and lets you know it.’

So it wasn’t the police who were shadowing him. If they had been interested in his movements they would have questioned Zani. Zani ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds.

Few knew he gave information to the police. Corridon knew.

He made it his business to know things like that. It was the surest way of avoiding trouble.

‘Someone’s interested in me,’ he said casually. ‘They’ve been shadowing me all day.’

‘That shouldn’t worry you. From what I’ve heard the Gestapo hunted you for two years. They never caught up with you, did they?’

‘Once,’ Corridon said, and his face set. ‘But this is different. I want to know what it’s all about. Any ideas?’

‘Me? Why should I? I hear nothing these days.’

Corridon studied the dark negroid face, then shrugged.

‘All right; forget it. I’ll find out.’ He finished his whisky, paid for it and pushed away from the bar. ‘I’ll sit around for a while. It’s raining like hell.’

‘Suit yourself. You know you can stay as long as you like. Want a girl?’

‘I’ve outgrown women,’ Corridon returned with a cynical smile. ‘Besides, I’ve seen your girls . . . not for me, thanks.’ He wandered away from the bar and paused beside the piano, aware that most of the men and women at the tables continued to watch him with furtive curiosity.

‘Hello, Max,’ he said to the pianist.

The pianist continued to play. Without moving his lips, he said, ‘Hello.’

Corridon stared at the flying fingers, an interested, polite expression on his blunt-featured face. To those watching he appeared to be fascinated by the performer’s technique.

‘What do you know, Max?’

Max began to play ‘Night and Day’. His thin face twisted as if the melody had painful memories.

‘There’s been a girl asking about you,’ he said, still without moving his lips. ‘Came in three nights ago with Crew.’

Corridon flicked ash from his cigarette and continued to watch the flying fingers.

‘Who was she?’

‘I dunno. She hasn’t been in before. Foreign looking: young, dark, big eyes, in a black sweater and slacks. Her name’s Jeanne. Crew seemed scared of her.’

‘What did she want?’

‘Asked me if I knew where you lived, and if you’d been in here recently. I said I didn’t know and hadn’t seen you.’

Corridon nodded absently.

‘Nothing else?’

‘Said if I told Crew when you came in it was worth a fiver to me.’

‘A fiver?’ Corridon raised his eyebrows. ‘I’d better see Crew.’

‘Keep me out of it.’

‘Yes. Well, thanks, Max. You won’t lose by it.’

‘I’m not worrying,’ Max returned, and pushed back his chair at an angle. ‘Thought you had gone for good. Effie will be pleased to see you again.’

Corridon grinned.

‘How is she, Max?’

‘She’s come on. If it wasn’t for her mouth I’d have ideas about her. She’s got a figure like Grable now. Marvellous how she’s come on.’

Corridon fished out a five-pound note, concealed it in his hand and dropped it into the open piano.

‘Go on keeping your trap shut, Max,’ he said, and moved away.

As Max switched from ‘Night and Day’ to ‘The Man I Love’ he sent a whistling sigh down his thin nostrils.

III

Crew . . . Corridon had forgotten Crew. He hadn’t seen Crew for four years. His mind went back into the past and he conjured up a picture of tall, effeminate Crew with his sleek fair hair and the red carnation in the buttonhole of his faultlessly cut suit. Crew had always been a bit of a mystery. No one knew where his money came from. Some said he lived on women, others that he was a police informer, the less unkind that he had a private income. He never did any work, and was usually to be found after dark hanging around Piccadilly or propping up a bar in the better-class pubs around Leicester Square. He wasn’t popular; a man no one trusted.

Although he knew Crew well by sight, Corridon had only met him once to speak to. It was during a game of poker.

Corridon had been winning steadily until Crew joined in, then the cards turned against him. After the third deal he had caught Crew cheating and had promptly hit him over the head with a beer bottle inflicting a four-inch gash across his forehead. It was possible, Corridon thought, that Crew harboured a grudge against him. It seemed odd to Corridon, who never nursed a grievance, that anyone should remember something against him for four years; but some men were like that. If Crew intended to square accounts he could be dangerous. He had a peculiar talent for prying into other people’s affairs.

But who was the girl? Corridon wondered as he sat at a corner table, a whisky before him, aware that Zani was looking across the smoke-filled room at him and that the men and women at the other tables were still talking about him. Who was she? Foreign looking; young, dark and big eyed. Corridon

groped into the past, but none of the many women he had known fitted the description. There had been a time when women had been essential to him, but he had got over that now. After his experiences during the war nothing was essential to him and nothing interested him.

Getting up abruptly he returned to the bar.

‘Is there a room upstairs that overlooks the street?’ he asked, leaning his bulk against the bar.

‘What if there is?’ Zani asked suspiciously.

‘I want to go up there to look out of the window.’

‘Well, all right,’ Zani said after hesitating. ‘There’s Effie’s room. She’s not in bed yet. I’ll get her.’ He went to the door at the end of the bar, opened it and gave a shrill whistle. ‘Hey, Effie! Come up here a moment.’ He turned back to Corridon. ‘What do you want to look out of the window for?’

‘Mind your own business,’ Corridon said shortly. ‘One of these days, Zani, you’re going to poke your snout into my affairs once too often.’

‘Can’t a man ask a question...?’

‘Shut up!’ Corridon said sharply. ‘I’m sick of the sound of your voice.’

The door behind the bar opened and Effie appeared. She had been fifteen when Corridon had last seen her; an awkward, shy little creature with a skinny undeveloped body. Max was right.

The last three years had brought her on, Corridon thought, startled. If it hadn’t been for her deformity - a double harelip - she would have been a beauty.

When she saw him blood mounted to her face and her eyes brightened.

‘Hello, Effie, have you forgotten me?’ he asked casually. He knew she worshipped him. He had won her forever by offering her a kind of jeering friendship that had cost him nothing.

Zani had found her outside the club six years ago. He had guessed she had run away from home because she refused to tell him about her parents, her background or where she lived.

She had been a hideous little creature, half-starved and dirty with two big teeth showing through the divided lip. But Zani wasn’t fussy. He needed help in the kitchen, and since no one claimed her, he had given her a home and worked her as ruthlessly as he worked the rest of his staff.

‘Hello, Mr. Corridon,’ she said and backed away.

Zani watched her embarrassment with a sneering smile. He thought it was comic that Effie should be in love with Corridon.

‘Take him upstairs to your room. He wants to look out of the window or something. Look sharp about it.’

Corridon followed Effie behind the bar and through the doorway into a dimly lit passage. When he had closed the door, shutting out the sound of music and whispering voices, he caught hold of her arms and pulled her to him.

‘Well, aren’t you pleased to see me, Effie?’ he asked, smiling at her. ‘I bet you have forgotten all about me, although you pretend you haven’t.’

‘Oh no, I haven’t,’ she protested breathlessly. ‘Honest, I haven’t. I’d never do that. But I didn’t think you were ever coming back.’

‘Well, you’re wrong. I’ve missed you, Effie,’ and holding her at arm’s length, he was surprised to find that he had missed her. ‘You’ve grown up overnight. Why, you’re beautiful.’

Her hand went to her mouth.

‘You shouldn’t say that. It isn’t true.’

‘That’s nothing. You know, it’s time it was fixed.’ A sudden idea jumped into his mind, and without considering the consequences, he went on; ‘I know a bloke who could do it. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? When I get enough money we’ll have it fixed. It won’t be long. A month, maybe.’

But as soon as he had voiced the idea he knew he hadn’t meant it. He was always getting these crazy impulses. Only last week he had given an old woman selling white heather a five-pound note just to see the expression on her face when it dawned on her how much he had given her. Then the same evening he had noticed a young, shabbily dressed couple standing outside a theatre in the Strand looking longingly at the photographs of the ballet, and he had brought two dress-circle seats and had given the tickets to the couple and had gone off grinning at the sight of their dumb-founded faces.

But this time he wasn’t going to get off so cheaply and he was dismayed to see by the expression on Effie’s face that she believed him. He remembered now that her trust in anything he said had been terrifying. During the war, when he had been stationed in London, he had spent much of his spare time at the Amethyst Club, and, to Zani’s annoyance, visited the kitchen regularly and talked to Effie while he helped wash the dishes. At first he had done this because he was sorry for her, and it pleased him to feel he was being kind. But it was by no means one-sided. He found to his surprise that she meant a lot to him, or rather her adoration meant a lot to him. She had once told him that she had prayed for him every night, and he had laughed at her. But it was extraordinary how the thought of those nightly prayers had helped him when he was in the hands of the Gestapo. She was the only person he knew who gave a damn what happened to him, and you needed someone like that. It was all very well to sneer at prayer and to stand on your own feet, but sooner or later you needed some kind of anchor.

A man must have someone - even if it were only a drudge with a harelip. Her trust in him touched an almost forgotten self-respect.

She was looking at him with tense expectation. 'A month?' The way a dog looks at a bone just out of reach. 'Oh no, it wouldn't be right.'

'Well, six weeks. I don't know. It depends on the money. It shouldn't be longer than a couple of months.' He spoke sharply, annoyed with himself. The operation might cost a hundred; even two. He had no idea how much it would cost.

He must have been cracked to have made such a promise. Well, he had given his word now. You couldn't go back on a promise to Effie.

She was quick to catch the sharpness in his voice.

'But you need your money. It doesn't matter. Honest, I don't mind. It's kind of you.'

'Now, stop it, Effie,' he said, and was suddenly glad he had made the promise. It was time he did something for her. He couldn't expect to have her prayers for nothing. 'Come on. Take me upstairs. We'll talk about it some other time.'

She was glad to escape from his half-jeering smile and ran up the stairs. He followed her more slowly, thinking, 'I'm getting soft. It's time I did a job of work. But I'll do it. She's worth it in her funny way.'

He caught up with her on the top landing.

'In here,' she said, and opened a door.

He entered a small, dark room and stumbled against a bed.

'Don't put on a light,' he said quickly, sensing that was what she was about to do. 'There's someone out there I want to see.'

'Who is it?' she asked, joining him at the window.

'That's what I want to find out.' He could see the mouth of the cul-de-sac and part of Frith Street. A street light lit up the shadows, but there was no one in sight. He stood for some minutes peering down into the semi-darkness. 'They're there somewhere,' he muttered to himself, then pushed up the window, and leaned out, feeling the rain cold against his face. Below was a sloping roof.

'What are you doing?' Effie asked nervously as he slid his leg over the sill.

'I'm going to get a better look.'

'But you'll fall!' She caught hold of his arm. 'You mustn't. You'll fall!'

'Of course I won't,' he said, controlling his impatience, and pulling free. 'It's all right, Effie. I'm used to this kind of thing.'

‘But you will... please don’t...’

‘Don’t fuss,’ he said sharply, and holding on to the sill with one hand, allowed his body to slide down the wet tiles until his feet reached the gutter.

From where she stood, safe and out of the rain, his position looked perilous, and unable to watch him, she turned away, hiding her face in her hands. It gave him an odd feeling of elation to see how much she cared for him.

The tiles were wet and greasy. If he slipped or if the gutter gave under his weight he would pitch head first into the cul-de-sac. But he wasn’t thinking of sudden death; it didn’t occur to him that he might slip. He made for the brick projection that separated the Amethyst Club from the adjacent building. From there, he guessed he would have an uninterrupted view of the whole of Frith Street.

The cold drizzle, falling now in a fine cloud, ran off the roof in rivulets. Once the gutter bent under his weight and he swore softly, but he reached the projection, gripped the stack pipe and hauled himself up so he could peer cautiously into the street below. As he had guessed he now had a clear view of the street, and began methodically to examine every dark doorway and passage, watching for a betraying movement or a shouldering cigarette end that would give away the hiding place of the man he was looking for.

He remained motionless for some time, unaware of the cold and wet, but he saw nothing to attract his attention. Still he waited, obstinate and angry, his legs becoming cramped and his fingers stiffening on the cold stack pipe, his eyes never ceased their searching patrol of the street. Finally his patience was rewarded for he spotted a movement in a dark doorway some seventy yards or so from the mouth of the cul-de-sac. His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness by now, and he could just make out a dim figure standing in the doorway.

At this moment a taxi passed and its headlight swept the doorway. Corridon had a brief glimpse of a short, thickset man in a shabby olive-green trench coat that was buttoned up to his chin and a black military beret pulled down over his dome-like head. Then darkness again closed down as the taxi went on, turning the corner into Old Compton Street.

Corridon had no doubt that this man was one of those who had been following him for the past twenty-four hours. He had never seen him before, had no idea who he was, could think of no reason why he should be waiting in the cold and wet to follow him as soon as he left the club. And Corridon was sure there were others. It seemed probable that the foreign-looking girl whom Crew had brought to the club was another of them.

As Corridon began to work his way back along the gutter towards Effie’s room he decided not to bother with the man in the black beret. Crew would know all about it. Zani could tell him where Crew was to be found. He’d find out from Crew.

chapter two

I

On the following morning, a few minutes after ten o'clock, Corridon arrived at Crew's flat.

Corridon had spent the night at the Amethyst Club, dozing in a chair, his feet on the table, ignoring Zani's growling insistence that he should go home. At daybreak he had again climbed to the projection on the roof but saw no sign of the man in the black beret. Taking no risks, he had left the club by climbing a wall at the back of the building to an alley that led eventually into Dean Street. From there he took a taxi to Charing Cross Road where he had a shave and breakfast at a nearby cafe. He took his time over his breakfast, drank several cups of coffee, read the newspaper and smoked innumerable cigarettes.

He sat at a table by the muslin-covered window and watched continually for the man in the black beret, but he didn't see him. When he finally left the cafe he wandered around the back streets of the West End for an hour or so until he was sure no one was following him, then he set off to see Crew.

Crew had a four-room flat over a tobacconist's shop in a dirty little street off Drury Lane. To reach the flat you had to pass two smelly dustbins that blocked the entrance to a flight of uncarpeted stairs leading to a dimly lit landing. At the far end of the landing was Crew's front door.

To see Crew moving purposely about the West End you might have mistaken him for a member of the Diplomatic Service or even perhaps a Harley Street specialist - specializing, of course, in women's diseases. There was an air of distinction and authority about him; a bedside manner that deceived people into thinking he was a man of substance, culture and importance.

It irked Crew to have to live in such a sordid district, but it was essential for him to be near the West End at a reasonable rent, and this little flat was the best he could afford. For he was by no means a man of substance. Although always well dressed, his aristocratic appearance and his nimble fingers were his only assets. By profession - if you could call it a profession - he was a pickpocket; a secret he shared with no one, and of which he was slightly ashamed. Even Corridon, whose knowledge of the West End and the activities of its underworld members was encyclopaedic, had no idea what he did.

Crew had been picking pockets for years. He had a horror of the police and of being arrested, and selected his victims with the utmost care, making sure that what he got from them always justified the risk he ran. His fingers were incredibly nimble. He could steal a watch off a wrist, a wallet protected by an overcoat and a pair of links out of shirt cuffs without his victim being aware of what was happening. To remove a necklace or brooch, to open a handbag on a woman's arm and take the money

in it was child's play to him. No one suspected him; least of all the police who were well aware that a brilliant pickpocket was working the West End, and had been trying to trap him for years.

By the time Corridon reached Crew's flat, the rain had given place to thin, watery sunshine that emphasized the dirt and decay of the houses lining the street. He was surprised that Crew should live in such a district, remembering him from the past, freshly shaved, well dressed, fastidious in his appearance, and he paused outside the tobacconist's shop, wondering if Zani had given the correct address. No one paid him any attention. A long line of cars and trucks were parked along the kerb, and men carrying boxes of flowers piled high on their heads jostled him as they loaded their vehicles.

Zani had said the flat was over a tobacconist's shop and this was the only tobacconist's shop in the street. Dodging a driver who bore down on him with a sack of potatoes on his back, Corridon mounted the uncarpeted stairs, moving silently on crepe-soled shoes. He paused at the top of the stairs to listen, but the street was alive with noises as lorries manoeuvred to pass the line of trucks and cars, and drivers shouted to each other as they drove up on the pavement, reversing and roaring their engines, blanketing all other sounds. Walking softly to Crew's front door, Corridon rapped sharply and put his ear against the door panel and listened. There was a long pause, then he heard a movement on the other side of the door, then a bolt slid back and the door eased open. Crew appeared.

Although Corridon hadn't seen him for four years he recognized Crew immediately. Time had dealt lightly with him. He had perhaps grown a little thinner and his hair had receded slightly from his high forehead. There were lines now running from his nose to his mouth and a network of faint wrinkles under his eyes, but otherwise he was the same immaculate, distinguished-looking Crew whom Corridon had once hit over the head with a beer bottle.

When Crew saw Corridon he gave a convulsive start and sprang back, trying to slam the door, but Corridon's foot was in the way.

'Hello, Crew,' Corridon said gently. 'Weren't you expecting me?'

Crew peered round the door, leaning his weight against it, imprisoning Corridon's foot. He breathed heavily, his mouth hanging open, a vacant look of fear in his eyes.

'You can't come in,' he said in a shaky, breathless voice. 'Not now. It's inconvenient.'

Corridon smiled jeeringly and put his hand on the door and gave it a sudden hard shove, sending Crew staggering back. He had entered the little hall and closed the door.

'Remember me?' he asked, and looked pointedly at the jagged white scar that ran across Crew's forehead and disappeared into the thinning fair hair.

'It's Corridon, isn't it?' Crew said, backing away. 'You can't come in. I was just going out.' His smile flickered on and off like an electric light with a faulty connection. 'I'm sorry, but I'm late as it is.' He looked into the deepset, cold grey eyes and began to wring his hands, then suddenly conscious of what he was doing, hurriedly thrust them into his trouser pockets. 'I – I shall have to turn you out.'

Perhaps some other time, old boy.’

He grimaced at Corridon, trying to appear at ease, but succeeding only in showing an abject fear.

Corridon glanced round the hall. A vase of Keizer Kroom tulips on a table, their red and yellow petals a little full-blown, surprised him. He hadn’t imagined flowers and Crew going together.

‘I see you’ve still got that scar,’ he said and pointed. ‘There’s a reasonable chance you’ll get another.’

Crew backed against the wall. He looked at Corridon in horror.

‘What do you want?’ He stopped trying to smile, and his air of authority and importance fell from him, leaving only his effeminacy and sham.

‘Are you alone?’ Corridon asked.

‘Yes . . . but you’d better not touch me.’ Little beads of perspiration gathered at Crew’s temples. ‘My solicitor . . .’ He broke off, realizing the futility of talking of solicitors to a man like Corridon. He repeated weakly, ‘You’d better not touch me . . .’

‘Go in there,’ Corridon said, pointing to a door. ‘I want to talk to you.’

Crew went into the room. He walked slowly, his legs dragging. Corridon followed him, closed the door and surveyed the room with raised eyebrows. It wasn’t the kind of room he expected Crew to live in. It was restful and pleasant; painstakingly furnished to give comfort and tranquillity, and it achieved its purpose. Wherever he looked there were vases of tulips and narcissi, filling the room with their sweet, cloying scent.

‘You know how to make yourself comfortable, don’t you?’ he said as he sat on the arm of a big, easy chair. ‘Very pretty, and flowers too. Yes, very pretty indeed.’

Crew hung on to the back of the settee. He looked as if he were going to faint.

Corridon studied him. He couldn’t understand why Crew was so frightened. He wasn’t the type who scared easily. Corridon remembered his bland manner when he had caught him cheating. It had been his smug confidence, making a joke of it, that had incited Corridon to hit him.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ he demanded sharply. ‘What’s scaring you?’

Crew made a gulping noise in his throat. He muttered something, moved uneasily from one foot to the other, finally managed to say, ‘Nothing... nothing’s the matter.’

‘Well, you’re certainly acting as if you were scared,’ Corridon said, watching him. ‘But if there’s nothing - there’s nothing.’ He suddenly barked: ‘Who’s Jeanne?’

Silence hung in the room, broken only by the sharp busy tick of the clock on the mantel and the sudden uneasy rasp of Crew's breathing.

'I asked you who Jeanne is - the girl you took to the Amethyst Club three nights ago,' Corridon said through the silence.

Crew's mouth worked convulsively. He said: 'Go away. If you don't leave me alone I'll call the police.'

'Don't be a fool.' Corridon took out a packet of cigarettes, lit one and tossed the match into the hearth. 'You took this girl to the club and she asked Max about me. I'm interested. Who is she?'

'That's a lie,' Crew said in a whisper. 'She doesn't even know you. She's never seen you.' His finger hooked into his collar and he pulled at the collar as if it were strangling him. 'Why should she ask Max about you? It's a lie.'

'All right, it's a lie. But who is she?'

Crew hesitated. He puzzled Corridon. He could see Crew was frightened, but it was beginning to dawn on him that Crew wasn't frightened of him. He had been frightened before Corridon had knocked on the door.

'No one you know,' Crew said sullenly. 'A friend. What's it to you who she is?'

Corridon blew a smoke ring and stabbed at it with his finger.

'Do you want me to hit you?' he asked, his expression polite and interested. He watched the smoke ring dissolve, added. 'I will if you don't talk.'

Crew stiffened. He was expecting this. He had a horror of violence, and already he could feel Corridon's massive fist smash into his face. He remained still, his eyes darting this way and that, tense as if trying to make up his mind what to do. Then he glanced over his shoulder to another door at the far end of the room. He looked from the door to Corridon as if he were trying to convey a message.

'You'd better not touch me,' he said, his mouth twitching.

Again he looked at the door.

Was he trying to tell him they weren't alone in the flat?

Corridon wondered. He too looked from Crew to the door and back and raised his eyebrows inquiringly. Crew nodded eagerly, like a man in a foreign country who has at last succeeded in making himself understood by gestures. He put his finger to his lips, reminding Corridon of a third-rate actor in a melodrama, and Corridon felt an inclination to laugh.

‘Tell me about Jeanne,’ he said, getting quietly to his feet.

‘There’s nothing to tell.’ Again the frightened eyes strayed to the door. ‘She’s just a girl I know.’

Corridon moved silently up to Crew.

‘Who’s in there?’ he whispered, his face close to Crew’s. He could see the tiny sweat beads on Crew’s face and smelt the brilliantine on his hair. Aloud, he went on, ‘What does she do? Where does she come from?’

Grew raised three fingers and motioned to the door.

‘I don’t know anything about her. She was a pickup.’ He tried desperately to be jaunty. The flickering smile came and went. ‘You know how it is. She was a pretty little thing. I haven’t seen her since.’

‘Three of them?’ Corridon whispered.

Crew nodded. He was recovering slightly. Returning confidence crept over him like a second skin.

Raising his voice, Corridon asked, ‘Do you know a little fella in a black beret?’

The returning colour and confidence drained out of Crew’s face. He sagged at the knees. It was as if Corridon had hit him suddenly and viciously in the belly.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he gasped, then screwing himself into a frenzy of courage, shouted: ‘Get out! I’ve had enough of this. You’ve no right to force your way in here. Get out! I won’t have you here!’

Corridon laughed at him.

‘Your pals must be pretty sick of you by now,’ he said contemptuously, then raising his voice, he called, ‘Come on out, the three of you. He’s told me you’re in there.’

Crew gave a gasp and slumped into a chair. He seemed to stop breathing in the pause that followed, then as the door of the far room opened he drew a quick intake of breath that whistled through his teeth. The man in the black beret came quietly into the room, a Mauser pistol in his gloved hand.

II

Several times during his life Corridon had been held up by a gun. It was an experience that made him nervous and angry. It made him nervous because he knew how easily any fool could let off a gun;

whether they meant to or not. There were people who held you up with a gun who didn't mean to shoot, and there were people who held you up with a gun who did. Corridon decided that the man in the black beret would shoot if he were given the slightest opportunity. Corridon could tell this by looking into his dark protruding eyes. Life, to this little man, was of no more importance than the dirt on his shabby trenchcoat or that grimed the finger curling round the trigger.

The big Mauser pistol wasn't a threat: it was harnessed death to be released without pity by the squeezing of a finger against metal.

'Keep very still, my friend,' the man in the black beret said.

His accent was scarcely perceptible, but it was there, and Corridon recognized it. He was a Pole. 'No tricks, please or you will be sorry.' The gun-sight centred on Corridon's chest.

Corridon looked beyond the threatening gun to the door.

She was standing in the doorway, her arms folded across her chest. Her black sweater and black slacks looked funereal in the bright, colourful room. Her features were small and finely made. Her sallow complexion and big black eyes emphasized her painted lips. Her hair was fine and dark, and fell to her shoulders, the fringe lying across her forehead in a neat, hard line. She was a few inches taller than the man in the black beret, and her chest was high and arching; her hips narrow.

She was unusually long in the leg, giving her a boyish figure until you came to the high, arching chest. There was nothing boyish about that. Her eyes held Corridon's attention. The whites were extraordinarily clear, like new porcelain. They were steady, hard eyes; old in suffering and suspicion, in distrust and bitterness.

'Hello, Jeanne,' he said and grinned. 'What's the idea of the gun?'

'Will you please sit down and keep your hands where we can see them?' she said in a cold flat voice. 'We want to talk to you.'

Corridon continued to smile, but his lips felt stiff. He glanced at Crew, who had risen to his feet and had moved away from him. He was staring at the gun in horror.

'Is that the reason why you've been following me about for so long?' Corridon asked, 'Were you shy or couldn't you make up your mind?'

'Will you please sit down?' she repeated.

The man in the black beret pointed with the gun to an armchair facing the bay window.

'There,' he said.

Corridon shrugged and sat down.

‘What’s the idea of the gun?’ he repeated.

Another man looked into the room from the far doorway. He was tall and thin and blond. He had only one arm and a scar ran down the side of his face, blotting out his right eye that was hidden under an eyeshade.

‘All right?’ he asked the girl. ‘I’d like to get on if you can manage.’

There was no doubt about him. He was English. Good breeding, a good school, a university background, the ability to command were all his, making Crew’s carefully cultivated appearance as false as a counterfeit coin. The shabby but well-cut tweed suit, the fair, neatly clipped moustache, the handkerchief in the cuff were worn as a uniform of his class.

‘It’s all right,’ the girl said, ‘but you might take him with you.’ Her hand indicated Crew. ‘He’ll be in the way.’

‘Oh, yes.’ The one-armed man beckoned to Crew. ‘Come along.’ He spoke as if he were used to being obeyed. As Crew crossed the room, the one-armed man looked over to Corridon and smiled. There was charm in the ravished face when he smiled. ‘Perhaps we’d better introduce ourselves,’ he said. ‘This is Jeanne Persigny.’ He waved to the girl. ‘Jan holds the gun. I can’t pronounce his other name. You’d better call him Jan as I do. I’m Ranleigh - Nigel Ranleigh. Please listen to what she says. We wouldn’t be doing this unless we had to. I’m sorry about the gun, but you have a reputation for violence, haven’t you? Jan isn’t quite up to your weight, and I’m afraid I couldn’t do much if you felt like starting a rough house.’ He smiled again. ‘Well, I have some work to do so I’ll get on. She’ll talk to you.’ He motioned to Crew. ‘Our friend here isn’t one of us. He happened to get mixed up with us. I don’t know who is more sorry. Probably we are.’ He smiled and went into the other room, closing the door.

Corridon took off his hat and ran thick fingers through his shock of red-brown hair. They used to call him Bricktop in the Commandos. Women found him attractive. His strength and force of character rather than his looks were his assets. He had a heavy, blunt-featured face with a square chin, a firm mouth and a slightly crooked, flattish nose. His eyes were grey and cold and deepset. His complexion was beefy and red. He had a reckless, jeering smile that infuriated people easily as he intended it to do, but he also had moments of kindness amounting to sentimentality that often made him uneasy.

As he sat staring at the girl and Jan, he admitted to himself that he had no idea what all this was about. The gun upset him.

He had a feeling the man in the black beret would shoot at the drop of a hat, and the girl wouldn’t turn a hair if he did. They reminded Corridon of the people he had worked with in France during the war: the fanatics belonging to the underground movement who sacrificed themselves without thought, killed without pity. These two were dangerous; but Ranleigh was different. He wasn’t their kind. Corridon couldn’t understand why Ranleigh was mixed up with these two. He liked Ranleigh. He had met so many of his kind in the army; dependable men of courage who did a job, won their medals without

fuss and lost their lives.

The girl pulled up a straight-backed chair and sat down before a table, facing Corridon. Jan stood behind her, pointing the Mauser at Corridon's chest, his eyes as expressionless as two oysters on their half-shells.

'Will you answer some questions about yourself?' the girl asked abruptly. She laced her fingers, her hands on the table and looked straight into Corridon's eyes.

'Why should I?' he demanded, aware of the threat of the gun. 'What's the idea? Who the hell do you think you are?'

Her face-hardened. She wasn't the type to be bullied or shouted at, but Corridon didn't care. If he could make her angry so much the better. He knew how to deal with angry people.

'We want a man for a certain - job,' she said, hesitating over the word, frowning. She spoke fluent English with no accent, but at times she would grope for a word. 'But first we want to know if you're the right man. We cannot afford to make mistakes.'

'I don't want a job. You're wasting my time.'

'You want money, don't you? We will pay well.'

He smiled jeeringly.

'How well?'

They looked at each other across the table, and he realized there was much more than the table separating them; a gulf that neither of them would bridge. He couldn't say exactly why he felt that; it was an instinct rather than a feeling. There was about her a hardness that sealed off pity and love and kindness and made her a neuter object in spite of her figure and looks.

He couldn't imagine making love to her. She was as sexless as a shop window dummy, and he wondered what could have happened to her to have made her like this. She had been beautiful. She had been small and soft-fleshed and big-eyed and blonde. She had slender white arms that were cool to the touch, and when they held you, made your blood hammer in your temples although you knew how rotten she was, and that her body was merely as finely adjusted mechanism for lust that she offered as a bribe if you would talk. He remembered how she had looked when she realized he was going to kill her. Her beauty had fallen from her, and the lies and the corruption and filth in her showed like nakedness.

He had shot her in the mouth, and the heavy bullet had torn off part of her skull and smashed her face so that the young men who had loved her and talked would have shuddered with horror to have seen her. Thinking back into the past made him sweat and his heartbeat more quickly and this annoyed him.

He moved uneasily, looking at the girl with angry eyes.

‘You were once caught by the Gestapo,’ she went on. ‘They tortured you, trying to make you tell who had been dropped with you and what your objective was. But you told them nothing in spite of everything they did to you. You escaped as the invading Allies entered Germany and you were sent home. You spent four months in a military hospital recovering from the brutalities of the Gestapo.’

‘Let’s make an end to this,’ Corridon said roughly. ‘What do you want? Come on, you’ve talked enough about me. What’s behind all this? What’s your racket?’

‘Am I right so far?’ she asked, unmoved by his outburst. ‘All this did happen to you, didn’t it?’

‘It happened all right. Now shut up about me or I’ll walk out of here.’

‘One more thing, please. And this is important. After the war you couldn’t find anything to do that interested you. You decided to go to America. You spent a year smuggling dollars into Canada. The American police suspected what you were doing, but you evaded them and returned to London. You have been here a week, and you are running short of money. You are not quite certain what you are going to do. It amuses you to extract money from racketeers, but even racketeers are protected by the police. You haven’t quite made up your mind, have you? We have a job for you. It’s a job that will suit you, and it’s worth a thousand pounds.’

III

Ranleigh came into the room, his hand in his pocket. He glanced quickly at Corridon, then wandered up to Jeanne and stood by her side.

‘How are you two getting on?’ he asked and smiled encouragingly. He reminded Corridon of a Welfare Officer trying to make the Camp concert go with a swing. ‘We’ve dug up a lot of information about you, haven’t we?’ His hand rested lightly on the back of Jeanne’s chair.

‘If you have the time to waste you can dig up as much about anyone,’ Corridon returned shortly. He slid his hand into his pocket. Instantly Jan jerked up the Mauser.

‘Bring your hand out very slowly please,’ he said softly but with menace.

‘It’s all right,’ Ranleigh said quickly. ‘He’s not going to make trouble. Put the gun away.’

‘That’s right,’ Corridon said and brought out his cigarettes.

‘I never make trouble,’ and he laughed.

‘I do not put the gun away,’ Jan said to Ranleigh. ‘I do not trust him. You may, but I do not.’

‘There’s one more thing we want to ask before we tell you about the job,’ Jeanne said, paying no attention to what was being said.

‘I tell you I do not trust him—’ Jan began when Jeanne screamed at him, ‘Be quiet! I’m talking! Be quiet!’

‘And that, fatty, is telling you,’ Corridon said.

‘I have to ask you one more question,’ Jeanne said, turning back to Corridon, her black eyes glittering.

‘All right; what is it?’

She hesitated, then looked over her shoulder at Ranleigh.

‘Ask him.’ She waved her hand towards Corridon.

‘Oh, yes,’ Ranleigh. ‘Yes - I wonder if you’d mind letting us see your chest and back? You can guess why, can’t you? You see, it’s like this: we’re not absolutely sure you are Corridon. We’ve checked up on you as best we can. We have your official record, but it doesn’t contain your photograph. We do know about the scars on your chest and back, and we have to be absolutely sure you are Corridon.’

Corridon uncrossed his legs and made to get up. He had had enough of this. There was a frosty look in his eyes and his mouth was set in an angry line.

‘Sit still,’ Jan said. The gun threatened Corridon. ‘If you move I will shoot. I am a very good shot. I could take off a finger. I mean it’

Corridon relaxed back into the chair again.

‘I’m not putting on a show for anyone,’ he said. He wanted to hit Jan and damage him. ‘You can go to hell - the three of you.’

There was a moment’s surprised silence, then Jan took a step forward, his shoulders hunched. But Ranleigh’s hand closed over his wrist.

‘Cut it out!’ he cried. ‘We’re doing this all wrong. Go and look after Crew. Go on, get out of here!’

Jan wrenched away.

‘We’re wasting time,’ he exploded excitedly. ‘Leave him to me.’ There was a vicious snap in his voice now. ‘He sits there, sneering at us. Leave him to me for three minutes. He’ll sneer the other side of his face.’

‘You fool!’ Jeanne cried, jumping to her feet. ‘You? You think you can made him talk? After what the

Gestapo did to him. You?’ Her lips curled scornfully.

Jan flew round on her, his mouth working.

‘There’s too much talk . . .’ he began, his voice high-pitched, when Corridon suddenly shot out of his chair. He had caught Jan’s wrist, snatched the gun out of his hand and clubbed him on the side of his head before any of them realized he had moved. Jan went staggering across the room, dazed. He bounced against the wall, then slid to the floor and lay there.

Jeanne and Ranleigh stood motionless, staring at Corridon who held the Mauser, pointing at them.

‘He’s right. There’s been too much talk! I’ve had enough of it and I’m going.’ Then he suddenly grinned, pushed the Mauser into his coat pocket and bent to pick up his hat. ‘I guess I nearly lost my temper that time,’ he went on. ‘I’ll be running along. You’d better keep clear of me in the future. If this happens again I shan’t behave so nicely.’

‘That was pretty neatly done,’ Ranleigh said admiringly. He turned to Jan who was crawling to his feet, his hand to the side of his head, still dazed. ‘Go and look after Crew. You’ve done enough damage for today.’

Without a word, Jan went into the other room. He closed the door with a sharp, venomous click.

Corridon moved to the door as Ranleigh said, ‘I’m sorry about this. We’ve handled you badly. Can’t we discuss this as a business proposition?’

Corridon glanced over his shoulder and paused.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said, looked from Ranleigh to Jeanne.

She was watching him intently, but he couldn’t read anything in the blank expression on her face.

‘I wish you would,’ Ranleigh went on. ‘We want your help, and we’re prepared to pay for it. We’re serious about the thousand pounds. Won’t you meet us halfway? Give us a hearing. Jan is a fool. He thinks a gun will get him anything he wants. I was against the gun from the start. Can’t I persuade you?’

Corridon suddenly grinned.

‘I think you have.’ He sat down on the arm of the chair holding his hat in his hand, ready to walk out, but also ready to listen. ‘What’s the job?’

‘We must know if he’s Corridon,’ Jeanne said quickly. ‘We must know that first.’

‘Yes,’ Ranleigh said. ‘You see if we’ve slipped up,’ he went on to Corridon, ‘And we talk, we’d be in a mess. The job’s confidential. We’ve already made one mistake. That chap Crew is a pickpocket. He stole my wallet and found papers that gave our game away. We had a hell of a time finding him.

Then he tried to blackmail us. So we moved in here and kept him prisoner. We're still trying to make up our minds what to do with him. So, you can see, we can't afford to make another mistake. If you are Corridon, then you'll have scars on your back and chest where the Gestapo left their trademark. We're not really doubting Thomases, but we just have to be sure.'

Corridon released a thin cloud of tobacco smoke down his nostrils. He brooded for a moment, then with an impatient shrug, pulled back a coat sleeve, undid a shirt cuff and bared his muscular arm. A few inches above his wrist was a broad white scar. It bit into his flesh like a tight bandage, sharp-edged and shiny.

'They put handcuffs on me every night,' he explained and smiled mirthlessly. 'They made them hot so I wouldn't feel the cold. Does that satisfy you?'

Both of them looked at the scar with cold detachment. There was not pity or horror on either of the faces, only a kind of professional interest.

'They had bright ideas, didn't they?' Ranleigh said. He touched the scar on his face. 'They did that with a red hot bayonet.'

Corridon looked sharply at him.

'So you've had a dose too?'

'Oh yes, and so has Jeanne,' Ranleigh came forward and examined Corridon's scar closely. 'It's all right,' he went on to Jeanne. 'It's Corridon all right. The dossier mentions the handcuff scars.'

'Yes,' she said. 'All right - then tell him.'

Ranleigh moved away from Corridon, took a cigarette from a box on the mantel and lit it.

'It's an odd sort of job,' he said, looking intently at the glowing tip of the cigarette. 'It's dangerous too. I can't think of anyone who could do it better than you. We have tried and failed. If you can't do it, I don't think anyone can, and it's a job that's got to be done.'

Corridon swung his leg and waited, aware that both of them were watching him closely.

'Well, what is it?' he asked abruptly.

Ranleigh said, 'A man is to be executed. We want you to do it.'

chapter three

I

The girl had said, 'We would pay a thousand pounds. Half now and half when the job is done.'

The words moved at the back of Corridon's mind as he sat in the armchair and listened to Ranleigh's voice. 'Half down and half when the job is done.' He had grown accustomed to listening to such a proposition. Whenever there was an off-coloured job to be done they always began like that. It had been astonishingly easy for him to acquire a reputation for doing such jobs successfully. His war record, his appearance and the exaggeration of others had led to the belief that he would undertake any kind of shady job. Men who were afraid to risk their own skins came to him: fat, dark men; thin nervous men; tall and short, but all with a bundle of dirty five-pound notes in their pockets and greed in their bright, beady eyes.

He had listened to them as he was listening to Ranleigh, bargaining shrewdly, raising the price, explaining how he would do the job while they secretly envied him his confidence, his apparent disregard of danger and his strength; congratulating themselves on coming to him. The right man for the job, they said to themselves. Look at his record. If he can't do it, no one can. And they were so carried away by his forthright manner and the simplicity and daring of his plan that they willingly parted with half the promised money, as a sign of their faith in him. Half down. Then the expectant wait, and the realization that they had been tricked. A day or so later, after the bargain had been made, he would wander into a pub where they happened to be, perhaps drinking to his success, and smile at them. The jeering smile sent a sudden cold shiver of apprehension up their spines. He had changed his mind, he told them, his broad-shouldered bulk resting against the bar, his foot on the brass rail, a cigarette between his hard, thin lips.

They'd have to find someone else for the job, or, better still, forget about it. Some had the courage to ask for their money back, making a joke of it as he surveyed them with his deepset, cold grey eyes. He always gave them the same answer: 'You'd better sue for it!' And he would stroll away, his hands in his pockets, his hat pulled down over his eyes, the bored, jeering expression in his eyes. 'Half down and the rest when the job is done' propositions made him a lot of easy money, and listening to Ranleigh he saw no reason why this shouldn't be yet another gift from the gods.

But this job they wanted him to do wasn't like the other jobs he had been offered. Nor were these three like the others who had come to him. He felt, however, that the principle was the same, and listening with a polite, interested expression on his face that he could so easily switch on, and that had deceived so many people.

Jeanne had left them. Ranleigh had said to her: 'I think I can put this over better alone. But, of course,

if you would rather stay . . .’

She had left the room without looking at Corridon, and he had been surprised to find that there was a certain emptiness in the room when she had gone.

Ranleigh produced from a cupboard a bottle of whisky and two glasses.

‘It’s a bit early for a drink,’ he said, ‘but you’ll have one, won’t you?’ He measured out two drinks, handed a glass to Corridon.

‘Now she’s gone I can talk more freely. The whole thing’s a bit rum.’ He raised his glass. ‘Well, cheerio.’

Corridon nodded to him and drank a little of the whisky. He was thinking that if he could persuade Ranleigh to part with five hundred pounds he could get Effie’s mouth fixed. The operation could be over and done within a couple of weeks. It pleased him to think of Effie’s delighted surprise. If he played his cards carefully there was no reason why he shouldn’t walk out of this room with the money in his pocket.

‘It’s the sort of thing you might read about in a novel,’ Ranleigh was saying. ‘You wouldn’t expect to run into it in real life. But she’s like that. She’s a bit incredible, isn’t she?’

‘You all are,’ Corridon said bluntly. ‘What are you? A secret society or something?’

Ranleigh laughed.

‘You could call us that, I suppose. It’s something you will understand. You’ve been through it yourself. That’s why we decided to ask you to help. We know you wouldn’t give us away even if you didn’t take the job.’

‘I won’t give you away,’ Corridon returned. ‘But that doesn’t mean I’ll take the job. Are you serious about...?’ He stopped.

The word executioner was too melodramatic for him to use.

‘Oh yes,’ Ranleigh said. ‘It isn’t as cockeyed as it sounds. I’d better begin at the beginning.’ He paused for a moment, then went on, ‘We three are what is left of a small group of men and women working for the French Resistance Movement. Originally there were nine of us: two Frenchmen, Pierre Gourville and Georges; two Frenchwomen, Jeanne and Charlotte; two Poles, Lubish and Jan; three Englishmen, Harris, Mallory and myself.’

‘Yes,’ Corridon said. Such a combination of men and women was familiar to him. He had come across many of them in his work as a spy. He had found them useful. They were patriots; fanatics, and they did whatever he wanted them to do without question.

‘Our job was to derail trains,’ Ranleigh explained. ‘We moved about the country, hiding by day and operating by night. We did a damn good job.’ He brooded for a moment, his one eye alight with enthusiasm. ‘Pierre Gourville was the leader. He was a man of extraordinary courage and tenacity. He was a good man.’ He stared at Corridon. ‘An exceptional man. I don’t want to labour the point, but we would have done anything for him and were nothing without him. He had the knack of getting the best out of you. He inspired loyalty.’

Corridon sipped his whisky, an empty look in his eyes. He knew what Ranleigh meant. He had met men like that. A man who was entirely selfless puzzled him. He felt there must be a catch in it somewhere, but he had never been able to discover exactly what the catch was.

‘Jeanne and Gourville were lovers,’ Ranleigh went on, lowering his voice. ‘I want you to understand about Jeanne. It’s important. They were like one. I’ve never seen anything like it. Oh yes, they were in love, but not in the conventional way in which we think of love. It was much more than that: a fusion, if you like, of mind, body and spirit.’ He frowned at the whisky in his glass. ‘I’m bad at this, and it’s important. The whole of this affair hinges on their relationship. They lived for each other.’ He hesitated, groping for words and repeated, ‘I’m putting this badly,’ and looked up at Corridon, a little embarrassed. The ingrained reserve of his class was only at ease with an understatement. ‘They would have died for each other.’ He smiled apologetically. ‘That’s the best I can do.’

‘All right,’ Corridon said, concealing his impatience. ‘Then one of you betrayed him?’

Ranleigh looked fixedly at him.

‘It can’t mean anything to you,’ he said after a long pause.

‘You didn’t know Pierre. Without frills, that’s what happened.’

Corridon finished his whisky. It was plain enough to him now what it was all about. It wasn’t the first time such a thing had happened.

‘Well, it’s your show, isn’t it?’ he asked. ‘Why bring me into it?’

‘I’m coming to that,’ Ranleigh returned. ‘I’ll be as brief as I can. Jeanne and Mallory and myself were caught. We had gone out on a job, and we made a mess of it. I won’t bore you with details. We were caught and handed over to the Gestapo. They knew we were part of Pierre’s organization. We were questioned. They wanted Pierre badly. We didn’t count. He was the one at the back of it all. So long as he was free to operate, the derauling of trains would go on at the same damaging pace. Jeanne and Mallory were present when they worked on me.’

His hand went to his scar. ‘It must have been a pretty grim business for them.’ He looked at Corridon with a frank little grin. ‘I wasn’t particularly brave. They made me yell like hell once or twice.’

‘One is inclined to be noisy at that kind of party,’ Corridon said brutally, and laughed.

‘Yes. They wanted to know where Pierre was. I managed to keep my mouth shut, but only just. They grew tired of working on me after a while, and besides. I wasn’t in very good shape by then, so they turned their attention to Jeanne. I knew they wouldn’t get anything from her, but they tried hard enough. They couldn’t even make her cry out. Well, they gave up after an hour of it, and had another go at me. They smashed my arm. I passed out after that. Later, Jeanne told me what had happened.’ Ranleigh suddenly stood up and began to pace the floor. ‘It’s something I can never understand. Mallory talked. He didn’t even put up a show. As soon as they turned their attention to him, he said he would tell them what they wanted to know.’

The memory of what happened agitated him, and for a moment or so he moved restlessly about the room, a sick expression on his face. ‘They had blinded me in one eye and had smashed my arm so that it had to come off, and Jeanne - well, you can imagine what they’d done to her, so it was a bit of a jar to us both to realize we had gone through all that for nothing.’

He went to the window and stared down into the street. ‘We three were locked in a cell together after it was all over. I was half out of my mind with pain, and Jeanne was bleeding badly. Mallory kept away from us. He wasn’t touched. It was horrible to watch Jeanne trying to get at him; she was screaming and crying and calling him names, but she was too weak to reach him. It was the most awful night I have ever spent. He only spoke once. He said, “Can’t you see, you fools? They would have gone on and on. One of us would have talked eventually. Pierre will understand. It’s the fortunes of war”.’

Corridon only half listened. His thoughts were busy. Five hundred pounds! He might get more. He was good at bargaining. Yes, he might push up the price. He stared across at Ranleigh’s tense back. If he had only to deal with Ranleigh it should be easy.

II

‘I must tell you about Mallory - Brian Mallory,’ Ranleigh said as he poured out two more drinks. Corridon noticed his hand was unsteady. ‘He was a fighter pilot. He joined up with us after he had escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp. He seemed the right type. There was nothing weak about him. He was a good-looking chap. I suppose he was between thirty and thirty-five; public school and seemed to have plenty of money. He seemed absolutely reliable. He had made a spectacular escape; killing two guards, and was hunted for weeks. Pierre often said he considered Mallory one of his best men, and Pierre knew what he was talking about. He had a lot of initiative and never seemed to worry about risks. He always volunteered for the most dangerous jobs, and more often than not Pierre used to have to hold him in. He gave us the impression of being courageous, tough and unbreakable.’

‘I’ve met fellas like that,’ Corridon said. ‘They seem all right until they are cornered, then they go haywire. It’s called lack of moral fibre.’

‘It wasn’t like that with Mallory,’ Ranleigh said emphatically. ‘He had been cornered a dozen times. He had fought his way out without turning a hair. He just wasn’t like that. God knows what got into him that night. I don’t. I wish I did. He told where Pierre was and who would be with him; Charlotte and Georges. Luckily, Lubish, Jan and Harris were away on a job, but he gave a detailed description of them all. It was a complete give away.’

‘How long ago was this?’

‘About eighteen months. Oh, I know we have taken our time to get here, but it hasn’t been easy. We’ve had to wait for things to settle down. We’ve had to save money. Jeanne’s been ill. At one time nothing went right. But we’re here now.’

‘They caught Gourville?’

‘Yes. Georges and Charlotte were killed in the fighting. Unfortunately they caught Pierre alive. He was in their hands two weeks before they killed him.’

‘What happened to you?’

‘We were lucky. There was an air raid and the prison in which we were was hit. In the confusion we got away.’

‘And Mallory?’

‘He got away too. We were a lot slower than he and he left us.’

‘And now you intend to kill him?’

‘Yes. Jeanne was ill for a long time. She had brain fever, and nearly went out of her mind. The only thing that kept her alive was the thought that one day she would meet Mallory again. We have all sworn to get him, and we are bound by honour to see the job through.’

‘But why drag me into it?’ Corridon asked, stretching out his long legs.

‘It was my idea,’ Ranleigh returned. ‘The other two don’t like it. You see, Jan was married to Charlotte. He has a personal reason for finding Mallory. So has Jeanne. I haven’t the same claim, but I’ve given my word.’

‘And the other two? Where are they?’

‘They’re dead,’ Ranleigh said quietly. ‘Mallory killed them last week.’

A flicker of interest showed in Corridon’s eyes. He hadn’t expected this.

‘Last week? You mean - here, in London?’

‘Yes.’ Ranleigh again began to pace the room. ‘We’ve underestimated Mallory. We knew he’d be a hard nut to crack, but we thought the five of us would be more than a match for him. He is a first class shot; strong, quick and as dangerous as a tiger. He has a clear-thinking, ruthless mind. He’s good at hunting men, but then, so are we, and we thought the five of us could pull him down. We are beginning to doubt. There are only three of us left. You see, we don’t know where he is. Harris had a clue to his whereabouts and went to investigate. He didn’t come back. He was found in a pond on Wimbledon Common. You know the kind of thing: unknown man commits suicide. There was no question of foul play, but we knew Mallory had got him.’

‘Lubish also had a clue. He was found lying on a railway track, cut to pieces by a train. They brought that in as accidental death. After Lubish’s death I managed to persuade Jeanne to see reason. We must have outside help. Mallory knows us. He knows we are after him, and he is hitting back. Up to now he has had it all his own way. As soon as one of us gets on his track, he appears from, nowhere and strikes. Someone he doesn’t know must go after him. We heard about you. You could do it. If you can find him for us we’ll do the rest; but knowing him, if you do find him, you’ll have to act quickly. I don’t think there’ll be a chance to bring us on the scene. You’ll have to do the job. That’s why we’re offering a thousand pounds.’

‘It’s murder,’ Corridon said, the polite, interested expression much in evidence. ‘Have you thought of that?’

‘Did you call it murder when you shot Maria Hauptmann or the others who were traitors?’ Ranleigh asked quietly.

‘No, but it was murder for all that; only it was legalized murder. This is different. If I kill a man now, I shall be arrested, tried and perhaps hanged.’

‘It must be an accident or suicide,’ Ranleigh said. ‘He has killed two of us that way.’

Corridon drank a little whisky, appearing to think, but there was no need to think. He knew what he was going to do.

‘There are risks,’ he pointed out. ‘You must look at it from my point of view. You’re asking me to pull your chestnuts out of the fire. I have no personal grudge against this man. There were dozens like him. Killing a man in war-time is one thing; killing him now is something else.’

Ranleigh stubbed out his cigarette. A frown pulled his eyebrows into a wrinkled knot above the bridge of his nose.

‘There’s no point in beating about the bush,’ he said with sudden curtness. ‘Either you’ll take the job or you won’t. What’s it to be?’

‘I wouldn’t do it for a thousand.’

Ranleigh looked sharply at him.

‘Does that mean ...?’

‘Of course,’ Corridon broke in. ‘I’ll tackle anything if the price is right. A thousand isn’t enough. This is a business proposition. You’re asking me to gamble with my life. This fella might be too smart for me. I might go the way the others went. If I succeed I might make a mistake and hang. I’m risking my life, and I value it above a thousand pounds.’

‘Yes,’ Ranleigh said. ‘That’s fair enough.’ He said candidly, ‘The trouble is we haven’t much money. I’ll have to talk to the others. But fifteen hundred is the best we can do, and if we give you that it’ll put us in a hole.’

Corridon studied him. There was no guile in the ravished face, and Corridon was disappointed. He liked to bargain. He had had much experience in screwing money out of others. It was a game he enjoyed. But Ranleigh was too honest. Corridon could see he was speaking the truth. The bargain was stillborn; the battle of words over before it began.

After a moment’s hesitation Corridon said with a shrug, ‘All right, I’ll do it for that. I could use fifteen hundred. I thought I could get more out of you.’

Ranleigh laughed.

‘I know you did, that’s why I put my cards on the table. I’m no good at haggling. But I’ll have to ask the others. They may not want to pay all this: it’s practically all the money we have.’

‘Talk to them,’ Corridon said. ‘Half down and the rest when the job is done.’ He concealed a smile. ‘See what they say.’

III

Crew came into the room. He stood hesitating, looking at Corridon who lounged in the chair and grinned at him. Ranleigh had sent him out while he talked with Jeanne and Jan.

‘You’d better sit down and keep quiet,’ Corridon said. ‘I’ve been asked to keep an eye on you.’

‘What are they going to do with me?’ Crew blurted out.

Horror lurked in his eyes. ‘You know what they’re up to, don’t you? You’re in this too, aren’t you?’

Corridon lit a cigarette and surveyed Crew through a cloud of smoke.

‘I suppose. I am,’ he said indifferently. ‘And I’ve no idea what they are going to do with you. I don’t

give a damn. You were a fool to try blackmail.'

'Yes.' Crew suppressed a shiver. 'But how was I to know? She scares me.' He looked fearfully at the door. 'She'd do anything. I think she's cracked.'

'You never know with foreigners, but I wouldn't say she's cracked.'

'They've been here four days now,' Crew said, clenching and unclenching his fists. 'I can't move without one of them comes with me. There's no privacy. I can't stand much more of it. I can't see how it's going to end.'

'You shouldn't have picked his pocket.'

Crew flinched, and his face turned a dull red.

'He told you that, did he?'

'He said you were a pickpocket and you tried blackmail.'

Crew began to excuse himself.

'I was short of money. They shouldn't be in this country. Their papers aren't in order. They could be arrested. 'I - I only wanted fifty pounds.'

'You should have left them alone,' Corridon returned. He was getting bored with Crew's misery. 'It's no good appealing to me. I can't help you. After all, it's your funeral.'

Crew began to pace up and down, his hands clenched tightly behind his back.

'You don't think . . . ' He broke off, unable to voice the thought that had been haunting him for the past two days. He looked helplessly at Corridon, and then resumed his pacing. 'They're getting on my nerves. If I could see how it was going to end. They wouldn't...' Again he stopped, biting his lip and staring at Corridon. 'They don't trust me. That's the trouble. I wouldn't do anything. I've given my word. I even offered to swear on the Bible.'

'Have you got one?' Corridon asked with his jeering smile.

Crew looked at him seriously.

'No, but they could buy one couldn't they? I said I'd pay for it . . . ' His voice trailed away. He repeated hopelessly, 'They don't trust me.'

Corridon suppressed a yawn.

‘You might fix me another drink. Is it your whisky or theirs?’

‘It’s unbelievable,’ Crew said, ignoring Corridon’s request, ‘to get mixed up with such people. I didn’t know such people existed. They’re going to kill this chap Mallory.’ His face twitched suddenly. ‘That’s murder. They think nothing of it. Nothing . . . I’ve heard them talk. She’s the worst. She’s hard. Isn’t she?’ He stood before Corridon, his eyes feverish. ‘Isn’t she hard . . . like granite? She’s not like any other woman I’ve known.’ He turned away and wrung his hands. ‘I keep thinking they’re going to kill me,’ he burst out. ‘I know it’s silly of me, but I can’t help putting myself in their place. What else can they do? If they’re going to kill this chap Mallory, why shouldn’t they kill me?’ He swung round to face Corridon again. He was sweating. ‘I can’t sleep. It’s getting on my nerves.’

‘You’d better have a drink too,’ Corridon said, rising to his feet. ‘You’re hysterical.’

‘Do you think they’ll kill me?’ Crew asked. He wiped his sweating hands with a rag of a handkerchief. ‘That Pole - he keeps looking at me as if he were planning something.’

Corridon mixed a stiff whisky and soda and pushed the glass into Crew’s hand.

‘Don’t be a fool,’ he said roughly. ‘Pull yourself together. Nothing like that’s going to happen.’

The glass rattled against Crew’s teeth as he gulped down the whisky.

‘I wish I could be sure,’ he went on after a long pause. ‘It’s driving me mad.’ Tears sprang into his eyes. ‘They keep looking at me. There’s no privacy. And she - she’s the worst. She’s inhuman. You don’t know what she’s like.’

Ranleigh came into the room with Jeanne. Crew jumped back, his face going slack.

‘Would you keep Jan company?’ Ranleigh said quietly. ‘I’m sorry to keep pushing you from one room to the other, but you’ve brought it on yourself, haven’t you?’

‘I won’t!’ Crew exclaimed, backing away. ‘I’ve had enough of this! You’ve got to go. All of you. Please go...’ He began to wring his hands again as Jan came into the room.

‘Come on,’ Jan said.

Crew sagged limply and walked slowly across the room. Jan followed him into the room and closed the door.

‘He thinks you are going to kill him,’ Corridon said lightly. ‘He must have been reading too many gangster novels.’

‘We’ve decided to pay you what you ask,’ Jeanne said, ignoring the implied question.

Surprise and disappointment drove Crew from his mind. He had expected and hoped for a long and expert haggle.

‘Half down and half when the job’s done?’ he asked. ‘Seven hundred and fifty pounds?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

Corridon felt something had gone wrong. He was suddenly suspicious and uneasy. There must be a catch in it somewhere, unless he had underestimated them. Ranleigh might be bamboozled, but surely not the other two. He sat, nursing his glass, looking at Jeanne doubtfully.

She stood before the hearth, her hands in her trouser pockets, her face empty of expression. Ranleigh stood by the window momentarily withdrawn from them.

‘All right,’ Corridon said. ‘Tell me what I have to do and I’ll do it. I’ll need a photograph or a good description of him. Have you any ideas where I can find him?’

‘There’s no photograph, I’m afraid, but I have written down a description,’ Ranleigh said, turning. ‘Finding him won’t be easy. We have only two clues, but they must be good ones. Harris and Lubish used them, and they found Mallory. You’ll have to try them yourself, but you’ll have to be very careful.’

Corridon grinned. While Ranleigh was speaking he was aware that Jeanne was watching him closely. Her intense scrutiny warned him to be on his guard.

‘I’ll be careful. What are these clues?’

‘We thought it would be easy to find out something about him, but he’s covered his tracks. We tried to remember anything that would lead us to him from the past conversations we’ve had with him. He rarely talked about himself, but we’ve remembered two things: an address of his aunt he gave me in case he was killed and the name of his girlfriend. His aunt lives near Wendover, Bucks. I’ve written the address down for you. Lubish went to see her. He was found on a stretch of railway line between Wendover and Great Missenden. It looks as if Mallory might have been with his aunt when Lubish called. His girlfriend’s name is Rita Allen. She works at Mastins and Roberts, the multiple stores in Regent Street. She’s on the stocking counter. Harris went after her. He was found the next day in a pond on Wimbledon Common. Probably Rita Allen lives in that district. Those are the only two leads we have. You’ll have to go on from there.’

‘And hope one or both of them will tell me where I can find him?’ Corridon said. He finished his whisky and put the glass on the table. ‘All right. I’ll see what I can do. You’ll be here I suppose, I’ll keep in touch with you.’

‘We don’t know yet,’ Ranleigh said. ‘We may be here or we may move. It depends . . .’ He glanced at

Jeanne. 'But we know where you are.' He added with a smile, 'You won't lose us. We're difficult people to shake off.'

The smile softened the warning, but it was there.

Corridon laughed.

'I shan't run away.' He got to his feet. 'Well, I'll make a start. This should be interesting.' His enthusiasm struck a false note. 'I used to be good at this sort of thing.' He thrust his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out the Mauser pistol.

Both Jeanne and Ranleigh stiffened at the sight of the gun but immediately relaxed as Corridon laid it on the table. 'I'll leave you the gun. He'll want it, won't he? I have a gun of my own.'

Neither Jeanne nor Ranleigh said anything. 'Have you the description?'

Ranleigh took an envelope from his pocket.

'There's everything here,' he said.

Corridon smiled.

'Everything? The money?' His finger pressed the envelope and he shook his head. 'No, not the money. We said half down . . . didn't we?'

Jeanne went to a cupboard, took from it a worn leather briefcase.

'You'll sign an IOU?' she asked.

'I beg your pardon?' Corridon said, not quite sure if he had heard aright.

'You'll sign an IOU?' she repeated woodenly.

'Of course.' He marvelled at her innocence. They had no right to be in England. Crew had said so. Their papers weren't in order. How then did they hope to collect on an IOU?

Ranleigh gave him a sheet of notepaper and a pen.

'And the money?' Corridon asked blandly. 'Shall we have it on the table? It's not that I distrust you . . . it's business, isn't it?' Jeanne put three bundles of one-pound notes on the table.

Her fingertips rested on the polished surface, close to the gun.

Corridon pulled up a chair and sat down.

'If I were going to cheat you,' he said to her, 'I wouldn't have returned the gun, would I?'

‘Count the money,’ she said curtly.

‘You want me to do this job, don’t you?’ he demanded, stung by the contempt in her eyes. ‘I didn’t ask to do it. If you want my help you must expect to pay for it.’

‘Count the money,’ she snapped, and her eyes glittered.

Shrugging, he flicked through the pound notes. His fingers were expert, rustling the notes quickly and without hesitation.

‘Right,’ he said, picked up the pen and scrawled on the sheet of paper. ‘There. Now I’ll start.’ He pushed the three bundles of notes into the brief case, tucked it under his arm and stood up. ‘Suppose we meet at the Amethyst Club tomorrow night? I’ll let you know how I have got on.’

‘Yes,’ Ranleigh said. There was a strained expression on his face. ‘We expect quick service. That money means a lot to us.’

‘It means quite a bit to me, oddly enough,’ Corridon returned, and couldn’t quite conceal the jeering smile.

‘We’re trusting you,’ Ranleigh reminded him.

‘That’s right,’ Corridon said, added, looking at Jeanne, ‘but you have my IOU.’

She said nothing, staring at him, her big dark eyes brooding and her mouth a hard line.

‘Well, so long.’ He turned to the door. ‘See you soon.’

Neither of them said anything and he looked over his shoulder at them. Ranleigh was holding the IOU. Jeanne still stood by the table, her fingertips near the gun. There was a tense atmosphere in the room, but Corridon didn’t let that worry him. He had the money. It had been absurdly easy; the easiest job he had ever done. Of course there was Jan, but Corridon believed in taking risks. When they realized he wasn’t going through with the job they would threaten him, but he was used to threats. He didn’t believe they’d dare do anything except threaten, and he knew how to look after himself. Jan and his gun didn’t scare him, and if they were troublesome he had only to tell Zani about them. Zani would be quick to act. He was always on the lookout for information to give to the police, especially information that didn’t involve his clients. These three would be a gift to Zani.

He repeated, ‘Well, so long,’ and went into the neat little hall, opened the front door, ran down the carpeted stairs.

Seven hundred and fifty pounds! He’d go along and see about Effie’s mouth. He’d go right now.

As he moved into the street he noticed an elderly man in shirtsleeves rearranging the display in the flyblown window of the tobacconist’s shop. His thick awkward fingers were building a tower of

cigarette cartons on a dusty shelf. He looked up and caught Corridon's eye. Corridon winked at him.

chapter four

I

Corridon had never stayed in one place long enough to make a home for himself. Since his return to London he lived in a three-room flat over a garage behind St. George's Hospital. He rented it furnished and thought he was lucky to have it in spite of the exorbitant rent. A woman came in every day to keep it clean and Corridon had his meals out. He scarcely ever used the small, scantily furnished sitting room. It was damp and dark, and during the day the constant noise of car engines, the hiss of hoses on coachwork, the yapping of dogs and the whine of an electric saw working nearby came in through the badly fitting windows to distract him. The bedroom, also damp and dark, overlooked a high wall that shut out the light.

Discomfort and the lack of a homely atmosphere meant nothing to Corridon. He never noticed his surroundings. The flat was a place to sleep in, and as such it served its purpose and it had several advantages. It was near the West End. It had bars to every window and a solid oak front door. The rooms over the garages were used by commercial firms who moved out at six o'clock each day and did not appear until nine the following morning. There was no one to spy on him, and at night the flat was as lonely and as impregnable as a fort.

Corridon had returned to the flat earlier than usual. He had had supper in a pub in Shepherd Market and had walked along Piccadilly to Hyde Park Corner, arriving at his flat a few seconds before nine o'clock. As he let himself in he heard Big Ben strike the hour, and paused to count the strokes. The chime of Big Ben always gave him a feeling of nostalgia, reminding him of the time when he was in France when he used to listen each evening in some secret hiding place to the nine o'clock news, knowing that Big Ben was still there and would be there tomorrow to strike out the hour.

When the last stroke died away, he closed and bolted the front door, turned on the light and climbed the steep flight of stairs that brought him directly into the sitting room. There was a smell of damp and Ronuk in the room, and a cold cleanliness that constantly reminded him of a waiting room in an institute for the poor.

He emptied his pockets before removing his coat and found the envelope that Ranleigh had given him. He had pushed it into his pocket and had forgotten about it. He flicked it against his fingernails, then carried it into the bedroom, turned on the light and sat on the bed. He was tired. He had had little sleep the previous night and he yawned, thinking of what he had done during the day, satisfied the way things had turned out.

He flopped back on the pillow, swung up his legs and lit a cigarette. Seven hundred and fifty pounds! He had paid the bundles of pound notes into his bank, grinning when the cashier had given him a

quick, surprised glance. Then he had gone along to a pleasant house in Kensington and talked to the plastic surgeon who had done so much for him when he was in hospital recovering from the Gestapo's attentions. He had told him about Effie.

'I don't care what it costs, Doc, but fix it for her.'

And the doctor had made an appointment to see Effie.

Shying away from the thought of Effie's gratitude, Corridon had telephoned her and told her what he had arranged, then hung up quickly before she could begin to thank him.

He had a man to see in Whitechapel and another man to see in Balham High Street. Two small parcels he had brought back with him from America, carefully sewn inside the flaps of his trench coat pockets, exchanged hands. He took a bus back to the West End, had dinner and returned to his flat. The day had been satisfactory and lying on his bed, he had a feeling of well-being as he stared up at the ceiling.

The room was silent; no outside sounds came to him. There was something reassuring about the thick iron bars at the window. He felt shut in, away from all interruption, with no sense of loneliness, and as he lay there, relaxing, he thought of Jeanne Persigny, seeing her as she stood before Crew's hearth, her hands in her trouser pockets, her face expressionless, and he wondered what she was doing at this moment. Tomorrow night he would meet her at the Amethyst Club, and he would tell her he wasn't going through with the job. He could imagine her reaction. Scorn and anger would blaze up in her eyes.

Ranleigh would stare at him, embarrassed, like a man who has caught a friend in a shabby act. Jan would feel for his Mauser. Corridon's mouth twitched into a grin. He would tell them to screw. There was nothing they could do about it.

Remembering the envelope that Ranleigh had given him, he picked it up and opened it and drew out several sheets of paper. He began to read the neat typewritten words without interest. Mallory meant nothing to him, and he read what Ranleigh had written because he was relaxing and had nothing else to read.

Brian Mallory.

Born: 4th February, 1916.

Description: Height: 6ft. 1in. Weight 182 lbs. Hair: dark brown. Eyes: hazel. Complexion: fair. Heavily sunburned.

Peculiarities: Voice affected by a wound received while escaping from P.O.W. camp. Speaks in a whisper, unable to shout or raise his voice, but practice has enabled him to make himself heard by enunciating his words with remarkable clearness.

Mannerisms: When angry has a trick of grinding his right fist into the palm of his left hand. When pleased slaps his hands and rubs them briskly together. Invariably holds cigarette between index finger and thumb. Has the habit of lighting matches by flicking their heads with his thumbnail. Prides himself on a poker face: seldom laughs or smiles.

Corridon gave an impatient grunt, skipped the page and began to read at random.

Relations: As far as is known only relation is Miss Hilda Mallory, The Dell, Wendover, an aunt, who brought Mallory up after the death of his mother when he was four years old. Quarrelled with his father and they seldom met. In spite of this, his father made him his heir and left him a considerable sum of money at his death.

Corridon yawned. He wasn't interested, and although there was a considerable amount more in this vein he couldn't be bothered to go on with it. Rolling the sheets of paper into a hard, tight ball, he flipped it into the empty fireplace.

In a moment or so he would get up and undress and go to bed, he told himself, and sighed contentedly, closing his eyes.

Minutes ticked by and he still lay there, breathing lightly, the hard lines in his face softening, his mind floating in the half-world of sleep and wakefulness.

II

He dreamed that Maria Hauptmann was sitting on the end of the bed, her slim white hands folded in her lap and her face smashed and bleeding as he had seen it when she lay at his feet after he had shot her. She seemed to be trying to say something to him, but she hadn't a mouth; only two staring eyes above a black cavity in her face from which he could see a few teeth protruding. But he was sure she was trying to say something. It wasn't the first time he had had this dream, and he always had the impression she was about to say something important, but she never did. She just sat on his bed and filled him with horror and wouldn't go away.

A knock on the front door wakened him. He raised his head from the pillow, aware that his jaws ached and that he had been grinding his teeth in his sleep, and listened. A minute ticked by and the knock was repeated. He swung his legs off the bed and sat up. Moving softly, he went into the sitting room, and without turning on the light, pulled aside the curtain and looked into the mews. She was standing there in the moonlight, still wearing the black sweater and slacks, bareheaded, her hands in her trouser pockets, a cigarette in her lips.

He stood for a moment watching her, then turned on the light and went down the steep stairs. He had

no idea why she had come at this hour to see him, but he had no misgivings as he slid back the bolt and opened the door.

‘Come in,’ he said. ‘Are you alone?’

‘Yes,’ she returned and walked past him into the tiny hall.

‘Straight upstairs,’ he told her, closing the door, but not before he looked into the darkness, wondering if Jan or Ranleigh were out there somewhere, hiding in the shadows. He saw no one.

She climbed the steep stairs, and he followed her, his eyes on her straight back, seeing the movement of her hips as she stepped from one stair to the next. She went into the sitting room, to the hearth, turned and faced him. He stood just inside the doorway.

‘What brings you here?’ he asked, rubbing his face with his hand. ‘I was just going to bed. I didn’t get much sleep last night.’

She looked away from him and said nothing and began examining the room, taking in every detail, missing nothing.

Watching her he was aware for the first time of the shabbiness of the room, of the threadbare carpet, the armchair with the protruding spring, the scarred, stained table, Landseer’s ‘Stag At Bay’ over the mantelpiece.

‘Have a drink?’ he went on abruptly and picked up a bottle of gin from the sideboard. ‘There’s some vermouth somewhere.’ He wandered into the kitchen, irritated to find he needed an excuse to get away from her silent, disturbing presence. By the time he had found the vermouth and returned, the feeling had passed, but a slight uneasiness remained.

She was still standing by the hearth, silent, motionless and watchful. He mixed the drinks, whistling under his breath and put a glass on the table near her.

‘Sit down and make yourself at home; not that this dump is much of a home, but it’s the best I could get.’ He flopped into the armchair that creaked under his weight. ‘Well, bung-ho.’

He drank some of the gin and vermouth and grimaced. ‘This gin isn’t much.’

She made no move and ignored the drink he had put on the table. She said suddenly. ‘You have a habit of making promises and not keeping them, haven’t you?’

He wasn’t expecting such a direct attack, and for a moment he was disconcerted, then he laughed.

‘There’s not much you haven’t found out about me, is there?’ he said and stretched out his long legs. ‘You’re right. I don’t always keep my promises.’

‘You undertake a job, accept payment, then you don’t go ahead,’ she went on. ‘It’s a pretty easy way

of making money, isn't it?'

Corridon nodded.

'It's easy enough. Too easy sometimes,' he said lightly. But he was surprised that she was so quiet and calm. He had expected her to fly up at him and would have been easier in mind had she done so.

'And there's no redress for those who have given you the money, is there?'

'None at all,' Corridon said cheerfully. 'The jobs I get offered never stand investigation. But of course, if you've kept the IOU you could sue,' and he laughed.

She stubbed out her cigarette, picked up the gin and vermouth and looked at him steadily from over the top of the glass. He got ready to duck, believing she was going to throw the contents of her glass in his face, but she didn't. Instead, she drank half the gin and vermouth, went over to the settee and sat down.

'I expect Crew told you our papers aren't in order,' she said. 'That we have no authority to be here?'

'He mentioned it. I thought at the time you were being a little optimistic to ask for an IOU.'

'You don't intend to look for Mallory, do you?'

This wasn't going quite the way he had planned, but she was merely anticipating what he was going to tell her tomorrow night so it didn't really matter. She may as well know now as later.

'Of course not,' he said mildly. 'If you want the man's life you'll have to kill him yourselves. You can hardly expect me to kill a man I've never seen just because you are incompetent, can you?'

'And yet you accepted our money.'

'I always accept money,' he returned, took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and offered it.

'Have a cigarette?'

She took one. He noticed her slim hand was steady.

'People shouldn't come to me with these cockeyed jobs,' he went on. 'They should leave me alone.'

She leaned back and crossed her legs and looked perfectly at ease and relaxed. Her apparent calm was beginning to puzzle Corridon.

'You're taking this very well,' he said, hoping to set her off. 'It can't be a joke to lose all that money.'

For the first time since they had met, she smiled.

'You think I'm a fool, don't you?'

‘Not exactly,’ he returned and laughed. ‘A little simple perhaps.’

‘Because I asked for an IOU?’

‘Well, you can’t collect on it, can you?’

‘No, I can’t collect on it. I knew that. I asked you to sign it for another reason.’

He became alert then, wondering if he had misjudged these three. He had felt all along that they had given in too easily. But what could they do? The money was safely in his bank; they couldn’t touch it.

‘And what was the reason?’

She finished her drink, then held out the glass.

‘I’d like another please.’

He took the glass, surprised, and as he was mixing the drink, she said, ‘I’ve come to persuade you to find Mallory.’

He looked over his shoulder at her and raised his eyebrows.

‘I wonder what makes you think you can do that?’

‘Won’t you?’ She leaned forward. ‘He was a traitor. He deserves to die. You had no liking for traitors two years ago, had you?’

‘I didn’t give a damn one way or the other,’ he said, handing her the glass. ‘I did what I was told. My personal feelings for the man or the woman concerned never entered into it.’

‘You wouldn’t hesitate if you had known Pierre,’ she said, and one hand clenched and the knuckles whitened.

‘But I didn’t know Pierre.’ He flopped down into the chair again. ‘After all there were hundreds of Pierres. Just because you two were lovers ...’

She jumped up, spilling her drink, her eyes like black explosions.

‘Are you or are you not going to find Mallory?’ she demanded standing over him.

‘Certainly not,’ he said casually, now feeling sure of himself. This was what he expected and what he could cope with. ‘Pull your own chestnuts out of the fire.’

‘Do you mean that?’ she cried. He could see she was struggling to control a fury that threatened to engulf her. Her chest laboured; her face was chalk white and as expressionless as a plaster mask.

‘Of course, and there’s nothing you can do about it. You have my IOU, but you can’t collect on it. You have Jan and his popgun, but I’m more than a match for him, and you know it. You three don’t scare me. I have your money and I’m sticking to it. There’s nothing any of you can do about it.’

She suddenly turned away and stood with her back half turned to him so he couldn’t see her face. She remained like that for a few seconds and then she went to the settee. As she sat down Corridon saw she was quiet and calm again, and he wondered what was coming.

‘I knew you would be like this,’ she said, ‘but Ranleigh said he trusted you.’

‘Ranleigh’s a trusting type,’ Corridon said, watching her narrowly. He felt she was more dangerous like this than when she was angry. ‘He judges people the way he judges himself. It’s a great mistake.’

‘Yes; it’s a great mistake.’ She looked away from him and studied the engraving over the mantelpiece. ‘But you are going through with this, you know. We would have preferred to have had your willing cooperation, but if we can’t then we must force you to do what we want.’

He laughed, genuinely amused.

‘Brave words, aren’t they?’

‘Do you think so?’ She swung round to face him. ‘We’re not threatening you. We’re telling you to find Mallory, and you’re going to find him.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

She paused just long enough for her next words to have their full dramatic effect, then she said, without taking her eyes from his, ‘Crew’s dead.’

III

He remembered Crew saying, ‘I keep thinking they’re going to kill me. I can’t help putting myself in their place. What else can they do?’ and wringing his hands.

Corridon was thrown out of his stride, and for a long moment he didn’t know what to say. A cold prickle ran up his spine, and again the thought flashed through his mind: Have I underestimated these three or is she lying?

She was lighting a cigarette when he said sharply, ‘Why should I give a damn whether he’s alive or dead? He’s nothing to me.’

She lay back against the settee, watching him, a finger tap-ping her cigarette, flicking ash on to the threadbare carpet.

‘You are not being very clever,’ she said. ‘Think a moment. Crew may have meant nothing to you alive, but he does - now he’s dead. Work it out for yourself.’

‘What are you driving at?’ Corridon demanded, sitting forward.

‘Crew was shot five minutes after you left,’ she returned, her face expressionless. ‘Can’t you see? Work it out for yourself.’

He realized suddenly that somehow these three had been too clever for him. But even now he couldn’t understand what had gone wrong. Only the cool, triumphant look in her eyes warned him that they had outwitted him.

‘He’s nothing to me - alive or dead.’

‘They won’t believe that.’

‘Who won’t?’

‘Why, the police, of course.’

Then he saw how they had done it, and he went hot with rage. His fingerprints would be on the gun. He remembered now that Jan had worn gloves. The IOU he had signed would supply the motive. He had been seen leaving Crew’s flat. The window dresser would remember and identify him. The police had been waiting years to get their hands on him. They wouldn’t look too closely at the evidence.

‘You’re lying,’ he said sharply. ‘None of you would have the guts to shoot Crew.’

She looked steadily at him, but said nothing as if his outburst didn’t merit an answer. He lit another cigarette, crossed his legs, uncrossed them, made an impatient movement and stood up.

‘If you try to pin this on me, I’ll drag you three into it,’ he warned her.

‘I don’t think you’ll succeed,’ she said quietly. One slim hand pushed back her dark hair from her face. ‘No one knows we stayed at Crew’s place. We were very careful not to be seen. We shall drop out of sight. There’s nothing to connect us with Crew - nothing at all.’

Corridon rubbed his jaw as he stared at her, then turned and mixed another drink. While he was doing this, his mind picked over the problem, trying to find a way out.

‘You don’t think you’re going to leave here after what you’ve said? All I have to do is to send for the police, get my story in first and hand you over. Perhaps you haven’t thought of that?’

‘That wouldn’t be very clever, would it?’ she said and smiled.

‘You’ll have to do something better than that. It would be your word against mine. Your reputation is against you. The worst that could happen to me would be a few months in prison; but I’d probably be deported. I could always come back.’

She was right. He wasn’t being very clever about this, but he admitted for the moment he was rattled. He sipped his drink and brooded. In a way it was inevitable. You couldn’t always expect to win at this game. He had known sooner or later he was bound to slip up. The best way out now would be to admit defeat. He might still outsmart them if they were off their guard.

‘All right,’ he said and managed to laugh. ‘It looks as if you’ve pulled a fast one on me. I’ll give you the money back. That’s what you want, isn’t it?’

‘No, we don’t want the money. You accepted payment you must finish the job. You are to find Mallory.’

‘To hell with Mallory,’ he burst out. ‘I’ve better things to do than waste my time on a wild goose chase. Find him yourself. I’ll return the money tomorrow.’

‘You’ll find Mallory or we’ll send the gun and the IOU to the police. You can please yourself.’

His face set in hard lines.

‘Don’t push your luck too far.’

‘There’s no luck about it. We knew what you intended to do and we took precautions. You have no alternative. You would be wise to realize that.’

He sat down again. He was caught and he knew it. If they were coldblooded enough to kill Crew they would have no compunction in saddling him with the crime.

‘It looks as if you’re going to get your own way, doesn’t it?’ he said lightly.

‘You played into our hands,’ she said, stubbing out her cigarette.

‘And Crew? You killed him in cold blood - one of you did. He had done nothing to you.’

‘Oh, but he had. He should have left us alone,’ she said stonily. ‘No one is going to stand in our way now we have got so far. We couldn’t trust him; but we wouldn’t have killed him if you had played straight with us. He had to go then. It was the obvious way of getting a hold on you.’

He wondered suddenly if this was a bluff. He couldn’t accept the fact that Crew was dead: shot down in cold blood. Suppose they had hidden Crew somewhere? Suppose he wasn’t dead?

She went on, ‘You are to find Mallory. You have the clues and his description. We shan’t interfere

with you. You can go about finding him as you think best, only you must find him. We will give you three weeks.'

'And then?'

'If you haven't found him by then we must decide whether you have tried or whether you have cheated us. We have taken every precaution. The gun and the IOU are with a firm of solicitors who have been instructed to forward them to the police unless they hear from one of us once a week.' She rose to her feet. Her silky dark head reached to his shoulder. She looked up at him, serious, quiet and without fear.

'Why didn't Ranleigh come?' he asked. 'Or Jan?'

She made an impatient movement as if such a question was immaterial; a waste of time.

'Ranleigh doesn't know about Crew. Jan is too quick-tempered. Besides, I do my own jobs.'

'So Ranleigh doesn't know? Murder would shock him, is that it?'

'Perhaps. It doesn't matter.' She moved past him to the door. 'I think that's all. We shall be keeping in touch with you. You have three weeks. Don't underestimate Mallory. He is very dangerous.'

'Let me go first,' he said, 'And I'll turn on the light.' He was holding himself in like a tightly clenched fist.

He went down the stairs, turned on the hall light and opened the front door. The mews was dark, and a cold wind blew against his face. The light from the hall lit up the damp cobblestones; his shadow looked immense against the doors of the opposite garage.

She stood by his side, looking out into the darkness.

'We'll keep our side of the bargain,' she said. 'Find Mallory and we'll pay you the rest of the money.'

'Don't think you'll get it all your own way,' he said, no longer able to conceal his anger. 'I'm a damned unhealthy subject to blackmail, and you'll find that out before long.'

His words had an instantaneous effect on her; like a spark in a powder barrel. He had felt all along that her quiet and calm had been a mask, hiding her real feelings, but he hadn't suspected the savage ferocity his words now released in her.

She sprang away from him, faced him, the hall light falling directly on her. She seemed to grow in stature, the muscles in her face became rigid, giving her a bony, scrapped look, her eyes shone like those of an enraged cat, even her hair seemed to stiffen, and she held her hands before her, the fingers hooked into claws and shook them at him.

‘And you’ll find I am a bad subject to cheat!’ she cried in a hoarse, croaking voice. ‘I want Mallory. I’m going to have him. And you are going to find him for me! You! Yes, you - you cheap crook! You - you petty-minded hero!’ She spat the words at him. ‘I knew all along what your game was. But there are no means too dirty to use so long as I find Mallory; that’s why I’m using you! And find him!’ Her voice rose. She screamed at him, ‘Do you hear? Find him! I’ll have no mercy on you if you don’t. I’ll see you hang!’ She backed away, her face working, her eyes twin conflagrations.

Corridon stared at her, feeling a chill run through him. She looked mad, dangerous, somehow not of this earth.

‘Find Mallory!’ she screamed again, and then she was gone; her black clothes making her instantly invisible as she stepped back into the darkness.

IV

As Corridon fastened the belt of his coat, he hummed softly under his breath, his eyes cold and his face set. First, he must make sure that Crew was dead. If Crew had been murdered there was no doubt that this girl would carry out her threat; unless, of course, he succeeded in finding Mallory. From the first he had suspected she was dangerous; now he began to think she wasn’t in her right mind. He remembered that Crew had called her inhuman. He had said she was cracked, and seeing her when she had screamed at him, Corridon wondered now if Crew hadn’t been right.

He picked up his hat and made for the door leaving the light burning. If they were watching the flat it was as well for them to think he was still there. Going downstairs, he opened the front door and looked into the darkness. He saw nothing, and knew no one could see him. Heavy black clouds now blotted out the moon. There was a hint of rain in the wind and it had turned colder. He closed the front door silently behind him and moved towards the funnel-shaped exit that led into Grosvenor Square.

He reached Crew’s flat within a half an hour, satisfied that no one had followed him. The dingy street was empty and the tobacconist’s shop was closed for the night. Crew’s flat was in darkness.

He paused outside Crew’s front door and examined the lock with the small torch he had brought with him. He saw at once that the lock would offer no difficulties. He was expert in forcing any kind of lock, and fiddled for a moment or so with the thin strip of celluloid, forcing it against the tongue of the lock and levering gently. The door swung open. Darkness and the cloying scent of flowers met him as he stepped into the hall; and another smell too: the smell of gunpowder.

He stood in the hall, listening for a moment or so, then entered the sitting room. He sent the beam of the torch slowly round the room. There was no one there; the curtains were drawn and the floor by the window was covered with tulip petals. Moving silently he crossed the room to the far door, turned

the handle and shone the beam of his torch into the darkness. Into the small, bright circle of light there appeared in turn a bed, an armchair, a dressing table, a wardrobe, a vase of jonquils and a red and blue silk dressing gown hanging from a hook on the wall. Corridon directed the circle of light to the floor. At the foot of the bed, lying on his side on a thick lamb's wool rug was Crew.

Corridon gave a soft little grunt, walked across the room and stood within a few feet of Crew. He leaned forward and peered down at him. Crew had been shot through the head at close range. The small bore of the Mauser's bullet had drilled a neat little hole through the centre of his forehead. Jan must have shot him suddenly and without warning for there was no fear or horror on Crew's face. Apart from the waxen stiffness and the odd set of the jaw he might have been asleep.

Corridon turned away. There was no point in staying in the flat a second longer than he needed to. He was satisfied now that Crew was dead, and although he had seen many deaths from violence, Crew's death shocked him. He wondered how long Crew would remain there on the lamb's-wool rug; how long it would be before the police began their inquiries. Would the tobacconist remember him? There was a remote chance that he wouldn't. It depended on the length of time that elapsed before Crew's body was discovered. Anyway, he had been a fool to come here. He might have known she wasn't the type to bluff, and if anyone saw him leaving...

Abruptly he snapped off the flashlight and stood motionless, holding his breath and listening intently. Had a board creaked outside or had he imagined it? He waited, but heard nothing.

Was there someone in the next room? Had that been a foot on a loose board he was almost sure he had heard?

He moved forward, paused to listen again, and this time a board did creak. If he hadn't been straining to hear the slightest sound he would have missed it above the distant hum of traffic in the Strand.

The darkness pressed in on him, and he put out a groping hand to touch the door, but met no resistance. He groped for a moment into a void of darkness, and it came as a shock to realize that although he had shut the door when he had entered the room it was now standing open.

He was sure that someone was in the adjoining room, and he moved forward, holding his torch ready to snap on the light, his body tense, his movements without sound.

Then someone said out of the darkness, 'Is that you Ranleigh?'

Corridon had no idea from where the voice was speaking.

The sound came out of the darkness like a vapour; like a spirit voice whispering through a trumpet at a séance. It had no body or direction, and had a certain ghostliness that sent a chill running up his spine.

'Who's that?' he demanded sharply and instantly dropped down on one knee, an unconscious movement of self-preservation.

The darkness was lit up by a blinding flash of flame. The room vibrated and the windows rattled with the sharp crack of gunfire. Corridon jerked back as the bullet skinned the side of his face like the touch of a branding iron. He caught a glimpse of a figure facing him; a glimpse revealed by the gun flash and instantly gone. As he flattened out on the floor, expecting to feel another bullet smash into him, he heard the door slam and the soft pad of footsteps running down the uncarpeted stairs.

Slowly he got to his feet, his hand to his cheek, feeling blood running between his fingers. He guessed from the whispering voice and the accuracy of the blind shooting, that the man who had fired at him was Mallory.

chapter five

I

Although he had no description of her, Corridon recognized Rita Allen the moment he saw her. There were three women serving behind the stocking counter of Mastins and Roberts' Regent Street store, and of these three only one could possibly be Mallory's girlfriend. The other two women were elderly, tired-looking and dowdy. There was nothing tired-looking or dowdy about Rita Allen. She was as smart as burnished copper and as hard, and you could tell by the way the other two looked at her that they thought she was no better than she should be. And you could tell, too, that Rita Allen thought they were dowdy old frumps, and the less she had to do with them the better.

Even before he noticed the two elderly assistants, Corridon guessed this tall girl with the peroxide blonde hair and scarlet fingernails was Rita Allen. He came into the spacious department as out of place as a guardsman at a pacifist's tea party, and stood for a moment looking at Rita, his fiery head and massive shoulders outlined against a built-up display stand of pink silk underwear. He met her quick, calculating look of interest, and because he had a lot of experience with women, he sensed her immediate reaction to his bulk and appearance, and knew it was going to be easy.

There were a few women customers in the department, but only one of them was being served. She was a thin, sour-faced, middle-aged woman who flushed angrily when she saw Corridon and moved quickly to hide the garment of ribbons and bows and lace one of the dowdy assistants was showing her. Then Rita Allen came from behind the counter, a bright smile on her large, carefully painted mouth, her tapering fingers touching her blonde hair as she walked towards him.

'Is there something I can show you?' she asked when she reached him, and he was immediately aware of her bold, strong body under the black silk dress.

She was, he supposed, about twenty-nine or maybe thirty.

At close quarters she was sensual; a woman, you felt, who had a lot of experience; whose sophistication and ultra-smartness diverted your attention from the fact that her features were actually plain when you looked closely at her. But there was nothing plain about her figure nor in the trim elegance of her appearance.

Corridon gave her a wide, friendly grin, and she instantly responded, smiling brightly at him, showing white even teeth.

'I guess you can,' he said. 'I was wanting some stockings. Can I get them here or am I going to be snarled up with coupons and things like that?'

He was aware of her searching scrutiny, and had a feeling that she was estimating the cost of his suit, the value of his gold wristwatch; missing nothing down to his Cordovan calf shoes.

‘I’m afraid you are,’ she said, and laughed. She had a nice, merry laugh and he laughed with her. ‘You’ll have to find three coupons for every pair.’

‘Well, darn it, that lets me out,’ Corridon said with a rueful grimace. ‘I thought I’d sweeten the setup by giving the wife of the guy I’m doing business with a few pairs of stockings. It was just an idea, but if I have to part with coupons it’s got to stay an idea. I haven’t any coupons.’

‘What a shame,’ Rita Allen said sympathetically. She had the knack of making you believe she really cared. ‘You’ll have to think of something else, but it’s not easy to give a present these days.’

‘I should have brought something with me, but the idea didn’t occur to me until I was on the boat.’ He glanced at the underwear displayed around him and grinned. ‘Well, it’s a darned shame, I had to screw up my courage to come into this holy of holies, and now it’s all for nothing.’

‘Why don’t you give her a handbag or something like that?’ she asked, and he was quick to see that she would be sorry to see him go.

‘Sure; I’ll find something.’ He twirled his hat in his hands and eyed her with unconcealed admiration. ‘Anyway, if I hadn’t come in here I wouldn’t have met you. Where I come from we like to tell a girl she’s good to look at; that is, if she is good to look at. Would you mind if I put it on record that you look good enough to eat?’

She lifted one beautifully arched eyebrow.

‘No, I don’t mind, but it’s unusual, isn’t it?’

‘Maybe I’m an unusual sort of guy, and another thing, while we’re on the subject, would you be dated up tonight? Would there be any hope for me if I were hanging around the back entrance of this store when it closes?’

Her forget-me-not blue eyes sparkled, and smilingly she shook her head.

‘Absolutely no hope,’ she said. ‘I don’t go out with strange men.’

‘I guess that’s right. And you couldn’t make an exception for a lonely guy who’s looking for a good time with a pocketful of money to burn?’

Again she shook her head, but this time she wasn’t nearly so convincing.

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘That’s tough,’ Corridon said gloomily. ‘Maybe you have a boyfriend all dated up? I might have guessed it.’

‘Oh, but I haven’t.’ For a moment her smile flickered and he saw a hard expression jump into her eyes, but it was instantly gone, and if he hadn’t been watching her closely he wouldn’t have noticed it. ‘Nothing like that. After all, you can’t expect me to go out with someone I’ve never met before, can you?’

‘Why not? We’ll have to make a start sometime. If you haven’t anything to do tonight I can’t see any objection why you and me shouldn’t keep each other company. It’s the civilized thing to do. My name’s Steve Henley. What’s yours?’

‘Rita Allen, and I really don’t think...’

‘Well, all right, let’s forget it. I’m sorry if I spoke out of turn. It’s just seeing you, feeling kind of lonely, being at a loose end. You know how it is. But if you won’t, you won’t.’

She said quickly as if she were afraid he was going to take her seriously, ‘You do sound in a bad way. I’m sorry you’re lonely. I suppose I could make an exception. I don’t do this as a rule I - I’m particular who I go out with.’

He grinned at her and she smiled back. Now that she had lodged her claim to respectability she wasn’t going to put any more obstacles in his way.

‘So you’ll come?’

‘You’re not the first American I’ve been out with at short notice. You boys certainly know how to hustle.’

‘That’s right. Suppose we meet at the Savoy bar at eight o’clock. Can you make it?’

‘I’ll make it,’ she said, and he had no doubt that she would.

It had been easier than he had anticipated, and he wondered, as he walked towards Piccadilly Circus, whether Harris, who had been found in a pond, had succeeded in taking her out. If he had, then obviously the experience hadn’t done him any good. But Corridon believed in learning from the mistakes of others. He wouldn’t end up in a pond on Wimbledon Common.

He was sure of that.

II

‘Come back to my place,’ Rita Allen said, holding Corridon’s hand in hers and pressing it against her side. ‘I don’t want this to end - not ever. It’s been a lovely, lovely night.’

‘That goes with me too,’ Corridon said, steadying her. ‘O.K. Let’s go to your place. Where is it, anyway?’

‘Wimbledon. It’s not far. We’ll get a taxi.’ She leaned heavily against him. ‘I think I’m a bit tight. Am I? Do you think I’m just a little bit tight?’

‘You could be,’ Corridon said gravely, thinking if she wasn’t she should be. She had swallowed innumerable cocktails, a bottle of champagne and three double brandies. ‘I’m not all that sober myself.’

‘Nice Steve,’ she said, resting her head on his shoulder. ‘I’m glad I came out with you. You’re quite the nicest man I’ve met this year.’ She squeezed his hand. ‘And I do love a spender. Most men are so mean. We’ve had a lovely time, haven’t we?’

‘We certainly have,’ he said and waved to a passing taxi. As the taxi, ignoring the oncoming traffic, made a half-circle to reach them, he thought back on the evening. She had been gay and frivolous and anxious to please. Men had looked at her, envying him, and would have willingly changed places with him for she was quite the best-dressed and most sexy-looking woman in the Savoy grill. But Corridon had ached with boredom. The sustained effort to match her enjoyment, to compete with her empty chatter, left him apathetic and tired.

Well, he was going to her home, and there, he planned, somehow, to pump her about Mallory. She might or might not talk about Mallory. It was a toss-up. At this moment he was so bored he didn’t care whether he got the information or not. All he hoped for was that she wouldn’t expect him to make love to her.

‘And we’re going to have a lovelier time when we get home,’ she was saying as if she could read his thoughts, and pressed herself against him to reassure him that he wasn’t spending his money for nothing. ‘We are, aren’t we?’

‘You bet,’ he said flatly, jerked open the taxi doors. ‘Where shall I tell him?’

She gave him an address in Wimbledon and sank down on the taxi seat with a sigh of content.

‘I love riding in taxis, don’t you?’ she said as the taxi rattled along Piccadilly. ‘Put your arm round me and hold me tight.’

She ran her fingers through his hair, then pulled his head down, her lips searching for his.

With his mouth on hers, he stared blankly at an advertisement screwed to the panel behind the driver’s back. It was an advertisement for a holiday camp, and pictured a man and a girl in swimsuits on a raft, clasped in each other’s arms. The caption of the picture read: ‘YOU MUST HAVE FUN!’ The blonde woman in his arms moaned softly and pressed against him. Was this what was called fun? he wondered. She meant nothing to him. He had no feeling of desire, and realized with a sense of satisfaction that sometime between the time he had escaped from the Gestapo and now he had grown

out of the habit of promiscuity. But he had a part to play and he held her firmly, careful that she should be the first to draw away.

‘Nice,’ she said with a little sigh. ‘Nice Steve,’ and she closed her eyes. ‘Hold me like that,’ she went on. ‘I’m sleepy.’

‘Go to sleep then,’ he said, and furtively wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘I won’t run away,’ wishing that he could.

To his relief she did go to sleep, her head on his shoulder, her fine blonde hair against his face, and he stared out of the window, thinking of Harris, wondering if he too had taken her in a taxi to Wimbledon, and whether she had called him nice and had pulled his head down to kiss him.

Well, Harris was dead. He was probably killed when he left her place. Corridon pressed his hand to his side. The .38 automatic, slung in a shoulder holster under his coat, had a reassuring bulk. Mallory wouldn’t find him as easy as Harris.

It was after one o’clock when the taxi pulled up outside a small detached villa on the edge of Wimbledon Common.

Rita Allen sat up as the driver opened the door, and touched her hair with quick, smoothing fingers.

‘All right?’ Corridon asked, helping her out.

‘Yes. That last brandy was just a bit too much for me.’ She giggled, holding his hand possessively. ‘But I’m all right now.’

As Corridon paid the driver the gleam of water in the moonlight attracted his attention. Not more than two hundred yards from Rita Allen’s house was a large pond surrounded by willow trees. He stared at it, startled, wondering if that was the pond in which Harris had been found and was tempted to ask her.

‘Let’s get inside,’ she said, tugging at his arm. ‘I could do with another drink.’

He followed her up the steps and stood behind her while she unlocked the front door. In the moonlight her hair looked like spun silk.

‘Do you live here alone?’ he asked, following her into a dark little hall.

‘Oh yes, quite alone,’ she returned and laughed. ‘Are you surprised?’

‘A little.’ He blinked in the shaded light she had turned on. ‘I should have thought an apartment would have been more convenient.’

‘Come in and have a drink,’ she said, and led the way into the front room.

He thought cynically that it was a typical love nest. A big divan dominated the room. Facing the door was a massive mahogany cocktail cabinet, packed with bottles and expensive cut-glass tumblers and wine glasses, and a big easy chair stood near the electric stove that hid the empty grate. A fine Chinese rug covered the floor and two standard lamps reflected an amber light on to the ceiling.

‘Some style,’ he said, tossing his hat on the divan.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Some style.’ There was a sudden bitter note in her voice that made him look sharply at her. She stood by the cocktail cabinet, staring at the divan, her face hard. ‘Well, what are you going to drink?’ she went on abruptly, added, ‘You mustn’t think the rest of the house is furnished like this. It isn’t; this is a special room.’

‘Scotch. Let me fix it. What’s so special about it?’

‘You sit down.’ She poured a stiff drink, opened a tiny refrigerator built into the cabinet and took out a bowl of ice. ‘Well, it is special, isn’t it? I call it my operating theatre.’ She shrugged indifferently, went on, ‘Oh, I know I’m no better than I should be. That’s what they say, isn’t it?’

‘What are you talking about?’ he asked, puzzled.

‘Nothing. It’s all right.’ She suddenly smiled. ‘You amuse yourself while I run up and change.’

How many times had he heard those words? he wondered, taking the drink. Most of the sophisticated women he had known had used those identical words at one time or another.

He watched her leave the room, knowing in a few minutes she would return and expect him to make love to her. The thought bothered him, and he paced up and down, frowning. There was nothing in the room to interest him. There were no cupboards or drawers to look into. No places where a clue might be hidden that’d lead him to Mallory.

He heard her moving about upstairs, and he went to the door. Across the hall was another room. He looked in, turned on the light and found it empty of furniture, and he could smell the dust that lay thickly on the bare floorboards. Well, she had admitted that all the rooms were not as grand as the one he had just left, and wondered how many more empty rooms there were in this house.

He was lolling in an armchair when she came in. She had on a scarlet wrap of heavy silk, and she posed in the doorway for him to admire her, but to him she was just an empty-faced doll, no more of flesh and blood than the image on the screen of a woman in Technicolor.

‘Very nice,’ he said as she dropped on to the divan and smiled at him. ‘Now let me mix you a drink.’

She stretched out, turning on her side so she could watch him. Her wrap fell back, showing her long, white, pumice stoned legs.

‘It doesn’t seem we’ve only known each other a few hours,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t, does it?’

He agreed gravely as he handed her a whisky and ice. 'Tell me something,' he went on, standing over her. 'Why do you work in a store - with a set up like this?'

'I've got to live,' she said defensively.

'Don't tell me they pay this good.' He took in the room with a wave of his hand.

'Of course not, and don't be so inquisitive. Anyway, I like to be independent. You never know, do you?' She stretched out her hand. 'Come and sit down; close to me.'

He decided to waste no more time. He had come to find out about Mallory; he would find out about him now.

'Have a cigarette,' he said, offering his case, and when she had taken one, and he could see she took it with surprise and reluctance, he produced a match from his pocket, and watching her closely, ignited it with a flick of his thumbnail. The trick was familiar to her for she gave a little start and looked swiftly at him.

'Cute, isn't it?' he said as she lit her cigarette, holding his hand to steady the flame. 'I met a fella in France during the war who taught me that trick. I've always wanted to do it.'

'Oh?' She released his hand and dropped back on the pillow again. The expression on her face was elaborately indifferent.

'They do it on the movies, don't they? Tough guys, like James Cagney.'

'That's right.' He looked at the glowing tip of his cigarette. 'Funny how something like that starts a train of thought. This guy for instance. He was in the Air Force. I met him after he'd escaped from a prison camp.'

'Don't let's talk about the war,' she said quickly. 'Let's talk about ourselves.'

'He was a good-looking fella,' Corridon went on as if he hadn't heard. 'I've often wondered where he got to. He'd been wounded in the throat, and could talk above a whisper. He did me a good turn once. I'd like to meet him again.'

She closed her eyes. Under her expert makeup she had turned pale, and he had an idea that she was holding herself in; making a desperate effort not to give herself away.

'And I'll tell you something else that's funny,' he went on relentlessly. 'He once told me he was in love with a girl, and had furnished a room where they could meet. He talked about a cocktail cabinet with a refrigerator. It's not often you run into a luxury like that.' He paused, seeing her stiffen, then went on, 'You wouldn't know him, would you? His name was Brian Mallory.'

III

A car, grinding in second gear, came down the road and stopped a few houses away. A man's voice shouted cheerfully, 'Thanks a lot, old boy. You know your way, don't you? Follow this road, and take the second to the right. The station's at the bottom of the hill.'

'Do keep your voice down, darling,' a woman screamed. 'You'll wake everyone in the street. Of course, Bertie knows the way; don't you, Bertie?'

Another man's voice shouted above the hum of the car engine. 'I'll be all right. Well, see you soon. Be good.'

'Thanks again, old boy. We've had a grand time; simply grand. My turn next time, don't forget And make it soon.'

A car door slammed.

'Well, cheerio.'

'Goodbye, Bertie,' the woman screamed.

'Bye-bye, Doris. Don't do anything you wouldn't tell your ma about.'

The car engine roared, gears clashed and the car drove away.

Out of the silence that followed Rita Allen said, 'So you're another of them.' She was sitting bolt upright, her fingers digging into the soft folds of her wrap. 'I might have known it. What a fool I am!' She scrambled off the divan and stood over him. 'Why can't you leave me alone?' She was panting, her eyes dark with a kind of angry terror. 'I don't want to be mixed up in this.'

'You're mixed up in it already,' Corridon said curtly. 'Harris was murdered.'

Her hand flew to her mouth and she bit on her knuckles, stifling a scream.

'I won't listen! I don't know anything about it. Mallory is nothing to me!

'You can't get out of it as easily as that,' he returned, and caught hold of her wrist as she backed away. 'Harris was murdered.'

She struggled to free herself from his grip. Her blonde hair fell about her face, when she found she couldn't break free she began to cry.

'Let me go! I don't know what you're talking about,' she moaned. 'He wasn't murdered. He killed

himself. It said so in the papers. It wasn't my fault. I had nothing to do with it.'

'Mallory murdered him,' Corridon said and shook her. 'He came here and Mallory was waiting for him, and you say you had nothing to do with it.'

Again she tried to pull away.

'You're mad!' she cried. 'Mallory wasn't here. He has not been here for weeks. The fool killed himself.'

'That's what you say. But I know Mallory killed him. I have proof, and I want to find him. If you don't know anything about this business you'd better tell me where he is.'

'That's what the other fool wanted to know, and look what happened to him.' She beat her clenched fists together. 'How do you know Mallory killed him?'

'Where is he?' Corridon demanded.

'I wouldn't tell you even if I knew, and I don't. I don't want to be mixed up in this.' She looked wildly round the room. 'I won't be mixed up in it.'

'You can't help yourself. You'll either tell me or the police. Suit yourself.'

At the mention of the police, she blanched, and dropped on her knees beside him, she wailed, 'But I don't know. I don't know anything about him.' Her hands caught one of his and her scarlet nails dug into his flesh. 'I might have known this would happen to me! I was mad to have had anything to do with him. I was in love with him at first. I thought he'd marry me. I waited and waited. I gave myself to him. There was nothing I wouldn't give for a kind word from him, but he doesn't know the meaning of the word.' Words flowed from her now like the bursting of a dam. 'He bought this house and furnished this room without consulting me. Then he said this was where I was to live. I was too spineless to tell him to go to hell. I loved him. I'd do anything for him. He's used me like a tart for six years, and it'll go on and on until he's sick of me. He doesn't give me a penny. If it wasn't for my friends...'

Corridon made an impatient movement.

'I don't want to hear all this. Tell me where I can find him; that's all I want to know.'

She jerked away from him.

'That's what the other fool kept saying, and now you tell me he was murdered. Do you think I want your death on my hands too?' She pointed wildly at the window. 'They found him out there - in the pond. The police came and an ambulance. I watched them bring him out on a stretcher, covered with a blanket, and I knew who it was. I thought he had killed himself. I nearly went mad with worry.' She raised her voice as she cried, 'Leave Mallory alone. He's fatal. Do you hear? He's fatal.'

‘Don’t get worked up,’ Corridon said sharply. ‘If you know where he is tell me.’

‘There’s a gang of you after him, isn’t there?’ she demanded clutching hold of his wrist. ‘There’s a girl and a little man in a black beret. They came out here to look at the pond. I watched from the window. You’re one of them, aren’t you? What has Mallory done?’

‘Never mind,’ Corridon returned. ‘Just tell me where I can find him.’

But he couldn’t pin her down. She kept shooting off at a tangent, as shifty as quicksilver.

‘I didn’t think when you came into the store you were one of them,’ she went on. ‘You were so nice to me, and I was having such a lovely evening until you spoilt it. You don’t know what a rotten life I have to lead. I must have money. I might just as well be on the streets. It’s his fault. I was a decent girl before I met him.’ She fondled his hand, and her touch sickened him. ‘It’s not often I meet anyone as nice as you. Old men are the worst...’

He pulled free, stood up, and with a grimace of disgust he couldn’t conceal, went over to the cabinet and mixed a drink, he swallowed it at a gulp, put down the glass and began to pace up and down.

She sat back on her heels, strangely recovered from her apparent agitation, and watched him narrowly. It suddenly occurred to him that she was angling for money and he was impatient with himself for not having thought of that before.

‘Tell me where I can find Mallory and I’ll give you ten pounds,’ he said, taking out his wallet.

‘But I don’t know,’ she returned, her eyes riveted on the two five-pound notes he dangled before her. ‘I know so little about him. He just rings up. I don’t know where he lives.’

Corridon shrugged, losing patience. He was sick of her; of this room with its atmosphere of lust, sick of the avid way she was eyeing the money in his hand.

‘All right, if you don’t know, you don’t.’ He made to put the money back into his wallet but an almost imploring gesture from her made him pause. ‘Well? Have you changed your mind?’

‘I won’t pretend I don’t want the money. I do. I haven’t a bean until the end of the week...’

‘Well, earn it,’ he said. ‘Has Mallory ever written to you?’

She hesitated, then said, ‘Yes, when we first met; not since.’

‘No address on the letter.’

‘Oh, no.’

‘What about the postmark?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘Of course you do. It’d be the first thing you’d have looked for. What was the postmark?’

‘Dunbar,’ she said sullenly.

‘Was he on holiday?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You’ll have to do better than this if you want the money.’

‘How do I know you’ll give it to me?’ There was a crafty expression in her eyes, and he thought she had all the hallmarks of the oldest profession. The only difference was she had no beat to patrol.

He threw a five-pound note at her.

‘Here’s one to get on with. You’ll get the other when you’ve told me what I want to know.’

She clutched the note, her eyes brightening.

‘If I didn’t need it so badly...’

‘You don’t have to make excuses,’ he interrupted, sickened. ‘Did he ever tell you he lived in Dunbar?’

She hesitated, then said reluctantly. ‘I think he has a place near there. He once spoke of buying an island and building a house on it.’

‘How long ago was this?’

‘When I first met him. About five years ago. It might have been a lie, but I don’t think so. He never mentioned it again.’

‘Well, that might be something,’ Corridon thought. ‘An island off Dunbar. That shouldn’t be too difficult to find. You have no idea exactly where the place is?’

‘No.’

He brooded for a moment, asked, ‘How often does he come here?’

‘When he feels like it.’ Her face hardened. ‘Sometimes twice a week; sometimes I don’t see him for two months.’

‘And you say the last time you saw him was weeks ago? How many weeks?’

‘Six - perhaps seven, I can’t remember.’

Corridon ran his fingers through his hair. He felt he wasn’t getting anywhere, and was irritated.

‘Did he ever mention any of his friends by name?’

‘Oh, no, he never talks about himself.’

He looked doubtfully at her. He wasn’t getting much value for his ten pounds. He wasn’t even sure she was telling the truth. A house on an island of Dunbar. An unlikely story. No other information of value. Had he wasted an evening and ten pounds to be told Mallory had once had a house on an island?

‘Is there anything else you can tell me? Has he any relations?’

‘He has a sister.’

This was better. A house on an island. An aunt at Wendover, and now a sister ‘How do you know that?’

She hesitated for a fraction of a second then said glibly, ‘She phoned once, asking for him.’

Corridon felt she was lying.

‘You mean she phoned here? That’s unusual, isn’t it? Brothers don’t usually tell their sisters about their paramours.’

‘Is that what I am?’ she asked with a sneer.

‘Never mind what are,’ Corridon said curtly, ‘were talking about Mallory’s sister. When did she ring you?’

‘Oh, it was a long time ago. Soon after I met Mallory.’

Corridon thought for a moment, then asked, ‘Did she leave a telephone number?’

‘Why yes. I’d forgotten about that.’

‘What was it?’

She was quick to realise that this was something to bargain. ‘Couldn’t you spare a little more than ten pounds?’ she asked coaxingly. ‘You’ve no idea how broke I am...?’

‘What’s the telephone number?’ Corridon repeated.

Her face set in sullen lines.

‘I don’t remember.’

‘All right,’ Corridon said, shrugging. ‘You have five pounds I’ll keep the other five. He got to his feet. ‘I’ve had enough of this. I’ll be running along.’

‘You’re as hard as the rest of them,’ she exclaimed angrily. ‘Make it eight pounds and I’ll tell you.’

‘Five. Take it or leave it.’

She stared at him, trying to make up her mind whether he was bluffing or not, and as he put the five-pound note into his wallet, she said quickly, ‘All right. Wait here. I have it in an address book somewhere. I’ll get it.’

She had been gone from the room less than a minute, time enough for her to reach the stairs when he heard her wild, frantic scream. It ran through the silent house, a blood curdling sound that brought him to his feet and to the door before he could open it, the house shook to a tremendous crash in the hall. For a moment he stood motionless, his hand gripping the doorknob, his heart racing, then he jerked open the door.

She lay in a huddled heap at the foot of the stairs, her head bent back on her shoulder at a hideous and unnatural angle; one long naked leg jointed up the dark staircase like an accusing finger.

chapter six

I

As Corridon paused outside his flat door, fumbling for his latchkey, a figure loomed out of the rain and darkness, moving silently on rubber-soled shoes and came towards him. Corridon spun round, his hand whipping inside his coat; the gun was half drawn when a voice said hurriedly, 'It's all right. It's me — Ranleigh.'

'What the hell are you playing at; sneaking up like that?'

Corridon demanded furiously, startled to find how jumpy he was.

'I've been waiting hours for you,' Ranleigh said. There was a strained note of anxiety in his voice. 'I must talk to you.'

'Well, all right,' Corridon said curtly. 'You'd better come in.'

He opened the front door and led the way up the steep stairs to the sitting room. As he pulled off his wet trench coat, he demanded, 'What is it?'

In the hard light Ranleigh's face looked white and drawn. Water dripped from his mackintosh on to the carpet.

'They've killed Crew,' he said huskily.

Corridon looked blankly at him. So much had happened since Crew's death that it seemed to him unimportantly remote.

'What of it? Have you only just found that out?'

'You know then?' Ranleigh passed his hand across his face. 'It's not in the papers yet, is it?'

'Take that coat off. You're making a hell of a mess,' Corridon said impatiently. As Ranleigh unbuttoned his mackintosh, Corridon went on, 'It's not in the papers. She came here last night to tell me. The idea is if I don't find Mallory she's going to send the gun and the IOU to the police. The gun has my fingerprints on it and the IOU supplies the motive. Doesn't she take you into her confidence?'

Ranleigh seemed dazed. He pulled off his mackintosh and dropped it on the floor.

'It's murder,' he said in a stifled voice.

Corridon stared at him.

‘Of course it’s murder. What’s the matter with you? You planned to kill Mallory. That’s murder too. What’s the difference?’

Ranleigh slumped into an armchair as if his legs would no longer support him.

‘To have killed him like that. It’s unbelievable. She’s mad. They both are. What an utter fool I was to have had anything to do with them.’

‘Have you turned suddenly squeamish?’ Corridon asked, puzzled. ‘You were keen enough to murder Mallory when last we met.’

‘I never thought they’d catch up with him,’ Ranleigh said in a low, hesitant voice. ‘I’ve never taken their plan seriously. I swear I haven’t!’ His voice shot up. ‘I’m going to the police. I won’t have anything to do with murder.’

‘It’s a bit late to get cold feet now,’ Corridon said. ‘It’s no use going to the police. What we have to do is find Mallory, and find him quickly.’

‘But don’t you see,’ Ranleigh said, beating the arm of the chair with his fist, ‘if I go to the police and tell them what’s happened, it’ll let you out. I won’t let them shift Crew’s murder on to you.’

‘The police have been trying to get their hooks into me for years,’ Corridon returned, moving restlessly about the small room. ‘They wouldn’t believe you. Besides by this time tomorrow I shall probably be wanted for another murder.’

Ranleigh started up in his chair.

‘Another murder?’ he repeated. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I went home with Rita Allen tonight. She fell downstairs and broke her neck.’

‘But that’s not murder—’

‘Isn’t it?’ Corridon said. ‘She was pushed. The point is I was there. Sooner or later the taxi driver who drove us to her house will give the police a description of me. I was seen leaving Crew’s flat by the tobacconist in the shop below. Sooner or later he, too, will give a description of me. Then some bright lad will put two and two together and he won’t make it add up to five.’

‘But who pushed her?’ Ranleigh asked, leaning forward. ‘How do you know she was pushed?’

‘Can’t you guess? I think it was Mallory.’

Ranleigh flinched.

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘I don’t see why you shouldn’t. I think he was in the house when we got there. She was giving secrets away, and half the time she was yelling her head off. She went upstairs to get something for me and he gave her a shove. If it wasn’t Mallory, who else could it be?’

Ranleigh turned pale. ‘It’s unbelievable,’ he said and lay back limply in the chair.

‘What makes you say that? You were full of Mallory when we first met. He was this and that and the other. He was a killer. Why should it be suddenly unbelievable?’ Corridon demanded. ‘You’re not conforming to type. How did you get mixed up in this cockeyed idea of killing Mallory? Just where do you fit in?’

‘I don’t,’ Ranleigh said miserably. ‘As a matter of fact I don’t fit in anywhere.’ He hesitated, then plunged on, ‘I’ve been a bit of a failure all my life. I suppose I’ve never really grown up. Ever since I was a kid I was always reading adventure stories. I have a penny-dreadful mind. When Jeanne said she was going after Mallory the idea appealed to me. I never thought she would catch up with him, otherwise I wouldn’t have touched it.’ A faint flush spread over his ravished face. ‘To tell you the truth I dreaded coming back to England and trying to find a job. I was pretty useless, but now with only one arm . . .’

He wasn’t asking for sympathy, but just stating a fact. He went on: ‘It seemed to me to be just the thing to stay on in France with them. Harris and Lubish had a bit of money. So long as we all stuck together they were willing to share. We lived pretty rough, but it was good fun, and there were no responsibilities to worry us. I had my gratuity and could pay my whack for a bit, and when that ran out Harris was always willing to lend me a quid. It was right out of an adventure book for me until Harris died. That shook me, although I didn’t believe Mallory had anything to do with it. I still don’t somehow. Harris was an odd type. He had a horror of water. He was found in a pond. If he had accidentally fallen in he would have panicked. He couldn’t swim. I still don’t believe Mallory killed him.

‘Then Lubish went, and I didn’t know what to think. It could have been an accident. Jeanne swore it was Mallory, but how does she know? Lubish could have fallen out of the train.’

He rubbed his knee with the palm of his hand and stared down at the threadbare carpet. ‘Then Jeanne said it was my turn to go after Mallory. But I didn’t want to go after him. I liked him. He was really a terrific type.’ Ranleigh’s face lit up. ‘There’s nothing the beggar couldn’t do, and I swear he didn’t betray Pierre because he was afraid of what the Gestapo would do to him. There isn’t an ounce of cowardice in the chap.’ He fingered his moustache, a worried frown on his face. ‘It was then I suggested outside help. I had a job to persuade Jeanne, but I did it in the end. Now I’m sorry. I am really sorry to have dragged you into this.’

‘So am I,’ Corridon said grimly.

‘But, you see, I still couldn’t believe she really intended you to kill Mallory. But I realize now they

mean business.’ He moved uneasily, crossing and uncrossing his long legs. ‘Jan shot Crew after I had left the flat to follow you. When I returned he met me at the street corner and said Jeanne had decided to move and it wasn’t safe to go back to Crew’s flat. I guessed something had happened, but I hadn’t the courage to ask outright. Jeanne had found rooms in an awful little hotel near Chancery Lane. We went there. It was only later in the day that she told me Crew was dead. She wouldn’t go into details, but I could see by the look on Jan’s face that he had shot the poor devil. Well, that settled it for me. I felt I couldn’t stick them any longer. I thought I’d better see you.’

Corridon stifled a yawn. He was tired and his head felt as if it were stuffed full of cottonwool.

‘Well, now you’ve seen me, what’s your next move?’

‘I don’t know. I was going to the police, but if you don’t want me to do that - well, I don’t know.’

‘We can’t go to the police,’ Corridon said impatiently. ‘What we have to do is to find Mallory. Did you know he has a sister?’

‘Has he?’ Ranleigh looked surprised. ‘I know he has an aunt, but I haven’t heard about a sister. Are you sure?’

‘Rita Allen told me. Mallory’s sister telephoned her years ago and left her telephone number. I was lucky to find the number in an old address book in Rita’s bedroom. I’ve checked the number in the directory. Her name is Ann Mallory and she lives at 2a, The Studios, Cheyne Walk. I intended to see her today after I’ve had a sleep.’ Corridon touched the adhesive plaster on his cheek. ‘And there’s something else I haven’t told you. I’ve run into Mallory,’ and he told Ranleigh how he had gone to Crew’s flat and what had happened there.

‘He thought you were me?’ Ranleigh said, visibly startled. ‘I’ve never done anything to him.’

‘If he had meant to kill he would have fired a second time instead of running away,’ Corridon pointed out.

But Ranleigh was plainly upset. ‘We’ve always got on well together. To have fired like that—’

‘I tell you he deliberately missed. He wasn’t shooting to kill.’

‘I don’t like it,’ Ranleigh persisted. ‘You’re sure it was Mallory?’

‘Whoever it was had an extraordinary voice; a harsh kind of whisper. He used your name. Who else could it be?’

‘Yes,’ Ranleigh said. ‘It could have been no one else.’

‘Well, forget it. I’m going to bed. I’ve had enough of all this for one night. Do you want to bunk here or are you going back to them?’

‘I’m not going back,’ Ranleigh said emphatically. ‘I’ll stay here for tonight if you don’t mind. Perhaps tomorrow—’

‘Yes. We’ll have another talk tomorrow. You can sleep on the sofa. I’ll get you a blanket.’

When Corridon had made Ranleigh comfortable, he went into his bedroom and shut the door. But he didn’t go to sleep immediately. He thought about Ranleigh, and decided he would persuade him to go back in the morning. It would be sound tactics to have a friend in the enemy’s camp, and he felt he could trust Ranleigh. It might be possible for him to get the gun and the IOU. If he did, half of Corridon’s troubles would be solved. He would talk to him about that in the morning.

And when he did eventually fall asleep his dreams disturbed him. This time it was Rita Allen who sat at the foot of his bed and tried to tell him something, but every time she was about to speak a hand came out of the darkness and closed over her mouth: Brian Mallory’s hand.

II

Ranleigh was making coffee when Corridon wandered into the kitchen a few minutes after ten o’clock the following morning.

‘It’s in the paper,’ Ranleigh said, his face tight with suppressed excitement and uneasiness. ‘About Crew.’

Corridon ran his fingers through his hair and grunted.

‘Well, go on. What does it say?’

‘The police want to interview - you’d better read it for yourself. The paper’s in the sitting room.’

‘Anything about Rita?’

‘No. The tobacconist chap has given a pretty detailed description of you.’

Corridon grinned sourly.

‘I told you he would.’

He went into the sitting room. The finding of Crew’s body made front page news. There was a picture of the tobacconist in the doorway of his shop. He said in an interview with the reporter that he had seen a tall, powerfully built man with a ruddy complexion, dressed in a trench coat and grey slouch hat leaving Crew’s flat about the time Crew had met his death. The police went on the account, were

anxious to interview this man in the hope that he could throw some light on what appeared to be a murder of revenge. Nothing appeared to be missing from the flat.

Ranleigh came in carrying a tray of toast and coffee.

‘The fun’ll start when they find Rita,’ Corridon said as he poured a cup of coffee. ‘I’ve got to get myself some sort of alibi.’

‘And you’d better get rid of the trench coat and hat,’ Ranleigh advised. He seemed more his old self; less nervous and more ready to be a help. ‘If they find them here—’

‘You’re right. Suppose you do that for me? I’ll shove them in a suitcase. Will you take it to the Amethyst Club, off Frith Street, and give it to Effie Rogers? Tell her it’s from me, and I want her to keep it until I call for it. Will you do that?’

‘Of course,’ Ranleigh said willingly. ‘How about an alibi?’

‘I’ll fix that,’ Corridon returned. ‘Now look here, I’ve been thinking about you. You say you’re sorry to have dragged me into this business. Well, all right, but are you willing to give a hand to get me out of the mess I’m in?’

‘Of course,’ Ranleigh said at once. ‘That’s why I came here last night. I’ve told you. I’ll go to the police or I’ll do whatever you think best.’

‘I want you to go back to those two.’ And as Ranleigh was about to protest, Corridon hurried on. ‘They’re too tricky to be left on their own. I want to know what they’re up to and if you’re with them you can keep me posted. Besides, you might get a chance to find the gun and the IOU.’

‘It’s asking a lot,’ Ranleigh said uneasily. ‘You’re asking me to spy on them.’

‘It’s up to you. If you won’t do it, then you won’t. But it’s the only way you can help me. You can see that, can’t you?’

Ranleigh hesitated, then said, ‘Well, all right. I’ll do what I can, but I don’t like it. If they found out —’

‘Why should they? Don’t tell them anything. Pretend I gave you the slip and you’ve lost me. I’m going after Mallory now. I’ll see his sister this morning. You’d better jot down her telephone number in case you want me. I shall be there about noon. Where can I find you?’

‘We’re at the Endfield Hotel, Brewer Street. It lies off Chancery Lane,’ Ranleigh returned as he wrote down Ann Mallory’s address and telephone number on the back of an envelope.

‘Right. I’ll pack the suitcase and then you can get off. Not a word to them about Mallory’s sister. From now on we tell them nothing.’

When Ranleigh had gone with the suitcase, Corridon put through a call to Zani.

‘I didn’t leave the Club until noon the day before yesterday,’ he said when the guttural voice came over the line. ‘Tip Max. It’s worth fifty quid to you.’

Zani didn’t say anything for a moment or so. Corridon could hear his heavy breathing coming over the open line.

‘They had a good description of you,’ he said at last. ‘That alibi won’t stand up for long.’

‘It’s got to,’ Corridon said grimly. ‘You can make it stick. You and Max.’

Again there was a pause, then Zani said, ‘Well, all right. I’ll tell the tale, but don’t blame me if—’

‘Make it stick,’ Corridon said curtly and hung up.

He stared at the telephone for a moment or so, a worried frown knitting his brow. At one time Zani could be relied on, but Corridon had a feeling he wasn’t going to be much help now. But Zani was the best bet. There was no one else to supply an alibi at short notice. He was about to go into his bedroom when the telephone rang. He turned back, lifted the receiver and said, ‘Who is it?’

‘It’s me - Effie, Mr. Corridon,’ a voice said breathlessly.

He knew immediately that something was wrong. Effie had never telephoned him before, and he could tell by the sound of her voice that she was upset.

‘Why, Effie,’ he said. ‘What’s the trouble?’

‘I’ve been trying to ring you,’ she said urgently. ‘The police have been here. Mr. Corridon. I heard them talking to Zani. He’s given them your address.’

Corridon’s face set

‘How long ago?’

‘More than ten minutes. It’s that Detective-Sergeant Rawlins. He said something about murder.’

‘Right, Effie. There’s nothing to worry about. Thanks for phoning. Look after the suitcase I’m sending you. Don’t let anyone get hold of it. So long, Effie. I have to hurry,’ and he hung up as she began to speak again.

For a moment he stood thinking. Then as he turned once more to the bedroom there came a sharp rap on the front door.

It wasn’t Mrs. Jacobs who cleaned the flat. She invariably rang the bell. He guessed who it was, and silently moved to the window and looked through the net curtain into the mews below. He caught a

glimpse of two burly men who were looking up at the window; one of them was Rawlins.

Corridon had been in too many tight corners to be more than momentarily startled. It was no new experience to be hunted by the police and he was ready for them. He went swiftly into his bedroom, opened a cupboard and took out a light overcoat and hat. At the bottom of the cupboard was a rucksack that he kept packed with the bare essentials he needed for just such an emergency as this. He snatched it up, took from a drawer a wad of pound notes, stuffed them into his coat pocket. He was back in the sitting room, ready to go when another sharp rap sounded on the door. He grinned sourly, slung the rucksack over his shoulder, opened the door and stepped out into the passage. Immediately above his head was a skylight. He pushed back the bolt that secured it, slid back the frame, jumped up and caught the edge with his hooked fingers and drew himself up. The roof sloped gently towards the mews. A chimney stack hid him from view. He wondered if they had posted a man at the back of the building. Knowing how thorough Rawlins was from past experience, he guessed there would be someone waiting for him. Keeping to the centre of the roof and bending low, he knew he would be out of sight of anyone at ground level on either side of the building, and he crawled along the roof towards the exit of the mews.

The last garage but one in the row was empty, and when he reached it, he levered back the skylight and lowered himself into a dim, dusty passage. He went down the stairs, opened the front door a few inches and peered along the mews. Rawlins and his companion were now standing with their backs to the opposite garage, staring up at Corridon's flat. Several chauffeurs had suspended cleaning operations and were watching them with lively interest. Corridon waited. All eyes were on his flat, but he knew the moment he stepped into the mews he would attract attention. He watched Rawlins and the other detective have a brief conversation, then he stepped quickly back as Rawlins came marching down the mews towards him, leaving the other detective to lounge outside Corridon's front door.

Corridon pushed the door shut until he heard Rawlins's heavy tread pass, then he opened the door again.

Rawlins had gone, but the other detective looked set for staying the whole day. Still Corridon waited. After a few minutes the detective turned his back and began to wander to the far end of the mews. Hesitating no longer Corridon stepped out of the doorway and walked briskly towards the exit. At every step he expected to hear a shout behind him, but resisted the temptation to look over his shoulder. Nothing happened, and he reached Grosvenor Square without interference. He quickened his pace as soon as he was out of sight of the mews, and headed for Hyde Park Corner.

III

A high, green-painted gate set in a six foot wall carried a brass plate that read: The Studios, Cheyne Walk.

Corridon paused outside the gate, looked to right and left, then lifted the latch and pushed the gate open. He found himself in a paved courtyard around which were a number of small bungalows, each equipped with a vast skylight to catch the north light. No. 2a, a neat little house with whitewashed walls, stood hidden behind the end house in the left-hand row. It stood alone as if it were a builder's afterthought; as if he had planned to build fifteen studios and had found room only for fourteen. The odd one, No. 2a, had been dumped out of sight as if in disgrace.

Corridon went up to the Oxford blue painted front door and rang the bell. He stood waiting, his hands in his pockets, his rucksack over his shoulder. His mind was blank. He had no idea what he would say to Mallory's sister. He was relying on his wits to produce the right words to suit the type of woman she might be. And standing there in the warm sunlight, his shadow sharply etched against the white wall, he experienced a feeling of expectancy and excitement.

The door opened and a girl stood before him. Immediately he saw her he felt a sudden pang of disappointment, for unconsciously he had been expecting someone glamorous; another Rita Allen perhaps without her professional hardness. But you couldn't call this girl glamorous. She was of average height and thin. He noticed at once how thin her wrists were and how small were her hands. Her grey-blue eyes looked directly at him, and she smiled. Her hair, he noticed, was dark brown and cut short; a tousled mop that fitted her small-shaped head like a fur cap. Her body was too slender in the neat, print frock, giving her a brittle, rather helpless appearance.

She said, 'Good morning,' in a clear, quiet voice. Her face had lit up when she smiled and made him feel she liked him and wanted to be friendly, and hoped he would be friendly too.

The quick wit Corridon was relying on deserted him. This quiet, rather plain-looking girl with her big, serious eyes, and apparent brittle helplessness threw him out of his stride, and he said what he didn't mean to say because there was something about her that made telling a lie difficult.

'I'm trying to find your brother - Brian Mallory,' he said a little lamely. 'You are his sister, aren't you?'

Her smile faltered and the light went out of her face.

'Brian?' she said. 'Didn't you know?' As if Corridon were an old friend of Brian's and she had immediately accepted him as such. 'Why, Brian's dead. He died nearly two years ago.'

chapter seven

I

The Endfield Hotel, Brewer Street, off Chancery Lane, was anything but a high-class hotel. There was no sign over the entrance, sandwiched between a law stationer's and a photographer's shop, and although the name of the hotel was in-scribed on the glass panels of the front door, the design of the inscription was so complicated and the lettering so oblique that it was practically unreadable.

Beyond the double swing doors of the hotel entrance was a steep flight of brass-bound stairs; and at the head of the stairs, for no apparent reason, hung a dusty bead curtain that rattled irritatingly as it swayed in the continuous draught that swept up the stairs from the front door. On the other side of this curtain was a small, dark, square-shaped lounge that contained six shabby basket chairs, three bamboo tables and two sad-looking palms in grimy brass pots. Nearby was the manager's office and reception desk that, so far as you were concerned, consisted of a locked door marked "STRICTLY PRIVATE," and in smaller type, "No Admittance," and set in a matchwood panel by the door a glass-protected opening no larger than the opening through which you buy a ticket at a railway station.

Through this opening, after you had waited and rapped impatiently, you booked a room and received your key, seeing only the flat, dusty bosom of a black dress and two flabby white hands of the manager's wife. And that glimpse was all you ever had of her.

A few yards past the manager's office was a door marked Lounge, Residents Only, an even darker and sadder room than the public lounge.

The residents' lounge had two small windows that overlooked the back of the buildings lining the north side of Chancery Lane. Very little light penetrated this forest of grimy masonry, and consequently the lounge was dim and airless.

Two aspidistras stood on either side of the big, empty fireplace. Worn leather armchairs in pairs lurked in the darkest corners of the room. Under one of the windows was a bamboo table, and seated at the table was Jan Szymonowicz, the man in the black beret.

For almost an hour Jan had been sitting at the table, his feet and knees together, his elbows on the dusty glass top of the table, his round, fat chin resting on his clenched fists. He spent much of his spare time in brooding about the past. His life now was dedicated to the past. He had no future. He was like a man with an incurable disease, who knows that at any time his life may end abruptly and without warning. He viewed such an end with complete indifference if he viewed it at all. His thoughts were continually occupied with two people: Charlotte, his wife, and Mallory.

He retained a clear and brilliant picture of Charlotte in his mind. He had only to shut his eyes and she would appear before him more clearly defined than she had ever appeared to him in the flesh. He was seeing her now as he sat alone in the dim, dusty lounge; a short, thickset woman, inclined to fat, with immense muscular legs, solid, broad hips and raven black hair that fell to her shoulders. She was about thirty-five when she had died. He had married her when she was sixteen.

Since her death he had tried to recall the events of each day of those nineteen years, treasuring every remembered incident, squeezing his memory for other treasures that he knew he had forgotten. He liked to recapture the simple happiness and pleasures they had shared, remembering the unremitting work on the farm he had bought - a Pole in a foreign country. He liked to dwell on the solid companionship she had offered, on her unflinching acceptance of his poverty, her courage and kindness. He remembered the fierce light that had burned in her eyes when the news came that for the second time in twenty-five years Germany was invading France. He had been waiting for his call-up papers when the Maginot Line had been turned. His farm, near Sedan, was almost immediately overrun. He would have been sent to a concentration camp had not Charlotte hidden him, and kept him hidden until the tide of German soldiers had passed on. It was Charlotte's idea that they should both join the Underground Movement. At first Jan had been reluctant. It was a man's job, he kept arguing, but in the end Charlotte had her way.

Pierre Gourville and Jeanne had welcomed them, and the four of them had concentrated on the enemy's lines of communications, wreaking damage wherever they could. Later Georges, Lubish and Ranleigh had joined them; then Harris, and finally Mallory. Jan distrusted the three Englishmen.

Hadn't the English promised to help Poland? Hadn't they inveigled France into this war? Hadn't they decamped at Dunkirk to the safety of their island, leaving Poland and France in the hands of the Hun? He distrusted and disliked Mallory more than the other two because Mallory treated the work they did as a kind of game, and seemed unaware of the constant danger that sickened Jan, not for himself, but for Charlotte.

When Jeanne told him that Mallory had betrayed Gourville he was not surprised. He had nearly walked into the Gestapo trap himself, arriving a few hours after Gourville had been taken away. He had found the bodies of Charlotte and Georges still in the passage where they had been shot down, defending themselves.

At first he could not believe that Charlotte was dead. He lived in a dazed stupor, expecting at any moment to hear her voice and loud ringing laugh, and to see her moving purposefully about preparing a meal or washing his clothes with that placid expression on her face that was a constant reminder to him of her happiness. When Ranleigh told him about Mallory his mind was still dazed. He heard the words, but they had no meaning. It was only after several days had passed that he realized it was Mallory who was responsible for Charlotte's death. Immediately he realized this, his grief and overwhelming sense of loss were replaced by an implacable desire for revenge. His first reaction was to go off by himself and hunt for Mallory, but Jeanne had persuaded him to wait. She too was determined to settle her account with Mallory, and pointed out that they would have to prepare themselves, that Mallory would not be easy and there was success in numbers. Not only that but Jan

would have to learn English. The hunt would be in England, and if he wanted to be independent he must be sufficiently word perfect not to arouse suspicion.

For over a year he studied English. Lubish, Harris and Ranleigh had volunteered to remain with them, and Ranleigh willingly assisted Jan in his English lessons, being constantly astonished at the speed with which Jan picked up the language.

And all the time, while preparing, while they saved money, working at whatever jobs they could find, Jan nursed his ruthless hatred of Mallory, irritated that he was not to be alone in this coming manhunt, but uncertain of himself, not sure that he could manage on his own in a foreign country, and bitterly resentful that Ranleigh and Harris should presume to join forces with him, in what was, after all, a private affair.

He was resentful too of Jeanne's hatred of Mallory, refusing to believe that her love for Gourville was on the same level as his own love for Charlotte. From the beginning he had disapproved of Jeanne's association with Gourville. They should have married if they had meant so much to teach other. Marriage was the only possible outcome of a sincere relationship between man and woman. They could have married. Had they done so he would have grudgingly recognized Jeanne's right to revenge. But they hadn't. He felt there could be no sincerity in such a relationship.

If only he could be sure of himself, he thought as he sat by the window, he would slip away from Jeanne and Ranleigh and continue the hunt for Mallory alone. But without them, he wouldn't be able to find his way about London without getting into some minor trouble that would inevitably betray him to the police. If the police discovered he had no passport he would be sent back to France or worse to Poland. He wouldn't be able to get emergency ration cards as Jeanne had done, buying them from a secret source that she had discovered.

Then again she had the money. Without the money he would be helpless. It infuriated him to think that Corridon might find Mallory. He had protested violently when Ranleigh had suggested outside help, but they had out-voted him - two against one.

He thought about Crew. The shooting of Crew had been the only really satisfying thing he had done since coming to this country. For once he had taken the initiative into his own hands. While Ranleigh and Jeanne were hesitating, not knowing what to do with Crew, he had acted. As soon as Ranleigh had left the flat he had shot Crew through the head. Jeanne had been in the other room. The report of the Mauser had been muffled in a cushion, but she had come into the room in time to see Crew fold up limply on the lamb's-wool rug, and Jan quietly smothering the burning silk of the cushion that had been ignited by the flash of the gun.

And for the first time since he had known her he had admired Jeanne. Instead of having hysterics she had immediately seen how they could obtain a hold on Corridon. Jan was the first to admit that to shift the blame of Crew's death on to Corridon would never have occurred to him. He doubted very much if Corridon's fingerprints still remained on the gun, but that didn't matter as Jeanne pointed out so long as Corridon believed they did. The important thing was to have a hold on him so that he could be

controlled. For Jan now hoped to persuade Jeanne to give up the idea of using Corridon and to let him try his luck. They should be able to get the money back from Corridon, and if he became a nuisance, which was unlikely, he could be dealt with, although, he wouldn't be so easy to get rid of as Crew had been.

Then there was Ranleigh. He was becoming a problem.

Crew's death had upset him. Jan had never trusted Ranleigh.

He was weak. Jan was willing to admit that he behaved well enough in France. In fact, the way he stuck out against the Gestapo was good, but war brought out the best in men, and a year of peace, of doing nothing, had undermined Ranleigh.

They would have to do something about him before long.

The door of the lounge opened at this moment and an old man came in. He stood hesitating in the doorway, peering round the dim room, a querulous expression on his thin, lined face.

'They've hidden "The Times" again,' he said in a voice that shook with a worn-out anger. 'I've looked everywhere for it. I'm not going to tolerate this nonsense much longer.'

Jan gave him a contemptuous glance and turned back to the window.

The old man hesitated. Anger had tired him. He was lonely, and had a sudden desire for company. He would have liked to have sat down and talked to this foreign-looking chap, but the effort to begin a conversation was too much for him.

He said feebly, 'But perhaps I'm disturbing you. I didn't know anyone was here.' Then, as Jan said nothing, the old man went on with returning peevishness, 'I can't understand how you chaps are allowed in this country. The place is full of foreigners. It's beyond me. The Government must be mad. We can't feed our own people.'

'Go away, you old fool,' Jan said without looking round.

'What? What was that?' the old man asked, surprised. 'I'm sorry, but my hearing is very bad. What was that you said?'

Jan hunched his shoulders impatiently. He said nothing. The old man hesitated, sensing Jan's contempt, uncertain of himself.

'You haven't seen "The Times" have you?' he asked without hope. 'I'll complain to the manager. You wouldn't understand; it's part of our national life.'

He shuffled down the passage to the manager's office, leaving the door of the lounge half open.

Jan got up and closed the door, then he returned to the window and sat down again at the bamboo

table. He began to plan Ranleigh's death.

II

Jeanne Persigny pushed open the double swing doors of the Endfield Hotel and mounted the brass-bound stairs. She moved slowly, her face thoughtful. Under her arm she carried a number of newspapers. She pushed aside the bead curtain as the old man who had spoken to Jan was about to rap on the glass panel of the reception desk. But when he saw Jeanne he paused. He had caught a glimpse of her when she had first arrived at the hotel and had immediately wondered who she was. He had lived many years at the Endfield Hotel and hated the place. It was the best he could afford on an Indian Army captain's pension. His name was Henry Meadows; he was seventy-three and lonely. During the time he had stayed in the hotel he had never seen a young, attractive woman visitor.

Jeanne, in her black sweater and slacks, seemed to him to be someone from another world.

'Good morning,' he said in his thin shaky voice and bowed 'You've been out early this morning. Ah! The papers, I see. I was looking for "The Times." Now, I wonder...'

After a moment's pause to look at him with blank, unfriendly eyes she went past him down the passage without a word. Her utter disregard and rudeness reacted on him like a physical blow. He turned to stare after her, muttering under his breath, feeling suddenly very old, as if, in that moment of cruel disregard, what remained to him of life had been snatched away from him.

Jeanne entered the residents' lounge and shut the door.

'The police have found Crew,' she said quietly, speaking in French.

Jan started violently and turned to look at her.

'I didn't hear you come in,' he said to explain his sudden movement. 'It is in the papers?'

She threw the newspapers on the table and sat down in one of the dusty armchairs standing in a dark corner away from him.

'It's on the front page.'

Jan read the account in each of the papers, taking his time, his smooth, fat face expressionless.

'The description of Corridon is too good,' he said when he had finished. 'They'll catch him.'

'I don't think so. He can look after himself. It'll make him all the more anxious to find Mallory.'

Jan threw the paper on the floor. He looked at Jeanne searchingly.

‘But if they do catch him he’ll tell them about us. It was a mistake to meddle with such a man. We should have kept this affair to ourselves.’

‘Oh, stop grumbling,’ she exclaimed irritably. ‘If there is one person who can find Mallory it’s Corridon. Look at his record. He knows this country far better than we do, and besides, Mallory doesn’t know him.’

‘I say it is a mistake,’ Jan said obstinately. ‘I was against it in the first place. You should never have listened to Ranleigh.’

‘You are an uneducated fool,’ Jeanne said, raising her voice. ‘You do nothing but criticize. Because you are obstinate and a fool you wouldn’t care if you went the same way as Harris and Lubish. Well, I would. You want to get Mallory yourself, but you’re not clever enough, nor am I, nor is Ranleigh. But Corridon is. How many more times must I tell you this? How many more times must I tell you it doesn’t matter who settles Mallory so long as he is settled?’

‘That’s what you say,’ Jan said harshly, his eyes burning with suppressed fury. ‘I wish to have the satisfaction of killing him with my own hands, and that I shall do.’

‘Then do it!’ Jeanne flared. ‘I shan’t stop you. Go and find him and do it - if you can.’

‘I shall do it, but in my own time,’ Jan returned. ‘I have waited for over a year for this. I am not going to be cheated out of it because of a woman’s whim.’

‘What a stupid fool you are,’ she returned contemptuously. ‘Up to now I have done everything. I got you into this country. I made all the plans. I got the necessary ration cards so we could stay here. I found Corridon. All you have done is to grumble and shoot Crew. And we may yet be sorry you did that. And you talk about whims.’

‘We shall see,’ he said, turning back to the window. ‘I wouldn’t have waited so long to settle with Mallory. You may be content to wait but I am not. If we are to remain together there must be action soon. Otherwise I want some money and I shall look for him on my own.’

‘Ask Corridon for the money,’ she said and smiled jeeringly. ‘He has it now, and if you think . . .’ She broke off as the lounge door opened Ranleigh came in.

He looked quickly at them as he shut the door, then came uneasily to the fireplace.

‘Why have you come back?’ Jeanne asked, sitting forward.

‘Where’s Corridon?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ranleigh returned. ‘I lost him.’

There was a long pause, then Jan swung round and shook his finger at Jeanne.

‘You see. Muddle the whole time. He’s lost him now, and the money too. And you call me a fool.’

‘Be quiet!’ Jeanne said with restrained fury. She jumped to her feet and went up to Ranleigh. Her black eyes glittered in her white, tense face. ‘How did you lose him? I told you not to take your eyes off him. What happened?’

Ranleigh said curtly, ‘He went to his flat. I kept watch until he put out the lights and I assumed he had gone to bed. I had nothing to eat so I went to a coffee stall not far away. I was only gone a quarter of an hour. The rest of the night I spent outside his door, but he didn’t come out in the morning. He must have slipped out while I was at the coffee stall.’

She made a furious gesture with her hands.

‘Why didn’t you telephone here? Jan would have relieved you. Must I tell you everything you should do? Can’t you use your own brains once in a while?’

‘It’s as well for him he did leave last night,’ Ranleigh said through tight lips. ‘While I was waiting this morning the police arrived. They were outside still when I came away.’

Both Jeanne and Jan stiffened. Jan got to his feet.

‘The police?’ Jeanne said.

‘Yes. I was lucky not to walk into them myself. I spotted the police car outside the mews.’

‘You see,’ Jan cried in triumph. ‘I said they would know who it was. I said they would capture him.’

‘They haven’t captured him yet,’ Jeanne returned, but she looked worried.

‘There’s nothing more I can do,’ Ranleigh said, anxious to get away from them. ‘I’m going to bed. I’ve been up all night. You two had better work out what our next move is to be.’

‘We won’t find Corridon again.’ Jan said bitterly. ‘He’s gone, and with our money. Now the police are after him he won’t give a damn about us. This is just another of our muddles.’ He shot a baleful look at Jeanne. ‘We must do what we should have done a week ago - find Mallory ourselves. I will see Rita Allen myself today.’

‘It’s no use bothering about her,’ Ranleigh said without thinking. ‘She’s dead.’ As soon as he had spoken he realized he had made a slip and changed colour, furious with himself.

‘Dead?’ Jeanne repeated and stared at him. ‘How do you know she’s dead?’

‘Corridon told me,’ Ranleigh said, knowing it would be dangerous to lie.

‘Corridon?’ Jeanne and Jan exchanged glances. ‘When did he tell you this?’

Ranleigh moved away, took out his cigarette case and selected a cigarette. The pause gave him time to think, but he was obviously flustered.

‘Last night. I -I met him for a moment in the street. He told me he’d been out to her place.’

‘Now wait a minute,’ Jan said, his eyes hard. ‘Why didn’t you tell us this at once?’

Ranleigh nervously lit the cigarette. His hand was unsteady.

‘Give me a chance to speak,’ he said sharply. ‘I was just going to tell you.’

‘Were you? It didn’t seem like it to me. You say she’s dead. How did she die? What happened?’

‘Corridon thinks Mallory killed her.’

The two reacted to this.

‘Why does he think that?’ Jeanne demanded, her hand going to her throat.

By now Ranleigh had recovered his nerve. He said quietly, ‘He went back to Rita Allen’s place, and Mallory, so he thinks, was hiding in the house. Corridon persuaded Rita to talk about Mallory. He thinks Mallory overheard what was said. She went upstairs for something. Corridon heard her scream and found her lying in the hall with a broken neck. He thinks Mallory silenced her. It looks like it, doesn’t it? Who else could it have been?’

Jan went up to him.

‘What else do you know, Ranleigh? What are you keeping back?’

Ranleigh flinched away from the hard, piercing eyes.

‘I’m not keeping anything back,’ he said lamely.

‘Aren’t you? Why did this woman go upstairs?’

‘How do I know? Corridon didn’t go into details.’

‘And you did not ask? Is that it? Or did you, and you’re not telling us?’

‘Now, look here—’ Ranleigh began angrily, but Jeanne interrupted him.

‘All right, Ranleigh,’ she said quietly. ‘Go to bed. There’s nothing more to say.’

Jan said furiously, ‘But there is! He’s lying about Corridon. I do not trust him. I have never trusted

him. He is keeping something back.’

‘What do you mean?’ Ranleigh demanded, alarmed. ‘You’d better be careful what you’re saying. I don’t know any more than you what Rita told him. You know what Corridon’s like.’

‘Let him go, Jan,’ Jeanne said.

‘No!’ Jan exclaimed furiously. ‘I’m getting to the bottom of this.’

‘Oh, go to hell,’ Ranleigh cried, turned and made for the door.

‘Ranleigh!’

There was something in Jan’s voice that made Ranleigh look quickly over his shoulder. He found himself facing the ugly Mauser that Jan had jerked out.

‘Stay where you are,’ Jan went on. ‘I’m going to—’

‘Put that gun away, you fool!’ Jeanne cried. ‘Someone’s coming...’

The door opened and Henry Meadows came in. He had a copy of “The Times” in his hand and he waved it at the three before him like a delighted child.

‘Mrs. Coddistall had it all the time...’ he began, then broke off as he saw the pistol in Jan’s hand. He started, gaped, then stood petrified. His pale eyes under their shaggy white eyebrows opened wide as he looked from Jan to Ranleigh and then to Jeanne. He said in a croaking voice, ‘Is there something wrong? What’s happening?’

Jan hurriedly slipped the gun into its shoulder holster out of sight. He took a threatening step towards the old man.

‘Jan!’ Jeanne said sharply.

Meadows retreated.

‘What - what - what...’ His voice trailed away as he met Jan’s hard, ruthless eyes; then he was gone, dropping “The Times” in the doorway. They could hear his feet shuffling in a stumbling run on the coconut matting.

For a long moment the three stood in silence, then Jeanne said in a low, explosive voice, ‘You’ve ruined everything, you crazy fool. He won’t keep this to himself. We must leave at once. Quick! Upstairs and pack.’

‘He won’t do anything,’ Jan muttered, shaken. ‘He’s old. He won’t know what to do.’

‘Upstairs and pack,’ Jeanne repeated. ‘If they call the police ...’ She pushed past him and went swiftly

down the passage. There was no sign of Meadows. She ran up the stairs.

‘She’s right,’ Ranleigh said, his face twitching. ‘You are a crazy fool.’ He made for the door. ‘You’re too free with that gun.’ He went out into the passage. Jan followed him, muttering under his breath.

‘Come quickly!’ Jeanne said from the head of the stairs. ‘He’s gone. Quickly!’ She leaned over the banister rail and beckoned.

They ran up the stairs. None of them thought to look into the public telephone booth that stood by the reception desk.

Meadows crouched in the booth, hidden from sight, his old head pounding with excitement. A pistol! In the Endfield Hotel of all places. If he hadn’t walked in like that there might have been murder. That just showed you. These foreigners had no business to be in this country. Why, he might have been shot himself. He began to tremble, but an ex-Indian Army officer wasn’t to be frightened by a gun. He knew what to do, and he was going to do it. As soon as Ranleigh and Jan had disappeared up the stairs, he pulled himself upright. He was short of breath and a little faint, but he didn’t hesitate. He lifted off the receiver, peered shortsightedly at the numbers of the dial. There was no time to get his glasses. There wasn’t a moment to lose. He peered closer. Then with a shaky finger he dialled 999.

III

They came out of their rooms simultaneously, each carrying their possessions crammed into leather suitcases. The three of them were wearing shabby olive-green trench coats and black berets they had worn in France, and standing at the head of the staircase, grouped together, there was a unity and strength in them that brought to Ranleigh the memory of the past dangers when they had worked together selflessly in a common cause against a common enemy. In spite of his uncertain position Ranleigh experienced a feeling of intense excitement and elation. The thought flashed through his mind that this was the kind of life to live. This was living adventure, not reading about it, and he realized with surprise that if he had his time over again he would still throw his lot in with these two foreigners, but for whom he would be living in a dreary suburb, anxious about holding down a job; probably married, one of a crowd.

The hotel was hushed. The lounge at the foot of the stairs was deserted. Even the bead curtain hung motionless as if petrified at the sight of them. And yet the three felt they were being watched, and that during the ten minutes they had taken to throw their things into their suitcases an enormous activity had taken place to trap them. This atmosphere of pending disaster affected them in different ways. It excited Ranleigh. It gave him a feeling of bravado, the kind of feeling a schoolboy experiences after seeing a film hero smash his way single-handed through a horde of enemies, helpless against superman tactics.

It frightened Jan. Up to now they had managed so well that it was inconceivable anything could go wrong. And yet he realized by his own stupidity he had endangered their undertaking. Before long, if not immediately, someone in authority would be told that he owned a gun. There would be an investigation by the police. He feared the police more than he feared losing his life. If the police caught up with him they would imprison him. He could think of no worse fate than to be locked in a cell, knowing that Mallory was at large; his chance of revenge ruined by his own irresponsible action. He was prepared therefore for any emergency; determined not to be captured. To him this was a continuation of war. He was in an enemy country. He didn't flinch from death, nor was he going to flinch from committing another murder, if, by doing so, he could avoid capture.

And Jeanne sensed this. She realized how dangerous he was in his present mood. She knew it would be useless to try to get the gun away from him. He had always been ruthless. If she attempted to curb him in any way he might turn on her. Her only hope was that their luck would hold, and they would be able to leave the hotel before anything happened.

She led the way down the stairs. Jan came next; Ranleigh brought up the rear. They moved quietly and without haste, a little unsure of themselves, not knowing if the trap had already been sprung. Glancing behind him Ranleigh caught a glimpse of a woman's head peering over the upper floor banister; a momentary glimpse for the woman jerked back out of sight. Jeanne was halfway down the stairs when she saw a movement that made her hesitate. Meadows was standing in the doorway of the residents' lounge. He too, jerked back as they came down the stairs. She saw only his long, thin foot, encased in a worn, highly polished boot. But he was there. So too was the manager's wife, hidden behind the glass opening in the reception desk, peeping anxiously at the stairs.

In those short ten minutes Meadows had been busy. He had telephoned the police and had warned the manager of the hotel. A pistol in the hands of such foreigners had spread panic through the dingy hotel. Even the elderly hall porter whose duty it was to see the visitors did not leave before paying their bill had refused to remain at his post, and had hidden himself in the gentleman's cloakroom.

At first the manager had refused to believe what Meadows had told him. He had been on the point of going upstairs to see for himself, but on reflection, had changed his mind. Admittedly Meadows was a bore and senile, but he was, none the less, an ex-Army officer, and the Indian Army did not breed liars nor men who panicked easily. There was no point, the manager decided, in running risks. The police had been sent for. They could deal with it. He had remained in his office and had taken the precaution of locking himself in.

The three reached the public lounge.

'Come,' Jeanne said, feeling now that after all their luck would hold. She went to the head of the stairs leading to the main entrance and pushed back the bead curtain. Then she came to an abrupt halt. Two policemen in flat caps had just come through the swing doors. They looked up at her, and one of them said sharply, 'Just a minute, miss.' He began to run up the stairs towards her.

It flashed through her mind that this was the end of her plans and work for the past four years. Panic

seized her. She wanted to turn and run, and would have done so had there been anywhere to run to, but there wasn't. The policeman, a tall, fair man with young, determined-looking eyes was almost within reach of her when the shattering report of Jan's Mauser vibrated through the hotel.

chapter eight

I

Why, Brian's dead. He died nearly two years ago.'

Corridon made no attempt to conceal his surprise. His eyes shifted from the girl's face to the complicated pattern of blue and white flowers on her dress. What she had just told him was the last thing he expected to hear, and at once wondered if she knew Mallory was being hunted, and if by saying he was dead she hoped to throw them off the scent.

He said quietly, 'I didn't know. I'm sorry. If I'd known I wouldn't have bothered you...' and looked reluctantly away from the blue and white flowers on her dress and met her eyes.

'Oh, it's all right,' she said quickly as if anxious he should not be embarrassed. 'Two years is a long time. At first I missed him terribly, but it's no use living in the past, is it?'

'I suppose not,' he returned and swung his hat against his knee, not sure what was to happen next, 'Well, that's that. I guess I don't have to look further. It's disappointing.' Then because he felt he hadn't struck the right note, he added, 'You can't imagine a fellow like Mallory dead.' He took a step back, bent down and groped for the strap of his rucksack. 'Well, I won't keep you...'

And all the time he was floundering he felt her big serious eyes on him, and wondered what she was thinking of and whether she knew he was one of Mallory's enemies.

'Oh, you mustn't go away like this,' she said quickly. 'Please come in. Were you an Air Force friend?'

'Well, I met him,' Corridon said cautiously. 'I thought a lot of him. My name's Corridon - Martin Corridon. I don't want to be in the way.'

She drew back, opening the front door wide.

'Please come in.'

He stepped from the dazzle of the white wall into a large airy studio. The wooden framework of the giant skylight made a square-shaped pattern of shadow and sunlight on the green cork flooring. Facing him was an easel on which stood a half-finished canvas of a nude woman. He knew nothing about art or painting, but he was immediately struck by the strength of the picture and the strength of character that came from the woman; her steady dark eyes seemed to look straight into his as he paused before

the canvas.

‘That’s good,’ he said involuntarily. ‘Is it yours?’

‘Yes.’ She stood by his side, her thick mop of hair reached just above his shoulder. Her hands went into the big pockets of her dress. She was so close to him that her arm touched his.

They both stood looking at the painting in silence, then she said, a wistful note in her voice, ‘Brian would have called it one of my French postcards. He used to be a big help to me. He had a natural flair for perspective.’

The nude woman’s eyes began to worry Corridon. They were too honest and penetrating, and he turned away to look around the big studio thinking how orderly and neat it was.

Along one side of the room was a bookcase that stretched the length of the wall. The books, still in their bright dust jackets, were additional colour to the cut flowers and the framed canvases that hung on the off-white walls. Several armchairs stood about the room away from the easel. A big divan covered with solid-looking cushions took up one corner and a big radiogram took up another. He looked at the other paintings on the walls. They were hers. He recognized the same strength, the same strong colours and firm, unhesitating brushwork. He found himself thinking it was odd that such a brittle-looking girl could produce such pictures. It was, he supposed, an indication of her character, and that there was in her a hidden strength.

Although he was feeling awkward, without the least idea what to say and do next, he was aware that she was completely at ease with him, accepting him without hesitation as an old acquaintance.

‘When did you meet Brian?’ she asked suddenly and swung round to look up at him, and he was uncomfortably conscious that she had the same honesty and penetration as she had created in the disconcerting eyes of the nude woman she had painted.

‘I ran into him during the invasion,’ he said, wishing now he had studied more carefully the particulars of Mallory, Ranleigh had given him. We shared a Nissen for a week. He lent me ten pounds. I wanted to repay him.’

‘Do sit down,’ she said. ‘It’s such a long time since I met anyone who knew him. I wish now I’d taken more interest in his friends. Is it too early for a drink?’

‘It’s never too early for me,’ Corridon said and took off his coat. And as she opened a cupboard to produce a bottle of gin and a bottle of Dubonnet, he went on, ‘I spent a long time in hospital after the war. Then I went to America. I’ve just returned, and suddenly remembered I owed your brother this money. I thought it’d be an excuse to meet him again. I tried the telephone book but he wasn’t in there, but I saw your name. He once mentioned he had a sister, Ann. I guessed it was you and came along.’

‘What did he say about me?’ She brought the drink and set it on a stool near him. He noticed her hand was unsteady. ‘Do sit down.’

‘I don’t remember,’ he returned, dropping into an armchair.

He wasn’t going to tell more lies than he had to. As it was he found it extraordinarily difficult to keep up this pretense. He kept having to check the impulse to tell her why he was looking for Mallory, and about Jeanne, Jan and Ranleigh. ‘We got talking about families and he said something about you. The name Ann stuck in my memory. It’s a name I like.’

‘And you don’t remember what he said? I’m afraid I’m a little sentimental. It would be nice to know.’

He was flustered now, and groped about for a ready lie.

‘I don’t really. Something about - well, I think he said you were beautiful.’

She looked at him searchingly.

‘He didn’t say that. It’s all right. I shouldn’t have asked you.’

‘I’m sorry. It’s just come out of my stupid head. I didn’t know I was going to meet you.’ He hurriedly changed the subject by asking, ‘How did he die? Or perhaps you’d rather not talk about it.’

‘Talk about it?’ she said and sat forward, colour coming into her face. He wondered why he had thought she was plain. Like that, her eyes alive, she was radiant. ‘Given the chance, that’s all I want to talk about. He was absolutely magnificent. He was shot down a few weeks after D-day, and was made prisoner. He escaped and joined one of the French Underground Movements. He managed to get a letter to me. It was the last I had from him. It was brought by an American pilot, a friend of his. It was a wonderful letter. He seemed so happy to be working with these people. There were eight of them; they derailed trains. The leader was a Frenchman, Pierre Gourville. Brian said he was a fine man; a man of tremendous courage and faith and patriotism. Brian always wrote the most graphic letters, and in this one he brought all eight of them to life. There were two Frenchmen, two Frenchwomen, two Poles and three Englishmen, including himself. He wrote about the girl, Jeanne Persigny, one of the Frenchwomen. He had a great admiration for her. They must have been wonderful people. It worried me to think he was doing such dangerous work, but there was nothing I could do. I couldn’t even write to him. Then later I heard from the Air Ministry that he had been caught by the Gestapo and had been shot while trying to escape. He died only two days before the fighting stopped.’

This was a blank wall, Corridon decided, convinced she was telling what she thought to be the truth.

‘I suppose it’s certain he is dead?’ he asked tentatively. ‘Odd things happen, you know.’

She looked up quickly, a puzzled expression in her eyes.

‘Why do you say that?’

He decided to see just how much she did know.

‘I talked to someone about your brother recently. One of his friends: Rita Allen.’ He saw her give a little start and clench her fists. ‘I don’t know if you’ve met her. She said your brother is alive. She claims to have seen him some weeks ago.’

Her sudden anger at the mention of Rita Allen went as quickly as it had come, and she sat for a long moment staring at him.

‘How could she say such a thing? Why did you go to her? I don’t understand.’

Corridon moved uneasily.

‘Your brother mentioned her. I ran into her a couple of days ago. We met by chance. When I heard her name I remembered your brother had said she was a friend of his. I naturally asked her if she could tell me where he was. She didn’t know, but said they had met some weeks ago.’

‘How could she?’ Anne repeated angrily. ‘You’re making a mistake. She was never a friend of Brian’s. He told me about her. He met her when he was stationed at Biggin Hill. It was a physical attraction - nothing more. You know what young officers were like in those days. They were afraid of missing something. She threw herself at him, and then began to pester him for money. He didn’t see her more than two or three times. How could she say such a thing?’

Baffled, Corridon sank further down into his chair.

‘I don’t know. She made out she had known him for six years or so. She even said he had furnished a house for her.’

‘A house?’ Angry indignation struggled with amused contempt. ‘But that’s ridiculous. Brian only knew her for a few days, then he was posted overseas. He never saw her again.’

‘He may not have told you everything,’ Corridon said, irritated by her emphatic faith in her brother. ‘After all brothers don’t usually tell their sisters—’

‘But that’s not the point,’ Anne said sharply. ‘That has nothing to do with it. ‘We’re not discussing my brother’s relations with this woman. She said he is alive. Well, she’s lying.’

‘But why?’ Corridon demanded, forced to argue. ‘Why should she?’

For a moment Anne was disconcerted, then she said, ‘How much money did you give her for that information?’

It was now Corridon’s turn to be disconcerted.

‘How did you know I gave her money?’

‘I tell you I know the woman. She would say and do anything for money.’

‘Well, all right, I admit I paid her, but why should she say he is alive?’

‘Wasn’t that what you were expecting to hear? If she had told you he was dead you would have had no further interest in her.’

Corridon stared at her. This was something he hadn’t thought of, and it disturbed him. As he sat trying to make up his mind whether Rita Allen had lied to him. Ann got to her feet and moved across the room and stood near the easel.

‘You worry me,’ she said after a long silence in which he watched her uneasily. ‘Brian never mentioned your name. There’s something about you that makes me think you don’t know my brother. What exactly was it you wanted with him?’

Corridon got quickly to his feet. He was about to say something when he saw through the window a man in olive-green trench coat and black beret come staggering into sight. It was Ranleigh. A frantic, breathless, sweating Ranleigh who ran gasping towards the studio and fell up against the front door and banged violently on the knocker.

Corridon sprang across the studio, jerked open the front door and caught Ranleigh as he fell into the hall. He was breathing in great noisy gulps and grabbed hold of Corridon.

‘What’s happened?’ Corridon demanded. ‘What are you doing here?’

Ranleigh was trying to recover his breath. His chest heaved with the effort. He seemed to be suffocating.

‘What’s happened?’ Corridon said again, and shook him.

‘They’re right behind me,’ Ranleigh gasped. ‘I had to come here. There was nowhere else to go. That blasted fool has killed two policemen!’

‘Shut up!’ Corridon said, and looked quickly over his shoulder.

Ann was standing in the doorway.

‘Did your brother ever mention Ranleigh in his letter?’ Corridon asked her. ‘One of the eight? This is Ranleigh. You said you wished you’d taken more interest in your brother’s friends. Well, here’s your chance now.’

The latch of the green painted gate set in the six-foot wall lifted, and the gate slowly opened. For several seconds nothing happened, then a policeman poked his head round the gate and surveyed the courtyard with alert eyes. He glanced back over his shoulder, shook his head and allowed the gate to swing open. Truncheon in hand, he stepped slowly and reluctantly into the courtyard, followed by another policeman also holding a truncheon.

There was a twenty-foot gap between each bungalow. From where Corridon was standing, half concealed by the window curtain, he could look through the window, past the gap between the bungalows that screened No. 2a, and see part of the courtyard and gate. He watched the two policemen making their cautious way along the concrete path, and through the open gateway he could see a crowd of excited spectators, standing on the opposite side of the road at a safe distance.

Ann stood at his side, also looking out of the window.

Still moving cautiously the two policemen advanced towards the right-hand row of bungalows. Corridon sympathized with them. They were hopelessly and inadequately armed to deal with what they supposed was an armed killer; but in spite of their caution, there was no hesitation in their slow advance.

‘Did they see you come in?’ he asked Ranleigh without looking away from the window.

Ranleigh was slowly recovering his breath. He sat limply in a chair, and when he spoke his voice was steadier and his breathing less laboured.

‘I don’t think so. I had a good fifty yards lead and turned the corner and bolted in here without seeing anyone. I don’t think they saw me. Are they out there yet?’

‘They’re searching the courtyard now.’

Ranleigh struggled to his feet.

‘If they catch me I won’t have a chance. They won’t believe I didn’t know he was going to shoot. It was coldblooded murder before witnesses.’

‘Sit down and shut up,’ Corridon returned, with a warning frown towards Ann. ‘If they don’t know you’re here you’ll be safe enough.’ And as Ranleigh again slumped into the chair, Corridon went on to Ann, ‘I’m sorry about this. There’s no time to explain now, but there is an explanation. Whatever happens I intend to keep you clear of it. I suppose you’re bound to take sides?’

She looked at him, alarmed but not frightened.

‘I’ve never seen either of you before,’ she said steadily. ‘If the police question me I shall tell them what little I know.’

Corridon smiled.

‘That’s the most sensible thing to do, but we can’t let you meet those two fellows.’ He glanced at Ranleigh. ‘We’ll have to tie her up. Look around for a cord or something, and hurry.’

She made a quick step back, but he caught her wrist.

‘Please be sensible,’ he said. ‘I won’t hurt you. Don’t scream or make a fuss. Both Ranleigh and I are wanted by the police. We don’t want to get rough unless we have to. So will you just do as you’re told? As soon as those two have gone, we’ll leave you. I promise you won’t come to any harm.’

‘I knew you weren’t genuine,’ she returned. ‘No, I won’t make a fuss. I heard what he said. He’s a murderer, isn’t he?’

‘Good lord, no. Ranleigh wouldn’t hurt a fly. Some of your brother’s pals are in this country. Jan did the shooting. You remember Jan - the Pole?’

She was too bewildered to be frightened.

‘What does all this mean? Why have you two come here?’

‘Sorry, it’ll have to wait until later,’ Corridon returned as Ranleigh came into the room carrying a collection of belts and scarves he had found in Ann’s bedroom. ‘Keep an eye on them,’ he went on, taking two belts from him. As Ranleigh went to the window, he continued. ‘You’re not going to make a fuss, are you?’

He had released her arm, but was watching her closely, suspecting she was going to scream, but she said, ‘No. What do you want me to do?’

‘Turn round and put your hands behind you.’

She obeyed and he rapidly bound her wrists together.

‘Too tight?’ he asked, and was surprised to find how much he disliked doing this to her.

‘It’s all right’

He rolled one of the silk handkerchiefs Ranleigh had given him into a ball.

‘Now open your mouth.’

He could see now she was beginning to be frightened.

‘I won’t make a noise,’ she said, and backed away.

‘Look, if we slip up and they find you, they’ll want to know why you didn’t make a noise,’ he explained patiently. ‘I must gag you. It’s for your own safety.’

She lost a little of her colour, but let him adjust the gag.

‘That’s fine,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Let’s go into your bedroom. You can lie on the bed until it’s over. I’ll let you free as soon they’ve gone.’

He went with her into the little hall and through to her bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at him. He could see she was very worried and frightened now.

‘I wish you’d trust me,’ he said, kneeling at her feet. He slipped a scarf round her ankles and bound them together. ‘Nothing’s going to happen to you. I give you my word. As soon as they’ve gone I’ll free you. Now lie on the bed. I hope you’re not too uncomfortable.’

She dropped back on the pillow.

‘I can guess how you’re feeling,’ he went on, anxious to reassure her. ‘But it’s going to be all right. You’re not scared, are you?’

She hesitated, then shook her head. He patted her shoulder, smiled at her, then hurried back into the studio and joined Ranleigh at the window.

‘Any sign of them yet?’ he asked, peering over Ranleigh’s shoulder.

‘No. I think they’re going from house to house,’ Ranleigh returned. Corridon could feel him trembling.

‘I must say you certainly jump feet first into trouble,’ Corridon said. ‘You must have been crazy to let the cat out of the bag in front of her. What happened?’

Ranleigh drew in a shuddering breath.

‘He shot two policemen! The mad, irresponsible fool! He suspected I was up to something, and accused me outright of betraying them to you. When I denied it he drew his gun. We were in the hotel lounge. Then, of course one of the residents came in and saw what was going on. Jeanne knew it was all up, and told us to pack and get out. Someone in the hotel must have called the police. We hadn’t taken ten minutes to pack our things, but the police were coming in as we reached the exit, one of them rushed towards us, and Jan shot him down. Before the other poor devil could move, Jan shot him too. It was the most coldblooded thing I’ve ever seen.’

Corridon lit a cigarette.

‘That’s one thing you don’t do in this country - shoot coppers,’ he said grimly. ‘It starts the worst kind of trouble. What happened then?’

‘I suppose I lost my head,’ Ranleigh said wearily. ‘As soon as I saw the chaps were dead, I dropped my bag and bolted into the street. People were staring at the hotel. I suppose they heard the shots. I must have looked pretty wild. A man tried to stop me, but I dodged him and ran like hell.’ He swung

round, his face twitching. 'You'll scarcely believe this, but Jeanne came rushing out of the hotel screaming for them to stop me; as if I was the killer. Of course that set the crowd after me, and in the confusion Jeanne and Jan calmly got into the police car and drove off. They passed me without even looking at me while I was running down the street with the mob at my heels.'

Corridon concealed a grin.

'That needed a nerve. Well, go on, how did you get here?'

'I was lucky. Once I ran slap into a policeman. We had a scrap but I got away. I dodged and doubled back, hid and ran again. They lost me eventually, and I took a taxi to Victoria Station. As I was paying the driver I saw a police car coming and one of the policemen shouted to the driver to hold me. I bolted, and it started all over again. Then I remembered I was near Cheyne Walk. If I hadn't dodged in here I'd've been caught.'

Corridon grunted, 'Well, you can't stay here long. You've complicated things, Ranleigh. I'm not blaming you, but you've properly upset my apple-cart I was getting along with her until you arrived.'

But Ranleigh wasn't listening. He was too wrapt up in his own troubles.

'They won't believe I didn't do it,' he said, gritting his teeth. 'What devils those two are. First they push Crew's murder on to you. Now they've pushed this on to me.'

'Oh yes, they're devils all right,' Corridon said with a grin, 'but that doesn't mean ...' He broke off, nudged Ranleigh and jerked his head to the window. 'Here they come.'

The two policemen and a bald headed man in a biscuit-coloured corduroy suit who walked just behind them, appeared from behind the row of bungalows and advanced towards No. 2a. 'Go into the bedroom and leave this to me,' Corridon said. 'Keep your eyes open. You may have to leave in a hurry.'

The front door bell rang as Ranleigh slipped into the bedroom. Corridon gave him time to shut the door, then went to the front door and opened it

'Something wrong?' he asked casually.

'We're looking for a man we believe came this way,' one of the policemen said abruptly. He looked past Corridon's burly form into the hall. 'He's tall and thin; one arm and one eye and a scar on his face; dressed in an olive-green trench coat and a black beret.'

'I haven't seen him.'

The man in the biscuit-coloured suit pushed forward. There was an aggressive look in his small, watery eyes, and his unshaven chin was thrust forward.

‘And who are you?’ he demanded. ‘I haven’t seen you before.’

Corridon eyed him up and down.

‘You want a shave,’ he said with his infuriating grin. ‘Or are you trying to grow a beard?’

‘Who are you?’ The fat, flabby face turned purple.

‘The name’s Henley. I’m an old friend of Miss Mallory. And what’s it to you?’

‘My name’s Holroyd - Crispin Holroyd.’ As if he expected Corridon to know the name. ‘I’m a good neighbour of Miss Mallory’s. Where is she? I’d like a word with her.’

‘She’s out shopping,’ Corridon returned, and looked away, turning his attention with studied rudeness to the policeman. ‘Anything else you want to know, officer?’

‘No. If you haven’t seen our man, that’s all.’

‘No, I haven’t seen him.’

Holroyd pulled the policeman aside and whispered in his ear, Corridon caught the words: ‘Stranger here - never seen him before - don’t like the look of him.’

He winked at the policeman.

‘If you like to stick around for the next half-hour, Miss Mallory will be back. She’ll vouch for me.’

‘That’s all right,’ the policeman returned irritably. He scowled at Holroyd and pulled free from his grasp. ‘Come on, Bill,’ he went on to his companion, ‘we’re wasting time. He must have gone straight on.’

Corridon watched the two policemen and Holroyd walked down the path. Holroyd was protesting to them, but neither of them took any notice of him.

‘All clear,’ Corridon called when he had shut and bolted the door.

Ranleigh came out of the bedroom. He was tense and pale.

‘What are we going to do with her?’ he asked, jerking his head towards the bedroom.

‘Leave her for the moment. The point is what are we going to do with you?’

Ranleigh went into the studio and began to pace up and down.

‘I don’t think I have a hope. The best thing I can do is to give myself up. Perhaps they’ll believe me.’

‘Did anyone see the shooting?’

‘I don’t know. I shouldn’t think so. They were all hiding from us. It was done so quickly. They heard the shots, of course, but I bet they didn’t poke their noses out to see who was shooting.’

‘Still, the police must know by now there was more than one of you. They’ll have Jan’s description. Maybe they’ll pick him up first. They may find the gun on him.’

‘That won’t let me out,’ Ranleigh said hopelessly.

‘No. We’ll have to do something. In a couple of hours they’ll get organized. They’ll throw in every available man. The police really go to town when one of their own kind gets knocked off.’

‘What the hell am I to do? Shall I give myself up?’

‘You’d better come with me,’ Corridon said after a moment’s thought. It won’t be long before they find out about Rita Allen, then they’re going to come after me with everything they’ve got. I’m going to Scotland. I didn’t tell you Mallory once owned an island off Dunbar, did I? He had a house up there. It might make a good hideout for us. He might be there. That’s where I’m going, and you’ll come with me.’

‘And we’ll come too,’ Jeanne said in her cold flat voice from the doorway, and Jan slid past her into the room, threatening Corridon with his pistol.

chapter nine

I

How does it feel to have a noose around your neck?' Corridon asked, stretching out his legs and looking at Jan with his jeering smile.

'Don't move your hands.' There was a vicious gleam in Jan's eyes. 'And you; sit down,' he went on to Ranleigh.

Ranleigh sat down; he seemed glad to.

'Talk about bad pennies,' Corridon went on. 'I suppose you followed Ranleigh here?'

Jeanne came up behind him.

'Yes, we followed him,' she said. 'Don't move. I'm taking your gun. If you move Jan will shoot.'

'Take it by all means. I hoped I'd seen the last of you two,' Corridon glanced over his shoulder at her. 'I suppose you know the police are right outside?'

Jeanne slipped her hand inside his coat and pulled out the automatic. She stood away.

'I know all about the police,' she said shortly. 'Don't try any tricks, Corridon. Nor you, Ranleigh.'

She moved round Corridon, slipping the automatic into the pocket of her trench coat.

'Keep out of my line of fire,' Jan said impatiently, 'Keep to one side, can't you?'

'There'll be no shooting. We have common difficulties now. It is better we work together.'

'I'm not interested in your difficulties,' Corridon said. 'I don't believe in shooting policemen. That's very much your funeral. And that popgun looks uncommonly like the weapon that put poor Crew to sleep. I shouldn't imagine my fingerprints are on it any longer. At a guess I'd say that lets me out.'

Jeanne pulled out a midday newspaper from her pocket and tossed into his lap.

'Guess again,' she said with a bitter little sneer. 'They've found Rita Allen and are looking for you. They have even printed your name. You are in as much trouble as we are, my friend; more so. They know you, but they don't know us.'

Corridon glanced at the front page of the paper and grimaced.

‘Taxi drivers are one of the biggest menaces to criminals,’ he said. ‘I thought that chap would pull the plug out before long. And they call me dangerous. Well, well, someone has worked himself into a nice state of nerves.’ He tossed the paper on to the floor. His eyes were hard and his smile without humour. ‘Do I look dangerous?’ He lit a cigarette, stared at Jeanne blankly, then went on, ‘I wonder how long this has been on the streets. Not more than an hour I should think.’

‘Why do you ask? Have you been seen here?’ she asked sharply.

‘Certainly. I’ve talked to two policemen and one of the neighbours. They were searching for Comrade Ranleigh. Didn’t you see them? When they read this description of me they will be back, and in force.’

‘What description?’ Ranleigh asked hoarsely. They were the first words he had uttered since Jeanne had burst in on them.

Corridon picked up the newspaper and tossed it over to him.

‘Here you are. You’re not the only fugitive around here.’ He looked at Jeanne. Well, it’s no good staying here. We’d better be off.’

She made an impatient movement.

‘The police are watching every street in the district. We can’t possibly go in daylight.’

‘If we don’t go now we’ll be caught like rats in a trap,’ Ranleigh said after a quick glance at the newspaper.

‘I was waiting for someone to use that cliché,’ Corridon said and laughed. ‘I object to being called a rat.’

Ranleigh stared at him wildly.

‘We must go! We can’t stay here. They’ll be back.’

‘Don’t let’s get excited. The police and this chap Holroyd have seen me here. All right, the thing to do is to move into Holroyd’s studio until tonight. If the police come here they’ll find the place empty and think - let’s hope - I’ve got through the cordon. If they search the studios I’m sure Jan can persuade Holroyd to bluff them.’

‘Who is Holroyd?’ Jeanne asked.

‘One of the good neighbours. He lives across the way.’

‘Where’s Mallory’s sister?’

Corridon studied her thoughtfully.

‘It’s remarkable how you keep abreast with the latest information. How did you know about her?’

She regarded him with an odd expression on her white, drawn face. His eyes glittered.

‘Don’t waste time! Where is she?’

‘Tied up on the bed in her bedroom.’

‘She has seen you?’ she asked, turning to Ranleigh.

‘Yes.’

‘Then she can’t be left here.’

Corridon knew she was right, but he was reluctant to agree.

‘I suppose we’ll have to move her to Holroyd’s place,’ he said. ‘It complicates things—’

‘Look, there’s Holroyd,’ Ranleigh broke in, pointing out of the window. ‘He’s looking this way.’

Through the fine net curtain that covered the window they could see Holroyd standing in the back doorway of the studio immediately opposite No. 2a. He was watching the bungalow, an intent curious expression on his pale, flabby face.

‘I’ll handle him,’ Jeanne said briskly. ‘Get the Mallory woman and come after me. Bring everything with you.’ She left the studio, opened the front door and walked quickly down the path towards Holroyd.

Corridon didn’t wait to see what happened. He went into Ann’s bedroom. She was lying on the bed, and by the disordered coverlet he guessed she had been trying to free herself.

She looked up at him, her eyes dark with alarm.

‘Things are happening,’ he said curtly as he bent over her. ‘I can’t free you yet. The whole gang’s arrived. Jeanne Persigny and the Pole, Jan. We’re going over to Holroyd’s bungalow as the police may come here. Don’t make a fuss.’ He untied her ankles and pulled her to her feet.

Ranleigh appeared in the doorway.

‘Come on,’ he said sharply. ‘She’s in there now.’

‘Bring my hat and coat,’ Corridon said, ‘and don’t forget my rucksack.’ He caught hold of Ann’s arm. ‘Don’t be frightened. I won’t let anything happen to you.’

But this time he didn't reassure her and she jerked away.

'Now look,' Corridon said patiently, 'be sensible...'

Jan pushed Ranleigh aside and came in.

'You're wasting time,' he said furiously. 'You were told to bring her. Well, bring her, and hurry.' He waved his pistol at Ann who stood petrified at the sight of him.

'Come on, kid,' Corridon said. 'You'll be all right if you don't make a fuss.'

Jan was staring at her.

'Take that gag out,' he ordered. 'She may be seen. If she screams I'll shoot. Put a coat over her shoulders.' He moved close to Ann as Corridon went to the wardrobe in search of a coat. His oyster-coloured eyes were cold and deadly. 'If you try any tricks I will kill you. It would mean nothing to me to kill the sister of a traitor.'

Corridon stepped between them, shouldering Jan aside. He removed the gag, and draped the coat over her shoulders, concealing her bound wrists.

'Don't listen to him,' he said, taking her arm. 'Come on.'

'Go on, get out,' Jan snarled to Ranleigh, who went first.

Corridon and Anne followed him.

II

Holroyd's studio was untidy and dirty, and crowded with de-pressing little watercolour paintings of Cheyne Walk and the Thames Embankment. There must have been over a hundred of them, Corridon thought as he sat in a dusty, shabby armchair before the big combustion stove that still contained the ashes of the last fire of the winter; uninspired efforts of an untalented brush, doomed to hang on those walls for a lifetime.

Jeanne sat on the arm of another shabby chair facing Corridon, her strong brown hands gripping her knee. There was a brooding, sullen expression on her face, and her eyes moved restlessly, continually shifting from Corridon to the curtained window.

They could hear Ranleigh moving about the tiny kitchen, preparing a hurried, makeshift meal. The smell of frying bacon reminded Corridon that he was hungry.

In the bedroom, leading off the studio, behind the closed door, Jan reluctantly guarded Ann and Holroyd.

When Corridon had brought Ann into Holroyd's studio, they had come face to face with Jeanne. For a moment the two girls had looked at each other. Jeanne had turned grey, and into her eyes had come an expression of vindictive hatred, and Corridon had hurried Ann past her into the bedroom.

Even now Jeanne hadn't recovered her usual bitter calm, and watching her, Corridon felt uneasy, knowing that Ann must not be left alone with her; sure that so great was her hatred of Mallory she would not be able to control that hatred in the presence of his sister.

Jeanne said suddenly as if she sensed he was thinking about Ann, 'You'd better talk to her. Find out where this island is. We'll have to take her with us.'

Corridon had already decided that too was inevitable and it worried him. But there was no alternative. If Ann was to tell them where the island was to be found, she couldn't be left to give away their proposed hiding place to the first detective to question her.

'I suppose so,' he said, and took out a crumpled packet of cigarettes and tossed her one. 'How about this chap Holroyd? What are we going to do with him?'

'Leave him here. He knows nothing about us. Besides it's essential someone should know we have taken the Mallory woman. Mallory will hear and come after her. I intend to use her to bait the trap we shall prepare for him.'

'What makes you so sure he will come after her?'

'I think he will,' she said softly and the brown hands clenched.

'Well, we have a lot to do before that. We have to find the island. It'll be a long journey, and it won't be easy going. Every policeman in the country will be on the lookout for us.'

'Do you think that worries me? We avoided the Gestapo; we will avoid the English police.'

'She thinks her brother's dead. The Air Ministry informed her he was shot while escaping from the Gestapo. You are sure this fellow's alive? There couldn't be a mistake, could there?'

'Are you suggesting his ghost killed Harris and Lubish and pushed Rita Allen downstairs?' she asked sarcastically. 'It would suit him to be thought dead until he got rid of us, then he could miraculously come to life again.'

Corridon shrugged.

'Yes,' he agreed, 'I suppose it would. Well, I'd better have a word with her. The first thing is to find this island.' As he got to his feet, he went on 'And while we're on the subject of Mallory let me

remind you you'll have to change your ideas. If we ever catch him he's to be handed over to the police. Do you understand that? He's wanted for murder now and he's going, to clear me of Rita's death. He'll hang. You'll get your revenge but neither you nor Jan can touch him. He's my baby now. Do you understand?'

She gave him a cold sneering smile.

'We haven't caught him yet. We may never catch him. Let us wait and see.'

Corridon knew by her manner that he couldn't rely on her.

They intended to kill Mallory if they caught him. That was obvious. They didn't care what happened to Corridon. He would have to forestall them. He must be the one to capture Mallory and when he caught him he'd have to keep him away from these two until he turned him over to the police. It would be a tricky operation.

He went into the bedroom without attempting further argument. There would be time for that later. Ann and Holroyd were sitting on upright chairs their hands bound behind them, Jan was lying on the bed, smoking, the Mauser by his side. He looked up and stared at Corridon, a baleful expression in his eyes.

'Take Holroyd out of here and get out yourself,' Corridon said curdy.

Jan slid off the bed.

'What do you want?'

'I'm going to talk to her,' Corridon said and nodded at Ann.

'Come, you,' Jan said to Holroyd, pointing the pistol at him.

Holroyd's face was the colour of tallow. When he stood up, his legs were so shaky he staggered and would have fallen had not Corridon caught hold of him and steadied him.

'Bear up,' Corridon said. 'Nothing's going to happen to you. In a few hours we'll be gone. Then think how you'll be able to talk. You'll be the local hero.'

He pushed the trembling man to the door.

III

You'll be more comfortable with that off,' Corridon said as he undid the belt that bound Ann's wrists. 'It's about time we had a talk, isn't it?'

She rubbed her wrists, restoring her circulation, but didn't say anything.

'I want you to get this straight,' he went on, a little disconcerted by her steady, calm gaze. 'The Pole is a killer. Make no mistake about that. The girl is neurotic; probably a little cracked. Ranleigh is harmless enough, but weak and scared of the other two. The three of them are wanted for murder. Jan thinks nothing of murder. He's shot two policemen, and a chap called Crew who happened to get in his way. If Jan thought either of us were going to be troublesome he'd wipe us out too. I'm telling you because I want to impress on you how dangerous it would be for you to try to get away.'

'If this is true,' Ann said, 'how is it you're with them?'

'I told you Jan shot this chap Crew. I happened to be with Crew a few minutes before he was shot. I was seen leaving his place. The police assume I did the shooting. I won't waste time going into details, but if I'm caught I'd have difficulty in beating the rap. I might not beat it. That's why I'm with them. I'm hoping to prove it was Jan and not I who shot Crew.'

She looked distrustfully at him as she continued to massage her wrists.

'I don't understand any of it, let alone believe it. It's all fantastic. How can I believe anything you say?'

'Wait here,' Corridon said. 'Don't try to get away.' He went into the studio where Jeanne and Jan were whispering together, watched by the terrified Holroyd. Corrigan ignored them. He searched amongst a pile of old newspapers that lay in an untidy heap on a table, selected one and returned to the bedroom.

'Here, read for yourself,' he said, handing her the paper. 'That's the account of Crew's murder. You'll see they have my description.'

She looked hurriedly through the account and then put the paper down. She wasn't so calm now, he noticed.

'But how do I know you didn't kill him?' she asked.

'I'm not asking you to believe it. To be frank I don't care two hoots if you do think I killed him. All I'm concerned about is the police shouldn't think so.'

'I see,' she said flushing. Then she asked abruptly, 'And what has my brother to do with all this?'

'I don't think I said he had anything to do with it, did I?'

'Then why did you come to me? Why did you ask so many questions about him? I don't believe

you're a friend of his. And why did that man call him a traitor? What did he mean?'

'Your brother is dead. Leave him out of it.'

'Do they think he's dead?' she asked sharply.

'No; but that's neither here nor there.'

'And you don't either; nor does Rita Allen.' She was breathing quickly, and there was a frightened expression in her eyes.

'Isn't he dead? Is that it? Is that why they're here? Has he done something to them? Are they after him? Please tell me. Is he alive?'

'They think so,' Corridon said guardedly.

'And they are no longer his friends?'

'Well, no.'

'Why? I must know if my brother's alive. Please tell me that.'

'You know as much as I do. You say the Air Ministry informed you he was dead. They out there think he's alive and hiding from them. That's all I can tell you. They think if they take you along with them your brother will come after you. In that way they hope to trap—' He broke off and snapped his fingers in irritation. 'I'm talking too much.'

'Please tell me the rest of it,' she said quietly. 'There can't be much more, can there?'

'Well, all right. You'll have to know sooner or later. I warn you it's not a pretty tale, but I don't think you'll believe it anyway. This is what they told me. Three of them, Jeanne, your brother and Ranleigh were captured by the Gestapo. They weren't important, but their leader, Gourville, was. Jeanne and Ranleigh were tortured, but they wouldn't give Gourville's hiding place away. Your brother volunteered the information before he was even touched. Gourville was captured and killed. These three are here to avenge Gourville's death. That's why they are looking for your brother.'

Ann sat down abruptly, white-faced, her eyes bright with furious, unshed tears.

'Oh no! It's a lie!' she cried passionately. 'A beastly, horrible lie! Brian would never have done such a thing. He would never have betrayed anyone. How dare they say such a thing?'

Corridon lit a cigarette and placed the match in an ashtray with exaggerated care. He didn't look at her.

'I'm telling you what I was told. They were there. Why should they lie? What's the sense in all this elaborate preparation and murder if he didn't betray Gourville?'

‘I tell you it’s a lie! Brian would never have betrayed a friend, and Gourville was his friend. I won’t believe it!’

‘No one’s asking you to believe it,’ Corridon said dryly.

‘They believe it, and that’s enough for them.’

‘You think he did it too, don’t you?’

‘It’s nothing to do with me what he did.’

‘But you do! And you’ve never met him.’

He realized this was true. He had never questioned Ranleigh’s story, and even now, seeing her pain and anger, he wasn’t influenced. He still believed Ranleigh’s story.

‘Well, it seems likely. He had every excuse. They knocked out Ranleigh’s eye and smashed his arm. They gave Jeanne a special kind of hell reserved for women. Sooner or later one of them would have cracked. He said as much when it was over. He avoided being maimed. I can’t say I blame him.’

‘Don’t you? Well, I would!’ She clenched her fists and he thought she was going to hit him. ‘If he betrayed his friend I wouldn’t care what happened to him. But I know he didn’t.’ She turned away, struggling with her tears. ‘He wouldn’t do such a thing.’

‘All right,’ Corridon said indifferently. ‘It doesn’t help one way or another. I shouldn’t have told you this. I didn’t mean to.’

She swung round. ‘Is Brian alive?’

‘Yes. He’s alive all right. There’s no doubt about that.’

‘Oh!’ She sat weakly on the bed.

Corridon moved over to the window and stared at the opposite bungalow. There was a long silence.

‘Is he in danger?’ she asked at last.

‘I don’t know,’ Corridon said without turning. ‘If they corner him they’ll shoot him, but from what they tell me he can more than look after himself.’

There was another silence, then she said, ‘What are they going to do with me?’

Corridon turned.

‘Your brother has a place near Dunbar, hasn’t he?’

She looked up, startled.

‘Why, yes. How did you know about that?’

‘It’s an island, isn’t it? Do you know where it is?’

‘Of course. It belongs to me now. Why do you ask?’

‘That’s where we are going. You’re coming with us.’

‘And you think Brian’s there?’

‘I don’t know, but they think he’ll come after you.’

Her eyes lit up.

‘He will if he knows I’m there.’

Her faith in her brother irritated Corridon.

‘He may not. You haven’t seen him for years.’

‘He’ll come. He’s very possessive.’ She sat thinking. Corridon watched her. He came to the conclusion that she was extraordinarily attractive. This conclusion surprised him.

‘You asked a little while ago whether I was going to take sides.’ she said suddenly. ‘I’m going to ask you that now. Are you on their side or mine?’

He wasn’t expecting this and looked blankly at her.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You asked me to trust you. Why did you ask that?’

‘Well, I suppose I was sorry for you,’ Corridon said, feeling awkward. ‘I wanted to help you. I felt it was my fault you’ve been mixed up with these two.’

‘Well, it is. Are you still prepared to help me?’

‘Of course,’ he said a little curtly. ‘I’ll see no harm comes to you.’

‘You’ve told me you’re only with them because you want to clear yourself of a murder charge. That must mean you are against them. So am I. Wouldn’t it be sensible for us to join forces?’

‘I suppose it would,’ he returned and smiled. ‘You’re no fool, are you?’

‘And you’ll find Brian isn’t either. If he’s alive and in trouble I am going to help him. I want you to

help him too. You have nothing against him, have you?’

Corridon hesitated, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell her that Mallory was a murderer.

‘I’ll do my best to see they don’t shoot him,’ he hedged.

‘He didn’t betray Gourville,’ she went on in a quiet, steady voice. ‘I know you don’t believe it, but he didn’t. If you meet him on Hermit Island you’ll know he didn’t.’

‘Is that what it’s called?’

‘Yes. It’s about twelve miles off Bass Rock, between Bass Rock and Dunbar.’

‘Could you take us there?’

She nodded.

‘And will you?’

‘Oh yes,’ she said without hesitation.

He studied her pale, determined face, puzzled.

‘Why?’

‘I want him to meet those three on his home ground. You have no idea how dangerous the island is to those who don’t know every step of the ground. It’s full of hiding places. Fogs come unexpectedly. It is lonely, and its rocks are sharp and there is quicksand. Brian and I know it well,’ her eyes sparkled. ‘They don’t. Oh, yes, I’ll take them there, but they’ll be sorry, I promise you that.’

chapter ten

I

They waited in the dingy studio for darkness to come.

Jan leaned against the wall by the window, his hands deep in his trenchcoat pockets, a limp cigarette hanging from his thin lips. Near him, Jeanne dozed in an armchair. Every so often when she drifted into a deeper sleep, her body jerked violently, awakening her. Ranleigh sat opposite them, his head supported on his hand, silent and effacing. He had scarcely said a word all the long afternoon.

At the far end of the room, Corridon and Ann sat together on the settee, hidden from the other three by an ugly, ornate screen. There was an explosive atmosphere in the studio, and Corridon had been careful to keep Ann from Jeanne's sight, certain that if they came face to face there would be a scene.

With her aid, he had worked out the route to Dunbar. It had been finally agreed that they should all go by road, using Ann's car. There was a motorboat at Dunbar, Ann had told him, belonging to the island, to take them across from the mainland.

And now they had nothing more to do but to wait until it was dark. The police had not returned, and Corridon assumed thankfully that the two policemen who had interviewed him with Holroyd hadn't connected him with the description in circulation.

At regular half-hour intervals Jan left his place at the window, crossed the studio and entered the bedroom where Holroyd had been left, tied to the bed. Each time he went into the bedroom he had to pass Ann and Corridon, and he gave Ann a hard, searching stare of hatred.

A few minutes past seven when dusk was falling, Ranleigh got up, muttering that he would prepare a meal. He went into the kitchen.

Corridon, bored with the long wait, also rose to his feet, stretched and joined Jan by the window. As he approached, Jeanne started up in her chair.

'Is it time?' she asked sharply.

'Not yet,' Corridon returned, conscious that Jan was eyeing him suspiciously. 'It'll be dark enough in about an hour.'

The three of them looked at the darkening sky. Heavy clouds were slowly climbing above the rooftops. It was turning cooler.

‘It’s going to rain,’ Corridon went on. ‘With luck it’ll clear the streets.’

The other two said nothing. He could sense their enmity, and shrugging impatiently he wandered into the kitchen where Ranleigh was laboriously preparing a meal.

‘Getting on all right?’ Corridon asked. ‘Can I give you a hand?’

‘They’ve scarcely spoken a word to me,’ Ranleigh said in a whisper. He looked haggard and anxious. ‘I feel the way Crew must have felt.’

‘You worry too much,’ Corridon said. He glanced over his shoulder through the open kitchen door. He could see Jan staring out of the window, his back to him. ‘We’re three against two now. Ann’s on our side.’

‘What good can she be against those two?’ Ranleigh asked indifferently.

‘She’ll be useful when we get to the island.’

‘If we get there. I know them better than you. They’re ruthless. They don’t trust me...’ He broke off as a faint cry took Corridon to the kitchen door in two strides.

Ann had come out from behind the screen to join him and had come face to face with Jeanne. As Corridon came quickly into the studio, Jeanne, her face white and her eyes glittering, had caught hold of Ann’s arms and was glaring at her with a look of insane fury on her face.

Moving swiftly, Corridon caught hold of Jeanne’s shoulder and jerked her round, breaking her hold on Ann’s arms.

‘All right,’ he said tersely. ‘Relax. I don’t want any dramatics.’

For a second she stared at him as if she didn’t recognize him, then she struck him, but he caught her flying wrist and gave her a sharp push, sending her staggering against the wall, ‘I said stop it,’ he barked. ‘Cut it out, will you?’

She leaned against the wall, trying to speak, but the words would not come. Then her breathing became laboured and a horrible change came over her. Her eyes seemed to recede in their sockets, the muscles in her face became rigid and a low hissing sound came through her locked teeth. In those few seconds she lost all semblance of sanity.

‘Look out!’ Ranleigh cried. ‘Watch her! I’ve seen her go like this before...’

Corridon took a quick step back. Ann caught her breath sharply. The malevolence in Jeanne’s eyes shocked them both.

Her hooked fingers and rigid brown hands lifted towards Corridon in a tentative groping way as if measuring their distance before they slashed at him.

Jan, who had been watching in silence, suddenly moved quickly between Corridon and Jeanne. Without hesitation, he hit Jeanne on the side of her jaw with his half-closed fist, and as she fell forward he caught her and lowered her gently to the floor. With surprising tenderness he lifted one of her eyelids, took her pulse rate and stood up.

‘Get a pillow for her,’ he said to Ranleigh, but it was Corridon who handed the nearest pillow to him. Ranleigh just stood staring down at the unconscious girl, horror in his eyes, unable to move.

Corridon watched Jan place the pillow under Jeanne’s head.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face, feeling slightly unnerved, knowing that his first impression of her was confirmed. She was, he realized, insane.

‘Shall I get her a drink?’ he asked awkwardly. Sick people and illness always bothered him.

‘She’ll be all right now,’ Jan said. The protruding eyes were worried; the square-shaped, ruthless hands gentle as he adjusted the pillow. ‘She’ll sleep for a little while.’ He stood up, looking at Corridon. ‘She has these attacks. Is it to be wondered at?’ He looked out of the corners of his eyes at Ann who had drawn back and was standing looking at Jeanne, pale and frightened. ‘Few women could have endured what she has been through.’

‘But this is serious,’ Corridon said, moving over to Ann.

‘Say nothing to her about it. She will not remember what has happened. It is nothing - a passing attack of nerves,’ Jan said, elaborately casual.

‘Don’t talk like a fool,’ Corridon said sharply. ‘She behaved just now like a dangerous lunatic. She needs proper care and attention.’

‘Yes?’ Jan said and smiled. ‘I don’t think so. It’s this waiting and hiding. She has had much to endure. She will be all right when we have found Mallory,’ and once again he smiled, a cold, vicious smile that sent a chill down Ann’s spine.

II

Jeanne opened her eyes to find Jan kneeling at her side, shaking her gently.

‘Wake up,’ he was saying. ‘How do you feel?’

To her his voice sounded far away, and she was conscious of a dull pain in her head and a feeling of lassitude that alarmed her. Jan’s round face and oyster-grey eyes swam before her, not quite in focus,

but comfortingly familiar. She made an effort to sit up, feeling his hand on her back, supporting her.

‘I’m all right,’ she said, her hand going to her head. ‘I’ve been asleep.’ Then realizing she was lying on the floor, she suddenly gripped Jan’s arm, staring at him with frightened, suspicious eyes. ‘What’s happened? What did I do?’

‘You fainted,’ Jan said soothingly. ‘Don’t get up unless you feel like it. There’s no immediate hurry. Corridon’s gone for the car.’

‘Fainted?’ She had never fainted in her life. ‘You’re lying.’ The brown hand tightened on his arm. ‘What happened?’

‘You fainted,’ Jan repeated quietly. ‘There’s nothing to worry about.’

But she knew he was lying; fear laid hold of her.

‘Tell me, Jan. What happened! Did I have another attack?’ She pulled at his arm, staring at him, trying to read the truth from his round, worried face. ‘Like the previous one? Tell me. I must know.’

His hesitation confirmed her suspicions.

‘Was it bad?’ she asked before he could speak. ‘How long did it last?’

‘It was nothing serious,’ he assured her. ‘At first I thought you had fainted.’ Then seeing the sick horror in her eyes, he went on hurriedly, ‘It may not happen again. There’s nothing to worry about.’

Her fingers touched the side of her jaw where he had hit her, and she flinched.

‘It hurts. You had to hit me?’

‘No!’ He waved his hands excitedly. ‘I tell you it was nothing.’

‘You had to hit me,’ she said dully, ‘and you say it is nothing.’ She caught hold of his hands. ‘What’s happening to me, Jan? I feel my mind is going. My head aches so, I’m frightened.’

‘The strain and worry - look what you have been through you need rest. It is nothing I tell you.’

‘What’s going to happen to me?’ she repeated, releasing his hands.

His worried tenderness gave way to impatience.

‘What does it matter what happens to either of us so long as we find Mallory? I have nothing further to live for. Have you?’

She rested her head in her hands, pressing her temples with her fingertips.

‘But shall we ever find him? And if we do it will mean the end of us. When he dies our lives have no further purpose. We will be finished.’

‘My life finished when Charlotte died,’ Jan said simply. ‘But don’t let us talk about these things now. We have much to do.’

Again she caught hold of his hands.

‘I don’t know what I should do without you, Jan. We quarrel; we disagree; sometimes we hate each other, but you’re always there when I need you.’

But he was a little bored now with kindness. There was still much to do. The twenty minutes he had stayed with her had exhausted the small amount of tenderness in his nature. He now wanted her to pull herself together and to be no longer a burden.

‘We have a common enemy,’ he said sharply. ‘Besides, good friends always quarrel. It is a test of friendship. Time grows short.’

She made a tremendous effort, controlling her shaken nerves, forcing her mind away from the racking pain that rolled around inside her skull, and slowly and with Jan’s help, she got to her feet. She held on to him, steadying herself, then moved away from him.

‘What is happening now?’

‘Corridon and the girl are getting the car. Ranleigh is packing food.’

A wave of irritation ran through her. How hopeless he was, she thought wearily.

‘You let those two go off together?’

Jan explained patiently, ‘I had to stay with you. Someone had to get the car.’

She straightened.

‘Yes. I’m sorry, Jan. You had to stay with me. But they could so easily take the car and leave us, couldn’t they? You thought of that?’

Jan lifted his shoulders indifferently.

‘It does not matter to me if they do go. We can do without them.’

‘No, you’re wrong. We can’t do without Corridon. He will lead us to Mallory. We must not lose sight of him.’

Jan flared up.

‘Always you say that. Have faith in me. Why do you pin your faith to this man Corridon?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t help it. I have a feeling about him. I am convinced he will find Mallory. I can’t explain why, but I feel it, the way you feel hunger. It is positive. I can’t ignore it. He is tied up in some inexplicable way with Mallory’s destiny and mine. I know he will find Mallory.’

‘Very well then,’ Jan said with restrained exasperation. ‘We shall see. But I warn you he’s not to be trusted.’

‘I know,’ she said helplessly, ‘and I hate him. I’d give anything to be free of him, but I am positive he will lead us to Mallory.’

‘I must see what Ranleigh’s doing,’ Jan said, knowing that if he didn’t change the subject of Corridon he would lose his temper. ‘Sit down and wait. The car will come. There’s nothing to worry about.’

He went into the kitchen.

‘Are you ready?’

Ranleigh gave him a furtive, uneasy look.

‘I have packed what I could find. There wasn’t much,’ he said. ‘How is she?’

‘All right. Have you seen anything of the car?’

Ranleigh shook his head.

‘And Holroyd; is he all right?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t been near him.’

Jan sneered.

‘You’re not much use, are you?’ He went out of the kitchen, across the studio, into the bedroom.

Jeanne heard him give a startled grunt.

‘What is it?’ she asked as he spun round to confront her.

‘He’s gone,’ he said. ‘That fool Ranleigh didn’t watch him. He’ll bring the police here!’

III

Don't put on the light,' Corridon said as Ann and he entered her bungalow. 'We're supposed to be in the garage. Now look, I want to talk to you. The woman's dangerous. She's off her head. It wouldn't be safe for you to come with us.'

He stood close to her in the almost dark studio. He couldn't see her face, only the dim outline of her figure, and he could hear her even breathing.

'Will you promise not to tell anyone where we're going? Do that and you can go. I'll tell them you gave me the slip.'

'I'm coming with you,' she said without hesitation. 'If Brian's alive, I'm going to be there to do what I can to help him.'

'But she's cracked,' Corridon said, worried. 'I can't be with you all the time. She may do you an injury.'

'I must take my chance. Now I know I'll be on my guard, but I'm coming with you. I've made up my mind.'

'Well, all right,' Corridon said. 'Have it your own way. I'll admit you'll be useful. With your knowledge of the district you'll save us a lot of time. You're sure now?'

'Of course I am.'

'Then pack whatever you want to take with you and be quick about it. Where's the phone? I want to put through a call.'

'It's by the window.'

As soon as she had gone into her bedroom, he groped his way across the studio to the telephone and dialled telegrams.

When the operator answered he said, 'Telegram for Detective-Sergeant Rawlins, C. Dept., Scotland Yard. Message begins "Check bullets that killed Crew and the two police officers, Endfield Hotel. Owner of Mauser pistol concerned is Jan - I'd better spell this - S-z-y-m-o-n-w-y-c-z." Got it?' He spelt the name again. 'Message continues. "This man with two companions stayed at Endfield. Inquiries should show these three also stayed with Crew for three days. Don't, repeat don't, connect me with either shooting. Corridon." Have you got all that? Yes, read it back,' He listened, grunted and said, 'fine. Get it off, girlie,' and hung up.

As he was about to turn away from the window a movement outside in the dark courtyard attracted his attention, and he drew back, watchful and alert. He made out four or five figures moving silently across the courtyard towards Holroyd's bungalow, and caught the glint of steel buttons. Instantly he spun round and ran swiftly across the studio to the door.

‘Ann!’ he whispered urgently. ‘Where are you?’

She came scurrying out of the darkness, colliding with him in the doorway. He steadied her.

‘What is it?’ she asked. ‘I’ve nearly finished—’

‘The police are outside. Leave everything. Is there a way out the back?’

‘Yes. It’s down here. Follow me.’ There was no hesitation, only excitement in her voice, and she caught hold of his hand and moved quickly forward into the darkness.

‘Wait,’ he said when she paused at die end of the passage.

‘Let’s get this straight. Where does this lead to?’

‘The garage, then through a gateway to Riley Street, on to King’s Road.’

‘Right. Keep close to me. If they spot us, throw yourself on the ground. They’ll be armed this time. Do you understand?’

‘Yes.’

Cautiously he opened the back door and peered into the darkness. As he did so there came the sound of gunfire: three sharp reports that shattered the silence.

‘That’s Jan,’ he whispered. ‘Here, give me your hand. Come on, as quietly as you can.’

Together they edged out into the darkness. More gunfire broke out, coming from the front of Ann’s bungalow. Close by they could hear men shouting.

‘Come on,’ Corridon said, and moved swiftly and silently through the gateway into the dimly lit Riley Street. He tightened his grip on Ann’s hand. ‘They may have cordoned off this road. If we’re stopped leave everything to me.’

They walked briskly down the street towards the bright lights of King’s Road. Halfway down the dark road, Corridon caught sight of a solitary policeman. He didn’t pause in his stride, but hooked Ann’s arm through his and continued on his way.

‘He may or may not stop us,’ he said out of the corner of his mouth, ‘if he does, get ready to run. I can’t see any more, can you?’

She said, ‘No,’ in a voice made husky with excitement.

The policeman crossed the road and came straight towards them.

‘Just a minute,’ he called, waving to them.

‘Run when I say so,’ Corridon whispered. Then raising his voice, he said to the policeman, ‘Were you speaking to me?’ He was within reach of the policeman now and as the policeman paused and stared at him, trying to see his features, he hit him on the side of his jaw, sending him crashing to the pavement.

‘All right - run!’ he said and gave Ann a quick push.

IV

With one swift glance, Jan took in the details of Holroyd’s escape: the crumpled bedspread, the two lengths of rope lying on the floor, the moving curtain, fanned by the breeze coming through the half-open window. How long had Holroyd been gone? Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes? Time enough for the police to be on their way.

Jeanne and Ranleigh stood in the doorway behind Jan and stared blankly at the empty bed. There was a dazed, vacant expression on Jeanne’s face that worried Jan. In past emergencies she was always to be relied on, but not now. Obviously she was still feeling the effects of her attack, and for the moment, he decided, she was useless. He looked sharply at Ranleigh and was relieved and surprised to see that although he was startled he was calm.

‘They may be out there now,’ Ranleigh said, seeing the danger at once. ‘If he telephoned they could be here within a few minutes.’

‘Yes, and this time they’ll be armed,’ Jan said grimly. ‘It won’t be like leaving the Endfield. Not easy, like that. Keep by Jeanne,’ he went on. ‘I’m going to take a look outside.’ Instinctively he felt he could rely now on Ranleigh. The sudden atmosphere of tension and danger, the hopelessness of their position if they were caught seemed to have stiffened Ranleigh’s nerves. The hands of the clock had turned back. He was the same Ranleigh who had worked against the Gestapo, who had resisted torture, and who was still one of the unconquerable nine. Jan sensed this regeneration and was thankful. It crossed his mind that not twelve hours ago he had plotted Ranleigh’s death, and he grimaced wryly.

‘Use the window,’ Ranleigh advised. ‘They may be waiting to rush the door.’

‘That was sound,’ Jan thought. The old technique was returning quicker to Ranleigh than to himself. He slid the Mauser out of its holster and balanced it in his hand.

‘Give him Corridon’s gun,’ he said to Jeanne, but she didn’t move nor say anything. Both men could hear her breathing, rustling dryly in her throat.

‘Take it, Nigel,’ Jan said, using for the first time Ranleigh’s first name. He wanted Ranleigh to know that his trust in him had returned, and he could think of no other way to do it, unwilling to say so in so many words.

Ranleigh slipped his hand into Jeanne’s pocket and took out the automatic. She shuddered away from him.

‘My head hurts,’ she moaned, leaning against the wall, the palms of her hands squeezing her temples.

Jan made a gesture of helplessness. In the darkness the sound of the safety catch as Ranleigh thumbed it back made a sharp exaggerated click.

‘I’ll take a look at the back,’ Ranleigh said. ‘Stay here until I return,’ he went on to Jeanne. ‘There’s nothing to worry about.’ He spoke gently, and Jan thought it was in an emergency like this that forgotten comradeship asserted itself.

As Ranleigh moved silently away, Jan approached the studio window, lifted the curtain and peered through the chink into the darkness. He could see nothing, and yet his instinct, a little rusty now, but still acutely developed, warned him that there was danger outside. Silently he pushed open the casement window without disturbing the curtains and listened. At first he could distinguish nothing above the steady hum of traffic moving along the distant King’s Road, then as he tuned this noise out of his hearing he picked up the faint, almost imperceptible sound of the river swishing against the embankment across the street. Then other sounds came to him: the soft scrape of a boot on concrete, a faint whisper of a man’s voice, the chink of metal against stone. He stiffened to these sounds of danger, and then, his eyes growing accustomed to the dark, he saw shadowy figures moving with surprising silence, taking up positions before the bungalow, and the glint of buttons confirmed his fears. The police were already there; cautious, obviously in no hurry, aware that the net was closed but the animals in the net still dangerous and yet to be captured.

Ranleigh joined him at the window.

‘They’re here. Four of them are guarding the back.’

‘I’ve counted eight so far in the front,’ Jan returned.

‘There’ll be more, and the streets will be sealed off. It’s not going to be easy.’ His voice was flat and expressionless, but he was aware of a dryness in his throat and that his heart was pounding, sending blood singing in his ears.

Both men stood silent in the darkness, facing each other. Again Jan felt that Ranleigh was surprisingly calm, and it irritated him that he himself was on the edge of panic.

‘The three of us can’t do it, Jan,’ Ranleigh said. ‘Take her and try the back way. I’ll cover you.’

Jan could scarcely believe he had heard aright.

‘You’ll cover us?’ he repeated blankly. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Go on,’ Ranleigh urged. ‘It’s your only chance. Two might do it, but not three. Take her and go.’

‘You mean it?’ Jan asked, shaken. ‘They’ll finish you.’

‘Why not?’ Ranleigh succeeded in controlling the emotion that welled up inside him. ‘I’m finished anyway. There’s no time to talk. You should be able to sneak through.’

‘Yes.’ Jan felt bad, thinking that this was the man he had planned to shoot. ‘But you have as much right to your life as I.’

Ranleigh interrupted him, pushing him from the window.

‘Go! Take her! As soon as you hear me shoot make a dash for it.’

Jan fumbled for his hand and gripped it hard, humiliated to be forced to accept his life from Ranleigh.

‘My good friend,’ he said, wanting to curse Ranleigh. ‘My very good friend,’ and then he was gone, leaving Ranleigh alone.

For some moments Ranleigh stood motionless, buoyed up by the immensity of his sacrifice. Jan had said not so long ago that this was the continuation of war. In war a man laid down his life for a friend: a heroic gesture, Ranleigh had always thought. Still more heroic then, he tried to assure himself, for a man to sacrifice himself for his enemy. Ranleigh had no illusions about Jan. Sooner or later Jan would have got rid of him; a shot through the head, a knife in the back. What did it matter how it was to be done? It would have been done. Ranleigh had no doubt about that; proof that he was no longer of use to them.

This way out was better. Those two would remember him as long as they lived now. It also avoided the suspense of waiting, of watching every move Jan might make, of sleeping lightly, of being afraid to turn his back. And by doing this Ranleigh felt he had finally defeated Jan, forcing him to call him his very good friend, and Ranleigh smiled bitterly. It was a triumph to him for he was sure that had Jan offered him his life he would not have called him his friend.

He pushed back the curtain a few inches with the muzzle of the gun. The window was open and the cool, damp air touched his feverish face. He had no doubt that when he fired the end would come swiftly. The men out there meant business. Two of their comrades had been killed; they would show no mercy.

He wondered what would happen to Mallory. It was a pity about Mallory. Something must have got into the chap to have done what he had done. If it hadn’t been for him this fantastic situation would never have arisen.

But at the same time, Ranleigh thought bitterly, if it hadn’t been for Mallory he would have had to find

a job, and by now, would be working in a shop or an office; trading on people's pity, displaying his empty sleeve and the patch over his eye as a beggar displays his rags. Well, at least Mallory had saved him from that degradation. Mallory was giving him a quick death, 'Who knows,' Ranleigh said to himself, 'I might meet him on the other side one of these days,' and although he didn't believe in the "other side" he felt comforted.

He heard Jan slide back the bolt on the back door, and for a brief, horrible moment his determination faltered and he began to tremble, more frightened of failure than of the police. The gun in his hand felt like a dead weight. It required a tremendous effort to raise it. Then he heard Jan whisper, 'We are ready,' and caught a note of impatience and doubt in his voice.

He jerked aside the curtains and stood squarely before the window, exposing himself fully to those outside, and with every nerve in his body shrinking in anticipation of the return blow, he fired shot after shot into the darkness.

chapter eleven

I

The taxi pulled up outside the cul-de-sac leading to the Amethyst Club. Rain was falling, a cold grey curtain in the street lights. Frith Street was empty. It was as Corridon had hoped: rain had come and had cleared the streets.

Bending his head, as if sheltering his face from the rain, Corridon paid off the taxi, taking care the driver did not get a glimpse of his features. Then he and Ann hurried down the dark cul-de-sac, rain pelting down on them as they ran.

Corridon made for the side entrance; a door in the basement that was guarded by iron railings. He opened the door and pushed Ann into a dimly lit passage that smelt of stale refuse and an accumulation of mass-produced meals.

‘So far so good,’ he said, keeping his voice low. ‘We’ll be safe here for a few hours if I can find Effie.’ He shook the rain from his coat. ‘Will you wait while I see where she is? I won’t be a moment.’

‘All right,’ Ann returned. ‘But suppose someone comes?’

‘Say you’re a friend of Effie’s. But I won’t be a moment.’ He touched her arm, smiling at her. ‘You’re a bit of a knockout, aren’t you?’ he went on. ‘You behave as if you’ve done this kind of thing every day of your life.’

‘Go and find Effie,’ she returned. ‘Compliments can wait.’

She was a knockout, he thought as he went swiftly down the passage that led to the underground kitchens. Talk about nerve! She hadn’t faltered once. If Mallory was anything like her no wonder Jeanne and Jan were scared of him.

The door leading to the main kitchen stood open, and he paused just outside and looked in. The staff were hard at work preparing last-minute meals. The smell of onions and hot fat was overpowering. He couldn’t see Effie, and guessed she was in the preparation room where he had spent so much of his spare time in the past talking to her. He found her busy peeling potatoes, singing to herself and alone.

‘Effie!’ he said from the doorway. ‘Is anyone around?’

She dropped her peeling knife, stifled a cry and jumped up, clutching the potato bowl to her. She stared at him with wide eyes.

‘Oh, Mr. Corridon!’

He entered the room, closed the door with his foot and smiled at her.

‘I’m in trouble as usual, Effie, and want your help. Will you help me?’

‘Of course.’ She put down the bowl and came to him. Her big eyes were dark with alarm. ‘What is it, Mr. Corridon?’

‘Can I go to your room? I have a friend with me. I don’t want Zani to know we’re here. Where is he?’

‘In the club. I must finish these potatoes, then I’m through for the evening. Can you find your way up?’

‘I think so. Come up as soon as you can. Can you get hold of an ABC timetable? And you might bring some food. Anything will do. But don’t let anyone know we’re here.’

‘I won’t. You go up, Mr. Corridon. I won’t be more than ten minutes.’

He slipped his arm round her thin shoulders and gave her a hug.

‘You’re a good scout, Effie. I knew one of these days you’d be able to help me.’

She touched his sleeve with an adoring gesture that moved him.

‘Is it the police, Mr. Corridon?’ she asked, and he could feel her trembling against him.

‘I’m afraid it is,’ he said and grinned. ‘But don’t be frightened, I can handle it. You won’t be long, will you?’

He returned to Ann, who was leaning against the dirty wall, her hands in her mackintosh pockets, completely at ease.

‘We’ll go upstairs,’ he said. ‘Effie’s lent us her bedroom.’

They reached Effie’s room without meeting anyone on the way, and Corridon drew the blind before turning on the light.

‘Let me give you a hand with that,’ he said as she slipped out of her mackintosh. He took off his coat and hung both coats on a hook on the back of the door. ‘You’d better sit on the bed. It’s more comfortable than the chair,’ and as she sat down he said with a smile, ‘You can’t say you’re leading a static form of existence now, can you?’

‘Just because I am an artist,’ she returned a little mockingly, ‘it doesn’t mean I sit and vegetate. I keep

thinking about those three. They couldn't possibly have got away, could they?'

'The chances are they have. They're experts at getting out of tight corners. I think we should assume they have escaped and act accordingly. But that doesn't mean you should continue to keep with me. Look, why don't you give up the idea and go home? So far you're in the clear, but if you continue to keep with me you'll eventually land in serious trouble.'

'You seem very anxious to get rid of me. I like trouble and I assure you I can look after myself. I take after Brian.'

'So it seems,' he said dryly, 'but there's no point in mixing you up with the police. If you must go to Hermit Island why not go on your own?'

'I thought we agreed to join forces?' The twinkle in her eyes belied her serious expression.

'That was before the police came into this,' Corridon said patiently. 'From now on things are going to be tricky.'

'I've lost sight of three of you,' she said, a sudden curt note in her voice, 'and I don't intend to lose sight of you.' Then with a laugh, she added, 'Besides, I don't think you'd ever find the island unless I was with you, and I want you to be there well ahead of the other three if they do happen to turn up.'

He regarded her thoughtfully, wrinkling his brows.

'I can't make you out. You just don't behave like any other woman. This is all wrong: you should be scared out of your wits. You don't know me from Adam, and yet you want to come along with me. It beats me. I can't make you out at all.'

'Put it down to the war,' she said and laughed. 'You don't think I stayed at home and did nothing, do you? I'm afraid the war made for me a new set of standards or bad habits. I don't know quite what to call them. Since then I've been trying to live a normal life, but it hasn't been easy, and when you suddenly appeared—' She broke off with a smile. 'Well, I'm not going to miss any excitement if I can help it.'

'What did you do during the war?' he asked sharply.

'The same as you. I didn't place you at first, but I know you now. I've often heard about you. You trained under Ritchie, didn't you? I was with Massingham. You'd left by then.'

'Massingham? Good Lord! Were you one of his foolish virgins?' Corridon's eyes brightened.

'I was. I did ten drops. I'm rather proud of it.'

'When they told us they were dropping girls we thought they'd hit on a new secret weapon. I don't think Massingham ever got over the rude things we said about his lady shock troops. He loved every

one of them, didn't he? Well, I'll be damned! So you were one of Massingham's girls.'

'Don't look so startled,' Ann said. 'I know I look as if I'll snap in two, but you'd be surprised how tough I am. And please don't be anxious about me. I can take care of myself.'

'I bet you can,' Corridon returned. He had had and still had a great respect for Massingham's trainees. 'Well, that's different. Of course you want to get in on this. All right, I won't keep you out. After all you're one of the old brigade.'

A tap came on the door and Effie came in carrying a tray of food. She nearly dropped the tray when she saw Ann. Watching her, Corridon saw her eyes darken. A sullen, sulky expression made her ugly.

'Come in, Effie,' he said, taking the tray from her, 'I want you to meet Ann Mallory. Ann, this is Effie, my best pal.'

But even that little flattery did not thaw the cold light in Effie's eyes, and when Ann said, 'It's very kind of you to let me use your room,' Effie flushed and looked away. She sensed at once that in this girl she had found a rival, and immediately hated her.

'Did you find an ABC?' Corridon asked, setting down the tray on the bed. He glanced at his wristwatch. The time was a few minutes after ten o'clock.

'I'm getting it now, Mr. Corridon,' Effie said coldly and went out.

Corridon made a little grimace.

'Here, start eating,' he said. 'We'll have to be going soon.'

Ann selected a chicken sandwich and offered the plate to Corridon.

'Is she in love with you?'

'Who? Effie?' Corridon shrugged. 'I suppose so. She's a good kid. I suppose it's my fault. I've known her a long time. I'm having her mouth fixed. She's been a good friend to me, but that's all. Anyway, on my side.'

She liked him for his embarrassment and tactfully changed the subject.

'I wish we could find out what happened to those other three. I don't want them to get to Hermit Island before we do.'

'I'll find out. I can find out most things here.'

Effie returned with the ABC.

'Now listen, Effie,' Corridon said. 'I have to leave London. I won't go into details because the less

you know the better. We're going to Scotland tonight. We'll need food for the journey and I want you to come with us to the station to get the tickets. The police will be on the lookout for us, and if we can get on the train without being seen so much the better. Will you do that?'

'Very well, Mr. Corridon,' Effie said, her face darkening.

The thought of Corridon going to Scotland with this girl was like a knife stab to her.

Corridon opened the ABC.

'Will you get the food ready and ask Max to come up? Can you get hold of him without Zani knowing?'

'I can try,' Effie said sullenly and went away.

'I'm afraid that poor girl thinks I'm a rival,' Ann said, obviously worried. 'Hadn't you better reassure her?'

'I can't do that,' Corridon said, glancing up from his frowning scrutiny of the timetable. 'I haven't entirely reassured myself about that.'

For a moment she looked startled, but not disconcerted as he rather expected, then she lifted her shoulders a little impatiently.

'You don't have to say that, you know. I'd much rather you didn't.'

He turned back to the ABC.

'All right,' he said, scowling at the Scottish tables, 'but that happens to be the way I feel about it. I thought you might as well know.' Then as she said nothing, he went on, 'There's a train to Dunbar from King's Cross at one o'clock. It arrives at noon tomorrow. We'd better take that.'

'Do you think they'll be watching the stations?'

'If those three got away, they'll certainly watch the stations.'

Corridon returned. 'They won't leave a loophole unwatched. That's why I want Effie to get our tickets. My description has been well circularized, and by now, they may have circularized yours.'

Ann felt in her dress pockets.

'May I have a cigarette? I've left everything at home. I wish I'd had time to pack a bag.'

'I left my bag too,' Corridon said, giving her his carton of cigarettes. 'I left it at Holroyd's place. The police will know I was with Jan. That's fine, isn't it?' He made an angry gesture. 'I must be slipping not to have thought of that before.'

The door pushed open and Max put his head round. He looked from Corridon to Ann and pursed his lips.

‘Did you want me?’ he asked unnecessarily.

‘Come in and shut the door,’ Corridon said shortly. ‘I won’t introduce you. You’ll have less lies to tell if you don’t know who she is.’

Max gave Ann a low bow.

‘It’s my loss, lady,’ he said.

‘All right,’ Corridon said irritably, ‘shelve the old world stuff for a more suitable occasion. Heard anything about the shooting at Cheyne Walk?’

Max smiled.

‘Of course, The club’s buzzing with it. That’s all they’re talking about.’

‘What happened?’

‘You mean you don’t know?’ Max looked blank. For Corridon to admit ignorance of such a sensation shocked him.

‘What happened?’ Corridon repeated.

‘It was the same three who shot the coppers at the Endfield Hotel,’ Max said, and from the admiration in his eyes he obviously approved of the shooting. ‘The police were tipped off these three were in a studio in Cheyne Walk. They surrounded the place. The chap with one arm held them off while the other two slipped out the back way. There was a lot of shooting. I wish I’d been there. It was the best thing since the Sydney Street siege, but that was before your time, wasn’t it?’

‘Never mind the Sydney Street siege. Did they get away?’

‘Two of them did. The bloke with the one arm was killed. Real gangster stuff. They shot him to pieces. Pity. He had guts.’ Max shook his head sadly. ‘The other one cut his way through the bogies guarding the rear with a knife. Killed one flattie and scratched another. They say he was wounded himself but that may be copper talk. Anyway, they got away.’

Corridon and Ann exchanged glances.

‘All right, Max, that’s all I wanted to know. Keep your mouth shut about me. I don’t want Zani to know I’m here.’

‘I won’t tell him,’ Max said. He paused, looking at Corridon doubtfully. ‘There’s a rumour you’re connected with these three. There wouldn’t be anything in that, would there?’

‘It’s a bad time to ask questions,’ Corridon said, his eyes hardening.

‘So it is,’ Max said. ‘But I thought I’d mention it. They intend to catch those two. Every flatfoot in the country is on the job. You’ll have to be careful.’

Corridon nodded.

‘I’ll be careful.’ He took out two five-pound notes. ‘Here, buy yourself a tie.’

Max’s slim fingers closed over the notes.

‘I wouldn’t take it if I didn’t need it,’ he said. ‘Well, thanks. Anything else I can do?’

Corridon shook his head.

‘So long, Max,’ he said.

Max again bowed to Ann.

‘If we ever meet again, lady,’ he said, ‘I hope it will be in happier circumstances.’

He went away as unobtrusively as he had come.

II

A solitary electric light lamp hung from the ceiling of the church and cast a circle of hard brilliance over the centre pews.

Two candles burned steadily on either side of the altar and the silver crucifix glittered in their yellow, subdued flames. An old woman sat at the rear of the church, her head in her hands.

The sound of her wheezing breath invaded the silent church, warning the two, seated away from the light in a side pew, of her presence.

They waited impatiently for the old woman to go, but she seemed in no hurry. She had come in as Jan was painfully taking off his trench coat, and the loud squeaking of her boots had frozen him into an anxious immobility. She had sat down behind and to the right of them, not noticing them, and now she was praying with an exasperating thoroughness that infuriated Jan. He held his left bicep, squeezing the veins, trying to stop the steady bleeding from the wound in the fleshy part of his arm. His left sleeve and hand were wet with blood that dripped on to the pew seat and on to the white stone floor. He was afraid to remove his coat in case the old woman noticed them. Not far away the police were

still combing the streets, hunting for them, and a cry from her would bring them instantly to the church.

Jeanne sat close to the wounded man, her eyes fixed on the glittering cross, paying no attention to him, and Jan felt her indifference with growing anger and despair.

Their escape had been miraculous. Jeanne had been useless; a doll to be pushed and pulled; unhelpful, unaware of their danger, frighteningly apathetic. He had no idea how they had managed to slip through the cordon. There had been moments of acute danger; moments when capture had seemed inevitable. A policeman had cornered them and had hit at Jan with his truncheon, the blast of his whistle cut short as Jan had ducked under the blow and had struck upwards with his knife.

Out of the darkness had come a shot, and Jan had felt the white-hot touch of the bullet as it passed through his arm. But he had kept hold of Jeanne, pushing her into the darkness, gritting his teeth against the pain, using every scrap of cover, weaving his way through the line of hunting men soundlessly and swiftly, pulling Jeanne with him.

As the cordon tightened and he had begun to despair, he had seen the church. The shadowy figure of armed men were converging on them: a game of blindman's buff and only his acute hearing to outwit them. He had pulled Jeanne into the dark porch and waited, knife in hand for them to come after him.

But they didn't. They ran past the church, their whistles piercing the wet night air, sure that their quarry had gone on ahead of them.

It was then he realized how badly he was bleeding. His head felt hot, and there was an irritating singing in his ears that now made hearing difficult. Still holding Jeanne's arm, he entered the dim sanctuary of the church and sat down in a pew. For some minutes he relaxed against the hard, polished wood of the pew and his mind drifted away into a dark unconsciousness that knew nothing of murder or pain or the terrors of being captured and locked up behind bars like an animal.

But the readiness and ease in which his mind accepted the anaesthesia of exhaustion frightened him and he shook off the coma that was stealing over him. He realized he would have to rely on himself to avoid being caught. He did not think Jeanne was capable helping him. She sat staring straight before her, her dark eyes bemused, her mouth twitching, her fingers uneasily pressing her temples.

He looked over his shoulder: a slow furtive glance that betrayed his fears. The old woman was sitting forward, her face buried in her hands, resting on the back of the pew in front of her. Her wheezy breathing was laboured. She was no longer praying; she was asleep.

Jan unbuttoned his coat and struggled out of it, flinching with pain. He looked with distaste and fear at the red-soaked shirtsleeve.

'Do something for me,' he said in Jeanne's ear. 'I'm bleeding. Help me, can't you?'

She turned her head slowly and looked blankly at him, and seemed not to recognize him. He gripped her arm and shook it, digging his fingernails into her flesh. She tried to pull away, but he tightened his

grip.

‘I’m bleeding,’ he whispered fiercely. ‘Help me.’

Then her mind appeared to clear for she shifted her eyes from his face to the blood-soaked sleeve.

‘Your knife,’ she said, wrenching free. ‘Take off your scarf.’

He sucked in a breath of relief as he handed her the knife and watched her cut off the sleeve, working with her old expertness. Both of them stared at the bruised, swollen flesh and the wound.

‘Put a pad on and tie it tightly,’ he said. ‘We must stop the bleeding.’

She made a pad from handkerchiefs and held them in place with his scarf.

‘That is good,’ he said, feeling the sweat of faintness on his face. ‘Help me on with my coat. The old woman may wake.’

And then there was nothing to do but wait. He put the pistol on the ledge in front of him beside the hymn books within easy reach of his hand. His legs felt weak, and it worried him as he realized how much strength he had lost. If they came now there would be no escape. He would kill as many of them as he could before being killed himself. They would not take him alive.

He looked at his watch. The time was a quarter past ten, and he wondered what had happened to Corridon and the Mallory girl. If Corridon had evaded the police, would he go to the island? Was it possible that Mallory was hiding there as Corridon had suggested? Jan reached out and touched the cold butt of the pistol as if to draw strength from it. He knew he could not go on much longer. It was only a matter of time before the police caught up with him. If he was to find Mallory he must find him at once. The island seemed to him to be his only hope. If Mallory was not there then he must admit defeat.

It would be impossible to search the whole of the country for him now that the police were hunting for them. Hermit Island was his only hope. Somehow he had to get there, but how, he had no idea.

It was nearly midnight before he decided it would be safe to leave the church. The old woman had long since gone, going out without noticing them, her mind heavy with sleep. Jan had watched her, crouched down in the pew and had listened to her squeaking boots as she trudged down the aisle into the street.

For a long time now the church had been silent. There was no point in remaining longer, and he touched Jeanne lightly, waking her from uneasy sleep.

‘It is time to go,’ he said. His arm ached and was rigid in stiffness. ‘Are you all right?’ He was relieved to see an alertness come into her eyes as she sat up, looking, he thought, more like her old self.

‘Yes, I’m all right.’ She ran her fingers through her thick hair. ‘And you? How’s the arm?’

‘Yes, it will do. It is time to go.’

‘I haven’t been much use to you, have I?’ She said unexpectedly.

He shook his head, too tired and worried to deal gently with her.

‘But now you must make up for it. Much depends on you. I’m not well.’

‘What are we going to do?’

‘Isn’t that for you to say?’ he returned sharply. ‘Don’t you always make the plans?’

She stared helplessly at him as her mind floundered with the effort to concentrate, and with a pang of dismay he thought she would not be equal to the task of planning their escape. Her brainstorm had been far more damaging to her than the previous ones. In the past she had recovered quickly from these strange attacks, but now her mental make-up seemed completely disorganized, and it was only her willpower and discipline that forced her mind to work.

But even then she groped vainly for an idea on which to base a plan of escape. Watching her, Jan could see she didn’t know how to begin.

‘The island,’ he said impatiently. ‘That’s where we must go. How do we get there?’

‘The trains to Scotland go from King’s Cross. We can’t hope to go by road.’

‘Where’s King’s Cross?’ he asked, rocking to and fro to the steady throb in his arm.

‘Near Gray’s Inn Road. We shall have to walk.’

Jan’s face set. The idea of a long walk frightened him. His legs were trembling, and every now and then a sick feeling of faintness crept over him. He knew he was in no shape for a walk of any distance.

‘I don’t think I could walk far,’ he said cautiously, and it crossed his mind that if she realized how weak he was she might be tempted in her present mood to leave him. He decided if she showed the slightest sign of treachery he would kill her. He was now a little light-headed, and the pain in his arm lashed him into a frenzy of despair and rage that he only kept under control with difficulty. ‘I have lost a lot of blood.’

She turned and studied him, seeing his grey complexion, the sweat beads of pain, and the fury that was seething within him.

‘Jan...’ She gently touched his sound arm. ‘We’ll manage somehow. It’s all right. I won’t desert you. You’ve done so much for me. Should we risk a taxi?’

He touched his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. The last thing he expected from her was kindness. Since Pierre's death kindness had gone out of her, and this sudden pity for him he could see so clearly in her face moved him.

'I can't walk far,' he said. 'It'll have to be a taxi. I'll leave my coat here. Lend me yours. I'll hang it over my shoulders. If we go bareheaded they may not recognize us. Don't forget, they are looking for berets.'

She slipped off her coat and draped it over his shoulders, hiding the blood-stained sleeve.

'We must find out about trains,' she said, and now she had again accepted responsibility her voice was brisk. Will you wait here while I telephone the station?'

He shook his head.

'We must go together, Jeanne.'

She saw he was frightened she would desert him, and still uncertain of herself, still frightened of the racking pain in her head, she was glad he had need of her.

'We'll jump in a goods train,' she said. 'At least we can find our way about a railway siding, can't we?'

He got slowly and unsteadily to his feet.

'One of our few accomplishments,' he said sadly. 'We have a long journey ahead of us, Jeanne. It's worrying me. Do you think we'll get there?'

'Yes.' She turned and looked at the silver cross on the altar. 'Give me a few minutes, Jan. We may never have the opportunity to be in a church again.'

He leaned his weight against the pew, fighting off the feeling of sick faintness that suddenly swept over him.

'Hurry,' he said nervously, and wiped the sweat from his face.

She knelt, facing the altar. Watching the back of her head, her square shoulders, her straight back, he wondered how she could pray. Once he had believed in God; but not now. His faith had died with Charlotte, and he could not think why Jeanne should wish to pray. What had she to pray for? he wondered, closing his eyes. He felt cold and had to keep his teeth clenched against the increasing pain in his arm. Did she think God would grant her anything? Was she trying to make her peace with Him? How could she expect to be forgiven when her only purpose in life was to kill Mallory? Both of them were beyond the comfort of religion. She was wasting time.

Impatiently he laid his hand on her shoulder and she looked up, turning her head, and he saw an odd

expression in her glittering eyes.

‘We must go,’ he said sharply. ‘Every moment is precious. You are wasting time.’

She stood up.

‘Yes, you are right. There is nothing for either of us here.’

They went silently down the aisle and stood for a moment in the dark porch. Then like ghosts they moved into the empty, rain-swept street.

‘Walk on,’ he said curtly. ‘You’ve got to keep away from me. They’ve published a photograph of me, and I may be spotted at any moment.’

She was quick to realize the danger, but instead of leaving him, she caught hold of his wrist and pulled him into a nearby lavatory, closed and bolted the door.

‘We’ll be safe here for a moment,’ she said calmly. ‘How did they get hold of your photograph?’

He made an impatient movement.

‘What does it matter? They’ve had it years. The point is someone’s bound to recognize me; probably they’ve done so already.’

‘Let me see the photograph.’

He hesitated, not wanting her to know that Rita Allen was dead. He realized, however, that she was certain to find out sooner or later, and perhaps it would be better for her to find out from him than from anyone else. He pulled out the newspapers and handed them to her.

She examined the photograph carefully.

‘Yes, it’s you all right,’ she said. ‘The likeness is too good. We’ll reach Dunbar in thirty minutes. What are you going to do?’

‘Take a chance,’ Corridon said grimly, ‘but you have to keep clear of me. We mustn’t overestimate people’s intelligence. They may not spot me.’

He saw she was only giving him half her attention, and he watched her, as her eyes skimmed the type matter, waiting for the inevitable change of expression when she read of Rita’s death. It came. He saw her stiffen, her hands tighten on the paper.

‘Why, she’s dead!’ she exclaimed and looked up, staring at him, a questioning, searching look in her eyes. ‘They say she’s been murdered.’

‘That’s right,’ he said quietly. ‘They think I did it. I was with her. She fell downstairs.’

He saw fear and distrust on her face.

‘But they say she was murdered,’ she said. ‘Then there was this man, Crew. You were with him also, weren’t you?’

‘That’s right.’ He took out a packet of cigarettes, offered it, but she shook her head, and he noticed she was edging away from him, trying to put as much space between them as the cramped little compartment would allow. Without showing he had noticed her growing alarm, he lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. ‘I know what you’re thinking. Well, that’s all right. I can’t help it if you feel that way about it. I know it looks bad, but that’s something else I can’t do anything about. It doesn’t matter anyway.’ And here he knew he was lying. It did matter.

He didn’t want her to regard him as a murderer. ‘You and I are parting. I was a thoughtless fool to have mixed you up in this mess in the first place. Take my advice and get a train back to London when we reach Dunbar. Keep away from me. I’m going to your island. I believe your brother’s there, and I must talk to him. If you’ll take my advice, and if you want to help your brother, you won’t say anything to the police about where I’m going.’

‘There’s something behind all this, isn’t there?’ she asked sharply. ‘I’ve felt all along you’ve been concealing something. What is it?’

And because it was suddenly essential to him at this parting for her to have a good opinion of him he decided to tell her the truth.

‘Yes, there is something,’ he said curtly. ‘I don’t like telling you, but it’s necessary. You remember there were originally nine members of Gourville’s saboteurs? Gourville, Charlotte and Georges were shot by the Gestapo. Your brother disappeared. That left five of them, who all thought your brother had betrayed them, Harris and Lubish, discovered clues that took them to your brother. They both died violently. One of them fell out of a train. The other was drowned in a pond. I went to see Rita Allen to get information about your brother. While I was in the house someone threw her downstairs and broke her neck.’ He leaned against the wall, his body swaying to the movement of the train, his eyes on her face. ‘Lubish, Harris and Rita died because they either knew something about your brother or else they had run into him unexpectedly. Who killed them? It’s not hard to find an answer to that one, is it?’

She said very quietly, ‘I don’t think I know what you’re driving at. Are you suggesting my brother killed these three?’

‘I don’t believe in coincidences; anyway, not three of them in a row. One, yes; two, perhaps, but three, no.’

‘So that’s why you want to find Brian?’

‘That’s right. Naturally you must take sides. The best thing for you to do is to leave this to me and go home. If you tell the police where I am you may also be telling them where your brother is.’

‘You have a lot against Brian, haven’t you?’

He studied her pale, set face.

‘I think I have. You see, unless I can prove he or someone else killed Rita Allen I’m for it. The police won’t hesitate to charge me with her murder. I must see your brother.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me this before?’

‘The general idea was to find him through you.’

‘Then why have you suddenly changed your mind?’

He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair.

‘I suppose it’s because I’ve come to know you. Before, you were just a girl who might be useful. Now, you’re something else.’

‘I see.’

‘Well, now you know. Go back to your seat. When we reach Dunbar, go home. Forget about me. I’ll give your brother a square deal. I promise you that.’ He controlled the sudden impulse to take her in his arms, and said with unconvincing indifference, ‘Well, so long. It’s been nice while it lasted.’

He opened the door, shook off her restraining hand and walked quickly away down the corridor.

III

The long line of goods wagons came to a shuddering stop, their buffers hammering together, one after the other in a long continuous series of sound, and the train whistle screeched impatiently at the red light of a distant signal.

Jan woke with a start, and raising his head, stared into the inky darkness. The rhythmic sway of the wagon had lulled him to sleep, but now the train had stopped he was immediately awake, his ears pricked for danger, his eyes trying to pierce the solid blackness before him. He became aware of a gnawing pain in his arm that felt hot and swollen, and a pounding in his temples as if someone was beating his head with a rubber hammer. He had never felt so ill, and he was afraid.

‘Jeanne—’ His voice was a hoarse croak, a sound he did not recognize and that frightened him.

‘Jeanne - are you there?’

‘Yes, I’m here,’ she said out of the darkness, and he heard the scrape of her shoes on the floor of the wagon as she sat up.

‘My arm’s bad,’ he said gritting his teeth as the throbbing suddenly turned into a vicious stab of pain, like a flame against his flesh. ‘There’s nothing to drink, is there?’

‘No.’

He waited for her to come to him, for a word of sympathy, but she remained where she was. For several minutes he lay still, his fingers pressing his temples, trying to stop the pounding that was going on inside his head. He knew without moving that while he had slept his strength had drained out of him. It was as if his muscles, hands and sinews had melted in the fever that now gripped him, and yet his mind was surprisingly clear, and he realized that unless a miracle happened he would not leave this stinking wagon except on a stretcher.

‘It is suffocating in here,’ he said suddenly. ‘Can you let in some air? Where are we? Have a look, Jeanne.’

He heard her get up and grope her way across the wagon.

She began to fumble at the door. There was a sudden clank of metal as she pulled the bar out of the sockets. The top half of the door swung outwards, letting in the faint light of the dawn and he could just see Jeanne’s outline, a sharp silhouette against the sky, as she peered along the permanent way.

He struggled to sit up, but immediately pain laid hold of him, making him catch his breath sharply. The hammer inside his head increased its violence, and it seemed as if his head would burst under the pressure of its blows.

‘The signal’s against us,’ Jeanne said calmly. She peered at her wristwatch. ‘It is just after four.’

‘Where are we, Jeanne?’ he asked painfully. ‘Have you any idea?’

‘I am not certain - Chantilly, I think.’ She again leaned through the opening, staring intently at the almost invisible countryside. ‘West of Chantilly I would say.’

Chantilly? What was she talking about? The effort of thinking was too much for him and he closed his eyes, suddenly not caring where they were or what was going to happen to them.

He lay still for what seemed to him to be a long time, then suddenly the train jerked forward, the whistle screeched again and the coupling began their reverse clattering.

The violent jerk jarred him back to consciousness. What had she said? Chantilly? But Chantilly was in France. They were in England; at least, he assumed they were in England; but were they? He gritted his teeth, feeling cold sweat running down his face as he tried to remember exactly what had been happening.

He remembered the escape from Cheyne Walk and the church.

He had lost a lot of blood in the church. He remembered feeling deathly ill. Jeanne had said they must get to King's Cross station. They had gone there in a taxi. The driver had been an old man; tired, wet and indifferent. He had given them one quick, unseeing glance as they had bundled into the stuffy cab, and they were sure he wouldn't know them again. He remembered too that he had fainted in the taxi, and Jeanne had had a frantic time bringing him round, a moment or so before the cab had pulled up outside the station.

How he had found the strength to leave the cab and to walk into the goods yard he would never know. He had been dimly aware that Jeanne had supported him on the long, nightmare walk over acres of railway lines, past stationary wagons into what seemed to him to be a whirligig of white, green and red lights. Every so often a train would let off a deafening screech of steam, making his skin crawl and his knees tremble. He kept imagining that a train was rushing at them to rend them and tear them into bloody tatters as they moved slowly from sleeper to sleeper to an unknown and hopeless destination. How Jeanne had known which train to board defeated him. She had left him sitting on an oil barrel beside the permanent way, and had gone off into the darkness. She had been away a long time, although by then time meant nothing to him. He was content not to move, to nurse his aching arm and to let his mind go blank, thankful that she could take over the responsibility and leave him to his suffering.

He remembered feeling her strong hands on his sound arm, pulling him to his feet, supporting him while he dragged one leg after the other, intent only on keeping moving, leaving the direction to her.

He remembered the overpowering smell of fish, and the sound of an iron bar grating in its socket as she opened the truck door. She had great difficulty in getting him into the truck.

Without her aid it would have been an impossibility. As it was he suffered excruciation while she hoisted him by his coat into the smelly darkness.

But he remembered nothing more until now. He had rolled over as she had pulled him into the wagon and had laid with all his weight on his wounded arm. The pain had taken hold of him like the blast from an explosion and had hurled his mind into a screaming, horrible blackness, and his consciousness had snuffed out as if he had died.

And now she was talking about Chantilly. Had they crossed the Channel? How could they be west of Chantilly? Perhaps he had misunderstood her. Perhaps she had named some English town that sounded like Chantilly. His mind wandered into the past. Chantilly! Their old headquarters. Gourville's last hiding place. Where Charlotte had been buried. He wondered with a feeling of suffocating excitement whether by some miracle Jeanne had managed to get him out of England. But common sense asserted itself. He must have misunderstood her.

'What did you say, Jeanne? Where did you say we were?'

'Chantilly,' she retorted sharply, looking over her shoulder.

‘Get up and see for yourself. Why are you lying there? Get up! The train will be stopping in a moment.’

‘But how did we get there?’ he asked, bewildered. ‘We were going to Scotland. What’s happened? How did we make the crossing?’

‘Oh, be quiet! You’re raving!’ she said fiercely and again leaned out of the truck. The dawn light was strengthening, and he could see her more clearly. Her hair flew like a flag in the rush of wind as the train rattled along.

He hid his face and wept. They were going home. Somehow a miracle had happened. He didn’t care now what happened to him. If he could die in Chantilly he would be content. If he could be buried near Charlotte he would accept death gladly. But again his common sense jarred him alert. They could not be in France. It was an impossibility.

‘Jeanne - come here, he called, raising his voice above the noise of the train. ‘Jeanne—’

‘Wait!’ she cried, and glanced back over her shoulder, the outline of her head sharply visible against the grey sky. ‘I’m looking for Pierre. He said he would meet us.’

‘Jeanne! Why are you talking like this?’ He struggled up, supporting himself on his sound arm, ignoring the pain that pounced on him as soon as he moved. ‘Jeanne! Come here!’

But she paid no attention. With a long blast of its whistle and with a surge of increased speed, the train tore past a small station, lit by gas lamps; dirty, deserted and greasy with rain and oil.

‘They’re not stopping!’ she cried frantically. ‘We’ve gone past! We’ve gone past Chantilly!’

For a horrible moment he thought she was going to throw herself out of the truck. She was leaning far out, precariously balanced, her hair streaming in the wind, trying to catch a last glimpse of the station as the long line of wagons swept round a steep bend and pounded on with steadily increasing speed.

‘They’ve gone past!’ she cried, turning. ‘What will Pierre think? What are we going to do?’

‘Come and sit down,’ he said, certain that she was out of her mind. For some time now he had suspected that her experience at the hands of the Gestapo, the loss of Pierre and the long months of illness, had undermined the foundation of her reason. The strange brainstorms she had had, the violent, aggressive tempers that had taken hold of her at the slightest provocation, the sullen silent moods and the odd glitter that periodically appeared in her eyes had all been warnings of her mental deterioration. And now, just when he had the most urgent need of her, the thin, worn thread of reason must have snapped.

‘This is no time to sit down,’ she exclaimed furiously. ‘We’re being carried on to Paris. We must do something.’

‘There’s nothing I can do,’ he returned. ‘I’m badly wounded. Don’t you remember? I was shot in the arm.’

Lurching to the sway of the train, she came over to him and knelt by his side.

‘How did you get hurt? Why didn’t you tell me? When did it happen?’

It was too dark to see her face, but he fancied her eyes were glittering and he could hear her laboured breathing.

‘You’re not well,’ he said, gripping her arm. ‘You must pull yourself together. I need you. Now listen, Pierre’s dead. Mallory betrayed him. We are on an English train going to Scotland to find Mallory. Don’t you remember?’

She knelt in silence at his side for a long time. He could feel her arm trembling in his grasp.

She said at last, ‘Yes. I remember. It seemed so real just now. I thought we were going to meet Pierre, but, of course he is dead.’

Had he dragged her back to sanity? he wondered, wishing he could see the expression on her face. If he had, could he keep her sane until he was well enough to look after himself? He felt sure now that her recovery could only be a temporary one.

‘You mustn’t worry,’ he said. ‘It’s a long time since we travelled in a truck. It’s the association of ideas. I thought for a moment when I woke that I too was back in the past. Can you tell where we are?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said sullenly. ‘My head hurts. Don’t ask me anything.’

She got up and went listlessly to the door of the wagon and peered into the semi-gloom.

Useless! he thought in despair. Now what was going to happen? Once again the responsibility of finding Mallory rested with him. His determination wavered. He couldn’t go on. The difficulties were too great. Weakly he decided to admit defeat and give in, and as soon as he had made the decision a lethargic peace crept over him. Even the pain in his arm seemed to lessen, and after a time he drifted into an uneasy sleep. The long, screaming blast of the whistle as the train rattled and banged over the complicated set of points that switched the train on to the northbound route, did not waken him.

IV

As Corridon walked quickly down the corridor of the train, a big, heavily built man stepped out of a

first class compartment and stood squarely in his path. It was Detective-Sergeant Rawlins.

‘Don’t make a fuss, old chap,’ he said with a genial smile.

‘Hudson’s just behind you. It’s a fair cop, so don’t let’s have any bother.’

Corridon’s heart gave a lurch and he stopped in his tracks. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed the burly figure of Detective-constable Hudson blocking his way of escape.

Turning to face Rawlins, he said with elaborate casualness, ‘Why, hello, Rawlins. Didn’t expect to see you here. Did you get my telegram?’

By the merest fluke he had come to a standstill by one of the coach doors, but the train was travelling too fast to risk a jump.

It would be suicide to escape that way.

‘I got it,’ Rawlins said breezily. He was a breezy kind of man; big, red-faced and hearty. He always looked as if he had just come from a fortnight’s holiday at the seaside, exuding energy and good health, Corridon knew him to be a courageous, hard-working, conscientious policeman. To have stepped in front of him the way Rawlins had done had needed nerve, and Corridon admired him for it. ‘You needn’t worry about Crew,’ Rawlins went on amiably. ‘We knew all about him before your wire. Still, I appreciate your tip just the same. Suppose you let Hudson pat you over? You’re carrying a gun, aren’t you?’

‘That’s right,’ Corridon returned with his jeering smile. ‘Go ahead, Hudson. It’s in my right-hand pocket.’

Hudson, stony faced and hard eyed, dipped into Corridon’s pocket and fished out the .25 automatic.

‘Going in for toys now?’ Rawlins asked and rubbed his hands. ‘Thought you’d’ve had something better than that. Got a permit for it, old chap?’

‘Certainly,’ Corridon said. ‘It’s in my wallet. Want to see it?’

‘Not just now. You don’t give us much chance to lock you up, do you?’

‘You don’t imagine you’re going to lock me up this time, do you?’ Corridon said, raising his eyebrows. ‘You have nothing on me, Rawlins.’

‘That’s what they all say,’ Rawlins beamed. ‘I’m surprised at you, Corridon. You’re reverting to type. Just step in here, old chap. You ought to be proud,’ he went on as he shepherded Corridon into the first-class compartment from which he had appeared. There was another police officer sitting in the far corner who scowled at Corridon as he sat down opposite him.

‘We turned a number of passengers out of here for your benefit and we have a car waiting at Dunbar

to take you back to London. That ought to make you feel important.'

'It does,' Corridon returned. 'But I'm not returning to London.'

'Sorry old chap, but they want a little chat with you in London,' Rawlins said, taking out a packet of cigarettes. 'Just one of those things, you know. Have a coffin nail?'

Corridon took the offered cigarette and allowed Rawlins to light it for him.

'If it's like that,' he said and laughed, 'I suppose I haven't much choice.' He wondered if Rawlins knew Ann was on the train. 'By the way where did you spring from?'

Rawlins sat by the door.

'Got on at Berwick. We saw you poking your handsome head out of the window so we slipped into the guard's van. We didn't want to disturb you until we had to. Did we, Hudson?'

Hudson, who was sitting beside Corridon, grunted.

'Our boys spotted you at King's Cross but just missed you,'

Rawlins went on. 'They phoned the Peterborough police and Detective-Constable Stewart got on board when the train stopped at Peterborough. As luck would have it I was in Carlisle on a little job that doesn't concern you and they telephoned me to meet the train at Berwick. Stewart wasn't sure of you, and the Chief thought I'd better bring you in. I hopped in a car and here I am. And a very reckless bit of driving it was, too.'

No mention of Ann, Corridon thought with relief.

He said, 'You are making a charge, of course?'

'Not unless you force me to,' Rawlins returned with a beaming smile. 'I wouldn't if I were you. Might complicate things. I'd prefer your cooperation if I could get it. Of course if you're going to be difficult I could arrest you, but that's up to you.'

'And what would the charge be?'

Rawlins winked.

'Don't call my bluff, old chap. I could make it stick if I wanted to. The fact is we want you primarily to help us find this Pole. When we've got him we might have to talk to you a bit more seriously. I'm not saying we would, but we might.'

'That means you haven't enough evidence to make a charge,'

Corridon said. 'I promise you, Rawlins, you never will.'

Rawlins sucked at his cigarette. He was a wet smoker and after a pull or two the cigarette was a soggy ruin.

‘We’ll see; we’ll see,’ he said airily. ‘I don’t mind admitting it’d please me no end to put you away for a long stretch, old chap. Maybe if I was lucky I might even fix you up with a noose. That little business before the war when you knocked off that secretary chap has always worried me. I feel I’ve left an untidy end hanging loose, and untidy ends, if you’ll pardon the vulgarity, give me a pain in my gut.’

‘What secretary chap is that?’ Corridon asked blankly.

‘Never mind. We won’t go into past history now.’ He shot out suddenly. ‘What was that little blonde like in bed? Any good?’

‘You’re talking in riddles,’ Corridon said. ‘Secretary chap; now blondes. What are you talking about?’

Rawlins beamed at the other two detectives who were staring at Corridon with cold dislike on their faces.

‘He has plenty of nerve, hasn’t he? Butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, would it?’ He went on to Corridon, ‘The blonde tart you went home with on the night of May 17: Rita Allen. You know, the one who fell downstairs and broke her pretty neck.’

‘Never heard of her,’ Corridon returned promptly. ‘I know bags of blondes, but not Rita - who did you say?’

A shadow fell across the floor of the compartment and Rawlins looked up sharply as a girl slid back the door. Corridon glanced up. He felt a tingle run up his spine. It was Ann. She stood in the doorway, not looking at him, but smiling at Rawlins.

‘Would you excuse me?’ she said and glanced at Rawlins’s thick legs that blocked the doorway. ‘I want to come in.’

Rawlins hurriedly climbed to his feet. The whole of his massive bulk blocked the entrance.

‘I’m sorry, madam,’ he said politely. ‘But this carriage is reserved. No doubt you will find room farther up the train. I’m sorry to inconvenience you.’

Ann said steadily, ‘I don’t think there is any room. I’ve looked everywhere. And there’s nothing to say this compartment is reserved, is there?’

‘That’s quite correct, madam,’ Rawlins returned patiently. ‘But we are police officers. I’m afraid I must ask you to try elsewhere.’

‘Oh!’ Ann returned, and smiled. ‘I didn’t know. I’m awfully sorry. If you’re a police officer—’ She looked past him at Corridon who stared blankly at her. ‘Well, I suppose I must try elsewhere, mustn’t I?’

‘I’m afraid so, madam,’ Rawlins said with his expansive smile.

‘Might I ask you a question?’ Ann said, looking up at him and returning his smile.

‘Certainly,’ Rawlins said, a little puzzled. ‘What is it?’

‘My brother swears they wouldn’t fine you five pounds if you pulled the communication cord. He says it’s bluff. But they do don’t they?’

‘Yes, madam, they do,’ Rawlins said. ‘Is that all?’

‘Yes; I hope you don’t mind.’

Corridon’s heart began to pound. This nonsense she was talking could only mean one thing. She was going to stop the train. It would be up to him to make whatever use he could of the opportunity.

‘No, madam, that’s quite all right,’ Rawlins said gravely.

‘Thank you so much,’ Ann said and went away down the corridor.

Rawlins pulled down the blinds as he shut the door leading to the corridor.

‘Now, that’s what I call a nice-looking girl,’ he said, rubbing his hands. ‘As a connoisseur of women, old chap, wouldn’t you say that was a very pretty girl?’

‘Certainly,’ Corridon said, and waited, dry mouthed, for the train to stop.

chapter twelve

I

‘Stop that woman!’ a man cried excitedly, but Ann had already opened the coach door and jumped on to the grass verge. She ran towards the viaduct, spanning the narrow river in the valley below. As she neared the viaduct, Corridon launched himself from the parapet. Rawlins’s vain clutch missed him by inches.

Ann saw two more detectives, one holding a blood-stained handkerchief to his nose, come tumbling out of the first-class compartment and join Rawlins.

The three detectives watched Corridon as he shot towards the river. He seemed to take an incredibly long time before he entered the water. For all his courage, Rawlins was not embarking on a dive like that.

So engrossed were the three men in waiting for Corridon to break surface that none of them noticed Ann climb up on the parapet a few yards from them.

Several of the hundreds of passengers who were hanging out of the train windows watching this scene, and scarcely believing what they saw was actually happening, shouted a warning.

Rawlins spun round and made a futile grab, but Ann was already in her dive, and went shooting down to the river.

Corridon broke surface in time to see her poised on the parapet, and watched her small figure coming down like a bullet towards him. He saw her enter the water with scarcely a splash, and when her head appeared above the surface, he swam quickly towards her.

‘You little fool!’ He exclaimed as he reached her. ‘You might have broken your neck.’

‘So might you,’ she returned, shaking the water from her eyes. ‘But we didn’t, did we?’

‘Sure you’re all right?’

‘Of course.’ She trod water at his side. ‘You must admit I stopped the train absolutely at the right moment. I had to join you. That detective would have guessed I was the culprit, and I didn’t fancy being taken to the local lockup.’

‘It was a very nice bit of staff work.’ Corridon said, ‘but why on earth did you do it? I warned you to keep clear of me. Now look at the mess you’re in.’

She laughed.

‘I’d rather be here than up there.’

They both looked up at the distant bridge. Most of the passengers had left the train and had lined the bridge, staring down at them. Corridon recognized Rawlins in the crowd and waved to him. Rawlins, accepting the inevitable, waved back.

‘Poor old Rawlins,’ Corridon said, grinning. ‘I bet he’s cursing. Well, come on. We’ll swim downstream for a bit and then land. I doubt if there’s a way down here, but there’s no point in wasting time. Let’s go.’

They began to swim strongly downstream. The river was running fast, and they made good speed. After several minutes the faint blast of the train whistle made them look back. In the far distance, the train, now looking like a toy, was on the move once more.

‘I wonder if Rawlins has stayed behind or whether he’s going on to the next town to raise the alarm,’ Corridon said.

‘My bet is he’ll get to a telephone and let someone else do the work. How are you managing? Getting tired?’

‘A bit,’ Ann admitted. ‘My clothes are hampering me. Do you think we could land?’

He examined the thickly wooded banks of the river.

‘Right-ho. Over to your left.’

They let the current take them to the side of the river, and with difficulty scrambled up the steep bank. Ann flopped on the grass, panting.

‘Phew!’ she gasped, squeezing water out of her hair. ‘I’m horribly out of training. Will we ever get dry?’

Corridon stood over her, oblivious to the water that dripped from him. A hurried glance to right and left showed him they were facing a lonely stretch of wooded country with steep grassy hills and flat stretches of gorse.

‘We’ll get dry all right,’ he said cheerfully. ‘The sun’s coming out. When you’ve got your breath back we must get on.’

‘Do you know where we’re going?’

He pointed to the distant hills.

‘That’s our way. Northeast. The shortest route to Dunbar. It’ll be a pretty rugged walk over those hills, but we’ll have to put up with it. There doesn’t seem to be a house in sight for miles.’

‘There may be on the other side of the hills,’ She scrambled to her feet. ‘I feel awful. Have I got to walk to Dunbar in these sopping clothes?’

He grinned at her.

‘Take ‘em off if you like. I shan’t mind. We haven’t time to dry them.’

‘I won’t do that,’ she said, trying to wring water from her frock. ‘But seriously, we’ll have to get a change of clothes from somewhere and we’ll want food too. You realize we must be twenty miles from Dunbar, don’t you?’

‘That shouldn’t worry you. Don’t tell me one of Massingham’s young ladies is dismayed by a trifle like that. I thought you were tough.’

‘I’ve told you already: I’m out of training. What are we going to do? Do you think we could steal a car?’

He laughed at her.

‘That’s the surest way of getting the cops on our trail,’ he said. ‘We might hire one. Anyway, let’s get moving.’

‘I just can’t walk like this. I’m going behind a tree to wring out my clothes,’ she said firmly. ‘My shoes are full of water and I’m sure I have a fish down my back.’

‘Go ahead,’ he said, shrugging. ‘But hurry.’

She went behind a big shrub, and while waiting for her, he wrung out his own sodden coat and trousers.

‘Ann,’ he called as he fastened his belt. ‘Why did you stop the train? I thought we had agreed to part. Then all of a sudden you reappear and obstruct the police so I can escape. Why did you do it?’

She put her head round the shrub to look at him.

‘You looked awfully sad and pathetic sitting with all those policemen,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t leave you like that.’

‘Cut the fooling,’ Corridon said curtly. ‘For all you know I’m a murderer. You do know I’m after your brother. It would have been a fine let out for you if I had been locked up. What’s the idea?’

‘You were kind to me when those three descended on me at my studio. I felt I owed you something,’ she said. ‘And besides, I’m quite sure you didn’t have anything to do with Rita Allen’s death. At first

I was a little scared, but when you had gone I thought about it, and I decided you weren't the type.'

'Well, you're a little fool,' Corridon said irritably. 'You should have minded your own business.'

'Which I suppose, is just your way of saying thank you,' Ann said, laughing.

It was towards six o'clock in the evening when Corridon caught sight of their pursuers. Up to that time he had believed he had covered their tracks well enough to avoid a concentrated hunt, but now, seeing the line of distant figures suddenly appearing from the wooded hillside, he knew that Rawlins had outsmarted him.

'Here they come,' he said, catching Ann's wrist and pointing. 'Look; up there, moving this way.'

Ann and he were standing against a dense background of trees, and he was sure that to the men coming towards them they were invisible, but he knew the danger of moving suddenly, especially if there were shepherds among them. With their phenomenal eyesight, they would be quick to spot any movement.

'Do you think they're after us?' Ann asked, watching the approaching men.

'You bet they are. Let's move back under cover. Take your time. They may see us.'

Slowly they stepped back into the shelter of the wood, and Corridon dropped to the ground, pulling Ann with him.

Up to now they had been extraordinarily lucky. A few miles from where they had dived into the river, they had come upon a lonely farmhouse. Corridon had decided it would be worth the risk to get their clothes dried there, and perhaps, some food for their journey.

The farmer's wife had accepted his tale of a motoring accident and had dried their clothes, giving them a great dish of ham and eggs while they waited, wrapped in blankets before a blazing log fire she had lit for them.

There was a carrier's van coming to the farm in the early afternoon, she had told them, and she was sure the carrier would give them a lift to Borthwick where, she thought, there was a garage that could help them.

This had suited Corridon. Their clothes were dry by the time the carrier arrived, and he was willing to take them to Borthwick. From Borthwick they picked up the bus to Giffard, but this had been a false move, although a necessary one as Corridon had been unable to hire a car. Someone, Corridon decided, must have recognized them in the bus and raised the alarm.

They were now five miles from Giffard; on foot and heading for Dunbar. They had a parcel of food with them and were well rested, so the distant line of approaching men did not disturb him. He felt confident they would be able to give them the slip.

‘If we had been ten minutes sooner we wouldn’t have spotted them coming out of the wood, and we’d have walked right into them,’ he said, watching the line of men swing slowly away from them. ‘The puzzle is: where to go? If we keep to our original route they’ll guess at once we’re heading for Dunbar.’

‘Let’s walk due north,’ Ann suggested. ‘That’ll bring us to Haddington. From there, if we’ve shaken them off, we can swing east to Dunbar.’

He stared at her, surprised.

‘How do you know that?’

‘You men,’ she said and laughed. ‘You think you know everything. I’ve toured Scotland often enough and I’ve been to Haddington. That’s how I know.’

‘Good for you,’ he returned and grinned. ‘But for all that I wish I had a map. This blind walking is a waste of time and dangerous. Do you think you can find your way from here to Haddington?’

‘I hope so,’ she said a little doubtfully. ‘We kept to the main roads last time I was here. What shall we do? Wait until it’s dark or take a chance now?’

‘We can’t afford to waste any time.’ The line of men had disappeared now behind the slope of the land. ‘They’re heading west. We’ll go north. If we’re careful we should be able to keep out of their way. I think we should go.’

They moved off together; rapidly over the open dale, slowing to a steady walk when they reached the hills, careful not to show themselves above the horizon.

‘I’m worried about you,’ Corridon said suddenly as they swung along. ‘I wish you had kept clear of me.’

‘Don’t fuss,’ she said, smiling. ‘I can look after myself.’

‘That’s what you think,’ he said shortly, ‘but if they pin Rita Allen’s death on me you’ll be in trouble. Ever heard of an accessory after the fact?’

‘I do wish you wouldn’t cross your bridges before you come to them,’ she said. ‘I’m not worrying. Why should you?’

He grunted, and after walking in silence for some time, he said abruptly, ‘You know I’m getting to like you.’

‘Are you?’ She looked quickly at him. ‘You don’t look very happy about it.’

‘I’m not. I’m not your type. I’ll have to watch my step with you.’

‘You do seem to make mountains out of molehills, don’t you?’

‘At one time I looked on women as two-a-penny. I was a love-em-and-leave-em Joe. I got out of the habit during the war, and women haven’t interested me for months.’ He looked down at her. ‘You’re interesting me, and I don’t like it.’ This time she hadn’t anything to say, and after a pause he asked, ‘Are you engaged or something?’

‘Something,’ she said, and smiled. ‘He’s in the Navy. I see him about once in six months.’

Again he grunted.

‘That’s all right then,’ he said.

‘Is it? We just like each other,’ she said rather defensively. ‘That’s all.’

‘Go on liking him,’ Corridon said sourly. ‘It’ll save you a lot of grief. You know this complicates things.’

‘What things?’

He stopped abruptly and stared at her.

‘I like you,’ he said in a flat, controlled voice. ‘And when I like a person I try not to hurt them. I’m sentimental that way. You wouldn’t believe it to look at me, but I am. It’s a vice with me.’

‘Why should you hurt me?’ she asked, bewildered.

‘I’m after your brother, aren’t I?’ he said impatiently. ‘I intend to hand him over to the police. Well, now I’m not sure.’

‘You won’t have to hand him over to the police,’ she said quietly. ‘You’re getting worked up for nothing.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I keep telling you, Brian didn’t kill Rita Allen nor did he betray Gourville. I know Brian. He was rather like you in a way. He just wouldn’t do things like that. So don’t worry.’

‘Now look,’ Corridon said. ‘Someone betrayed Gourville. Someone killed Rita and Lubish and Harris. If your brother didn’t, who did?’

‘I don’t pretend to know, but I do know Brian didn’t.’

‘That gets me nowhere. I’m sorry, but it won’t do.’

‘And I don’t believe he’s alive. I want to believe it. I nearly believed it when you first told me, but

I've been thinking about it. He meant a lot to me. I knew when he died. I woke up one night, knowing he was dead. I didn't hear from the Air Ministry until four months later, but it came as no shock. I had known for so long.'

He patted her arm.

'Forget it, will you.' There was a note of exasperation in his voice. 'Think about your nice sailor boy. Come on, we're wasting time.'

II

A little later, as the sun was going down behind the hills, the unexpected happened. Ann heard the beating of engines first: and looked up. She saw the helicopter as it zoomed into sight above the line of firs away to their right. It was making straight towards them, flying at less than five hundred feet above the ground.

'Down!' Corridon cried, but Ann was already lying flat in the long, coarse grass, and he dropped beside her. They stared up at the machine as it hovered above them. 'They've spotted us,' he went on in disgust. 'Would you believe it? They must want me pretty badly.' He could see the pilot and another man leaning out of the machine. The pilot waved. 'Nice friendly type, isn't he?' Corridon went on bitterly. 'They'll bring those beaters to us by wireless. Come on; let's make for the woods. It's our only chance.'

They jumped to their feet and began the long run across the open dale towards a forest of firs a half a mile away. The helicopter flew above them, hovering like a hawk.

Before they had covered half the distance to the sanctuary of the wood, a faint shout, carried by the rising wind, made Corridon glance quickly over his shoulder. The line of men now appeared above the hill to their right, a mile or so away, and were running fast, taking their direction from the hovering machine.

'There are a couple of lads amongst that lot who can run,' Corridon said grimly. 'Come on, kid, we mustn't be caught in the open.'

'We mustn't be caught at all,' Ann panted and laughed. She was running well, and her eyes were bright with excitement. It was as much as Corridon could do to keep pace with her as she increased her speed.

Again he glanced over his shoulder. The two fast runners had left the main body of pursuers far behind and were covering the ground like greyhounds. They were only a quarter of a mile away now,

and coming fast. He gritted his teeth and increased his speed, but he was too heavy and thickset for this kind of running.

‘Go on,’ he panted. ‘Get into the wood and wait for me there. Leave these two to me. Go on! Fast as you can.’

Obediently she drew ahead, moving effortlessly the way a deer runs and as fast.

He could hear the thud of flying feet behind him and again glanced over his shoulder. The two men, young and well built, were rapidly overhauling him. He stumbled and lost ground.

They were not more than fifty yards behind him now.

‘Hey! Stop, will you?’ One of them yelled and increased his speed.

The wood was just ahead. Ann had already disappeared, crashing her way through the undergrowth to the clearing beyond. Corridon had no intention of letting these two follow them into the wood. He looked past them at the straggling line of men who were following behind. They were still a good half-mile in the rear; far enough away for him to deal with these two and still make good his escape.

He suddenly swerved. The two men were almost on him, and he had to dodge as one of them, moving a little quicker than he had anticipated, rushed him. As he blundered past, Corridon hit him at the back of his neck with a hard, chopping blow, delivered with the side of his hand and with expert precision. The man dropped as if he had been pole-axed and lay still, flat on his face.

His companion, breathing heavily, jumped away from Corridon, startled by the abrupt way the odds had evened. Corridon gave him no time to get set. He hadn’t rough-housed with some of the most vicious fighters in the Commandos for nothing, and with an ear-splitting yell, he dived at the man’s legs, his shoulder catching the other’s knees, sending him over.

The man clutched hold of Corridon as they both hit the ground and feebly tried to get a grip on Corridon’s throat. Corridon threw him off, scrambled to his knees and as the man began to sit up, he hit him on the side of his jaw, flattening him.

Corridon was on his feet in an instant. The line of men were still some distance away. The mile run over rough country had slowed them down. Among them, plodding towards him doggedly, was Rawlins.

Corridon waved, then dodged into the wood. Ann caught hold of his hand, and together they ran swiftly down the steep path that led deeper into the wood.

As they ran, they could hear the distant sound of their pursuers entering the wood. There was a steady crashing of undergrowth, faint shouts and whistles blowing. They kept on, slowing now to a rapid trot, moving through the wood as silently as Red Indians, until after a while the sounds of pursuit died away.

Corridon pulled up.

‘That’s that I think,’ he panted and wiped his face with his sleeve. ‘It was a bit too close while it lasted, wasn’t it?’ and he grinned at Ann who leaned against a tree, struggling to regain her breath. She looked tired, but answered his grin with one of her own.

‘What now?’ she asked, and peered into the dark, gloomy forest of firs that seemed to stretch for miles before her.

‘It’s too dark for them to follow us now. It’s my guess they’ll withdraw and wait until the morning. By then, if we have any luck, we should be miles away.’

‘Shall we go on?’

‘That’s the idea. Feel like it?’

‘Not really, but we’d better.’

‘There’s no need to rush. We’ll follow this path. It must lead somewhere. Once clear of the wood we’ll be able to pick up a landmark. But we must keep moving.’

A half-hour’s steady walking brought them to the edge of the wood. The going was slow as they were walking in total darkness, both of them had had training for such conditions, otherwise progress would have been impossible. Away from the obstructing treetops, they could see the faint gleam of the moon, partially obscured by heavy, black clouds, and in the far distance the lights of a village.

‘I wonder where that is?’ Corridon said, pointing.

‘I don’t know, but it’s on our route, isn’t it?’

‘It should be,’ Corridon said doubtfully. ‘But before we go any farther, let’s eat. I’m starving.’

They sat down, side by side on the grass, and while Ann unpacked the parcel of food she had carried slung to her belt, Corridon attempted to study the contours of the distant countryside, but it was too dark to pick out any landmark and he gave it up.

They ate in silence. Both busy with their thoughts. Corridon was worried. He kept thinking of Mallory. What was going to happen when he came face to face with Mallory? Suppose after all this Mallory wasn’t on the island? It was a hundred to one chance that he would be there. And if he wasn’t - what then?

‘Worrying again?’ Ann said, looking at him. She could see by his tense attitude that he had something on his mind.

‘Sure,’ he said and laughed. ‘I’m always worrying. Now, don’t let’s start that all over again.’

It was all very well for Ann to say Mallory was dead, he was thinking, but ghosts don't shoot in the dark. He recalled the whispering voice he had heard in Crew's flat. Then the shot.

No, Mallory wasn't dead. Mallory could be dangerous. It would save a lot of complications if he was dead.

Ann said suddenly, 'Look, there's a car down there. That must be a road.'

Far below them the long, raking beams of a car's headlights suddenly appeared from behind a sloping hill, moving towards the village.

'Seems in no hurry,' Corridon said, leaning forward to stare intently at the distant lights. 'I believe he's stopping.' He jumped to his feet. 'He has stopped. Let's get down there, Ann. We might get a lift.'

'Suppose it's the police? Do you think it's worth the risk?'

'We won't rush it. We can but take a look. Come on.'

The way down to the hidden road was steep and easy-going, and they made good speed, running and walking, encouraged to see the car remained stationary as if waiting for them.

'Looks like a breakdown,' Corridon said, pausing as they reached the road. The car was a hundred yards or so from them, and they could see the bonnet was open and a man, holding an electric torch, was peering at the engine. 'Wait here. I'll have a word with him. Watch out for trouble.'

Leaving Ann, he walked towards the car. A quick glance, showed him the driver was alone.

'Can I help you?' Corridon called when he was within a few yards of the car.

The driver looked up sharply and swung his torch on Corridon.

'I doubt it,' he said and made no attempt to conceal his bad temper. 'Not unless you're a better mechanic than I am. The damned thing just packed up. I'm miles from anywhere, aren't I?'

'The nearest village is over there to your right,' Corridon said, pointing. 'About five miles away.' He drew close to the driver and studied him in the reflection from the headlamps.

Nothing to worry about here, he thought. Probably a commercial traveller.

'These new cars make me vomit,' the driver said, kicking one of the tyres viciously. 'I've had it only a couple of months. It's always going wrong.'

'Let's have a look,' Corridon said, and bent over the hot engine. 'What were the symptoms?'

'The damned thing gave a splutter and packed up.'

‘All right for petrol?’

‘The tank’s full. The blasted thing’s always going wrong.’

‘It’s probably carburettor trouble. Got any tools?’

‘You know this is pretty decent of you,’ the driver said cheering up. ‘Where the devil did you spring from?’

‘My wife and I are on a walking tour,’ Corridon said gravely.

He raised his voice. ‘Hey, darling. Come and give us a hand.’

Ann appeared out of the darkness.

‘This is my wife,’ Corridon said, not looking at Ann. ‘Our friend here has carburettor trouble and I’m hoping to fix it for him,’ he went on, addressing Ann, but still not looking at her.

‘My husband’s very clever with his hands,’ Ann said, suppressing a giggle. ‘I’m sure he can put your carburettor on its feet again.’

‘That’s fine,’ the driver said. ‘My name’s Brewer. Talk about good Samaritans. I don’t know the first or last thing about cars.’

He stared admiringly at Ann who suddenly became conscious that her frock had shrunk alarmingly and she was showing a great deal of her legs.

‘Well, it’s our luck’ too,’ Corridon said, spreading out the tools on the wing of the car. ‘We lost our way and were looking for a lift. When we saw your headlights we couldn’t believe our luck. It’s a lonely spot, isn’t it?’

While he took down the carburettor, Brewer made himself agreeable to Ann. He seemed almost regretful when Corridon reassembled the carburettor, adjusted the last screw and told him to start the engine.

‘I think she’ll go now,’ he said. ‘The feed was blocked by the look of it. Anyway, try her.’

The engine fired at the first touch of the starter.

‘You really are a bally marvel,’ Brewer said, beaming out of the window. ‘I should have been stuck here all night. Well, hop in; the two of you. Where can I drop you?’

‘We’re going to Dunbar,’ Ann said excitedly. ‘You couldn’t drop us off there, could you?’

‘Why not? I’m on my way to Edinburgh. I’d be glad to.’

They got in the car and Corridon slammed the door.

As they drove with increasing speed along the dark road, Ann slipped her hand into his. He let it lie there, but he wasn't thinking of her; he was thinking of Mallory.

chapter thirteen

I

The motorboat was an eighteen-foot Brooke runabout, fitted with a 10 h.p. engine and handled like a motor car. It was housed in a concrete and woodshed, and slung above the water in a cradle of steel hawsers. An electric winch lowered the boat by the touch of a button.

While Ann checked over the engine, Corridon kept an uneasy watch by the open doors.

Brewer had left them in the main street of the town, and as soon as he was out of sight, they had walked down to the sea.

They hadn't gone far when Corridon had a sudden feeling that they were being followed. He had said nothing to Ann, unwilling to believe that the feeling was anything more than an attack of nerves. He had kept a sharp lookout, but had seen no one.

Now, as he stood by the doorway, he experienced the sensation of being watched, and he peered into the darkness, feeling the cold wind that was coming off the sea, against his face, but could see nothing to confirm his suspicions.

'Everything's okay,' Ann said, climbing on to the slipway.

'Shall we go?'

'Yes,' he said, reluctantly turning from the door. 'It'll choppy out there. The wind's rising. The sooner we get off the better. How long will it take?'

'About an hour,' Ann told him. 'We'll be all right once we get there. There's plenty of tinned food in the house. We should have enough to keep us going for a week anyway.'

'A week will be about right' He again peered into the darkness. 'Come on; let's go.'

She sensed his uneasiness and looked sharply at him.

'Is there anything wrong?'

'Nothing. Nerves, I guess. I have a sneaking feeling someone's watching us.'

She hurriedly pressed the button of the winch, and as the boat began to settle gently into the water, she drew close to him.

‘Then let’s get off. It’d be awful if...’

She broke off with a stifled scream as a sudden movement at the open door made them both turn quickly. A shadow, thrown by the light hanging from the roof, fell across the bow of the boat.

‘Who’s there?’ Corridon asked, moving forward.

Jeanne came into the light. She held the Mauser pistol waist high and pointing at them. There was a cold, set expression on her white face and her eyes glittered.

‘I’m coming with you,’ she said breathlessly.

Corridon gave a little sigh of relief. He had been expecting Rawlins to come out of the darkness.

‘I’ve never met such a woman for turning up at the wrong moment,’ he said, and grinned. ‘How the devil did you get here?’

‘We arranged to meet here,’ she said in a cold, flat voice.

‘You didn’t think you were going to get rid of me so easily, did you?’

‘I’d forgotten all about you,’ Corridon said, eyeing the Mauser watchfully. ‘Is Jan snooping out there in the dark?’

‘No.’

‘Well, where is he then?’

She laughed. It was a curious, unexpected sound, and sent a little chill up Corridon’s spine. He stared at her, suddenly realizing how ill she looked. Her skin seemed to have shrunk, giving her face a starved, ferocious look. Her eyes glittered feverishly and had sunk deep into dark ringed sockets. Her lips were bloodless.

‘He is dead,’ she said.

‘Dead?’ He hadn’t expected this. ‘What happened? Did the police get him?’

She looked at Ann, and a bitter, sneering little smile flickered at the corners of her mouth.

‘Ask her. She knows. Mallory killed him.’

Ann caught her breath sharply and took a quick step forward, but Corridon pulled her to his side.

‘What are you talking about?’ he said to Jeanne. ‘What makes you think Mallory killed him?’

‘I saw it happen.’ She ran nervous fingers through her thick, black hair. ‘He followed us.’

‘Followed you - where?’

She stood motionless for a moment or so, then she said with a sudden rush of words, ‘Ranleigh was killed. He sacrificed himself for us. Jan was wounded. The police nearly caught us. Jan and I hid in a church.’ Then the words dried up and she stood looking at them, pressing her fingers to her temples, frowning.

‘Well, go on,’ Corridon said sharply. ‘What happened?’

‘We got on a train,’ she went on, more slowly now. ‘We were lucky. It went straight through to Dunbar. Jan was very bad. He was suffering from thirst. He kept asking for a drink. I left him and climbed from truck to truck, hoping to find something for him. Then I heard him cry out. I looked back. He was half out of the truck, clinging to the rail.’ She lowered her voice and said in almost a whisper. ‘Mallory had him by the throat. There was nothing I could do. I was too far away. Jan fell on the line. There was a train coming and he was cut to pieces. He died the way Lubish died; and it was Mallory who killed him.’

Corridon felt a tingle run up his spine.

‘You mean you saw Mallory?’ he asked, watching her closely.

‘Yes.’

‘You recognized him? It wasn’t someone you thought was Mallory?’

Her face hardened, and raising her voice, she said viciously, ‘Don’t you think I know Mallory when I see him?’

‘She’s lying,’ Ann whispered, and Corridon felt her trembling against him.

‘Wait,’ he said to her in an undertone. ‘Let her talk.’ To Jeanne he went on, ‘What happened after Jan was killed?’

Jeanne stared blankly at him, frowned, then with an obvious effort as if her memory was uncertain, said, ‘I followed Mallory here. He has gone to the island.’

‘You’re going too fast,’ Corridon said. ‘He knew you were on the train with Jan. Why didn’t he finish you too?’

Her eyes were blank now and the muzzle of the Mauser wavered uncertainly at them.

‘He’s gone to the island. I saw him,’ she said uneasily.

‘How do you know he is on the island?’ Corridon asked.

‘I saw him.’

‘But how did he get there? This is his boat. Why didn’t he take it?’

Her hand went to her forehead. She looked confused.

‘I saw him go,’ she said obstinately. ‘He took a boat from the harbour.’ She paused and went on as if talking to herself, ‘I am the last of them. They have gone, one after the other. He has been too clever for them, but he’s not too clever for me.’ She moved forward, threatening them with the Mauser. ‘Get into the boat,’ she said. ‘Quickly! We have wasted enough time. He is on the island. This time there will be no escape for him. Get into the boat.’

‘Come on,’ Corridon said to Ann and added in a low whisper, ‘Watch out for trouble. She’s as mad as a hatter.’

Jeanne climbed down after them into the boat. She kept away from them, sitting huddled up in the stern, covering them with the pistol.

Ann, white-faced and tense, started the engine and steered the boat out of the shed and headed for the open sea.

II

Hermit Island was much bigger than Corridon had imagined. He had pictured it to be a rocky platform, perhaps two hundred yards square on which a house had been erected, but when the motorboat entered a small well-concealed harbour, and looking up, he saw mighty walls of rock towering above him away into the darkness he had something of a shock. From the formation of the sharp jagged rocks he began to understand what Ann had meant when she said the island could be dangerous to those who did not know every step of it.

A heavy sea mist shrouded the island, and the wind howled dismally in the crevasses of the rock wall, and at the approach of the boat a great flock of sea-gulls rose out of the darkness, their mournful cries rising above the roar of the breakers.

By the boat-house, a replica of the shed on the mainland, was a flight of steps cut into the rock, and up these the three climbed, buffeted by the wind that seemed to clutch at them, threatening to sweep them into the sea. Corridon counted two hundred steps before they reached the broad rocky platform from which he could just make out the outline of a mighty peak in the distance, sharp-edged and black against the night sky.

He followed Ann, his head bent against the wind, along a narrow path that sloped gently into the darkness. Jeanne brought up the rear, and he could hear her muttering from time to time as she

stumbled over the uneven path.

They came upon the house suddenly and unexpectedly. It was built into the face of the rock wall, sheltered on two sides by massive rock formations, but directly exposed to the bitter winds that swept off the North Sea. It was a squat, two-storey building, anchored by steel rods to the solid rock. The roof, floors and walls were of concrete; the walls a foot thick. The house looked as ugly and as strong as an old Scottish fortress.

Near the house Corridon could make out another flight of steps cut into the rock that led upwards, and he learned later that at the top of the steps was a plateau, the highest point of the island with the exception of the Hermit, the distant peak he had seen from the lower level, from which the island derived its name.

The house was in darkness. Its windows, like black mirrors, reflected the slow-moving clouds. As Ann moved towards the front door, Corridon caught her arm and pulled her back.

‘Not so fast,’ he cautioned, looking up at the house. ‘Don’t let’s rush things. If someone’s there—’

‘There isn’t anyone,’ she said impatiently. ‘You don’t believe her lies, do you?’

‘All the same there’s no point in taking chances.’

‘I have nothing to be afraid of,’ she returned, pulling free, and before he could stop her she had run up to the front door.

‘Have you a light?’ she went on, looking over her shoulder. ‘We always seal the door when we leave. If the seal’s intact, then no one’s inside.’

He joined her, and threw the beam of his flashlight on to the blob of sealing-wax that would have broken had the door been opened. He saw at a glance that the sealing-wax had been attached to the door for some time.

‘Is there any other entrance?’ he asked, as Jeanne came cautiously forward and joined them.

‘No,’ Ann said. ‘This is the only way in. As you can see there are shutters up on the lower windows and they’re bolted from inside.’

She took a key from her pocket and unlocked the door. The three of them walked into a big, comfortable lounge.

As Ann turned on the lights, Corridon pushed past her.

‘Stay here,’ he said. ‘I’m going to look over the house.’

‘You won’t find anyone here,’ Ann said shortly.

'I'm taking no chances,' he said.

He went from room to room and satisfied himself that no one was hiding in the house, and that it was impossible for anyone to break in. When he returned to the lounge he found Ann standing by the big electric fire and Jeanne, ill at ease and restless, prowling about the room.

It was now after eleven o'clock and he decided against exploring the island in the dark. Jeanne reluctantly agreed. The size of the island, its precipitous cliffs, and the fury of the wind seemed to have awed her, and she kept away from the other two, fingering the Mauser, a sullen, brooding expression in her eyes.

When Ann offered to take her to a bedroom, she said curtly she would remain in the lounge by the fire.

'Let her alone,' Corridon said in an undertone. 'Let's go upstairs and get away from her.'

There were four bedrooms leading on to a gallery that overlooked the lounge. Corridon followed Ann into one of the bedrooms and closed the door.

'You don't believe Brian's here, do you?' she asked anxiously as he sat a little wearily on the bed. 'You don't believe her lies?'

He looked up at her.

'I'm sure she's insane,' he said quietly. 'Her story about Jan doesn't hang together. I'm beginning to think that Mallory is such an obsession with her she's imagining half what she thinks is happening.' He rubbed his jaw, frowning. 'It might be she's imagined everything that's happened if only I could think of a reason why Harris and Lubish and Rita Allen were murdered. The trouble is, although she's cracked, she's not the only one who is certain your brother's alive. Ranleigh and Jan thought so too.'

'You don't think Brian killed Jan? You don't believe that nonsense?' she asked.

'No. You remember she said there was nothing she could do when she saw Jan and Mallory struggling together. But she had the Mauser. She must have. Jan hadn't got it. He fell off the moving train, and if he had it, there would be no way for her to have got hold of it. She's a dead shot. She could have shot Mallory as he was killing Jan. No, the story doesn't hang together. We know Jan was badly wounded. He might have died from his wounds, and she's either imagined it was Mallory who killed him or is lying deliberately.' He ran his fingers through his hair. 'But why? There's something wrong somewhere. We're missing something. I'm going to think about it. There's something behind all this; some little thing that'll make sense if I can only hit on it.' He got up and went over to her. 'Go to bed, Ann. Let me think about it, and don't worry.'

'It's such a relief to me you don't believe her story,' Ann said, putting her hand on his arm. 'If only you'd believe Brian didn't have anything to do with any of this—'

‘She says he is on the island,’ Corridon said. ‘All right, if he is I’ll find him. I have a feeling tomorrow will see the end of it.’

‘You won’t find him,’ Ann said. ‘I know you won’t.’

‘Go to bed.’ His voice was curt. ‘Lock yourself in. I don’t trust her. I wish I could get hold of the gun. Go on, Ann. We can’t do anything tonight. We must wait until daylight.’

When she had gone he began to pace up and down.

Rain beat against the window, and he could hear the wind and the sound of the waves thudding on the rocks below. There was nothing he could do now until the morning, but he was reluctant to undress and get into bed. He felt uneasy, and the continuous muffled sound of the waves worried him.

Impatiently he took off his coat and sat in an armchair. It seemed a long time since he had slept. He had dozed in the train, but nothing more, and his eyes were heavy; yet he knew he wouldn’t sleep if he did go to bed.

He relaxed in the chair, closing his eyes, and began to think about Mallory.

Mallory: a voice in the darkness; a picture conjured up from the description of others. A good man; a bad man. A mythical figure who murdered ruthlessly. A man whom Ranleigh had admired, whom Ann loved; whom Jeanne and Jan hated with vicious intensity; a traitor; a man who was loyal to his friends. A will-o’-the-wisp; here on the island or dead, buried in some unknown grave in France.

Corridon thumped the arm of his chair in exasperation. He was missing something. He was sure of it now. The whole thing had started because Mallory had betrayed Gourville. If Mallory had kept his mouth shut none of this would have happened. Harris, Lubish and Rita Allen would have been alive.

These three wouldn’t have come to him for his help. If Mallory had kept his mouth shut. Why had Mallory betrayed Gourville? Even Ranleigh couldn’t understand that. Was this the key to the whole thing? Was this what he was looking for?

He sat up suddenly as the room was plunged into darkness.

Either the electricity had failed or someone had turned off the main switch. He got quietly to his feet, groped his way cautiously across the room to the door and looked into darkness. All the lights in the house had gone out, and the only sound he could hear was the sullen roar of the breakers.

And as he stood listening, his heart thumping violently, he heard out of the darkness somewhere below him a voice that stiffened the hair on the nape of his neck. A hoarse penetrating whisper that seemed to have no body nor direction. The same voice he had heard in Crew’s flat: Mallory’s voice, ‘Are you there, Jeanne?’

And Corridon’s nerves recoiled a split second before the flash of flame and the sharp explosion of

gunfire. A cry followed the crack of the gun: Jeanne's voice, then the sound of a bolt being pulled back, and a moment later a great blast of wind rushed through the house.

Ann came blundering out into the darkness and cannoned into Corridon.

'What is it? What's happening?' she cried, her voice tight with fear.

He pushed her aside and stepped to the balustrade of the gallery and sent the powerful beam of his flashlight into the lounge below.

It was empty. The front door stood open.

'Jeanne!' he called sharply. 'Where are you?'

There was no answer.

'Where's the main switch?' he said, turning to Ann.

'In the kitchen.'

'Wait here,' he said curtly and ran down the stairs. A moment later the lights went on again, and he came out of the kitchen to look around the lounge.

'She's gone,' he said, looking up at Ann who stood at the head of the stairs.

'But the shot? What happened?' Ann said, and came down and joined him.

He went over to the front door, peered out into the rain-lashed darkness, then closed and bolted the door.

'Look around, Ann, I want to find the bullet,' he said and began to examine the walls and the furniture, his face alight with excitement.

It was Ann who found the bullet, embedded in the oak panelling. Corridon dug it out with his knife and turned the flattened slug thoughtfully between his fingers.

'A Mauser bullet,' he said, and stood staring at Ann, and then he gave a little grin. 'I told you I was missing something. The voice fooled me. I think I've got it!'

III

From the plateau above the house Corridon had a bird's-eye view of the whole of the island. At the

far end the Hermit rose stark and black against the morning sky. From where he stood he could see that parts of the island consisted of flat stretches of moorland, but the bulk of it was rock, ending in sheer precipices to the sea. On the east side was a broad stretch of sand, while to the west the beach was strewn with jagged rocks at the foot of the black sea-cliffs.

After examining the ground for some minutes, Corridon decided to ignore the stretches of moorland. It offered no cover, and anyone crossing it would be instantly seen. The west side of the island with its massive rocks and boulders seemed to be the most likely place for anyone to hide, and he decided to begin his search from there.

He made his way down into the glen at the foot of the plateau. The ground offered excellent cover but his progress was slow as most of the time he walked in a stooping position to keep below the level of the thick gorse bushes that covered the glen. He was taking no chances.

Beyond the glen the ground began to rise, and after a while he came upon two paths, one leading to the beach and the other to high ground and eventually to the top of the precipitous cliffs a mile or so to the west. The path to the beach was bare of cover, and he decided to take the upper path. From the cliff head he would again have a bird's-eye view of the island, and would, he hoped, be able to examine the beach from the heights without the need to go down there.

He kept moving, aware of the utter loneliness of the island. His only companions were the gulls who flew above him in circles, uttering their harsh cries.

By the time he reached the head of the cliffs, it was almost noon, and the heat of the sun struck down on him. He had been walking for three hours, and had seen no other sign of life except the gulls.

Lying flat so as not to be seen against the skyline, he began to crawl to the edge of the cliff. His advance was cautious as he remembered Ann's warning that the ground was treacherous.

He reached the edge and looked down at the massive rocks below. A little to his right was a stretch of sand, drying in the sun, and half concealed by a barrier of rocks. Something on the face of the sand attracted his attention. He edged farther forward and craned his neck and looked down at a single line of footprints clearly imprinted in the sand. Even from that height and they were two hundred feet below him, the footprints were unmistakable. They were big and widely spaced and going away to the north, the opposite direction to the house which now seemed to Corridon to be miles in his rear.

The sight of the footprints gave him a shock. They were the last thing he expected to see. Mallory! And as if in answer to the question that flashed through his mind he saw something move away in the distance. He turned quickly and searched the sweeping dale of gorse and scrub, but saw nothing. Then as he was wondering if his imagination had played him a trick the silhouette of a broad-shouldered, tall man appeared against the skyline. The figure vanished as quickly as it appeared, but it was enough.

Without hesitation Corridon scrambled on hands and knees down the slope that led from the cliff top, and as soon as he was below the horizon he stood up and began to run.

The ground was rough and uneven, and by the time he reached the dale, he was panting and sweat ran down his face.

Beyond the dale was a stretch of barren ground, dotted with big boulders, and that led to the base of the Hermit.

He was now within half a mile of the towering peak, and looking up, he saw an eagle fly out suddenly from its hidden nest and sail away to the north. Watching it, he saw it climb steeply with a few hurried strokes of its wings and sheer away off its course, uttering its shrill squeal as if alarmed. He guessed the man he had seen must be close by, and he advanced cautiously, using every scrap of cover, careful not to dislodge any loose stones or give warning of his approach.

It took him nearly half an hour to reach the high ridge close to the Hermit's base, and bending low, he climbed the ridge and looked down on to a vast stretch of moorland that sloped steeply down to the cliffs. What he saw there brought him upright. The puzzled, cautious look went from his eyes and his strained, uncertain expression gave way to a broad grin.

Sitting on a rock, not more than ten yards away, was a big bulky man who was rubbing his ankle, a rueful expression on his red, sun-scorched face.

The man looked up sharply, and seeing Corridon, his face lit up with a beaming smile.

'Hello, old chap,' he said cheerfully. 'Damned rough going, isn't it? I was hoping to run into you before long. I've had just about enough of walking over this perishing island.'

It was Detective-Sergeant Rawlins.

IV

'You may not believe it,' Corridon said, coming slowly down from the ridge, 'but I couldn't be more pleased to see you.'

Rawlins continued to beam, but an alert look came into his eyes, and rather self-consciously, his hand strayed to his coat pocket.

'Well, that's something,' he said cautiously. 'I didn't think you'd be pleased to see me. Surprised, perhaps, but not pleased.'

'Well, I am,' Corridon said. 'And you needn't fumble for a gun,' he went on jeeringly as he sat on a rock close to Rawlins. 'I'm not going to make trouble. I really am pleased to see you. You've confirmed a little theory I was working on. Tell me, have you been walking along the beach about a

couple of miles back?’

‘That’s right,’ Rawlins said. He was having difficulty in keeping his smile bright, and his eyes were puzzled.

‘You know, for a moment, I thought it might be someone else,’ Corridon said. ‘Although I didn’t think anyone but a copper could make prints that size. How did you find your way here?’

‘The Pole, Jan, whoever he calls himself, put us wise,’ Rawlins told him. ‘This French girl’s here, isn’t she?’

‘She certainly is. So you’ve got Jan?’

‘Oh, yes. We got him or rather what’s left of him. My men picked him up on the railway line a few miles beyond Cockburnspath. He had quite a story to tell.’

‘Is he all right?’

‘No, I wouldn’t say he’s all right. In fact, I doubt if he’ll be alive when next I see him. He fell off a train. It’s a remarkable thing he could talk at all.’

Corridon took out his packet of cigarettes, lit one and tossed the packet over to Rawlins. He fancied he heard a slight sound behind him, but he didn’t look round.

‘He fell? He wasn’t thrown?’

‘This French girl: what’s her name?’

‘Jeanne Persigny.’

‘That’s right. He said she hit him over the head and threw him out.’

Corridon nodded.

‘I hoped that was coming.’

‘What do you know about it?’ Rawlins asked sharply.

A stone rattled down the ridge, making Rawlins look up, but Corridon didn’t turn.

‘A lot,’ he said. ‘It all hooks up with a chap called Mallory. Did Jan mention him?’

‘Oh, rather,’ Rawlins said and looked a little bored. ‘He was full of him, and how you were roped in to find him and God knows what. Did they really pay you seven hundred and fifty quid?’

Corridon grinned.

‘He was exaggerating,’ he said. ‘But they did pay me.’

Rawlins eyed him searchingly.

‘He claimed Mallory killed two of his friends, Lubish and Harris. He also said Mallory killed Rita Allen. The fellow’s up the pole; if you’ll pardon the pun. We checked up on Mallory right away. He died on active service about a year ago. There’s no doubt about that.’

‘Sure?’ Corridon said. ‘You’re absolutely certain?’

‘As sure as we can be. I’m satisfied.’

‘I suppose Jan gave you the background to all this?’ Corridon asked. ‘He told you about Gourville, and how it all started?’

Rawlins grunted.

‘Oh, yes. We’re checking on the tale now, but there’s nothing in it for us. I’m concerned chiefly with Rita Allen’s death, and I want to talk to the French girl.’ He continued to stare at Corridon searchingly. ‘You’re a pretty cool card, aren’t you?’ he went on. ‘What do you know about Rita Allen? You were with her when she died, weren’t you?’

Corridon nodded.

‘Between you and me and nobody else I was, but I didn’t touch her. I heard her scream and found her. I didn’t know if she had fallen or had been pushed. With my record it put me in an awkward position. I skipped out fast.’

‘Medical evidence showed she was pushed, and that makes it murder, old chap,’ Rawlins said gravely.

‘It’ll be hard to prove,’ Corridon returned. ‘You’ll have trouble convincing a jury.’

‘We can always try,’ Rawlins said, brightening up. ‘With your background and reputation ...’ He beamed. ‘It wouldn’t surprise me if we didn’t get away with it.’

‘Don’t count your chickens,’ Corridon said blandly. ‘You’re in for a little surprise, but don’t do anything rash. She’s a dead shot, and she’s been holding a gun on us for the past three minutes. Didn’t you hear her?’ He glanced over his shoulder, and raising his voice, called, ‘Come on out, Jeanne, and I’ll introduce you to Detective-Sergeant Rawlins.’

Jeanne appeared from behind a rock on the ridge just above where they were sitting, the Mauser in her hand. There was a sneering little smile flickering at the corners of her mouth.

‘This time, for a change, you’ve turned up at the right moment,’ Corridon said. He glanced at the startled Rawlins.

‘This is Jeanne Persigny. I wouldn’t advise you to try any tricks with her. Just sit still and take it easy, and if you can, keep your mouth shut. Jeanne and I have things to talk about. Haven’t we, Jeanne?’

‘Have we?’ she said in her cold flat voice.

‘Now, look here—’ Rawlins began, but Corridon silenced him with a gesture.

‘I don’t know if you overheard what we were saying,’ he went on to Jeanne as Rawlins subsided with a grunt, ‘but if you didn’t you’ll be interested to learn our friend here has picked up Jan, and Jan appears to have talked his head off. According to him it was you and not Mallory who threw him off the train. Was it?’

Jeanne said nothing. She leaned against the rock, holding the pistol against her hip, the muzzle pointing at the two men. In spite of her sneering smile she seemed on point of collapse.

‘You may as well own up,’ he said sharply. ‘Was it you who threw Jan off the train?’

‘Yes,’ she said huskily. ‘What does it matter?’

‘But it does,’ he said. ‘It matters very much.’ He paused and then went on, ‘It’s too bad you didn’t know Mallory died over a year ago.’

She flinched.

‘He’s alive,’ she said, and her hand strayed to her forehead.

‘No, he isn’t,’ Corridon said, watching her closely. ‘If you had known he was dead all this wouldn’t have happened, would it? Up to last night you had me fooled. But you overplayed your hand. That trick of imitating Mallory’s voice worked the first time, but you shouldn’t have tried it on again. It was pretty obvious to me after I’d found all the doors and windows of the house fastened that no one could have broken in, and then I found the bullet and that told me it was your gun that’d fired the shot. There could have been only one person who let off the gun and whispered your name: that was you. I began to put two and two together. If it was you imitating Mallory’s voice last night, it could also have been you imitating his voice in Crew’s flat. Now, why did you do it? Wasn’t it because you were anxious to confuse the hunt for Mallory as much as you could?’

A muscle in Jeanne’s white face twitched. She didn’t say anything.

‘The other problem that puzzled me,’ Corridon went on, ‘was why Harris and Lubish and Rita Allen were killed. They all had one thing in common: the three of them knew something about Mallory: something that would lead them to him. If Mallory was dead, who killed them?’

Jeanne flinched away from his steady gaze. She was breathing heavily and there was a feverish look in her eyes.

‘Where I went wrong was believing Ranleigh’s tale about Mallory betraying Gourville,’ Corridon said in the same, quiet conversational tone. ‘Ranleigh believed it, but he got it secondhand from you, didn’t he? But it wasn’t Mallory who gave Gourville’s hiding place away. It was you!’

She gave a shuddering gasp and her hands went to her face.

‘It can be the only possible explanation,’ Corridon said. ‘I’m not blaming you. I know what devils the Gestapo were. They worked on you first, but couldn’t get anything from you. Then they turned on Ranleigh. After he had lost consciousness, they came back to you again, didn’t they? And this time they made you talk. Mallory heard you give Gourville away. He was sorry for you, and he took the blame. It was the kind of chivalrous thing he would do. He was the type. When Ranleigh recovered consciousness, Mallory told him it was he who had betrayed Gourville, and Ranleigh believed it. Isn’t that right?’

She made an effort to speak, but the words wouldn’t come.

Her face had gone grey and she seemed scarcely able to stand.

‘That’s the key to the whole business,’ he went on, watching her. ‘It was Jan who insisted on revenge. You were frightened he would learn the truth. You knew if he found Mallory, Mallory would talk. So you did everything you could to confuse the hunt. Then when Harris and Lubish got on Mallory’s track, as you thought, you killed them. You followed Rita and me to her house and when you overheard her telling me about Mallory’s island you got scared and killed her too.’ He shot out his hand and pointed at her. ‘It was you all the time, wasn’t it? You and not Mallory from the very beginning.’

She stiffened, her face working, an insane glitter in her eyes.

‘Yes!’ she cried shrilly. ‘Yes, I betrayed Pierre! You don’t know what they did to me I didn’t want Mallory to take the blame. He loved me, the fool. As if I could care for a fool like him. Yes, I did it! I killed them!’ She began to back away, threatening them with the Mauser. ‘Stay where you are!’ she screamed at Rawlins as he stood up. ‘I’m not going to be locked away. If you come after me I’ll kill you!’

She turned and began to run blindly along the ridge towards the cliff head.

Rawlins gave a shout and sprang forward, then stopped as two figures rose out of nearby shrubs and began to run after Jeanne.

‘Catch her, Hudson!’ he bawled excitedly. ‘Don’t let her get away!’

But the two detectives were no match for Jeanne’s speed.

‘She won’t get far,’ Corridon said quietly.

Jeanne had reached the cliff head before the two detectives were even off the ridge. She was moving swiftly, and she was still running as she went over the edge of the cliff. It seemed a long time before they heard the thud of her body as it smashed on the rocks below.

V

The two detectives, carrying their burden, wrapped in a mackintosh sheet, walked across the sand to the police boat.

Rawlins stood, braced against the wind, his hands in his coat pockets, his face thoughtful. From time-to-time he glanced at Corridon who sat on a rock, smoking, his broad back turned squarely on the two detectives at work on their gruesome task.

‘Well, I suppose this lets you out again,’ Rawlins said wistfully. ‘I’ve never known such a chap.’

Corridon scowled at him.

‘You have the wrong ideas about me, Rawlins,’ he said coldly. ‘You want to wake up. The trouble with me is I’m too willing to help people. Let it be a warning to you. Look at the mess it lands me in.’

‘I know,’ Rawlins said and snorted. ‘Seven hundred and fifty quid and you call that helping people. You’d better watch your step. Sooner or later you’ll come to grief.’

‘Whatever they paid me it was cheap at the price,’ Corridon said bitterly. ‘I’ve had my face spread over every paper in the country, I’ve been shot at, chased by a bunch of flatfeet, accused of murder and God knows what else. And now I suppose I’ll have to go back with you and waste a lot of time making a statement and helping you clear up a mess that’ll get still more publicity. I wouldn’t have touched this job with the end of a rake if I’d known how it was going to turn out.’

‘If it’s any consolation, we shan’t keep you long,’ Rawlins said, looking towards the boat. ‘It was as well Hudson and Saunders came up when they did and heard what she said. We’re about ready to go. Got anything to take with you?’

Corridon hesitated, then shook his head.

‘No. I’m ready when you are,’ and he stood up.

Rawlins smiled slyly.

‘What about your boat? You didn’t swim here, did you?’ he asked and chuckled knowingly.

‘Never mind the boat,’ Corridon said curtly. ‘Don’t let’s waste time. It’s on the other side of the island. I’ll send someone to tow it in.’

‘And what about the young woman - the one who stopped the train?’ Rawlins asked. ‘She’s here, isn’t she? There’s a five-pound fine and a charge of obstructing the police to be taken care of. We can’t leave her here, you know.’

‘Don’t talk through the back of your neck,’ Corridon said. ‘No one saw her pull the communication cord. I’ll swear she hadn’t anything to do with it. You wouldn’t have enough evidence to go to court. Leave her out of this.’

‘Can’t do that,’ Rawlins said. ‘I’ll have to see her.’

‘Look, she’s a nice girl,’ Corridon said earnestly. ‘This is her home. The boat’s hers. She can go back to the mainland when she wants to. Get above your job for once, Rawlins. Leave her out of it.’

Rawlins scratched his chin.

‘She’s Mallory’s sister, isn’t she?’

‘You know very well who she is,’ Corridon said shortly. ‘There’s going to be a lot of talk in the papers about this business. I don’t want her name connected with mine. You know what the papers would make of it. You have a daughter of your own, haven’t you?’

Rawlins grinned.

‘That one won’t work,’ he said. ‘I have a son.’ He brooded for a moment, then asked, ‘Wasn’t she the girl who did ten drops into France during the war?’

‘That’s right. You try it one day and see how you like it.’

‘Not me,’ Rawlins said with conviction. ‘Yes, I think for a change you’re right. It wouldn’t be fair to connect her with a scallywag like you. Well, all right. Let’s go.’

‘And to think some people say the police are heartless,’ Corridon said with his jeering smile.

As he began to move towards the boat, Rawlins asked, ‘Don’t you want to say goodbye to her? We’ll wait for you. Don’t mind us.’ At times Rawlins could be heavily jocular.

Corridon scowled at him.

‘Why should I want to say goodbye to her?’ he asked shortly. ‘She’s not my type.’ He went on towards the boat, and as Rawlins caught up with him, he added sourly, ‘Besides she has a boyfriend in the navy.’

‘Grand fellows - sailors,’ Rawlins said and hid a grin. ‘She’ll be better off with a sailor. All the

same I'm disappointed in you. I thought you were pretty hot stuff with the ladies.'

'Oh, shut up!' Corridon growled, and as he got into the boat he looked along the stretch of cliffs, hoping for a last glimpse of Ann.

THE END