

Mission to Siena



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# James Hadley Chase



# **Mission To Siena**

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# Chapter I

## PRELUDE TO MURDER

Police constable Elliott stood in a shop doorway and surveyed the east side of the square with placid indifference.

It was a dark, wet November night; the time was a few minutes after eleven o'clock, and because of the rain and the hour, the square was deserted.

It had been raining steadily for the past three hours. Water gurgled in the gutters and dripped from the street lamps that made yellow pools on the glistening pavement. A cold wind added to the misery of the wet, and Elliott thought longingly of his comfortable sitting-room, the bright fire that would be burning, and of his wife who he hoped would be thinking of him. He scowled up at the dark sky, looking for a break in the clouds.

A woman's voice said, "Can you please direct me to Polsen's hotel?"

Elliott lowered his gaze and regarded the girl who stood before him. Her back was to the street lamp and he wasn't able to see much of her. She was wearing a white mackintosh and a close-fitting black hat, and she carried in her right hand a canvas and leather hold-all.

She spoke with a foreign accent that could have been Spanish or Italian. Elliott, who was no language scholar, couldn't decide which it was.

"Polsen's hotel, miss?"

"Yes."

"A hundred yards up on the right."

He stepped out of the shelter of the doorway and pointed. The girl turned to look in the direction he indicated, and the light from the street lamp fell on her face.

Elliott decided she would be twenty-five or six. The first thing he noticed was her red gold hair that showed just below her hat: a tone of colour he had never seen before. Her eyes were set wide apart, and as far as he could judge in the uncertain light, appeared to be as green as emeralds. There was a sensual quality in her beauty that aroused the male in him, something that hadn't happened to him in years.

"Thank you," the girl said and made to move on.

"Just a moment, miss," Elliott said. "If you are a stranger to London, I ought to tell you that Polsen's hotel isn't much."

The girl looked away across the wet square. He wasn't sure if she were listening to what he was saying.

"It's got a bad reputation, miss," Elliott went on. "It's not the sort of place a young lady like you should stay at."

The girl looked at him.

"Thank you. I am not staying there," she said. "Good night."

She turned and walked quickly away into the rain and darkness, leaving Elliott looking after her, frowning.

He lifted his massive shoulders under his glistening cape. Well, he had warned her, he told himself. He couldn't do more than that. He wondered who she was and where she had come from. He wondered too why she was going to Polsen's hotel. Polsen's was one of the many room-by-the-hour-and-no-questions-asked hotels in the district: no worse than the others, but distinctly unsavoury and sordid.

He shook his head. You wouldn't have thought a girl like that... Then because he had been on the same beat for fifteen years and was utterly bored with the routine, he ceased to ponder why she should be going to the hotel. If he worried about the actions of everyone who asked him the way, he told himself, his life would become a burden.

He moved on, carrying the image of the girl's beauty with him on his lonely, wet patrol.

Jack Dale, the night clerk of Polsen's hotel, watched the fat, elderly man hurry across the dingy hall to the revolving door and disappear into the rain.

He shrugged his thin shoulders. He supposed the fat man had a train to catch. He grinned cynically, wondering what tale he would tell his wife to account for his lateness. It was the elderly and the married who came to Polsen's.

A girl, her shabby cloth coat showing large damp catches, came down the stairs. Any claim she had to prettiness was marred by granite-hard eyes and a thin, bitter mouth.

She came over to Dale and tossed a key on the ink-stained blotter. She dropped a crumpled pound note beside the key.

"Going out again?" Dale asked as he picked up the note and slid it into a drawer. "It's raining like hell."

"Of course I'm going out again," the girl said crossly. "I haven't made enough this week to pay the rent. If this rain goes on much longer, I don't know what I'm going to do."

Dale grinned.

"The same old story," he said, turning to hang the key on the key rack behind him. "If it's not the rain, it's something else."

"You can talk," the girl said bitterly. "You don't have to stand in the rain hour after hour."

"Go away," Dale said. "You're breaking my heart."

He watched her walk down the steps into the wet darkness, shrugged his shoulders and reached for the Evening Standard. He was reading the football news when the girl in the white mackintosh came in.

He looked up, wondering what she wanted. She was a new one to him, and what a looker! He straightened and showed his discoloured teeth in a leering grin.

"Is Mr Crantor in?" the girl asked, her green eyes looking straight at him.

Dale stared at her.

"Yes, he's in. Room 26, on the first floor. He said for you to go up."

The girl turned away, crossed the hall and walked briskly up the stairs.

Dale whistled silently.

What in the world did a piece like that' want with Crantor? he asked himself. Crantor of all people. She had a hold-all with her. Was she staying? If she didn't come down in an hour, he'd better telephone Crantor.

The girl walked down the dimly lit corridor until she reached room No. 26. She paused outside the door and listened for a moment. Hearing no sound from within the room, she knocked with a gloved hand.

The door opened and Crantor stood in the doorway.

"There you are," he said, and his single eye moved over her. "I was beginning to wonder if you were coming."

She followed him into the large bed-sitting-room.

A shaded reading lamp made a pool of light on the large table on which lay a litter of papers. The rest of the room was in heavy shadows. Neither Crantor nor the girl could see much of each other.

"It's a filthy night," Crantor said. "Take off your mac. I'll hang it in the bathroom."

The girl took off the white mackintosh and her hat and gave them to him. She shook out her hair and crossed over to the mirror above the gas fire.

As Crantor carried the wet things into the bathroom that led off the bed-sitting-room, he thumbed down the light switch, lighting up the big shabby room.

He took his time hanging the wet mackintosh over a chair, then he came back and stood in the bathroom door and looked over at her.

Go on, he said to himself, take a good look at me. Let's see how strong your stomach is, you red-headed beauty.

The girl was wanning the back of her slim legs before the gas fire. She was fumbling for a cigarette as she glanced up and saw him in the full light from the overhead lamp.

It was during the battle for Cassino that Crantor received his face wounds. Redhot splinters of a mortar shell had mangled his features almost beyond repair. Plastic surgeons had worked patiently on him, and considering what he had looked like before he passed through their hands, they succeeded in achieving a minor miracle in giving him some resemblance to a human being. His left eye was covered with a black patch; his thin, cruel mouth was twisted down, and showed some of his lower teeth, fixing his face in a ferocious snarl. The rest of his features looked as if they had been moulded by someone doodling in putty.

The surgeons had told him to let the scars heal and then come back for another series of operations. They assured him in a year or so they would make him a passable-looking guy.

But Crantor had never gone back. He intended to, but he never found the time, and when Alsconi made him his London agent he put the idea out of his head for good. He was certainly not going to spend unprofitable months in a hospital when he could pick up the easy money Alsconi put in his way. Money was more important to him than looks.

After the first bitter months, he took a perverted pleasure in watching people look at him, shudder and look away, and he studied the girl facing him, watching for her reaction.

He was disappointed. She didn't shudder nor did she look away. She examined his face intently with neither pity nor disgust.

"Couldn't they do better than that for you?" she said. "Or hadn't you the patience?"

Crantor felt a spurt of vicious fury run through him. He had wanted to make her cringe. Now he wanted to take her by her white throat.

"What's it to do with you?" he said. "I'll look after my mug,' you look after yours."

"Don't talk to me like that!" the girl said sharply.

Crantor controlled his temper. What was he thinking of? He wanted to make a good impression on this girl, and snarling at her wasn't the way to do it. She was his first contact with Alsconi's organization. She had come all the way from Italy to discuss the arrangements he had made. If he gave satisfaction, there was a chance of promotion. He was ambitious.

He had worked for Alsconi now for two years and he had recently discovered the work he had been doing was of little importance to the organization: it was nothing more than a side-line. Now Alsconi had decided to begin real operations in London, and this was his chance.

"Sorry," he said and turned on the overhead light. "I'm still touchy about my face. Who wouldn't be? Here, sit down.

How about a drink?

"No, thank you."

She came over to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down. She was wearing a smartly tailored black frock. Around her throat was a thin gold collar of bay leaves.

Crantor also sat down. He kept back in the shadows, and when he lit a cigarette, he turned away so she couldn't see his face lit by the flame of his lighter.

"Have you found anyone yet to do the job?" she asked.

"I've found him," Crantor said. "It's taken time, but he's dead right for it." He glanced at his wrist watch. "He'll be along in a few minutes. I thought you'd want to see him."

"There must be no mistakes," she said, her green eyes searching out his single, gleaming black one. "This will be the first, and the first must always be successful." She tapped ash off her cigarette, and went on, "Who is this man you have found?"

"His name is Ed Shapiro," Crantor said. "He has no police record. He started life in a circus. Later, he became a knife thrower. He's good: that's why I've picked him. He chucked circus life after the war. He's done some smuggling for me, and he's now anxious to start up on his own. He wants to buy a fast boat. He jumped at the chance to earn the money we're offering."

"He won't bungle it?"

"If anyone can do it, he can."

"What have you done so far?"

"The note for the money was sent on Tuesday. Tonight, Shapiro is going out to the house. He will put the tortoise in the breakfast-room with another note. At nine tomorrow night a messenger will call for the money..." He broke off and looked across the table at the girl.

"There is one point I am not clear about. Suppose he pays up?"

"You don't have to worry about that. He won't pay: that's why we have chosen him. He's not the type to be threatened."

"All right, if you are sure. It will come unstuck if he does pay."

"He won't."

"Then Shapiro will move in at nine-fifteen. You have brought the knife?"

She leaned sideways and pulled the hold-all that lay on the floor towards her.

He stared at the curve of her back as she bent to open the bag. He felt bitterness stir within him. A woman as beautiful as this one wasn't for him. He had to make do with the ugly ones.

She took from the hold-all a flat wooden box which she put on the table. She opened it and took from it a broad-bladed knife with a heavy, carved wood handle.

Crantor studied it.

"Isn't this dangerous?" he asked. "Won't the police be able to trace this?"

"It is one of a pattern we always use," the girl said. "It is specially made for us. There's no chance of it being traced."

"I suppose all this is necessary," Crantor said uneasily.

"All what?" the girl asked sharply.

"The tortoise, the knife and the warning notes."

"Of course. We want publicity. The tortoise will intrigue the press. This affair will be headline news, and that is essential. We have someone else lined up after Ferenci. When this other one gets our demand note he will know we mean business and he will pay up. The plan has worked successfully in France, Italy and America. It will work successfully here."

"And if it does come off, am I to handle the others?" Crantor asked.

"Of course."

"It will be successful. I promise you that." Crantor got to his feet, crossed the room and poured whisky into a glass.

"Sure you won't have a drink?" "No, thank you."

He stood in the shadows, looking across at her. "I don't even know your name," he said, "or shouldn't I ask?" "Call me Lorelli," the girl said.

"Lorelli..." Crantor nodded. "It's a pretty name. Have you been with the organization long?"

"I have been instructed to pay Shapiro," the girl said, ignoring the question. "Where will I find him after he has done the job?" Crantor felt the blood rush up to his head. "You pay him? Why? I engaged him. Give me the money. I will pay him."



"Where will I find him?" the girl repeated, looking steadily at Crantor.

"But I don't understand," Crantor said, coming back to the table. "Don't they trust me?"

"Am I to report that you are not willing to obey instructions?" the girl asked, her voice flat and cold.

"Of course not," Crantor said hastily. "It just seemed to me..." "Where will I find him?" the girl asked.

"25, Athens Street. It's in Soho," Crantor said, making a tremendous effort to conceal his anger.

The telephone bell tinkled and Crantor answered it. "There's a fellow down here asking for you," Dale said. "Shall I send him up?"

"Yes," Crantor said.

"By the way," Dale went on, "is that young lady wanting a room? I can fix her up next to you." Crantor looked across at Lorelli. "Do you want a room here?"

She shook her head. "She won't be staying," he told Dale. "That's your bad luck," Dale said and laughed. Crantor slammed down the receiver.

Ed Shapiro was tall and lean, with a hooked nose, swarthy complexion and small restless eyes. He wore a black suit with a broad white stripe, a black shirt and a white tie. Cocked over his right eye, he wore a black snap-brimmed hat.

He lolled against the reception desk, a cigarette hanging from his thin lips, and breathed whisky fumes into Dale's face.

"Go on up. Room 26," Dale said, drawing back and grimacing. "You're carrying a load, aren't you?"

Shapiro shot out a long arm and caught hold of Dale's shirt front, twisted it and gave Dale a hard shake, jerking his head back.

"Shut it, pally," he said. "Button it up unless you want to lose some of those dirty teeth of yours."

Dale stood very still, his face turning white. The vicious expression in Shapiro's eyes shocked him.

Shapiro released his grip, pushed his hat a little further over his eye and walked across the hall and mounted the stairs.

He had been drinking heavily most of the evening, bolstering up his shaky nerves. He had done most things, but up to now he had stopped short at murder. But he wanted the fast motor-boat with a want that had gnawed at him for the past two months. He knew it was a bargain. He knew he would never get one as good and as cheap again. Where else could he hope to raise the thousand pounds Crantor was offering him that would complete the purchase price? He had been told that there was another buyer in the market.

"I can't hold it for you any longer," the owner had told him. "I'd like to do you a favour, but this other

bloke has the cash. If you can't come across by next Friday, I'll have to let him have it."

That was unthinkable, but the thought of murder made Shapiro's nerves jangled. Crantor had assured him the set-up was foolproof, but Shapiro had a healthy respect for the police. He had a healthy respect too for his own neck. Murder had a nasty habit of backfiring on you, just when you thought you had got away with it.

Crantor had brushed aside Shapiro's doubts.

"Use your head," he had said. "You've never been through their hands. They haven't got your prints. You won't be seen if you handle it the way I've told you to handle it. You're not hooked up with this fellow in any way. So what have you got to worry about?"

But the more Shapiro had thought over the plan, the more doubtful he became. He might be seen leaving the house. The thought of being hunted for murder turned him cold. That was when he began to drink, but after a few double whiskies his nerve returned and he thought of the boat. He could drive down to Falmouth as soon as he had done the job, buy the boat and hop over to France.

By now, as he climbed the stairs, he was eager to get the job done, and he walked to room 26 with a swagger, pausing in the doorway to stare at Lorelli who had turned in her chair to look at him.

"Come in and shut the door!" Crantor barked.

Shapiro closed the door. He looked from Lorelli to Crantor and back to Crantor again. "What was this piece doing here?" he wondered. What smasher! He fingered his tie, took off his hat and gave Lorelli a leering grin.

Crantor got to his feet.

"Okay, Ed, cut that out," he said, a rasp in his voice. "She's working with us."

Shapiro came over to the table. His grin widened.

"Well, well, that's nice. Hello, baby. I can see you and me are going to get along fine together."

Lorelli's cold green eyes looked him up and down.

"Speak to me when you're spoken to," she said curtly.

"Hey, don't give me that stuff," Shapiro said, grinning.

Crantor's open hand smacked him on the side of his face, sending him staggering.

Shapiro recovered his balance, and he stared blankly at Crantor, careful not to move.

"Sit down and shut up!" Crantor said in a soft hissing voice, his single eye like a red-hot ember.

Shapiro pulled up a chair and sat down. He touched his face.

"You'd better not do that again," he said unevenly.

"Shut up!" Crantor repeated.

"I don't think much of him," Lorelli said. She spoke as if Shapiro wasn't in the room. "He's drunk; his nerves are bad and he's got no discipline."

"He'll do the job," Crantor said. "If he bungles it, I'll kill him."

Shapiro suddenly felt sick. He knew Crantor didn't threaten.

"Now wait a minute..." he began, but the words trailed away as Crantor turned to stare at him.

"You heard what I said! Bungle this and I'll kill you."

"Who said I'd bungle it?" Shapiro said hoarsely.

"You'd better not," Crantor said. He picked up the broad-bladed knife and held it out to Shapiro, holding the blade in his hand and offering Shapiro the handle.

"This is what you'll use. Now show her what you can do with it."

Shapiro took the knife and balanced it in his hand. An odd change came over him as he touched the cutting edge of the knife with his thumb. The looseness went out of his face, his movements became decisive; his eyes came alive.

"What a beaut," he muttered. "What a smasher."

He flicked the knife into the air, sending it spinning and caught it by its handle as it fell.

"Show her," Crantor repeated.

Shapiro looked around the room. Not seeing any target worthy of a throw he got up, took a deck of cards from his hip pocket, selected the ace of diamonds and crossing the room he fixed the card to the wall with a piece of gum he had been chewing, and which he had parked on the glass of his wrist watch.

He walked back until he was at the far end of the room. The card was in the shadow and Lorelli couldn't see it. She watched Shapiro, her elbows on the table, her face between her hands.

Shapiro balanced the knife on the flat of his hand, then with a quick throwing movement, he sent the knife towards the opposite wall with the speed and the force of a bullet.

Crantor turned up the reading lamp and sent its beam across the room.

The knife had cut through the centre of the diamond and was half buried in the plaster.

"You see," Crantor said. "He can do that twenty times out of twenty."

Loreili relaxed.

"Yes, that is good enough," she said.

Shapiro swaggered across the room, jerked out the knife and came back.

"There's no one else in the country who could do that," he said. "So you think I'll do?"

"You'll do," Loreili said without looking at him, "if you keep your nerve."

"Don't worry about that," Shapiro said. "My nerve's fine. But how about the money? I want some now."

She looked up at him.

"You will be paid when he is dead and not before," she said and stood up, "I will be at 25, Athens Street at half-past eleven tomorrow night. You will then give me a detailed report.

Shapiro started to say something, then stopped as Crantor made a threatening move forward.

"I have things to do now," Loreili went on. "I must go. I will see you tomorrow about midday. My mackintosh please."

Crantor went into the bathroom and brought out the mackintosh and hat. The two men stood silent as she put on the hat and arranged her hair before the mirror.

"There must be no mistake," she said as she slipped on her mackintosh.

"It will be all right," Crantor said. She picked up the hold-all and crossed to the door. "You are responsible," she said and went out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

# Chapter II

## THE TORTOISE

As Harry Mason drove the black Bentley along rain-drenched Piccadilly, he thought gloomily that he would have to clean the car again, and that would be twice in a day. Once was all right; an accepted part of the day's work, but twice was laying it on a little too thick. Didn't it ever do anything else but rain in this perishing country?

Don Micklem, sitting at Harry's side, suddenly leaned forward.

"There's Mrs Ferenci," he said, breaking into Harry's thoughts. He lowered the window. "She may want a lift."

Harry swung the car to the kerb.

A girl in a black and white check mackintosh and a small black hat stood on the kerb looking vainly for a taxi. She was slight, fair with big violet eyes, and as Don waved to her, he wondered why she was looking so pale and worried.

"Julia!" he exclaimed, sliding out of the car into the rain. "I haven't seen you for weeks. Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

The girl's face lit up at the sight of him.

"Why, Don! I thought you were in Nice."

"Probably off in a couple of weeks. Hop in before you get wetter than you are." He opened the rear door and helped Julia into the back seat where he joined her. "What are you up to? Going anywhere in particular?"

"It's good to see you, Don," Julia said and her slim, gloved fingers touched his hand. "I thought you were away otherwise I would have called you. I want to talk to you. It's about Guido."

"Would you like to come back to my place?" Don asked, his steady grey eyes searching her face. "I'm free until one o'clock." He glanced at his strap watch. "It's only a quarter to twelve. Or shall we stop off at the Berkeley?"

"I'd rather go to your place," Julia said. "I mustn't be long. I'm lunching with Guido."

"Home, Harry," Don said, then as Harry whisked them towards the white-faced, olive-green shuttered house at the far end of Upper Brook Mews that had been Don's London home for the past six years, he went on, "Is Guido all right?"

Julia forced a smile.

"He's fine. He was only talking about you yesterday. You know about this company thing of his? He wants you on the board. But that doesn't matter right now. He'll talk to you about it. He has so many plans. He..." She broke off and looked out of the window, her hands turning into fists.

Don lit a cigarette, raised his eyebrows thoughtfully and wondered what was wrong. He hoped Guido hadn't been fooling around with some woman. He thought it unlikely for he knew how devoted Guido was to Julia, but one never knew.

Harry pulled up outside 25a, Upper Brook Mews, slid out of the car and held the car door open. He gave Julia a smart salute and her distracted smile disturbed him. Don led her into the big, restful lounge.

"Sit down, Julia," he said. "Have a cigarette and relax. How about a sherry or a martini?" "I'd love a sherry."

Don touched the bell and then carried a box of cigarettes over to Julia and put it on the table beside her.

He was lighting her cigarette when Cherry, Don's butler and major-domo, came into the room.

Cherry was tall and bulky with a pink and white complexion and several pink chins. He had often been mistaken for an Archbishop, and in spite of his sixty-odd years, he carried himself with surprising sprightliness.

"You rang, sir?" he said in his rich, fruity voice. "Mrs Ferenci would like a sherry," Don said. "I'll have a whiskey"

"Certainly, sir," Cherry said and inclined his head towards Julia. His fat, pink face showed reserved approval.

Suspicious of American women, he had long since decided that Julia was an exception. He was satisfied that she knew how to behave in any situation and also that she was wealthy. These two qualifications for Cherry's approval were essential.

When he had served the drinks and had silently departed, Don stretched out his long legs and smiled encouragingly at Julia.

"Well, let's have it. You're acting very mysteriously. Has Guido run off with some wild-eyed filly?"

"Of course not," Julia said. "That would be something I could deal with myself. No, I'm really worried, Den. He's received a horrible, threatening letter."

Don showed his relief with a grin.

"My dear Julia, you mustn't worry about that kind of thing. People with Guido's type of money are always getting threatening letters. The world is full of jealous crackpots. It doesn't mean a thing."

"But I'm sure it does. This - this creature is demanding ten thousand pounds. He says if Guido doesn't pay up tonight..."

Her voice faltered. "He says he will kill him. It's horrible, Don."

Don frowned.

"Ten thousand? He's ambitious, isn't he? Have you the letter with you?"

"Guido threw it away. He just won't take it seriously. I wanted him to tell the police, but he won't hear of it. You know how obstinate he can be. He says this Tortoise is either a madman or someone pulling his leg."

"Tortoise? What tortoise?"

"That's how the writer of the letter signs himself."

Don laughed.

"Well, there you are. He must be a crackpot. Now if he had signed himself the serpent or the wolf or something like that, there might be something in it. But a tortoise! Look, Julia, you mustn't fuss about this. Maybe it's one of Guido's racing pals playing a poor kind of joke."

Julia shook her head.

"That's what Guido says, but I don't believe it. He received the letter last Tuesday. I've been getting more and more worked up."

The money is to be paid tonight. Well, this morning... " She stopped, biting her lip.

"What happened this morning?" Julia tried unsuccessfully to control a little shiver. "We were at breakfast. I saw something moving on the floor. For a moment I thought it was a rat. It gave me an awful shock. Then I saw it was a tortoise. There was a piece of paper pasted across its shell. On the paper was a typewritten message. It said the ten thousand would be collected by a messenger at nine o'clock tonight. If the money wasn't given to the messenger, Guido would die. Oh, Don, it really scares me. It's horrible."

"That seems to be carrying a joke rather far," Don said. "How did the tortoise get into the house?" "I don't know. I begged Guido to call the police, but he wouldn't. He said if it got into the papers, everyone would laugh at him. You know how sensitive he is." Don rubbed his jaw. "What are you two doing tonight?"

"Guido wants to listen to Otello from the Scala on the radio. Don't you think we should tell the police?" Don hesitated, then shook his head.

"I think it would be a mistake as Guido is so set against it, Julia. A thing like this could get into the press and that type of publicity wouldn't be good for Guido. Let's face it. Suppose he did tell the

police. What would they do? They might send a constable to guard the house, but one constable isn't going to stop a determined blackmailer if this chap is a blackmailer, which I doubt. I agree with you we should take precautions. I don't think for a moment there is any danger, but I can understand how you feel. I'll come along tonight with Harry. I'll tell Guido I was passing and dropped in on the off chance you two would be in. I'm quite sure nothing is going to happen, Julia, but I want to set your mind at rest.

Guido, Harry and I can more than take care of any crackpot. What do you say?"

Julia's face brightened.

"Of course. I know the whole thing is silly, but I would feel so much better if you did come. There's only Dixon and Ethel in the house. Perhaps you are right and nothing will happen, but if you were there..."

Don got to his feet.

"That's a bet. I'll be along soon after eight. Now don't worry any more. Have a nice lunch and put this out of your mind," he said as they walked into the hall. "I'll see you tonight."

Cherry appeared, pink and benign.

"I have ordered a taxi for Mrs Ferenci," he announced. "It is arriving now."

Julia gave him a bright smile. Watching her, Don was relieved to see how much better she looked.

"Thank you, Cherry," she said, and turning to Don, went on, "You don't know what a relief this is to me to know you will be with us tonight."

"You worry too much," Don said. "Put it out of your mind."

When the taxi had driven her away, Don went back to the lounge. He finished his drink and stood frowning out of the window.

The Tortoise.

Was there anything in this or was it a hoax? Were there any of Guido's friends capable of going to such lengths just to pull his leg? Don doubted it. A crackpot then?

After a moment's hesitation, he went over to the telephone and dialled Whitehall 22. It would do no harm, he told himself, to ask Chief Superintendent Dicks of the Special Branch if he had ever heard of anyone calling himself the Tortoise. When he finally got through to Dicks' office, he was told the Superintendent had just gone to lunch and was not expected back until six o'clock.

"Never mind," Don said. "No, there's no message."

Marian Rigby, Don's dark, attractive secretary, came hurrying into the lounge.



"There you are," she said. "You haven't forgotten you are lunching with Sir Robert at one?"

"I'm just off. Am I doing anything tonight, Marian?" "There's the film premiere. You promised to go."  
"Oh, that. Would you call them and tell them I can't make it?" He smiled. "I have a date with a gentleman who calls himself the Tortoise."

That sounds more exciting than a premiere, doesn't it?"

Guido Ferenci, tall and fair, his handsome face still deeply tanned from the sun of Portofino where Julia and he had been holidaying a few weeks previously, poured an 85 brandy into balloon glasses with a loving hand.

"Don't think for a moment you are hoodwinking me," he said as he gave Don one of the glasses. "This rot about passing and looking in for a drink is so much eyewash. Julia brought you here to act as my bodyguard, didn't she?"

Don grinned.

"For a foreigner, he speaks beautiful English, doesn't he?" he said looking over at Julia. "I only wish I could speak Italian half as well."

"You speak Italian like a native," Julia said.

Guido looked affectionately at her.

"And that won't wash either. Never mind how well Don speaks Italian," he said, sinking into a big lounging chair opposite the one in which Don was sitting. "Now admit it: Julia persuaded you to come down to guard me, didn't she?"

Well, it's nice of you to come, but don't tell me you take this joker seriously. How can anyone take him seriously? Ten thousand pounds! Where does Mr Tortoise imagine I can raise that a kind of money?"

Don lit a cigarette.

"I don't take it seriously, but on the other hand, there are a few dangerous crackpots around. This fellow seems to be carrying the joke rather far. What happened to the tortoise and the note on its back that arrived this morning? I'd like to have a look-see."

"So you shall. Dixon's looking after the tortoise," Guido said, getting up to ring the bell. "I have the note in my desk."

As he opened a drawer in the desk, Dixon, Guido's manservant, came in. Powerfully built, with a hard, strong face, he looked what he had been during the war: a quarter-master of a destroyer.

"Bring the tortoise in, will you?" Guido said. "Mr Micklem would like to inspect it."

"Very good, sir," Dixon said and gave Don a respectful nod.

"Now where's that note?" Guido said as Dixon left the room. "I put it in this drawer, but it's gone. Have you moved it, Julia?"

"No," Julia said, getting to her feet, "Let me look. You know you can never find anything."

"When you get married, Don, acquire the reputation of never finding anything," Guido said, sitting down and smiling.

"It saves endless hours of dreary searching. Julia always finds my things for me now."

"I'm not being very successful at the moment," Julia said. "It's not in the desk. Are you sure you didn't throw it away as you did the first note?"

"No. I put it in the top drawer," Guido said, frowning.

As he got to his feet Dixon came in.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but you haven't moved the tortoise, have you?"

Don felt the atmosphere suddenly tighten.

"Of course not," Guido said sharply.

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's no longer in the box."

"Perhaps it has crawled out," Don said quietly.

"It couldn't have done that, sir. I put a lid on the box. Someone must have taken it."

"All right, Dixon. It doesn't matter," Guido said. "Just make sure it isn't crawling about the house."

"Yes, sir," Dixon said and went out.

Don glanced at Julia who was sitting motionless, her face pale.

"Well, this is a turn up for the book," said Guido who prided himself on his grasp of idiomatic English. "It looks as if the evidence has been pinched."

Although he spoke lightly, Don could see he was startled.

"Someone's been here," Julia said breathlessly. "What do you think, Don?" Guido asked. "I think your practical joker is carrying this much too far," Don said. "It might be an idea, Guido, to have a word with the police now."

Guido hesitated, then shook his head.

"No, I'm not going to do that. I can't afford the stupid publicity that is bound to follow. I've got the new board to think of No, I'm not going to call the police."

"But you must!" Julia cried. "You should have told them in the first place. You're in danger..."

"Don't get excited, Julia," Don said quietly. "I can see Guido's point. The newspapers would love a set-up like this."

After all, Guido is quite safe here. He's not alone. I'm here, and Dixon's within call. Besides, you forget Guido can more than look after himself. Hairy's outside watching the house. I told him what was in the wind, and he is keeping his eyes open. If we did call the police, they couldn't do any more than we are doing now..."

He broke off as the clock on the mantelpiece struck nine. Julia caught her breath sharply.

"The note said the messenger would come at nine!" she said, catching hold of Guido's hand.

"Darling Julia," Guido said. "There's nothing to be scared about. Of course no one will come."

Even as he spoke they heard the front door bell ring, and Julia jumped to her feet.

Guido put his arm around her. He glanced across at Don who had stiffened to attention.

The three stood motionless, listening. They heard Dixon cross the hall and open the front door. They heard a murmur of voices, then Dixon came into the room.

"There's a district messenger here, sir," he said to Guido. "He says he has come for a sealed package. What package would that be?"

Julia recoiled, her face going white.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Guido said angrily, and he took a step forward, but Don was before him.

"Stay with Julia," he said. "I'll handle this," and before Guido could argue, he walked into the hall, followed by Dixon.

Standing under the hall light was a sixteen-year-old boy, wearing a District Messenger's uniform.

"Sure you haven't made a mistake, son?" Don asked.

"I don't think so, sir," the boy returned and brought out his book. "Mr Ferenci, The Crest, Spaniards Avenue, Hampstead. One package to be collected. This is The Crest, isn't it?"

"That's right. What are your instructions? Where are you supposed to take the package?"

"To the Piccadilly Hotel, sir. A gentleman of the name of Montgomery will be waiting for it. I'm to give it to him and get a signature for it," the boy said.

Don studied him. He decided he was telling the truth.

"How are you to identify Mr Montgomery?"

The boy began to look bewildered.

"He will be wearing a white mackintosh and a black hat. Is there something up?"

Don shook his head.

"No. I'll get the package for you. Just wait here." He beckoned to Dixon. "Let's go into the kitchen," he said.

Looking as bewildered as the boy, Dixon led Don into the kitchen.

When Don had shut the door, he said, "Wrap up some folded newspapers in brown paper: about the size of a book."

His face blank with surprise, Dixon quickly made up the parcel and gave it to Don.

"That's fine," Don said approvingly.

He went back to where the boy was waiting and gave him the parcel.

"Here's what you do," he said. "I don't want you to get to the Piccadilly Hotel before ten o'clock. That's important. Give this package to Mr Montgomery and get his signature, but not before ten, do you understand?"

The boy nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, you get off," Don said and slipped a pound note into the boy's hand. "That's for keeping you out of bed."

The boy grinned.

"Thanks, sir. I'll do just as you say."

When he had gone, Don returned to the lounge where Guido and Julia sat side by side on the settee. Julia still looked frightened, but she had herself under control. Her hand gripped Guido's tightly.

"Well, it looks as if we have a crackpot on our hands," Don said, closing the door and coming over to the brightly burning fire. "He appears to be a Mr Montgomery, and he is waiting in the lounge of the Piccadilly Hotel for a district messenger to make him a present of your ten thousand pounds. I've made up a faked parcel, and the boy is going to deliver it. We must get the police on to this, Guido. It's got to be done. This fellow mustn't be encouraged. He could make himself a nuisance to others

unless he is stopped. I'll call Dicks. He'll take care of him."

Guido shrugged.

"All right. Go ahead."

Don lifted the telephone receiver. He held it to his ear for a long moment, then frowning, he tapped the crossbar, listened, then laid down the receiver.

He realized with a feeling of shock that he had taken this business up to now far too casually.

"I should have guessed it wasn't going to be as easy as that," he said, his face hardening. "The line's dead."

"You mean someone's cut the line?" Julia said, starting to her feet.

"I don't know. There's no dialling tone. Where's the nearest telephone, Guido?"

"About half a mile down the road," Guido said. "Will you go or shall I send Dixon?"

Don moved over to the fireplace and stood with his back to it. He stared down at the carpet for a long moment.

"Don't let's rush this, Guido," he said. "We haven't taken it seriously enough - at least we two haven't. We must be careful now not to be caught on the wrong foot again."

"Then you do think Guido is in danger?" Julia said, her eyes growing wide.

"I don't know," Don said, looking steadily at her, "but I think we should assume that he is and act accordingly. If this man really means business, it is quite unlikely that he will be at the Piccadilly Hotel. I was slow not to realize that when the boy told me where he was taking the package. If he does mean business, he'll probably waylay the boy before he reaches the station. I don't want to put the wind up either of you, but we must face up to the situation. One thing we must not do: we mustn't reduce our forces. This is a lonely spot; the road is dark and lonely and there are no other houses for quite a distance. If this crackpot is determined to make trouble he may try to stop us using an outside telephone. A lot depends on his mentality. What will he do when he finds the package contains useless newspapers ?

Will he give us rest and go home or will he try to make good his threat?"

Guido lit a cigarette. He seemed to be enjoying the situation.

"He would scarcely go to the trouble of putting the telephone out of order unless he intended to pay us a visit," he said.

Don nodded.

"Yes, I think we should be prepared for a visit." He smiled encouragingly at Julia. "It's-going to be all right. Don't look so scared. There are three able-bodied men in the house and one outside."

"Yes," Julia said unsteadily. She tried to match his smile, but didn't succeed.

"Let's get Dixon in and tell him what to expect," Don said. "I won't go out to Harry. He knows he has to keep his eyes open, and if the house is being watched, I should only give away his position.

We can rely on him to do the right thing at the right moment. But let's get Dixon in."

Guido rang the bell and when Dixon entered the room, he explained the situation.

Dixon took the news calmly.

"Well, sir ' he said, "I can't see him doing much damage with the three of us here, but if you like I'll have a crack at getting the police."

"No, we'll stick together," Don said. "The first move is to go over the house. We want to be sure no one has already broken in or can break in. Stay here with Mr Ferenci while I take a look around."

"I'm coming with you," Guido said.

"No, stay here with Julia, please," Don said firmly. "And you, Dixon, don't let Mr Ferenci out of your sight."

"Yes, sir," Dixon said.

Guido shrugged.

"All right I'll leave it to you, but watch out." He sat down, holding out his hand to Julia. "Come and sit with me, darling, and let's hold hands. We'll be laughing about this by tomorrow."

Dixon went across to the fireplace and picked up the poker. He balanced it in his hand, nodded his satisfaction and walked over to the door.

"No one will come in here, sir," he said to Don, "without an argument from me."

Don grinned.

"That's the idea. I won't be long. Keep the door closed. I'll call out when I come back."

He remembered there was a maid somewhere in the house and asked Dixon where she was.

"She's gone to the movies, sir. She won't be back until half-past ten."

"Right," Don said. "Then that leaves all the rooms except this one empty."

"That's right, sir."

Don closed the door. For a long moment he stood in the brightly lit hall and listened. The house was quiet. Faintly, he could hear the ticking of a clock somewhere upstairs and the irregular whirring noise from the refrigerator in the kitchen. He went swiftly and silently up the stairs to the upper landing.

His examination of the six rooms that led out on to the gallery was thorough. As he left each room, he locked the door after him. He didn't expect to find anyone lurking in the rooms and nor did he, but a growing sense of uneasiness worried him. He opened the sixth door and looked into the luxurious bathroom. There was no place for concealment there. He stepped out on to the gallery and moved to the banister rail to look down into the hall.

Then without warning the lights in the house went out. For a moment he stood motionless in the black suffocating darkness, cursing himself for not having a flashlight with him.

Then with his hand on the rail to guide him, he started towards the head of the stairs. He had only taken a few groping steps when he heard Julia's wild, terrified scream.

In the garden, close to the window of Guido's sitting-room, Shapiro had been waiting for Crantor, a mile or so away, to touch the high tension wires with the insulated pole he had with him.

Sweat ran down Shapiro's face as he waited. In his right hand he held the broad-bladed knife. Then suddenly he saw the lights that gleamed faintly through the curtains go out. He hooked his fingers under the window frame and pushed it up, then stepped back and waited.

The light breeze moved the curtains. He waited for perhaps ten or twenty seconds, then suddenly the curtains were pulled aside.

A tall man in evening dress stood before the open window as Crantor had said he would stand. The dim light of the cloud-covered moon fell directly on his white shirt front.

Shapiro raised the knife and his hand shot forward, sending the knife flying through the air. It was the easiest target he had ever had to aim at.

He heard the knife thud home, saw the fair man reel back, then he turned and ran around the side of the house to where he had left his car.

As he bolted into the darkness and as Don began a reckless dash down the stairs, Julia screamed again.

# Chapter III

## VENETIAN RED

The big, beefy figure of Inspector Horrocks came into Guido's study where Don had been sitting for the past half-hour, a cigarette burning heedlessly between his fingers.

"Now, sir," Horrocks said, closing the door, "perhaps we can take this a bit further."

"Yes," Don said, woodenly. He was still badly shaken by Guido's death and he would have preferred to have been left alone.

"It would help if you went over the whole story again, sir," Horrocks said, coming over to the fire, and lowering his bulk into a chair opposite the one Don was sitting in.

"Yes, of course," Don said. He went on to give the Inspector a detailed account of how he had met Julia, of the threatening letter and how he had come down to act as Guido's bodyguard. "I just didn't take the thing seriously," he went on, staring into the fire. "I feel responsible for his death. It wasn't until I found the telephone had been tampered with that I thought it possible we might be in for trouble. Even then it didn't occur to me it would happen so quickly. I thought Guido would be safe with Dixon and me to guard him. I left my chauffeur outside to watch the house."

"Where's he got to, then?" Horrocks asked.

"I don't know. I've been out to look for him, but there's no sign of him. I'm hoping he saw the killer and is after him."

Horrocks grunted.

"Is that likely?"

"I think it is. I'm anxious to get home, Inspector, in case he is trying to contact me."

"I won't keep you much longer, sir," Horrocks said. "I'd like to clear up one or two points. You didn't see the killer yourself?"

"No. I left Dixon with Mr Ferenci and I went upstairs to search the house. Then the lights went out and I heard Julia-Mrs Ferenci - scream. I belted down the stairs and rushed into the lounge. It was pitch dark in there. I had told Dixon I'd call out as I came in, but I forgot to do so. He took me for an intruder and closed with me. We had quite a scrap, and I had to knock him silly before I could get free of him. By the time I had found a flashlight, the killer had gone. I found Mr Ferenci lying before the open window. Mrs Ferenci had fainted. Then two patrolmen came in. You know the rest of it."

Horrocks nodded.



"The killer somehow fused the lights, then opened the window. Mr Ferenci either felt the draught or else heard the window open. He went to the window. The killer was ready for him. As Mr Ferenci pulled back the curtains, the killer threw the knife."

"How was it your men arrived like that? Did they hear Mrs Ferenci's screams?"

"It was the messenger boy. When he left here, a man came out of the darkness and struck at him with a club. The boy was too quick for him and bolted. The man went after him, but the boy got away. The attack was so quick, the boy didn't get much of a chance to see the man. All he can tell us is that he is tall and slimly built. As soon as the boy got clear, he dialled 999. One of our cars picked him up and brought him here. They arrived just too late." Don rubbed his forehead.

"Have you got anything from Dixon? Did he see anything?" Horrocks shook his head.

"I'm going to talk to him now. He's still groggy from the punch you gave him."

Don moved irritably.

"It was entirely my fault," he said angrily. "I told him I would call out when I returned. Naturally he went for me: he was like a wild cat."

A constable came in.

"Beg pardon, sir. There's a lady asking for Mr Micklem." "That'll be my secretary. I asked one of your men to telephone her. I want her to take care of Mrs Ferenci," Don said, getting to his feet.

"All right, sir. While you talk to her, I'll see how Dixon is getting on," Horrocks said.

Don found Marian in the hall.

"This is a frightful business," he said, going to her. "Poor Guido's been murdered. Julia's in a bad way. The maid's with her now, but

I don't think she's much use. Will you take charge, Marian? If she's as bad as I think she is, you'd better get the doctor.

The maid will tell you whom to get. I'll leave you to handle it."

"Yes, of course," Marian said. "Where is she?"

No questions; no flap. Don never ceased to wonder at Marian's unruffled calm. No situation ever seemed, to throw her out of her stride. He knew he couldn't leave Julia in better hands.

"The door facing the head of the stairs."

Marian nodded and ran up the stairs while Don went into the library where Dixon was lying on the settee with Horrocks standing over him.

"I'm sorry about this, Dixon," Don said, going over to him. "It was entirely my fault. You put up a good show."

"Oh no, sir, I didn't," Dixon said, sitting up. "I got proper wind up. I should have known it was you. The fight going out.."

"Well, never mind," Don said. He looked at Horrocks. "Go ahead, Inspector. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Will you tell me what happened from the time Mr Micklem left the room?" Horrocks asked, sitting by Dixon.

"Well, sir, I stood guard by the door. Mr Ferenci sat on the settee with Mrs Ferenci. All of a sudden the lights went out.

I heard Mr Ferenci jump to his feet. He said something about the window being open. Mrs Ferenci began to scream. I heard Mr Ferenci pull back the curtains. It was raining outside and dark, and I couldn't see a thing. I just stood like a fool staring into the darkness. Then the door burst open. Mr Micklem had told me he would call out when he came in. I did remember that. I thought he was an intruder and I went for him. Then I ran into a punch that knocked me out."

"So you didn't see what happened to Mr Ferenci?" Horrocks asked, an exasperated note in his voice.

"No, sir, I didn't."

Don lifted his shoulders. They were getting nowhere, he told himself He thought again of Harry.

"Has the telephone been fixed yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," HoiTocks said. "We can't find where the line has been cut."

"Then I'll get back to my place. If my chauffeur has had any luck he'll be trying to contact me. If I hear anything I'll let you know."

"I'd be glad if you would, sir."

Nodding to Dixon, Don went into the hall and up the stairs. He knocked on Julia's door. Marian came to the door.

"The doctor's coming," she told Don. "She's still unconscious."

"Stick with her, will you? I'm going home. There's a chance Harry spotted the killer and he may be trying to get me."

"I'll stay with her."

Leaving her, Don hurried to where he had left the Bentley and drove fast to Upper Brook Mews. As

he pulled up the front door opened and Cherry appeared. Don leaned out of the car window.

"Any news from Harry?" he asked as Cherry came majestically towards him.

"He telephoned about half an hour ago, sir," Cherry said, coming to rest by the side of the car. "He wishes you to go to Athens Street which he tells me is the second turning on the left off Old Compton Street. He said the matter was urgent."

"Thanks," Don said and making a U-turn he sent the Bentley shooting down the dark, deserted mews.

Athens Street turned out to be a narrow cul-de-sac, dimly lit by one street lamp.

Keeping in the shadows, Don walked quickly down the wet pavement until he was within a few yards of the high brick wall that cut the cul-de-sac off from Dean Street.

He spotted Harry standing in the dark shadows of an archway and he moved into the darkness and joined him.

"Phew! I'm glad to see you, sir," Harry said feelingly. "I've been trying to get you for the past hour. I kept popping over to the phone box, but I couldn't get Mr Ferenci's number."

"What's going on here?" Don asked.

"I spotted a bloke coming from Mr Ferenci's house and I followed him. He's holed up in that house across the way."

Don moved to the entrance of the archway.

"Which house?"

"The one by the wall, sir."

Don studied the three-storeyed building. It was in darkness. He could see there were two windows to each floor and the front door was set back in an archway similar to the one in which he was sheltering.

"Any other way out, Harry?"

"No, sir. I checked that."

"So he's still in there?"

"He's in there all right. About five minutes ago a woman came along and went in. She was wearing a white mackintosh and slacks. It was too dark to see what she looked like."

"What's he like, Harry?"

"Tall and thin, dark, hooked nose, flashily dressed."

The District Messenger had said his attacker had been tall and thin. This sounded like the man all right.

"When did you first spot him, Harry?"

"About a quarter of an hour after the messenger boy had left the house. He came from the back of the house, crossed the garden, vaulted over the wall and bolted down the street to an old Buick that was parked under the trees. I went after him and managed to get in the boot. He drove fast, and it wasn't much of a joy ride for me. He parked the car in a bomb site in Old Compton Street and came here. I had a lot of trouble following him. He seemed jumpy, and kept checking to see if anyone was following him, but he didn't spot me. I'm sure of that. He let himself into the house with a key, and that's the last I've seen of him. The woman knocked when she arrived and he let her in."

"Good show, Harry. I'm going over there to have a look around."

You stay here and keep your eyes open. If I run into trouble, you know what to do. This fellow's dangerous. He killed Ferenci, so don't be fussy the way you handle him if you have to handle him."

"You mean Mr Ferenci's dead?" Harry asked, shocked.

"Yes. I'll tell you about it later. Just keep your ears and eyes open."

"Wouldn't it be better if I went instead of you, sir?" Harry said, trying to sound casual. "No point in dirtying up your suit climbing in and out of windows."

"Do what you're told," Don said curtly. "Watch out. If he makes a bolt for it, stop him."

"Right-ho, sir," Harry said. "The easiest way in is through that window by the wall. The door's got a bolt on it. I've tried it. I'll give you a leg up. Get up on the roof and it'll be a piece of cake<sup>2</sup> to get in through the window."

They moved over to the wall. Harry locked his fingers and Micklem put his foot in the cradle thus formed. With a slight heave, he was within reach of the top of the wall. He caught hold of it, and another heave from Harry swung him onto the wall.

Harry waved to him and went back to the shelter of the archway.

Crouching, Don walked up the sloping roof. Just above him was an unlighted window. He peered through the glass into the darkness beyond and could just make out a dim, empty room. The window catch was back. He took out his pocket knife and gently levered up the window. Then he swung himself into the room, lowered the window and crossed to the door.

For a moment or so he stood listening, his ear pressed against the panel of the door, then hearing nothing, he turned the handle and pulled the door open.

He looked into a passage, dimly lit by a light coming from the hall. He moved out of the room, closing the door after him. Then he walked silently to the head of the staircase and again paused to listen.

From the room below he heard a man say, "It was easy. He came to the window and I nailed him."

Moving like a shadow, Don started down the stairs.

"Then he's dead?" a woman's voice said.

Don pricked up his ears at her accent: it was unmistakably Italian. He reached the foot of the stairs. The dim light that lit the hall was coming through a half-open door at the far end of the passage.

"Of course he's dead," Shapiro said. "Now look, let's have the money. I want to get the hell out of here."

"But can you prove to me that he is dead?" Lorelli asked.

Shapiro stared at her.

"What do you mean? If you don't believe me, go out there and take a look at him."

"Don't talk like a fool. When I have seen the morning papers, I'll pay you and not before."

Don edged forward so he could peer into the room. There were only a few sticks of furniture in the room: two chairs, a broken-down settee with some of the springs exposed and a tea chest on which stood a lighted candle stuck into a bottle.

Across the two windows were nailed two grey, dirty blankets.

He took all this in with one swift glance. His attention then centred on the two people in the room.

The man sat astride one of the chairs. He was tall and thin: his dark, cruel face had a wolfish look. He was staring with angry intent eyes at the girl who leaned against the wall, the flickering light of the candle falling directly on her.

She was above average height and around twenty-five or six, She was beautiful in a cold, hard way; her face was pale and her full-lipped mouth in contrast looked startlingly red, but it was her thick wavy hair that attracted his attention.

The colour was Venetian red, a colour that's rarely seen these days in Italy.

A cigarette hung from her glistening lips. Her arms were folded across her breasts. Under the open white mackintosh she wore a white sweater and black slacks.

"You're not kidding, are you?" Shapiro asked, glaring at her.

"I have been instructed to pay you when the job's done," Lorelli said. "I'll know by the papers

tomorrow morning if it has been done or not."

"I want the money now," Shapiro snarled. "I've got to have it. Look, I've a boat waiting for me. I need the money to complete the purchase. I can be in France by tomorrow morning if I buy the boat tonight."

"You heard what I said," Lorelli said coldly. Her hands slid into the pockets of her mackintosh. "I'm not going to argue with you."

Shapiro licked his dry lips.

"Now, look, baby, don't let's quarrel. How about coming with me? I'm starting a new racket when I've got the boat. I could use a smart kid like you."

"Could you?" Lorelli said, her eyes hard. "But I couldn't use a fool like you."

Shapiro grinned at her.

"Come off it. Let's be pals. Call me Ed. You and I could get places, working together. Let's have the dough' and come with me, Lorelli. What about it?"

"You'll have the money tomorrow morning and not before," Lorelli said sharply. "I'll bring it here at eight o'clock."

"That's what you think," Shapiro snarled, getting to his feet and kicking the chair out of his way. "We're going back to your place and we're going to collect that dough right now. I have ways of taming a twist like you."

She leaned against the wall, her green eyes watchful, her face expressionsless.

"Have you?" she said, "and I have ways of taming a rat like you." Her hand slid out of her mackintosh pocket. The .25 automatic she held pointed at Shapiro's face. "Get out of my way!"

Shapiro suddenly became deflated. He stepped hastily back.

Don didn't wait to hear any more. He went up the stairs, silently and fast, let himself through the window, closed it and within seconds had joined Harry in the archway.

"The woman's coming out in a moment," he said. "I'm going after her. Stay here and watch the house. I don't think our bird will move, but if he does, don't lose him."

"Okay; sir," Hairy said.

As he spoke the door of the house opened and the girl came out. She closed the door, then set off along the pavement towards the lights of Old Compton Street.

Keeping in the shadows and moving silently, Don went after her.

A half an hour later, Don was in a telephone box in Shepherd Market, speaking to Inspector Horrocks.

"This is Micklem," he was saying. "My chauffeur did spot our man leaving the house. He followed him to 25, Athens Street. There's a woman connected with this as well. She's at Market Mews. I'm watching her place and Mason's watching the other house."

"Well, I'll be hanged," Horrocks said. "Good work, sir. I'll have patrol cars sent to you both right away, and I'll be with you myself in ten minutes."

"Fine," Don said, and hung up.

He left the telephone box and returned to where he could watch the flat above a grocer's shop into which the redheaded girl had disappeared.

She hadn't been easy to follow. She had taken a taxi from Shaftesbury Avenue, and Don had been lucky enough to pick up another taxi before hers disappeared into Piccadilly. Leaving the taxi at Half Moon Street, the girl had walked along the park side of Piccadilly up Park Lane, looking back continually. Don had somehow managed to hang on to her without being seen, and he had finally spotted her entering the flat above the grocer's shop, using the side entrance. A moment or so later a light had come up in the upper window. He had waited for twenty minutes or so, and when the light had gone out, he had first checked there was no back exit to the flat, then had hurried to the telephone box that was only a few yards from the grocer's shop.

He had scarcely got back to the vantage ground where he could watch the flat when out of the darkness came two police officers.

"Mr Micklem?" one of them asked.

"You've been quick," Don said. "She's in that flat up there."

"Okay, sir," the policeman said. "Inspector Horrocks is on his way. He asked us to stick around. Here, Bill, go into Hertford Street and make sure there's no back way to this place."

The other policeman nodded and went away.

Don lit a cigarette. He felt a little tired. The shock of Guido's death had been a stiff one and now the reaction was beginning to set in.

He and the policeman watched the darkened window for the next ten minutes. Then the big figure of Inspector Horrocks followed by three plain-clothes men' came out of the darkness.

"Well, sir," Horrocks said, "this is a bit of luck. What's been happening?"

Briefly Don told him how Harry had seen the thin man leave Ferenci's house and had followed him to Athens Street.

"The woman joined him about two or three minutes before I arrived," he went on. "I broke in. This

fellow - he calls himself Ed and the woman Lorelli - was demanding his money for killing Ferenci." He repeated "the exact conversation he had overheard. "She's paying him at eight o'clock tomorrow."

"I doubt it," Horrocks said. "That's nice work, Mr Micklem. I've sent Hurst and Maddox over to Athens Street. They won't make a move without my say-so. Now let's see what she has to say for herself."

He crossed over to the shabby front door that led to the girl's flat.

"Stand by," he said to his men and lifting the knocker, he rapped loudly.

No one answered.

He hammered on the door several times, then stepped back.

"Okay," he said, "see if you can open the door."

Two burly plain-clothes men came forward. Two shoulders crashed against the door, and under the third assault the door burst open. The detectives darted up the steep narrow stairs.

Horrocks and Don followed them.

"Unless she is a fresh air fiend, it looks as if she's skipped," Don said, pointing to the open skylight at the head of the stairs.

One of the detectives came out of the upper room.

"No one here, sir," he said.

Horrocks growled under his breath.

"Send out the alarm," he said. "I want that woman. Mr Micklem will give you a description of her."

The detectives jotted down Don's description, then ran downstairs to the telephone box.

"She must have spotted you," Horrocks said angrily. "Here you," he went on to the other detective, "get Hurst on the car radio and tell him the girl's gone. Tell him to watch out: she may try to warn Ed."

He and Don went into the flat that consisted of a bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom.

Horrocks took a quick look round.

"We won't find much here," he said. "I'll have it checked for prints. Let's get over to Athens Street."

Leaving the two constables to guard the flat, Horrocks, Don and the three detectives got into the police car and raced down Piccadilly to Old Crompton Street. They found two policemen guarding



the entrance to Athens Street. They stiffened to attention when they saw Horrocks.

"Hurst about?" he asked.

"He's down the alley, sir."

Horrocks entered the cul-de-sac, followed by Don. They found Harry still at his post, and in the company of Sergeant Hurst and Detective Constable Maddox.

"Our man still in there?" Horrocks asked.

"I think so, sir," Hurst said. "We haven't seen or heard anything from the house, but there's no other way out except this way."

"Let's get him," Horrocks said. "Watch your step, Hurst. He's dangerous. What is the door like?"

Hurst shook his head.

"Two bolts and a lock. It'd be easier to jump him through that window," and he pointed to the window Don had used to get into the house.

"Okay, you two, go and get him," Horrocks said.

Don joined Harry in the archway. He itched to go into action himself, but he knew Horrocks wouldn't stand for it.

They watched Maddox give Hurst a leg up on to the top of the wall. Hurst began to walk up the tiles as Maddox scrambled up after him.

Watching the dark window, Don suddenly spotted a movement behind the glass.

"Look out!" he called sharply. "He's seen you!" Hurst was by now half-way up the roof. There was no cover. He too had seen the movement. His hand whipped to his pocket for his truncheon. There came a flash and the bang of gun fire. The glass of the window smashed.

Hurst dropped his truncheon, slumped forward and rolled down the roof, nearly taking Maddox with him.

Maddox grabbed at him and managed to check his descent as Don and Harry rushed forward.

"Leave him to us," Don shouted.

Gun fire crashed again. A bullet smashed a tile within inches of Maddox, who let go of Hurst and swung himself with desperate haste off the wall. Hurst slid limply off the roof. Don and Harry grabbed him and lowered him to the ground.

Harry's hand went to Hurst's neck. His finger found the artery.

"He's had it," he said in a shocked voice.

Horrocks joined them under the shelter of the wall. He paused only long enough to make sure there was nothing he could do for Hurst, then moving with surprising quickness for a man of his bulk, he ran back down the cul-de-sac.

Maddox joined Don and Harry in the archway where they had carried Hurst's body. Maddox was breathing heavily and his face was white and set.

"Shall we have a crack at getting in, sir?" Harry asked Don in a low tone, but Maddox heard him".

"You'll stay right here," Maddox growled. "You two keep out of this. This is police business."

Don said hopefully, "I could get that door open, sergeant..."

"You heard what I said, sir. You two keep out of it." There was a long pause, then Horrocks came back. "We'll have him in a few minutes," he said grimly. "He'll be sorry he started this." He turned to Don. "You've done more than your share in this, Mr Micklem. I'll be glad now if you'll go home."

Don stared at him.

"You're not serious, are you? Hang it, if it hadn't been for Harry and me..."

"I know that, sir," Horrocks said curtly, "but there may be more shooting, and I'm not carrying the can if you happen to stop a bullet. I'll let you know how it works out, but right now, you're going home."

Don saw the sense in this, and although he was reluctant to leave, he lifted his shoulders in a resigned shrug.

"Okay, Inspector; good luck and don't let him get away."

"He won't get away," Horrocks said. "I let you know how it works out."

"Come on, Harry, let's get out of here."

Leaving the shelter of the archway, Harry and he walked down the cul-de-sac into Old Crompton Street.

"That's a bit of a washout," Don said as they made their way to where he had left the Bentley. "I would like to have seen him caught."

"How's Mrs Ferenci?" Harry asked.

"She's pretty bad. Miss Rigby is looking after her."

As he paused to unlock the Bentley, two cars, packed with men, swept past.

"That's the end of Ed," Don said. "Let's get moving. As soon as the shooting starts, every street around here will be blocked."

It took them only a few minutes to reach Upper Brook Mews. During the drive, Don quickly sketched in what had happened at Ferenci's house.

"Looks like an organized gang, doesn't it, sir?" Harry said. Don pulled up outside No. 25a.

"That's what it looks like." He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was twenty minutes past one. "Okay, Hany, put her away and go to bed. We may be busy tomorrow."

He unlocked the front door and walked into the lounge. Some chicken sandwiches with a bottle of whisky, ice water and glasses stood on the table by the fire.

He poured himself a stiff drink and sat down. He sat for ten minutes or so, staring into the fire, thinking of Julia. It was hard to believe that Guido was dead. The whole nightmare thing was impossible to believe.

The sound of the telephone bell startled him. He picked up the receiver.

"Is that you, Mr Micklem?" Horrocks's voice boomed over the line. "Bad news: he got away."

"Got away!" Don exclaimed, starting to his feet.

"Yes. We broke in and found a tunnel in the cellar. It led to a builder's dump in Dean Street. He must have sneaked out that way."

"For the love of mike!" Don exploded. "That's not very bright, is it? So now both of them have got away."

"They won't get far," Horrocks said. "Every port, airport and station is being watched. We've got a good description of them. They won't get far."

"Like to bet on that?" Don said and slammed down the receiver.

A girl came across the hall of Polsen's hotel, hesitant and unsure of herself. Dale jerked himself out of a doze, looked at his watch and saw the time was fourteen minutes past four a.m. He got to his feet and leaning on the counter of the desk stared ill-temperedly at the girl as she came up to him.

Good grief! he thought. Where in the world has she come from?

The girl was dark and stupid-looking. She had buck teeth and she wore horn-rimmed spectacles. She had on a red and green tartan cloth coat that was slightly too large for her and her lank black hair was caught up in a pale blue silk scarf.

"If you want a room, it'll cost you a couple of pounds," Dale said, "and I want it in advance."

"Yes, I want a room," the girl said, opening her purse. "I lost the last train home."

"If you haven't any luggage, the charge is three pounds. That's the rule of the hotel," Dale said. "Take it or leave it." At that moment Crantor came in and up to the desk. "Gimme my key," he said curtly. The girl looked at him.

"Excuse me," she said, "he's charging me three pounds for a room because I haven't any luggage. Is that right?"

"Look, ugly," Dale snarled, "you heard what I said. Get out and stay out if you don't want to pay."

"Give her a room," Crantor said, picking up his key. "The charge is a pound." He looked at the girl. "Give him a pound."

Dale took a key off the rack and slid it across the counter. His thin, rat-like face was expressionless.

"Room 24," he said and took the pound note the girl gave him. "I'm on the same floor," Crantor said, looking at the girl out of the corner of his eye. She was drab and dull, but he was used to the ugly ones. "I'll show you the way."

The girl followed him obediently up the stairs. When they had rounded the bend and were out of sight of the desk, she said, "Have you heard from Shapiro?"

Crantor started, turned swiftly to stare at her. It was only when she slipped out the buck teeth that he recognized her.

"Lorelli! Well, I'll be damned!"

"I asked if you had heard from Shapiro?" "I've heard from him," Crantor said. He paused outside his door, pushed in the key, unlocked the door and opened it. "You'd better come in."

She followed him into the room and went over to the mirror above the fireplace. He shut the door and turned the key.

"The police nearly nabbed him," he said, taking off his damp overcoat and dropping it on the chair. "He's in a hell of a state."

Something must have gone wrong. He slipped up somewhere, but he wouldn't say where."

"The fool was followed," Lorelli said. "The police nearly caught me." She took a packet of cigarettes from her purse, lit one and blew smoke towards Crantor. "When I left Athens Street I was followed by a tall, powerfully built man. He wasn't a policeman. I'm sure of that. I couldn't shake him off. I went back to the room I had rented in Market Mews. I saw him go to a call box. I changed into this rig-out and got away over the roofs. The police came a few minutes later."

"Have you any idea who he could be?"

Crantor shook his head.

"Shapiro killed a cop. He's yelling for his money. It's going to be tricky getting him out of the country."

Lorelli came over to the table and sat down.

"Where is he?"

"He has holed up in his girl's flat. Maybe you remember her: Gina Pasero? Didn't she do a job for the old man in Rome some years ago?"

Lorelli nodded.

"I remember her. She's unreliable. I didn't know she was Shapiro's girl."

"What do you mean — unreliable?" Crantor asked sharply.

"If the police connect her with Shapiro, she'll talk. Has Shapiro told her anything about you?"

Crantor stiffened.

"I don't know. He might have."

Lorelli opened her purse and took out a slip of pink paper. She pushed it across the table.

"I left my bag at Euston station," she said. "There are two things in it that will interest you. One of them is a thousand pounds in five-pound notes. I was instructed to give that sum to the man who killed Ferenci... a man, you understand, not any particular man."

Crantor stared at her. "What's the other thing then?"

"A replica of the knife you gave Shapiro."

Crantor took the slip of paper, folded it carefully and put it in his wallet.

"The police have a description of Shapiro," Lorelli went on. "He can't get away. When he is caught, he will tell them about you."

"Yes," Crantor said.

"I don't think Shapiro is much use to us," Lorelli went on, looking at Crantor. "Do you?"

"Not now," Crantor said and picked up his overcoat. He put it on. "You'd better get some sleep. Your room is across the way."

"I'll wait here until you come back," Lorelli said. "We shall have to do something about Gina Pasero too. It won't take the police long to connect her with Shapiro. Do you know where she lives?"

"No, but I will find out," Crantor said, moving to the door. He paused with his hand on the door knob. "What shall I do with the money?"

Lorelli shrugged her shoulders.

"It belongs to Shapiro," she said.

Crantor's mutilated face lit up with a wolfish smile.

"Perhaps I'll persuade him to leave it to me in his will," he said and went out, closing the door behind him.

# Chapter IV

## GINA

A little after twelve o'clock the following morning, Marian came into Don's study to announce that Chief Superintendent Dicks of the Special Branch was waiting to see him.

"Dicks? What's he want?" Don asked, signing the last letter of a number that lay before him.

"He didn't confide in me, but he did say it was urgent."

"I have half a mind not to see him," Don said, pushing back his chair. "I'm fed up with the police. They had those two just where they wanted them and they calmly let them get away." He reached for a cigarette. "Any news of Julia? Have you phoned the Clinic yet?"

"Yes, just now. She is doing as well as can be expected, but she is still very ill. I'll go down after lunch and see if I can't get something less vague."

"I wish you would. I can't get her out of my mind."

"The Superintendent is waiting," Marian reminded him.

"All right, I'll see him now."

Chief Superintendent Dicks, a red-faced, jovial-looking man, was sitting comfortably in an armchair before the fire in the lounge. He was puffing placidly at his pipe; his shrewd eyes were half-closed as Don walked in. He and Don had known each other over a number of years and were old friends.

"There you are," Dicks said, looking up. "I bet you're hating the entire police force this morning."

"You're right, I am," Don said, sitting on the arm of a chair that faced the fire. "I have every reason to. The way your people let those two slip through their hands sticks in my gullet."

Dicks lifted his broad shoulders.

"We'll find them," he said. "At the moment they are lying low, but sooner or later they'll have to make a move into the open. They can't get away."

"I don't believe it," Don said irritably. "It wouldn't surprise me if they weren't already in France or Italy, laughing at you. What's the good of watching the ports and airports? You don't imagine they will go that way, do you? They've probably gone by fast motor-boat. It's easy enough and you know it."

"Fortunately for me," Dicks said, "catching them isn't my pigeon."

Don wasn't in a patient mood. He stared hard at Dicks. "Well, I can't imagine you're here to chit-chat

about the weather, Super," he said. "I suppose something is your pigeon. What is it you wanted to see me about? I'm a little pressed for time."

Dicks lifted his heavy eyebrows.

"Sounds as if you're a little testy this morning, Mr Micklem," he said. "Can't say I blame you. This has been a foul-up.

We should have had them by now. The Commissioner is raising all kinds of hell. Yes, I have a reason for seeing you. I thought you would like some information about the Tortoise."

Don looked at him, his angry expression fading. "What do you know about the Tortoise? What's he to do with your department?"

"I don't know much about him, and I'm afraid he is going to have a lot to do with my department," Dicks returned, settling himself more comfortably in his chair.

Don got up and as a gesture of peace went to the liquor cabinet, fixed two big whiskies and water and gave Dicks one of them. Dicks took it dubiously, sniffed at it and sighed with approval. "It's a bit early for me, but perhaps it won't do any harm. Thanks, Mr Micklem."

"Tell me about the Tortoise," Don said, sitting down. "I'd give a lot to get my hands on him."

"So would we, so would the French, Italian and American police. I know our people didn't come out of this business too well," Dicks said, "but you have to shoulder some of the blame. You see, Horrocks had never heard of the Tortoise while I had. If you had told me we might have had a very different story to tell."

"I did try to tell you," Don said shortly. "You happened to be out. I know it was careless of me not to try again, but I just couldn't take it seriously."

"I'm not saying we could have saved Mr Ferenci if we had known what was happening, but at least we would have had a good try. You aren't the only one who has looked on the Tortoise as a joke. The Paris police thought he was a harmless lunatic and Renaldo Busoni lost his life."

"Busoni? Wasn't he the Italian attache?" "That's right. He was fished out of the Seine after receiving threatening letters from the Tortoise. I got the report with a hint that Italian officials over here might be threatened in the same way."

"Who is the Tortoise?" Don demanded.

"He is a very dangerous and ruthless extortioner: a man who will stop at nothing."

"So Ferenci isn't his first victim?"

"Oh no; there have been nine others over a period of fourteen months," Dicks said. "Two of them were murdered in the States, three in France and four in Italy. Mr Ferenci is the first to be murdered



in this country. The trouble is we have no idea who paid the Tortoise's demands. We feel pretty sure there must be a great number of men and women in Europe and in the States who are paying up and saying nothing. If you had told me Ferenci had been threatened by the Tortoise I would have advised him to pay up."

"You're not serious, are you? That's odd advice from a police officer."

"It happens to be good advice," Dicks said quietly. "His wife wouldn't be in the London Clinic now if he had paid up and he would be alive."

"But that's not the point. You are admitting the police would have been helpless to protect him."

"That's what I am admitting. Let's face it. We haven't enough policemen to shadow any but the V.I.P.s day in and day out. The Tortoise is patient. Sooner or later he gets his man. Mr Ferenci wouldn't have rated a day and night bodyguard.

We would have to do something about the Italian ambassador's staff if one of them was threatened, but Mr Ferenci was an ordinary individual. We couldn't have looked after him for weeks on end. You've seen how the Tortoise works. You, Mason and Dixon were guarding Ferenci. That didn't save him, did it?" Dicks tapped out his pipe, blew noisily down it and began to fill it again. "The Tortoise knows that if he fails to make good his threat a crack will start in the racket he has built up. Pay up or die is his slogan. People are paying up because they believe they haven't a chance to survive if they don't."

"But Ferenci didn't know that," Don said sharply. "The Tortoise meant nothing to him."

"That's true. The Tortoise is starting his racket over here. No one knew about him before Ferenci died, but they know about him now. After the way the newspapers handled the murder, no one can fail to know about him. The next rich man who gets a threatening note from the Tortoise will know it isn't a joke. I think Ferenci was deliberately killed to advertise the arrival in this county of the Tortoise."

"It's up to your people to catch him," Don said grimly. "That's what you are here for."

"It's not going to be easy. We have no lead on him. If we do catch up with the killer, he isn't the Tortoise. If we catch this redheaded woman, she isn't the Tortoise either. The French police did manage to catch one of the Tortoise's dagger-men and persuaded him to talk, but he didn't tell them anything of any use. He said he was hired by a man who made an appointment with him on a dark road. This man - he may or may not have been the Tortoise - arrived by car and stayed in the car. The dagger-man didn't see his face. He took his orders and did the job. So you see the Tortoise is quite a headache. The American, French and Italian police have been wrestling with the problem for the past fourteen months. Now it's our turn."

"You don't sound very confident that you'll catch him," Don said.

"I know how you feel, Mr Micklem," Dicks returned. "You have just lost a good friend, but we can't work miracles. You can be sure everything will be done that can be done. It is an international job, of

course. It's my guess he operates from Italy."

"Why Italy?"

"Two reasons: every one of the Tortoise's victims have been Italians and this..."

He took from his pocket a flat box, opened it and produced a broad-bladed knife with an ornate wooden handle. "Take a look at this. It is the knife that killed Mr Ferenci. Make anything of it?"

Don took the knife and examined it.

"I don't pretend to be an expert," he said after he had turned the knife over, "but I'd say this is a copy of an Italian throwing knife of the medieval period: say about the thirteenth century. If I remember rightly I've seen something like it in the Bargello in Florence."

"That's correct," Dicks said, nodding. "Between them, the police in the States, France and Italy have nine such knives.

They have all been taken from the bodies of the Tortoise's victims. Every effort has been made to trace the knives without success."

"The red-headed girl, Lorelli, is an Italian," Don said. "Her accent was unmistakable."

"That's another pointer."

"Well, surely we are getting somewhere," Don said. "Why does he only attack Italians? Is it possible there's a political hookup? I know Ferenci was a rabid anti-Fascist. Know anything about the other victims' politics?"

"They are a mixed bag: nothing to go on. Some were anti-Fascists, some Christian-Democrats, some Fascists. I've worked along that line but it gets me nowhere."

"Have you asked yourself why he calls himself the Tortoise?" Don asked. "It's not a name to strike fear into anyone - a most unimaginative name for an extortioner. Why the Tortoise? There must be a reason. A tortoise is slow and harmless: the exact opposite to this killer. There must be a reason."

"I wondered about that myself, but I haven't any bright ideas. It might be a deliberate smoke screen."

"I don't think so. And another thing - why go to the trouble of manufacturing a copy of a medieval knife? Why not use a knife without the elaborately carved handle? I have a hunch that the tortoise and the knife are something this killer has adopted as a trademark for a very positive reason. We might get somewhere if we found out that reason."

"It's possible, but I don't see how we do it."

Don tossed his cigarette into the fire.

"It's a thinking point. I don't want to hurry you. Super, but I have a lot of work to do. I take it you didn't come here just to give me information?"

Dicks rubbed the side of his nose with his pipe.

"Well, I did and I didn't," he said. "I have a lot of respect for your talents. You did a fine job on that Tregarth business last year. Ferenci's a friend of yours. I thought I'd put you in the picture in case you wanted to take a hand in finding the Tortoise. If we are going to catch him we will only do so by underground information. I know you have a number of contacts in Italy and over here. Every scrap of information we can get will be useful."

"All right," Don said. "I'll see what I can do, but I'm not very hopeful. I know a couple of birds in Rome who might have some ideas. I'll have a talk with Uccelli. I don't know if you've run into him. He owns the Torcolotti restaurant in Soho. He is a smart old scoundrel. I've known him for years. What he doesn't know about the Italian colony here isn't worth knowing."

"We nearly nabbed him on a big black-market deal during the war," Dicks said, "but he was just too smart for us."

"I'm surprised you got as far as nearly nabbing him. I'll have a talk with him. He may know something."

Dicks put the throwing knife into the box and the box into his pocket.

"You wouldn't feel inclined to go to Italy and see what you can pick up there? I have a feeling that's where the real information is if we could only tap it."

"My dear Super, I can't plod over the whole of Italy in the hope of running into the Tortoise. Can't we pin it down to a district or better still a town? If we could do that I'd go."

"The five men who were murdered in Italy died in Rome, Florence, Padua, Naples and Milan. That's a pretty wide territory. I can't do better than that."

"Let's see if either of us can narrow it down first," Don said as Dicks got to his feet. "Let me have any information you get and I'll pass on any I get."

When the Superintendent had gone, Don remained before the fire, thinking. He was still there when Cherry came in to announce-lunch was ready.

Taller than the average Italian, Giorgio Uccelli was still erect in spite of his seventy-five years and his shrewd deep-set eyes were alert.

Don's father had known him some twenty years ago in Venice where Uccelli had owned a small, but first-class restaurant in Calle de Fabori. As a boy of sixteen, Don had had his first Venetian meal at Uccelli's restaurant and had immediately taken a liking for him. When Mussolini had come to power, Uccelli had left Italy and had settled in Soho.

Don had renewed their friendship and he often dined at Uccelli's now famous restaurant.

Having finished an excellent dinner, he had gone through to Uccelli's private room and was now sitting before a fire, a fine brandy in his hand and his face half-screened by the smoke of one of his cigars.

He and Uccelli had been chatting together for twenty minutes and Don decided it was time to get around to the reason for his visit.

"You heard about Mr Ferenci's death?" he said suddenly.

Uccelli's lined, swarthy face clouded.

"Yes. It was a great shock to me. Is Mrs Ferenci better?"

"She's still pretty bad. I guess you know the police aren't getting anywhere with the case?"

Uccelli lifted his shoulders.

"Police business doesn't interest me."

Don knew he was on touchy ground mentioning the police to Uccelli. He had heard rumours that Uccelli had been a big black-market dealer and now dealt in foreign currency on an extensive scale.

"Guido was one of my best friends," Don said. "I want to find the man who killed him. It's a personal thing."

Uccelli nodded. That was something he could understand.

There was a pause, then Don said, "I'm after information. Tell me what you know about the Tortoise?"

Uccelli shook his head.

"Very little. I know he exists and that he is dangerous. No Italian who owns more than five thousand pounds is safe from him," he said gravely. "He has a deadly reputation in Italy. Hundreds of people in Italy and France are paying him vast sums to keep alive."

"Does he live in Italy?"

"I don't know."

"He has people working for him: one of them is a girl with Venetian red hair. Do you know her?"

Uccelli shook his head.

"I don't know of any girl with Venetian red hair. That colouring has died out: you never see it these

days."

"The other is a tall, thin man, dark, hooked nose, flashily dressed whose first name is Ed."

Uccelli stubbed out his cigar.

"Yes, that sounds like Ed Shapiro. He dines here sometimes."

Don sat forward.

"What does he do for a living?"

"He's a smuggler. At one time he was a knife-thrower in a circus."

"That must be the fellow!" Don exclaimed. "Where can I find him?"

"I haven't seen him for some weeks. Perhaps his girl can tell you."

"Who is she?"

"Her name's Gina Pasero. She is an Italian. She works at the Florida Club in Firth Street. She is greatly influenced by money. Offer her something: fifty pounds, perhaps. If she knows where Shapiro is, she will tell you."

"Right, I'll talk to her. Now about this girl with the red hair. Her first name is Lorelli. Will you try to get me information about her? It's worth a hundred pounds to anyone who can put me on to her."

Uccelli inclined his head. "I will do what I can."

Don got to his feet.

"I'll see if I can get anything out of Gina Pasero," he said. "What does she do at the club?"

"She is a dance hostess. You will be very careful," Uccelli said. "This could be a dangerous business. You are dealing with men who do not value life. Remember that. If it is thought you are showing an interest in their activities, they will wipe you out."

"Don't worry about me, I can look after myself," Don said. "Find out about this red-head for me."

"I will do what I can. Be careful of Shapiro. He is very dangerous."

"I'll watch out. Thanks for the wonderful dinner. I'll look in in a day or so."

"Leave it a few days. Information is not always easy to get." Uccelli looked at Don. "And it is understood that anything I have told you is for your own use and is not to be given to the police?"

"That's all right," Don said. "I'll keep it to myself."

Leaving the restaurant, he walked briskly up Firth Street until he came to a door, over which was a neon sign that spelt out in blood-red letters:

FLORIDA CLUB: Members only.

Having paid a pound for a temporary member's ticket to a flat-nosed doorman, Don descended a flight of dirty stone steps that led to a shabby bar. Beyond the bar he could see a dimly lit room containing thirty or forty tables, a three-piece band and a small space in the middle of the floor for dancing.

He paused at the bar as he knew it was expected of him and ordered a whisky. Two blondes and a long-haired man in a check suit with enormously padded shoulders were propped up against the bar, drinking neat gin. They stared at Don with undisguised curiosity.

Don ignored them. He lit a cigarette and toyed with his drink for a few minutes until two more men drifted out of the restaurant and joined the others at the bar. Then finishing his drink, he went into the restaurant.

The pianist, saxophone and drums combination was playing in a half-hearted way. Three couples were moving about the floor in time with the music, but with no other claim to dancing. One of the men held a glass of whisky in his hand as he shuffled around the floor. His partner, a hard-faced girl with copper-coloured hair, was smoking.

Don went to a table in a corner and sat down. Nearby was a small dais enclosed by a rail. Behind the rail were three girls who were smoking and staring with blank boredom across the room.

A waiter in a grubby white coat came over to Don.

"Straight whisky," he said.

The waiter nodded and went away.

The band stopped playing. The couples on the floor didn't bother to clap. They drifted back to their tables and a funereal hush fell over the room.

Don thought the Florida Club was in a class of its own as a sordid slice of dull night life.

He glanced again at the girls behind the rail and decided the dark girl with a rose in her hair could be Gina Pasero. She was small-featured and pretty in a hard, sophisticated way. The shadows under her dark eyes gave her an interestingly dissipated look. She was wearing a red and black evening dress cut so low Don could see the tops of her firm, young breasts. She sat motionless, her hands folded in her lap. If her eyes hadn't been open, he would have thought she was asleep.

The waiter brought the whisky and Don paid him. The two blondes came in from the bar and sat opposite Don's table.

They stared fixedly at him.

Five leaden minutes crawled by, then the pianist began to play. After the third bar the saxophone and drums joined in as if they were doing the pianist a favour.

Don went over to the dais.

"Do you think you have enough strength left to dance with me?" he asked the girl with the rose in her hair.

The other two girls giggled, looking at him, crude invitation in their eyes.

The girl with the rose in her hair got up and came round the rail. She moved listlessly and she made no attempt to conceal her boredom. Don put his arm round her and moved her out on to the floor. He found it impossible to do more than shuffle around the floor. The lagging beat of the drum made any attempt to dance a farce.

After a minute or so of shuffling, Don said, "I bet this is where undertakers come to relax."

The girl didn't say anything. Don could only see the top of her sleek head. She seemed content to let him push her before him and keep her nose close to his gold tie-clip.

They circled the room, then Don said, "Don't let me stop you sleeping. Just rest your feet on mine and have yourself a quiet time."

The girl leaned back to stare up at him. At that angle he could look down the front of her dress, but he was too well-mannered to stare. The girl's shadowy black eyes expressed irritation and weariness.

"Let it lie, Jack," she said in a cold, brittle voice.

"Certainly," Don said. "Just let me know if I'm driving too fast for you."

"If you don't like the way I dance you know what you can do about it," the girl said, her voice hardening.

Switching from English into Italian, Don said, "I know what I would like to do, but this is hardly the place."

Boredom, irritation and weariness went away from the girl's face. Her eyes became alive. Her red, sensual lips curved into a smile.

"How did you know?" she said. "No one has spoken to me in Italian for years."

"I'm psychic," Don said, smiling at her.

She pursed her red lips.

"I think you're tight."

"That's an idea. Shall we stop this depressing shuffling and see what we can do about it?"

"That's up to you. It'll still cost you a pound an hour."

"Think nothing of it," Don said, leading her back to his table. "I'm made of money. What'll it be?"

She ordered the inevitable champagne and Don ordered another whisky. When the drinks had been served, he asked her from what part of Italy she had come.

"I was bom in Naples," she told him. "I married an American soldier who brought me to London. We hadn't been here two weeks before a taxi knocked him down and killed him."

"Tough luck," Don said.

She shrugged.

"He wasn't much. I was glad to be rid of him."

"You must have been pretty young when you married."

She laughed.

"I was fifteen. There were eighteen in my family. We lived in four rooms. I was pretty glad to get out." She smiled at him. "You're American, aren't you? How did you learn to speak Italian so well?"

"My father lived most of his life in Florence. I spent a lot of time with him. What's your name?"

"Call me Gina."

She began to tell him about Naples. He could see she was badly homesick and he let her talk. After she had worked through half the bottle of champagne and the wine had relaxed her, he said casually, "By the way, how's Ed these days?"

She continued to smile, but the light went out of her eyes. After a second or so, the effort of keeping the smile on her lips proved too much of an effort. Her face reverted to a cold, expressionless mask.

"What do you know about Ed?" she asked harshly.

"I want to talk to him. I've been looking all over for him. Where's he got to?"

"How should I know?" She reached for her bag. "I've got to go. I can't spend all the evening with you."

"Don't be silly," Don said, smiling at her. "I've got a deal. I want to gut in Ed's way. It won't wait. It's worth fifty pounds to anyone who can tell me where he is."

Her eyes lost their cold look.



"You mean you'll give me fifty pounds if I tell you where he is?" she said, staring at him.

"I'll give you fifty pounds if you show me where he is," Don said. "I'm not parting with all that money for an address."

The tip of her tongue passed over her lips as she studied him. "Honest? If I had fifty pounds could go home. I could go to

Naples."

"Show me where Ed is and you can go home. That's a promise." "I haven't seen him for weeks, but I think I know where he is. When will you have the money?" "In a couple of hours."

"All right. Meet me outside the Casino theatre at one o'clock. I can't get away from here until twelve, and I'll have to make sure he is where I think he is." "Then you'll do it?"

"There's not much I wouldn't do for a chance to go home," she said. "He's in trouble, isn't he?" "Would you worry?" She shook her head.

"Find out where he is, but don't tell him I'm looking for him," Don said. "That's important."

"I'm not likely to tell him," she said. "I'm not crazy. Ed's dangerous."

# Chapter V

## THE LONG SHOT

At five minutes to one, as Don walked briskly along Old Compton Street, his head bent against the driving rain, he could hear Harry's light footfalls behind him.

Although Don had promised Uccelli not to bring in the police, he had no intention of tackling Shapiro single-handed.

"This girl may not know where Shapiro is hiding," he told Harry. "She wants the money badly, and if she doesn't know where he is, she may be tempted to pull a fast one. So watch out. Keep out of sight, but move in if there's trouble."

He glanced over his shoulder as he neared the darkened Casino theatre and motioned Harry to stop. Harry slid into a dark doorway and out of sight.

Glad to get under the shelter of the Casino's canopy, Don glanced at his watch. It was now two minutes to one o'clock. There was no sign yet of Gina. He opened his coat and shook off the rain drops. Then lighting a cigarette, he leaned against the wall and settled down to wait.

After he had finished his second cigarette, he began to pace slowly up and down the length of the sheltered pavement. It was now quarter past one. He decided to give Gina another quarter of an hour before making a move. He continued to pace up and down, listening to the rain beating on the roof of the canopy. He remembered that Uccelli had warned him how dangerous Shapiro was. If Shapiro suspected Gina was betraying him...

Again Don looked at his watch. It was three minutes to half-past one. He looked up and down the deserted street, then crossing the street he joined Harry in the shop doorway.

"It doesn't look as if she's coming," he said. "I don't like it, Harry. She may have run into trouble."

"Do you know where she lives, sir?"

"No, but we should be able to find out. There's no point in hanging around here any longer. We'll go to the Florida Club.

They may know where we can find her."

Stepping out into the rain, they hurried over to Firth Street.

The Florida's neon sign still blazed into the dark night, making a red pool on the wet pavement.

"Wait here," Don said. "I'll see what I can find out."

He went down the steps to where the doorman sat in his cubby hole.

The doorman looked up and scowled at him.

"We're shut," he growled. "The last lot are coming out now."

"Is Gina around?" Don asked.

"She's gone home."

"I have a date with her, but I've mislaid her address," Don said, taking out a pound note and letting the doorman see it.

"Can you give it to me?"

The doorman eyed the pound note, rubbed his jaw, then lifted his heavy shoulders.

"I could," he said and pulled a well-thumbed notebook out of a drawer, flicked through the pages, found an entry and scowled at it. "I've an idea she's moved from the address I've 'ere. If she 'as, then you've 'ad it. Want to try it, mister?"

"Sure," Don said.

"2a, Peters Road: know where it is?"

"That's off Charing Cross Road, isn't it?" Don said and slid the pound note through the window of the glass partition.

"That's right." The doorman snapped up the note. "Twenty yards past Cambridge Circus on the left."

Don nodded and climbing the steps, walked out into the rain again.

Harry joined him.

"We may be out of luck," Don said. "I have an address, but she may have moved. Let's go and see."

Five minutes' brisk walking brought them to Peters Road: a dingy street lined on either side by shabby warehouses, small factories and two or three Greek restaurants. No. 2 turned out to be the address of a firm dealing in bathroom fittings. A narrow alley ran down the side of the building. Harry threw the beam of his flashlight into the darkness.

"This is it: No. 2a," he said and moved into the alley.

Don joined him.

Shielding the light with his fingers, Harry let the beam play over the door. He put his hand on the cracked, shabby door panel and pushed, but the door was locked.

Don stepped back and looked up at the building. There were two windows; one on the first floor and another on the second. No lights showed: the lower window was without curtains.

"Let's see if we can raise anyone " he said.

Harry dug his thumb into the bell push. They could hear the bell ringing somewhere in the house.

They waited for a minute or so while the rain fell steadily on them.

"Doesn't look as if anyone's at home," Harry said. "What do we do now?"

"Let's see if we can get in. I want to be sure this is her place."

Harry examined the lock of the door.

"Nothing to it, sir, I've a bit of wire that'll fix it." He handed the flashlight to Don and inserted a piece of wire into the lock. He fiddled for a few seconds then twisted sharply. The lock clicked back.

Don turned the handle and pushed the door open.

They stepped into a musty-smelling passage and Harry closed the door. The beam of Don's flashlight lit up a flight of stairs leading to the upper landing.

Moving silently and followed by Harry, Don went up the stairs. His flashlight showed a door at the head of the stairs, a short passage and another flight of stairs.

Across the door was painted in white letters:

The Acme Manufacturing Co.

"Stay here, Harry," Don said. "If she's anywhere, she'll be on the next landing."

He went along the passage and began to mount the second flight of stairs. These, he noticed, were covered with a dusty, threadbare stair-runner that looked as if it hadn't been swept in months.

At the head of the stairs was a red-painted front door; its brass fittings tarnished. The card-holder screwed to the door was empty.

Don listened outside the door. He stood listening for some moments, but no sound came to him. Turning the door handle, he pushed, expecting to find the door locked, but to his surprise it swung inwards.

Holding the door open, and not moving, he swung the beam of his flashlight around the small hall. Facing him was a large gilt framed mirror. Below it a carved wood chest on which stood a vase of dead zinnias. Dust lay thick on the chest and obscured the mirror. On either side of the mirror was a door.

Don moved into the hall, leaving the front door open. He crossed to the door on the right, turned the handle and opened it.

Darkness and silence came out of the room. He groped for the light switch, found it and pressed it down. A shaded lamp in the centre of the room sprang alight.

The bedroom, Don found himself looking at was skimpily furnished. A small padded chair stood before a walnut dressing-table on which stood triple mirrors. A walnut clothes closet stood against one of the walls. A pale blue fitted carpet covered the floor. Against the wall, facing the window, was a wide divan bed, covered with a pale blue bedspread.

It was this bed that held Don's rigid attention.

Ed Shapiro lay across the bed in a dark puddle of blood, his lips drawn off his teeth in a wolfish snarl. His bloodstained fingers were curled round the wooden handle of a knife that had been driven with great violence to the hilt into his chest.

Don didn't have to touch him to know he was dead.

Leaning over the banister rail, Don called softly, "Harry! Come up."

Harry mounted the stairs, two at a time. The sight of Don's set face brought him up short.

"Shapiro's in there - he's dead," Don said. "Take a look at him."

They went into the bedroom.

Harry touched the dead man's hand.

"He's been dead some time."

"Look at the knife. It's a copy of the one that killed Guido." ,

"I bet his pals decided he wasn't any further use to them, and they knocked him off," Harry said, stepping away from the bed.

"Yes." Don glanced around the room, then went out into the hall. He crossed over to the door on the left and opened it.

He looked into a small kitchen. On the table was a large stock of tinned food.

"Looks as if he had settled here until the police had given him up," he said. "Let's get out of here, Harry."

They left the flat and went down the stairs. Rain was still falling steadily. Harry closed the street door and he and Don walked quickly down the alley to Peters Road.

"Are you going to report this to the police, sir?" Harry asked.

"I'm finding Gina first," Don said. "Uccelli might know where I can find her." He peered at his watch in the light of the street lamp. "It's just two. Maybe he hasn't gone to bed yet. Let's see."

Uccelli hadn't gone to bed, and he answered Don's knock himself.

"I'm trying to find Gina Pasero," Don said after he had apologized for disturbing Uccelli. "Have you any idea where I can find her?"

"Come in," Uccelli said. "How wet you are. Have you tried the club?"

Don and Harry followed the old man into his room.

"I saw her at the club. I made a date with her for one o'clock. She hasn't shown up. Shapiro's been murdered. I'm worried about the girl."

Uccelli's eyes widened. "She used to live in a flat in Peters Road, but I did hear she had moved..."

"I've been there. That's where I found Shapiro."

"Why do you think the girl's in trouble?" the old man asked.

"I offered her fifty pounds for information. She said she would meet me later. She was anxious to have the money. She didn't turn up."

Uccelli pulled a little face.

"I don't know where she could be unless she's at the Miremare Hotel in Western Road. She often stayed there before she took the flat in Peters Road."

"All right, I'll try there." Don turned to Harry. "Get the car, will you?"

When Harry had gone, Don went on, "This is getting complicated, Giorgio." He sat on the edge of Uccelli's desk.

"Shapiro was hiding in the flat. Whoever killed him gave him a dose of his own medicine. The knife was thrown at him with tremendous force. It went into his body up to the hilt."

Uccelli lifted his shoulders.

"A good riddance. He was a bad and dangerous man."

"I must tell the police," Don said. "You understand?"

"Of course."

"You have heard nothing about the red-headed woman yet?"

"Not yet. I have already made one or two inquiries, but it may take time."

Don heard the Bentley pull up outside.

"You can rely on me not to tell the police where I got my information from."

"I know that," Uccelli said. "The night clerk at the Miremare may help you. His name is Cavallino. Tell him you come from me."

"Right," Don said. "I'll be in touch with you."

He went out into the wet night and got into the Bentley. A few minutes' fast driving brought them to Western Road.

"This is it," Harry said, slowing down. "Doesn't look much of a joint, does it?"

The entrance to the Miremare Hotel was sandwiched between a chemist shop and a petrol station. The name of the hotel was picked out in tarnished gold letters across two glass-panelled doors.

"Wait for me," Don said and slid out into the rain. He ran up the six steps, pushed open the door and walked into the dingy reception hall furnished with four shabby leather armchairs, a bamboo table and a fern in a tarnished brass pot.

The reception desk faced him. A single light lit up a row of keys and a series of empty pigeon-holes at the back of the desk.

A white-faced, black-haired man sat behind the desk, yawning over a paper-backed novel. He looked up as Don crossed the hall, pushed aside his novel and stood up.

"Is Miss Pasero staying with you?" Don asked, coming to rest at the desk.

The clerk looked him over suspiciously.

"I'm sorry, but I can't answer that question at this time of night," he said. "If you will call tomorrow morning..."

"You are Cavallino, aren't you?" Don said. "Uccelli told me to come to you."

Cavallino's face brightened: the suspicion went away.

"Please excuse me. I didn't know," he said. "Uccelli is a good friend of mine. Yes, Miss Pasero is staying here."

Don drew in a sharp breath of relief.

"I want to speak to her," he said. "It's most urgent."

Cavallino spread his hands.

"If you would care to wait, sir, I don't think she can be much longer." He consulted his watch. "It is nearly half-past two.

She is not usually as late as this."

"She's not in then?" Don said, his voice sharpening.

"No, she went out soon after twelve-thirty when her friend called for her."

"What friend?"

Cavallino frowned.

"Excuse me, sir, but you ask too many questions. It is not my business..."

"My reason is urgent," Don broke in. "Gina Pasero is connected with Shapiro. He was murdered in her flat and I think she is in danger. Who was the friend who called for her?"

"I don't know," Cavallino said, staring at Don in alarm. "A girl: I haven't seen her before. Miss Pasero returned from the club just after midnight. Someone called her on the telephone. At half-past twelve she came down from her room. I asked her if she were going out, but she acted as if she hadn't heard me. She went out. I went to the door. There was a car waiting. Miss Pasero was talking to this girl. They got into the car and drove away."

Don hunched his shoulders against the chill that crawled up his spine.

"What was the girl like?" he asked, and the tone of his voice made Cavallino stiffen.

"I couldn't see much of her, but I did notice her hair. It was an unusual colour: a Venetian red."

Don stared at him for a long moment.

"Let me have your telephone'," he said curtly

Cavallino pushed the telephone towards him.

"There is something wrong then?" he asked anxiously.

"That's what I'm going to find out," Don said and dialled Whitehall 1212.

Lorelli sat in the driver's seat of the Humber, her hands over her ears, her eyes shut.

The old, battered car stood under the trees of the tow-path, a few yards from Risings Lock. It was dark, and the white, damp mist hid the river.

It had been too easy. She had traced Gina to the Miremare Hotel. Gina had recognized her at once,



although it was now five years since they had met in Siena. She had accepted Lorelli's tale that there was work for her again in Italy. Excited and unsuspecting, she had got into the car to discuss the details.

Crantor had been hiding in the back of the car. He had risen up and hit Gina with a sock filled with wet sand. He had struck her on the top of her head, very hard and viciously. She had slumped against Lorelli. Shuddering, Lorelli had pushed her away from her, and Crantor, leaning over the front seat, had shoved Gina's unconscious body off the seat on to the floor.

"Okay," he said. "Straight ahead. I'll tell you where to go."

It had taken them half an hour to reach Risings Lock. It was now a quarter past one. The tow-path was deserted. Crantor got out of the car and stood listening for some moments to the sound of the rain, the gentle movement of the river and the wind in the trees. Then he dragged Gina's body out of the car, letting it slide on to the wet, muddy tarmac.

"Wait for me," he said and picking up the unconscious girl, he threw her over his shoulder and walked away into the darkness.

Lorelli waited, her hands pressed to her ears. She couldn't bear to hear the splash that she knew would follow when Crantor threw Gina into the river. After an interminable time Crantor returned to the car. He was breathing heavily. The front of his dirty trench coat was wet.

"Move over," he said curtly. "I'll drive."

Lorelli slid along the bench seat. Crantor got in under the steering wheel, started the car, turned on the parking lights and drove along the tow-path. After a hundred yards or so, he turned left on to the main road.

He drove fast, heading for London. Neither he nor Lorelli said anything until they came to the main London road, then Crantor said abruptly, "What will you do now?"

"The job's finished," Lorelli said. "I'll go back. I'll catch the ten o'clock plane to Rome."

"Is it safe? They'll be watching the airports."

"My papers are in order. They won't recognize me. Of course it's safe."

"Don't be too sure. The cops here are smart."

"They won't worry me."

"You'll tell Felix I did a good job?" Crantor said.

"Yes, I'll tell him," Lorelli said indifferently.

Crantor looked sideways at her.

"You don't sound enthusiastic. It is important he should know how I handled it."

"You were well paid," Lorelli said, staring through the windscreen at the beams of the car's headlights as they raced ahead of them.

Crantor grunted. He drove for ten minutes or so without speaking, then he said, "Do you want to stay at Polsen's for the night?"

"I may as well," she returned.

Again he glanced at her. Then his big, hairy hand dropped on to her trousered knee.

"You and I could be useful to each other," he said.

She hit the back of his hand hard with her handbag. The steel clip cut the skin. He jerked his hand away, cursing.

"Every man I have had to work with comes out with that proposition," Lorelli said angrily. "Can't you be different?"

"Why?" Crantor snarled as he sucked at his bleeding hand. "I'm a man, aren't I? Just because my face..."

"Oh, shut up!" Lorelli snapped. "You flatter yourself. What's your face got to do with it?"

Crantor's hands gripped the steering wheel viciously. He imagined his ringers' were sinking into her white throat.

They drove on in silence.

It wasn't until half-past two the following afternoon that Don came down to his study.

Marian was sitting at his desk, busying herself with a pile of unanswered correspondence. She concealed a smile as she watched him amble to his favourite armchair and lower himself into it with a groan.

"What a night!" he exclaimed, clasping his head in his hands.

"I didn't get to bed until half-past eight this morning. If this goes on much longer I'll finish up in a home for incurables."

"It wasn't so long ago that you told me you didn't need any sleep," Marian said, getting up and coming over with a number of letters in her hand. "Will you see your mail now?"

"Most certainly not!" Don said firmly. "I'm not doing a stroke of work today. Put those letters away and sit down. I want to talk to you."

With a resigned sigh, Marian put the letters on the desk and sat down.

"How's Julia?" Don asked, struggling with a gigantic yawn.

"She's better. The doctor says she can see the police tomorrow, and if she continues to make progress she can go home in a week."

"That's fine. I'm going to offer her the villa at Nice. She shouldn't go back to the Hampstead house after what has happened. The change and sun will do her good. I won't leave London until this murder has been cleared up. Right now, we don't seem to be getting anywhere." He went on to tell Marian what had happened the previous night. "So now Gina has vanished. The police are hunting for her, but they haven't got a thing to go on. Except for the hotel clerk, no one seems to have seen her. This woman with the red hair haunts me. She turns up and vanishes like a ghost."

"Why was Shapiro murdered?" Marian asked.

"The police had his description. He had to keep under cover. Dicks thinks the gang - he's convinced there is a gang over here decided he was too big a danger, so they wiped him out." He reached for a cigarette and lit it. "I'm hanged if I can see how we are going to get anywhere unless we get a lead on the Tortoise himself. Dicks thinks he is in Italy, and I'm inclined to agree with him. The facts

point to it. He uses an Italian weapon. He only attacks Italians, and the red-headed woman is an Italian. Dicks wants me to go to Italy and hunt around for information. He has a pathetic faith in my abilities after the Tregarth business. It's a cock-eyed idea. I can't go tramping over the whole of Italy in the hope of running into the Tortoise. If I could narrow the hunt down to a town or even a district I'd go, but I just don't know where to start."

"I think Siena would be a good starting place," Marian said.

Don stared at her.

"Siena? Why Siena of all places?"

"I've been doing some research," Marian said quietly. "You told me you couldn't understand why this extortioner calls himself the Tortoise, and that there must be a reason. I began going through books on history and symbolism, trying to find a connection between Italy and a tortoise. In the history of Siena I found that the tortoise is the crest of one of the seventeen wards of Siena."

"Wards? What wards?"

"Siena is divided into seventeen districts or wards: each ward has its name, its chapel and its flag. Most of the wards are named after animals or birds. There's the she-wolf, the owl, the goose, and the tortoise..."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Don said. "Isn't this something to do with the festival of the Patio: the annual horse race?"

"Yes, that's right. There has always been rivalry between the wards, dating back to the tenth century. They keep up their rivalry by racing a horse blessed by their church, against the other horses representing the other wards."

"My stars!" Don said, starting to his feet. "This could be the clue we're looking for. It would explain why the knife is a copy of a medieval weapon. This killer could be a crackpot who has borrowed from medieval history. I must tell Dicks."

He'll know if the Italian police have worked this line or not. Find out if he can see me right away, will you?"

Marian called up Dicks' office.

"He'll be waiting for you," she said when she had hung up.

"Then I'll get off. Marian, go and buy yourself a hat: money's no object and charge it to my account. You are an exceedingly bright and clever young woman."

"Thank you, but that's what I'm paid for," Marian said, smiling.

"I'll take you out to dinner tonight," Don said as he made for the door. "If you're not wearing that new hat, there'll be trouble."

Twenty minutes later he walked into Dicks' office.

"Any news of Gina Pasero?" he asked as he closed the door.

"Not yet," Dicks said. He looked tired and worried. "Have you something for me?"

Don straddled the office chair, resting his arms along its back.

"Are you still keen for me to go to Italy and see what I can dig up?" he asked.

Dicks lifted his eyebrows.

"I thought we had gone into that, Mr Micklem. You said..."

"I know what I said," Don interrupted. "That doesn't answer my question."

"Yes, I'm still keen," Dicks said. "I think you could easily find something that would put us on to the Tortoise."

"Good. I've decided to go," Don said. "But on one condition: I want a clear field for at least a week."

Dicks took out his pipe and began to fill it.

"I don't follow you," he said. "What do you mean - a clear field?"

"I'm backing a hunch. I don't want you to contact the Italian police until I have explored a little. Too many fish in the pond will stir up the mud."

Dicks looked doubtful. . "This is a murder case. If you have any information..."

"I said a hunch, not information. I'm not keeping it a secret. My secretary has been doing some research on the tortoise,"

Don said, "and she's turned up something that may give us the lead we're looking for. Ever been to Siena, Super?"

Dicks shook his head.

"Siena is a medieval town. They take a great pride in keeping it that way. Twice a year the festival of the Patio is held in the main piazza<sup>1</sup>. It consists of a procession of men in fifteenth-century costumes and a horse race. Each horse represents a ward. For hundreds of years Siena has been divided into seventeen wards or districts. Each ward is a self-contained unit with its own crest, leader, church, traditions, and flag. The wards are named after animals, birds and reptiles. One of these wards is named after the tortoise."

Dicks' deep-set eyes showed his interest.

"I know it is a long shot: no more than a hunch," Don went on, "but it might easily be the lead we are looking for. We are hunting for a killer who uses a copy of a medieval knife, who calls himself the Tortoise and who is apparently in rivalry with other Italians. The facts can be made to hook up with Siena."

Dicks shook his head doubtfully.

"It is a long shot: overlong I think."

"That's why I'm justified in asking for a clear field," Don said. "It isn't more than a hunch, but it needs careful handling."

If the Italian police started asking questions about the Tortoise in Siena, and if the Tortoise happens to be there, he'll vanish before they can get their hands on him. I could get information, if there is any information to get, without stirring up too much mud. Do you see what I'm driving at?"

Dicks rubbed his jaw.

"All right," he said. "Pm only agreeing because I don't think my opposite number in Italy would bother to investigate this line, Mr Micklem. He hasn't much imagination. If I haven't heard from you after a week, then I'll send him a report."

How's that?"

"Fine." Don got to his feet. "I'll be leaving in three or four days. If I dig up anything, I'll let you

know."

The telephone bell rang as Dicks was getting to his feet. He picked up the receiver and growled into it. His sudden change of expression made Don look sharply at him.

"Yes, all right," Dicks said into the receiver. "I'll be down." He dropped the receiver back on its cradle. "Gina Pasero has just been fished out of Risings Lock. She was hit on the head before being thrown into the river."

"Poor little devil," Don said. "I had an idea something like that had happened to her." .

"I've got to get down there. Do you want to come?"

"No. There are plenty of other people who'll identify her if that's what you want. I've got a lot to do if I'm to get off by the end of the week."

Dicks nodded over to a shabby suitcase standing against the wall.

"That belongs to her," he said. "We brought it away from the hotel. There was nothing in it to tell us anything. The only thing of interest are some snapshots of her taken in Italy. It proves my point again that the guts of this business is in Italy." He moved to the door. "Want me to drop you anywhere, ah, Micklem?"

"I've got my car. Would you mind if I had a look at those snapshots, Super?"

"Go ahead. I'll leave you to it. My chaps are waiting for me. Mind how you go in Siena and good luck."

When Dicks had gone, Don lifted the suitcase to the desk and opened it. He found an envelope lying on top of Gina's few possessions. He shook its contents on to the desk.

The snapshots were all of Gina, most of them taken against the background of Brighton. In one of them, she was standing arm-in-arm with Shapiro, and she looked very happy.

But the last half-dozen snapshots held Don's attention. They were of Gina somewhere in Italy. The second one made him stiffen. She was leaning against a low wall that was covered with a bougainvillea creeper in flower. In the distance, forming a background to the picture, was a large, ornate building. Its familiar outlines and its black and white marble campanile were unmistakable: it was the famous cathedral of Siena.

# Chapter VI

## EBONY COLOSSUS

Satisfied that he was now on the track of the Tortoise, Don went into action with a whirlwind rush that completely disorganized the placid calm of 25a, Upper Brook Mews.

Three hours after he had returned from Scotland Yard, Marian had been rushed to the London airport to catch a plane to Rome. With her went Cherry, pop-eyed with excitement, and delighted to be at last escaping from the rain and fog of London. Their instructions were to find and rent a villa either in or near Siena.

Harry was left in charge of 25a while Don cleared up outstanding business, swept half his correspondence into the waste paper basket and cancelled the numerous invitations that were the bane of his life during the London season.

On Thursday morning, two days after her departure Marian telephoned to tell Don she had found a villa and he could move in when he was ready.

"It's on a hill a mile outside Siena," she told him. "There's a wonderful view, no neighbours and the villa is completely screened from the road. The rent is horrifying, but I didn't think you would want to cut corners so I've taken it for a month with an option to run another three months if we want it."

On Saturday midday, a dusty Bentley nosed its way up a twisting lane, lined on either side by olive trees, through a massive archway, up a drive of flowering shrubs to a villa, red-roofed with dark-green shutters, that stood on rising ground overlooking Siena.

As Harry pulled up before the front entrance, Cherry appeared, his pink and white face wreathed in smiles. He came down the wide stone steps and opened the car door, giving Don a dignified bow.

"You look pretty pleased with yourself, Cherry," Don said. He stared at the villa. "My, my, this is quite a place."

"It is eminently satisfactory, sir," Cherry said. "Miss Rigby is waiting for you. Lunch will be ready in ten minutes."

An hour later, Don, Marian, Cherry and Harry were on the veranda that overlooked a magnificent view of Siena.

They had just finished a lunch prepared and cooked by Cherry: a lunch of ravioli, veal steaks with white truffles and ice-cream encrusted with candied fruits.

Don and Marian sat in basket chairs. Cherry rested his large haunches against the balustrade of the balcony: the furthest he would go to sitting in the presence of his employer. Harry was perched on the balustrade, his hands gripping his knees.

"You've done a good job," Don said, fanning aside the smoke from his cigar. "This is just the place for our headquarters. Somewhere in Siena is the man we are looking for. I'm sure of it. Now we've got to find him. It might not be too difficult if we could go around asking questions haphazardly, but we can't do that. He's bound to have a grapevine and he'd know fast enough we were making inquiries. Once he does know, we're sunk."

"So what do we do?" Harry asked, shifting impatiently.

"You and Cherry don't do anything for the moment. You'll run the villa and keep up the standard that's already been set." Don looked over at Cherry. "That meal was right out of the book, Cherry. It's obvious you haven't lost your continental touch."

Cherry preened himself and coughed behind his hand.

"If either of you could speak Italian," Don went on, "I'd let you loose in the city to see what you could pick up, but as you don't, the spade work must be done by Miss Rigby and myself." He turned to Marian. "We're going to dig into the history of Siena again. We'll go to the local bookshop and get all the books on the history of Siena they have in stock. I want to find out a lot more about the ward that represents the tortoise than we know already. When we have some facts, I can then ask questions, but they have got to be the harmless kind of questions a tourist interested in the history of Siena would ask, and not the kind of questions a policeman would ask."

Marian nodded.

"There's a bookshop in Via Pantaneto. They should have all we want."

"Okay, let's make a start. Harry, keep out of town. The less anyone sees of you the better. There may come a time when a new face will be useful, and that goes for you too, Cherry. Sooner or later, the Tortoise will find out, I am after him.

What I don't want him to know is I have you two helping me. Do you follow?"

Cherry, who hadn't forgotten the part he played in the Tre-garth affair, leaned forward, his fat face alight with excitement.

"I have come prepared, sir," he said. "I have my sword stick with me. If you will remember it came in useful in Venice last year."

The picture of fat Cherry tackling an armed thug with his sword stick jumped into Don's mind and he had to make an effort to suppress a grin.

"I remember all right. Keep it handy, Cherry. You never know. You may need it."

Marian and Don spent the next two days poring over the dozen or so books they had found at Pedoni's bookshop.

They sat together hour after hour on the veranda in the warm sunshine, oblivious of the view,



searching for some clue that might | lead to the Tortoise.

Harry busied himself in the garden and helped Cherry run the villa. Both he and Cherry cast anxious eyes at the other two as they turned page after page, waiting hopefully for a discovery that would give them some action.

On the evening of the second day, Don laid down his book and suppressed a yawn!

"Phew! I'm getting bored with this," he said. "Let's give it a rest. I'm going for a stroll in the town. Come on, Marian, keep me company."

Marian shook her head.

"I've nearly finished," she said, patting the large, dry-as-dust tome she held on her knees. "Another couple of hours and I'm through. I really can't face it again tomorrow. I must finish it."

"Your appetite for work is horrifying," Don said, heaving himself out of his chair. "All right, I'll go and find a nice blonde and paint the town red. Don't say you didn't get the first offer."

Marian waved him away.

"Some chance you've got to find a nice blonde in Siena," she said.

"Well, okay, I'll settle for a brunette. Come on: change your mind."

"Don't tempt me, please," Marian said firmly. "I intend to finish this tonight."

Shaking his head, Don went down to the garage and got out the car. Harry came out of the darkness and looked hopefully at him.

"You're out of luck, Harry," Don said. "I can't take you with me."

Harry rubbed his nose with the back of his hand.

"Okay, sir; just as you say."

"Go and play gin-rummy with Cherry. You might win some money off him."

Harry snorted.

"Some hopes," he said in disgust. "He's got that sword stick out and he is cutting and thrusting like someone on the movies. I told the old goat if he didn't watch out, he'd have a stroke."

Don laughed.

"Leave him alone, Harry. He has an adventurous spirit. He did damn well last time he produced that sword stick."

He drove down the drive and out into the lane. A mile of moonlit road brought him to the Porto Camollia over which was the inscription in Latin: Siena opens her heart still wider to you.

Leaving the car, Don walked towards the Piazza del Campo. It was just after half-past nine, and the narrow streets were already thronged with people aimlessly walking, filling the night air with the sound of their voices, moving aside indifferently as the cars with an impatient bep-bep on their horns forced their way through the solid crowd.

Don found his way to the Campo and over to a cafe where he sat down.

A brilliant scene lay before him. The shell-shaped Campo around which, twice a year, the Patio was raced for, was floodlit. The twelfth-century Palazzo Pubblico with its three hundred foot tower formed an impressive Hollywood-like background to the piazza.

Looking at this scene, Don thought how easy it was to put the clock back in Siena. He wouldn't have been the least surprised to see men in helmets and breastplates, arquebusiers and halberdiers, march into the piazza.

\* A harassed waiter, carrying a laden tray, paused to take his order for a coffee espresso.

While waiting, Don glanced at the people sitting around him. There was the inevitable quota of American tourists, a number of Italians discussing politics at the tops of their voices, and two tables from him, a gigantic negro.

The negro held Don's attention. He had never seen a man built on such a colossal scale. He was a Michelangelo creation carved from ebony with a muscular development much larger than life.

Although he was seated, he was a good foot higher than the waiter who was placing before him an enormous pile of pink icecream. His bullet-shaped head grew out of shoulders as wide as a barn door without any apparent neck to join one to the other. There was a brutish, alert expression on his face that made Don think of a gorilla. His bloodshot eyes were constantly on the move. They flickered in Don's direction, ran over him with an insolent, inquisitive stare, passed on and came back to him and repeated the stare.

Don stared back and the negro shifted his glance. He picked up a spoon that seemed like a toy in his enormous hand and began to shovel ice-cream into his thick-lipped mouth.

What a beauty! Don thought. My goodness! I wouldn't like to tangle with him. He's the stuff nightmares are made of.

He lit a cigarette and shifted his attention from the negro to the slow-moving crowd walking to and fro across the Campo.

He was worried. Nothing had been achieved yet, and he had now only four more days before Dicks sent his report.

Somewhere, he was positive, in this ancient city, was the headquarters of the Tortoise. So far the

books he and Marian had been studying had yielded no clue. Was he going about this search the right way? he asked himself. Should he take a risk and make some direct inquiries? Whom should he ask? If he went to the police, he would have to explain why he wanted the information, and he could imagine the reaction he would get. There was Pedoni, the bookseller. While Marian and he had been choosing books, they had talked with the old bookseller. He had told them he had lived in Siena all his life. He might be the man to consult.

Don finished his coffee. He glanced towards the negro who had suddenly risen to his feet. As he raised his great bulk to its full height of over seven feet, he seemed to enjoy the sensation he caused. The party of American tourists all stopped talking to stare at him. Even the Italians paused in their wrangling to gape. Slowly and with a jeering expression, the negro put a white slouch hat on his massive head, shot the cuffs of his cream silk shirt and strolled off into the crowd.

Head and shoulders above the crowd, it was easy to watch him cross the Campo until he disappeared through one of the dark archways that led into the labyrinth of the city's streets. Don signalled to the waiter, and while he was paying for his coffee, he asked casually, "Who was that negro? He looked like a prize fighter."

"For six months now," the waiter said, "every night without fail, he comes here to eat ice-cream. He works at one of the villas, so I am told. Some American perhaps employs him. He never speaks and I take care not to ask questions. To me he is a bad man."

Don grinned.

"You could be right," he said and got to his feet.

Deciding to explore the back alleys of the city, he left the Campo. He wandered through the narrow, crowded streets for an hour or so; aware that he was wasting time and that he should return to the villa and finish the book he was reading, but he was reluctant to leave the fascination of the pinched alleys, the massive Gothic-styled buildings that frowned down on him and the aimless, congested throng of people who surged around him like a sluggishly moving river.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when he began to make his way to where he had parked the Bentley. Cutting down a side alley to get away from the crowd, he came upon a steep dark hill that led to the Cathedral.

He walked up the hill, relieved to find that he had the place to himself. Ahead of him was a solitary street lamp that made a pool of yellow light on the cobbled road. Out of the shadows and into this pool of light a girl suddenly appeared.

Fifty or sixty yards behind her, Don was surprised to see her. He guessed she must have been moving ahead of him, but keeping to the dark shadows made by the high massive buildings. He had a brief glimpse of her as she walked through the pool of light before she disappeared again into the shadows.

Brief as the glimpse was, he recognized the Venetian red hair and the compact slim figure in its white sweater and black slacks. With his heart thumping with excitement, he lengthened his stride, his

rubber-soled shoes making no sound.

Although he couldn't see the girl now, he was sure she was still ahead of him and unaware he had recognized her.

At the top of the hill was an arch through which Don could see the lights of the piazza, del Duomo. Moving out of the darkness the girl passed under the arch and once again in the light from the piazza, Don caught the glint of her red hair.

She turned left and disappeared from Don's sight. He broke into a run, covering the last yards in five long strides. As he entered the archway, an enormous figure stepped squarely in his path and brought him to an abrupt standstill.

Steady as Don's nerves were, the sudden appearance of the giant negro startled him. He took a step back and looked up at the shadowy colossus who loomed before him.

"Got a match on you, bud?" the negro drawled.

Knowing that the girl was slipping through his fingers, Don attempted to sidestep the negro, but the negro moved the same way, again blocking his path.

Don had an alternative. He could give the negro a light and probably lose the girl or he could hang a punch on his jaw.

It occurred to him that he might easily break his fist against that massive jaw and there was no guarantee that he would knock the negro out. He decided to accept the situation. He took out his lighter and flicked up the flame.

The negro dipped a brown cigarette into the flame that lit up his face. His eyes looked like knobs of ebony dropped into the white of an egg.

"Thanks, bud," he said and chuckled. "Sorry if I held you up." His chuckle was the ugliest sound Don had ever heard.

Moving to one side, the negro went past Don and down the hill into the darkness.

As Don drove up the narrow lane towards the villa, his headlights picked out two figures sitting side by side on a low wall that overlooked the moonlit hills surrounding Siena.

He slowed down and leaned out of the window.

"Isn't it time you two were in bed?"

"Miss Rigby's got something," Harry said, an excited note in his voice. "We've been waiting for you."

He came over with Marian to the car.

"And I've got something too," Don said. "Hop in and let's get back. Where's Cherry?"

"We left him coping with his blood pressure," Harry said, as they got into the car. "I reckon he doesn't know his own age."

"Not entirely a bad fault," Don said and sent the car racing up the lane and to the villa.

A few minutes later, he pulled up outside the villa. "Go and get him," he said as they got out of the car. "This calls for a general conference."

As Harry hurried away, Don went on to Marian, "Have you really found something?"

"Yes, and just when I was giving up."

Cherry, looking hot and flushed and breathing heavily, came out on to the veranda, followed by Harry.

"Let's all sit down," Don said, sinking into a lounging chair. Seeing Cherry was about to prop himself up against the balustrade, he patted a chair near him. "Sit down here, Cherry."

"If you say so, sir," Cherry said and lowered his bulk into the chair, his back stiff with disapproval.

"Okay, Marian. Let's have it. What have you found?"

"I'm hoping this will be the lead we're looking for," Marian said. "The information I found is very scrappy, but it seems that in 1465 there were two powerful and rich families living in Siena. The heads of these two families were Niccolo Vaga and Jacopo Genga who were bitter enemies. They were chosen as candidates for the leadership of the Tortoise ward. The election was carried out with violence and hatred - I'm quoting from the book. Vaga won by a narrow majority. Genga plotted against him, and by some means not explained, succeeded in disgracing Vaga who was thrown into prison, his money and lands confiscated and his family exiled. Genga took over the leadership of the ward and had Vaga brutally murdered. Vaga's eldest son, Daniello, who had taken refuge with the other members of the family in Florence, vowed that neither he nor any male member of his family for generations to come would rest until his father's death had been avenged, the family fortune restored, and - and I think, this is important - the name of his family had become so powerful that it would strike terror into the heart of every Italian."

"Yes," Don said. "That could be it. It's just the kind of background a crackpot might pick on. If the Tortoise is related to the Vaga family, this could be his idea of levelling old scores. What happened to the family, Marian?"

She shook her head.

"I can't find any other reference to them in any of the other books."

"Well, okay, tomorrow we'll try the Records office and see if we can trace the Vaga family further." Don lit a cigarette and went on. "Lorelli is in Siena. I've seen her." He told them about the negro preventing him from going after Lorelli.

"I can't make up my mind, if he is one of them or if it was a coincidence that he appeared as he did. I think it is likely he is one of them, but we've got to make sure. This is where you two come in." He looked over at Cherry and Harry. "From now on, the villa is going to look after itself and we're going to take our meals out."

Harry's face lit up.

"That's the best bit of news I've heard since we came here, sir," he said. "What do we do?"

"This negro apparently goes every night to the cafe. There's no reason why he shouldn't be there tomorrow night. I want you two to find out where he goes. That's the first move. I don't have to tell you that it's essential he shouldn't know you are following him. You two get together and work out a plan. I suggest Cherry parks himself at the cafe, and you, Harry, at the other cafe across the Campo. When the negro leaves, you go on ahead of him and follow him from the front. Cherry will follow him from behind. Get a street map and study it. He's no fool, and if he gets an idea he's being watched, he'll try to shake you off; knowing all the alleys and side streets will be a help. Make sure he doesn't give you the slip and make doubly sure he doesn't spot you."

"We'll handle him," Harry said.

"Watch out. He could be a nasty customer," Don said, then turning to Marian, he went on, "We'll continue our research tomorrow. Both of us and also Harry and Cherry will be on the look out for Lorelli. She's also easy to spot. If any of us sees her, drop everything and go after her. She's much more important than the negro. If you do have to follow her, you'll find she's up to every trick. When I was shadowing her in London, I was certain she hadn't spotted me, but she had."

"This should be a most interesting experience," Cherry said, beaming.

"I hope it's no more than interesting," Don said and got to his feet. "Well, let's break it up and go to bed. Tomorrow we'll really start work."

In spite of spending practically the whole of the next day in the Records office at Siena, neither Don nor Marian found any further information about the Vaga family. All trace of the family ceased at Florence.

Straightening his aching back, Don looked with exasperation at Marian.

"It certainly looks as if no member of the family ever came back to Siena," he said. "I think the next step is to check the records in Florence. Do you feel like having a crack at it?" Marian nodded.

"Of course. There's a train to Florence in an hour. If I hurry I can catch it."

Soon after six o'clock Don drove back to the empty villa after seeing Marian on to the train. Cherry and Harry had already gone separately into the city and were ostentatiously sight-seeing while keeping their eyes open for any sign of Lorelli or the negro.

Don booked a call through to Chief Superintendent Dicks, and then settled himself down with a

highball and a cigarette to wait for Dicks to come on the line. After a twenty minute wait, the telephone bell rang.

"We're getting somewhere," Don said when he heard Dicks' voice. He went on to tell him about the Vaga family. "Can you get into touch with the Italian police without saying why and find out if there is any male member of the family still alive? It's my bet if there is, he's the Tortoise."

"I'll see what I can do," Dicks said. "I like the idea. It hooks up with the facts."

"Although I'm making progress I'm not moving as fast as I had hoped. I want you to hold off that report for another week. If the police move in at this stage, our bird might vanish. If I locate him, I let you know at once and they can collar him."

He purposely didn't tell Dicks that he had seen Lorelli nor did he mention the negro. He knew if Dicks learned just how far he had progressed, he would be certain to call in the Italian police, and Don was equally certain this wasn't the way to play the hand.

"All right," Dicks said. "It's not as if you have any evidence I can act on yet."

"Fine," Don said. "I'll let you know how it goes. Find out about the Vaga family for me as fast as you can and call me here before ten o'clock in the morning. So long for now," and he hung up.

He sat for some minutes, thinking. He felt he could safely leave Harry and Cherry to take care of the negro. He decided it would be safer to keep clear of the Campo himself in case the negro became suspicious of him. A cautious talk with Pedoni, the bookseller, might be worth while.

Leaving the villa, he went down to the car. It took him twenty-five minutes of slow driving to reach Via Pantaneto, and then nearly as long again to find a place where he could leave the car.

It was getting on for half-past seven by the time he pushed open the bookshop door and stepped into the brightly lit, well-stocked bookshop.

The shop was empty, and Don wandered over to the history section and began to examine the titles.

"Good evening," Pedoni said, coming from behind a partition that screened the office from the shop. He spoke Italian.

"Is there something I can show you?"

Pedoni was a small fat man, swarthy and on the wrong side of sixty. His small eyes, half-hidden behind thick-lensed spectacles, reminded Don of two glistening black olives.

"I'm looking for a detailed history of this city from 1400 to 1600," Don said. "There doesn't seem anything here."

"There's Cozarelli's history," Pedoni said. "That deals with the period or there's Mariano's history which also covers the period, although not in such detail." He fetched a short ladder, set it against one

of the shelves and clambered up it. He found the volumes and brought them down. "Cozarelli is the better of the two."

"I'm interested in the history of the wards," Don said, taking the book. He examined the index. There was no mention of either Genga nor Vaga. "I want to find out how the wards acquired their names, who their leaders were and so on."

Pedoni pushed his glasses more firmly up his fat nose.

"Mariano has a chapter covering that, I believe."

Don began to examine the second volume.

"I was in the Cathedral library yesterday," he said casually, "and I was surprised to see a picture there depicting Piccolomini at the court of James I. How was it that Piccolomini got over to Scotland?"

Pedoni beamed. Don had already discovered, the little bookseller liked nothing better than to air his knowledge of the great men of Siena, and for the next twenty minutes, he gave Don a detailed history of the life of Piccolomini.

"It was when he was elected pope in 1458 that the Sienese noblemen were re-admitted to a share in the government,"

Pedoni was saying when Don, seeing his opportunity, interrupted him.

"That would be in Jacopo Genga's time, wouldn't it?" he asked. "I was reading in one of the books I got from you that he grabbed power from a rival."

Pedoni's little black eyes turned cloudy.

"I don't recall Jacopo Genga," he said.

"He and this other fellow were candidates for the leadership of the Tortoise ward. He wasn't elected and he plotted against this other fellow - Vaga I believe his name was."

Pedoni shook his head.

"An obscure piece of history, signore. I know nothing about it"

"It doesn't matter," Don said, concealing his disappointment. He picked up Mariano's history. "I'll take this. It may give me what I'm looking for."

"I may be able to find exactly what you want," Pedoni said as he gave Don change from a five-thousand lira note. "If you will let me have your name and address, signore, I will send you a card if I am successful."



"Don't bother to do that," Don said, moving to the door. "I'll be in again."

"It is no bother, signore," Pedoni said, opening the door. "Besides I would like to send you my monthly lists. You are staying at the Continental Hotel perhaps?"

Don looked at the little man. There was a scarcely concealed tenseness about him that put Don on his guard.

"I'll be in again," he said. "Good night."

Pedoni stood for a long moment watching Don edge his way through the slow-moving crowd that packed the narrow street, then he shut the door, pulled down the blind and turned the key in the lock. He went quickly down the aisle to his office.

The office was small and lined with books from floor to ceiling. A desk, littered with papers and books and lit by a green-shaded lamp, stood in the middle of the room.

Pedoni paused in the doorway and looked at the girl with the Venetian red hair who sat behind his desk, her face white and tense.

"That could have been the man who followed me last night," she said.

Pedoni flinched.

"Do you think he is from the police?" he asked, coming over to the desk.

"Don't talk like a fool. Does he look like a policeman?" She got to her feet and began to move slowly about the crowded room. "He may be the man who followed me in London. He has the same build." She paused, then picked up the telephone receiver. She called a number, waited a moment, then said, "Willie, there's a job I want you to do. Look out for a tall, heavily-built American, about thirty-five, dark, small moustache and a Z-shaped scar on his right cheek. He's wearing a bottle-green linen suit: no hat. I want to know who he is and where he is staying. Keep with him. Find out if he is alone or with others. If you are quick you might pick him up right away. He's only just left the shop."

She replaced the receiver, snatched up her coat that was lying on a chair and slipped it on.

"I must get back," she said. "This could be dangerous." The alarm in her eyes sent a twinge of fear through Pedoni that quickened the beat of his heart.

# Chapter VII

## CORNERED

Felix - no one except the French police knew him by any other name - was indulging in his favourite pastime. He was standing before the big mirror above the fireplace, admiring his reflection. He was as handsome as any movie star could hope to be. He had dark, glossy hair, wide-set, dark-blue eyes, clean-cut features, a deeply tanned complexion and magnificent teeth that he took trouble to show when he laughed; a difficult feat as his upper lip was a shade too long, and unless he made the effort to curl it back, the effect of his gleaming white teeth was lost. His mouth was thin and cruel and this, combined with his better features, gave him a reckless, dashing appearance that most women found irresistible.

He was thirty-two years of age. Six of these years had been spent in prison. Before he was caught, he had roamed the French Riviera, plundering the villas of the rich. His success had been phenomenal. In sixteen months he had cleaned up fifty million francs, most of which he had lost at the Monte Carlo Sporting Club in two feverish and spell-binding sessions at the roulette table. To recoup his losses, he had gone after a diamond necklace reputed to be worth twenty-five million francs. He succeeded in stealing it although he had been forced into a hand-to-hand fight with a night watchman whom he was fortunate enough not to kill. The fence to whom he had taken the necklace refused to pay more than seven million francs for it, explaining at length the risk involved and the fact that when the necklace was broken up, its value was negligible. Knowing the police would have a description of him from the night watchman and that he would have to get out of France, Felix endeavoured to persuade the fence to raise his offer. His method of persuasion consisted of beating up the fence with fists carefully protected by leather gloves, the knuckles of which were ornamented with brass studs.

This was an error of judgment, for while the beating was in progress, the fence's wife alarmed by the uproar, called in the police, and for the first time in his life, Felix found himself inside a French prison.

Identified by the night watchman and betrayed by the fence, Felix was sentenced to fifteen years on Devil's Island. He spent six of these years in the steamy hell of the island before managing to escape. Taking refuge in Rome and knowing that a single false move would send him back to the island, he lived cautiously, getting himself a job as a tout for a shady nightclub. It was at this club that he met Lorelli.

Before meeting her, Felix regarded all women as amusing toys to be brutally used, discarded and forgotten. Lorelli, he quickly discovered, had other ideas in her beautiful head besides satisfying his physical needs. It was she who had suggested he should offer his services to Simon Alsconi, and it was she who had arranged the first meeting.

He was adjusting his tie in the mirror when the door opened and Lorelli came in. He turned to smile at her, but his smile froze when he saw her expression and how white she was. "What is it?" he asked sharply.

Lorelli shut the door, slipped off her coat and came over to the fire.

"You remember I told you about the man who followed me in London and put the police on to me?" she said a little breathlessly. "And I told you I was followed last night? The same man was in Pedoni's shop just now. He asked Pedoni for a book on the history of Siena that would explain how the wards acquired their names. He mentioned the Tortoise ward."

Felix stiffened.

"Sure it's the same man?"

"Almost sure. He's the same build. I didn't see his face in London or last night, but I'm practically sure."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. I gave Willie a description of him and he's looking for him now."

Felix lit a cigarette and sat down by the fire.

"Is he from the police?"

"I shouldn't think so. He's certainly not a policeman. He is an American and he looks wealthy. He mentioned Genga and Vaga: he seems to know their history." She clenched her fists. "I've always thought this was dangerous. We're giving too much away. I had a feeling sooner or later someone with a few brains would get on to us."

"Take it easy," Felix said. "You're getting into a panic. Let's face it: up to now it's worked like a charm. Okay, I admit I was doubtful myself at one time that this set-up did give too much away, but Alsconi insisted on playing it that way or not at all. He genuinely believes he is levelling old scores. We couldn't have worked up a racket like this on our own."

"It's the publicity that's done it. Look at the way the suckers have paid up: we scarcely have any trouble. Look at the money we're making."

"The money won't help us if we're caught," Lorelli said. "This has gone on long enough, Felix. I'm sure this American is on to us. He'll tell the police. It's time for us to quit."

"Quit? What do you mean?" Felix demanded, his eyes hardening.

"You know what quit means, don't you?" Lorelli said, her voice rising. "We've got to get out of here before we're caught! This has gone on long enough. I was so sure of myself before I went to London. I must have been mad to have had anything to do with Gina's murder. They could hang me for that! I didn't realize what I was doing until we had her in the car, then it was too late to back out. I can't sleep at night, thinking of what happened."

Now this American is on to us. He'll tell the police. I know he will!"

"Stop it!" Felix said angrily. "You've got cold feet! Pull yourself together!"

"How can you talk like that?" Lorelli said wildly. "Can't you see...?"

He got up and took hold of her.

"Shut up," he said violently and gave her a little shake. "Listen to me: you play your cards according to the cards you hold in your hand. If you win you win; if you go down, you take it. Right now you and I have a straight flush. We have never been so well off. No damned American is going to make you or me chuck in a hand as good as a straight flush."

She pulled away from him.

"You stupid fool!" she said angrily. "I've been waiting for this. I knew sooner or later someone would get on to us. I knew it! We have had our run; now it's time we got out. We've got to get away from here before the police move in! We could go to Buenos Aires."

Felix stared at her.

"Gould we?" He smiled unpleasantly. "Is that what you have been hopefully planning when you couldn't sleep? It's a charming thought. Can you imagine Alsoni's delight when we announce we are leaving him?"

"Oh stop it!" Lorelli said angrily. "He wouldn't know until it was too late to do anything about it."

Felix flicked his cigarette into the fire.

"Do you imagine he would shrug his shoulders and forget about us?" he asked. "You must be suffering from a touch of the sun, my beautiful nit-wit. He would find us wherever we went. We wouldn't have a moment's peace, and when he did find us..." He shrugged his shoulders. "But for the sake of an argument, just suppose a miracle did happen and we did manage to lose ourselves in Buenos Aires. How long do you think we would remain unrecognized? He has agents in every country in the world. They would be hunting for us. And just in case it enters your pretty head to go without me, let me remind you that you would never feel safe for a moment. Every step you heard behind you would turn you cold with fear. Every man who looked at you would make your heart skip a beat. You should know as I do, the last thing Alsoni would do is to let any of his organization walk out on him. There have been other fools who have tried to break away - look what's happened to them."

"So what are you going to do?" Lorelli asked, staring at him.

"I'm not going to panic," Felix said. "This American isn't going to rattle me. If he looks dangerous, I'll fix him."

"It might be too late."

"Now look," Felix said, "go to bed and relax. You're worked up. Maybe he has an idea we are here, but he hasn't found us yet. You seem to forget we'll need some finding."

"So you won't come away with me?" Lorelli asked, looking strangely at him.

"There's no question of going away," Felix said curtly. "We're in this to the end. You might as well make up your mind about that. Now go to bed."

"Are you going to tell Alsconi?"

"Not yet. I want some more information first."

She picked up her coat and moved to the door.

"Willie will be telephoning."

"Okay, I'll stick around until he does."

When she had gone, Felix lit another cigarette and moved about the luxuriously furnished room, his brows drawn down in a frown.

If this American thought he was going to bust up a racket as good as this one, Felix thought, he had another think coming. Maybe the best thing to do was to move in quickly and wipe him out before he made any more of his clever discoveries. He was still pacing the floor when Willie came through on the telephone.

"I lost him," Willie said. "He wandered around the streets for a while, then he went back to Via Pantaneto where he had a car. That beat me. He headed out of the city."

"Get the car number?" Felix snapped.

"I got that," Willie said. "It's registered in England." He gave Don's car number and Felix wrote it down.

"So it doesn't look as if he's staying at any of the hotels?"

"He left the city," Willie said.

"Then find out from the agents if anyone has recently rented a villa. I want to know where this guy hangs out. It's urgent."

"Can't do anything until tomorrow morning," Willie said sulkily. He hated any form of work.

"Get something for me by tomorrow," Felix returned and cut the connection. He called the operator.

"Give me Museum 11066, London," he said.

A half an hour later he was speaking to Crantor.

"Find out who owns car number PLM 122," he said. "It's urgent. Call me back as soon as you know."

Crantor said he would have the information in an hour.

As Felix replaced the receiver he heard the alarm bell in the hall start up. For a moment, he stood motionless, his hand still on the receiver, his heart hammering. The bell told him someone was in the grounds: someone who had no business to be there.

He jumped to the desk by the window, jerked open a drawer, snatched out a .45!, then opening the casement windows, he stepped out on to the terrace.

It was after eleven o'clock before Don returned to the Trioni villa. He had wandered the streets and alleys of Siena in the hope of finding Lorelli again, but finally, realizing the futility of such a hunt, he had returned to see if Harry and Cherry had had better luck.

He had been unaware of a small, swarthy man, dressed in shabby black with a black slouch hat pulled down over his eyes to shade his white, pock-marked face, who had followed him like a shadow wherever he went. He was still unaware of him when he had slid into the Bentley and had driven out of the city, leaving the pock-marked man glaring balefully after him.

As Don pulled up outside the villa, the front door jerked open and Harry came down the steps to meet him.

"Any luck, sir?" Harry asked.

Don could tell by the tone of his voice he had had more success than he had.

"Nothing really," Don said, entering the lounge with Harry at his heels. "Where's Cherry?"

"Gone to bed, sir. That nigger nearly walked him off his legs'. He led us a proper dance all over the city. He takes about three times the normal stride and Cherry had to run most of the time to keep him in sight."

Don went over to the bar, poured two beers and gave one to Harry.

"Where did he go?" he asked, sitting on the arm of a chair.

Harry took a long pull at his beer, sighed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Well, sir, after taking enough exercise to tire a horse, he got into a Citroen and belted off. Even if I had had the car, I couldn't have followed him without giving the game away. The road was straight for miles, and that was "a bit of luck. I watched his headlights for a couple of miles, then he suddenly turned off the road, and it's my bet he turned into the drive of a house. How would it be if we took the car now and investigated? I'm pretty certain I could find the spot where he turned off."

"Right," Don said, finishing his beer. "Come on; let's go then."

They went down to the car, Don slid under the driving wheel.

"I'm still trying to make up my mind if I dropped a brick tonight," he said, as he drove down the drive to the lane. "I was fishing for information. I thought that bookseller fellow might have some knowledge about old man Vaga. His reaction was most odd. I had an idea I scared the life out of him. He wanted my name and where I was staying. Maybe I'm getting too suspicious-minded, but it struck me il signor Pedoni might not be such a white-washed lily as he looks."

"Well, you can't call that nigger white-washed," Harry said. "Cor! What a size he is. The way he worked through that icecream made Cherry's eyes pop. I wouldn't like to have a scrap with him."

"Nor would I. He didn't spot you?"

Harry shook his head.

"He never looked around once. He just kept on walking like he was exercising himself. He certainly exercised Cherry.

Turn left here, sir," he went on as Don drove through the old gateway of the city. "That's where he parked his car, under those trees. He went up that road on the right."

Using his fog lights in preference to his tell-tale headlights, Don drove up the straight road that climbed steadily, passing on his left the Franciscan monastery. Beyond the monastery they came to hilly, open country.

About a mile further on, Harry said, "It can't be far off now, sir. Would it be an idea to leave the car and walk?"

Don nodded and pulled on to the grass verge. He turned off the lights and leaving the car, they started up the hill on foot. The road continued without a sign of any building, and after walking ten minutes, Harry said, "We couldn't have passed it, could we? I didn't think it was this far ahead."

"It's hard to judge from where you were. Let's go on for another mile," Don said. "I'm sure we haven't passed any side road."

A few minutes later, Harry said, "Here it is. Look, just ahead."

In the bright light of the moon, they could see a narrow lane that made a T-joint with the main road. It went straight for a hundred yards or so, and then disappeared around a curve into a wood.

"No sign of a house. Looks as if we've still got some walking to do," Don said and moved on, keeping to the grass verge to deaden the sound of his footfalls.

Harry followed him, and in single file they walked to the curve in the lane and into the wood.

It was almost pitch dark in the wood, but Don kept going, moving more slowly, just able to see the dim outlines of the tree trunks.

Ten minutes' walking brought them out of the wood to the foot of a hill, and ahead of them, seeming to

rise out of ground to confront them was a massive stone wall, some fifteen feet high that ran along the edge of the lane and out of sight into the darkness.

Clear of the trees, the bright moonlight lit up the wall as if it were daylight. Don paused. Some fifty yards further on he could see double iron-studded wooden gates set in a massive stone archway. The gates were closed.

"I bet this is the place," he said. "Looks right out of the Middle ages, doesn't it?"

Harry stared up at the high wall

"Can't see much from here. Shall I give you a leg up, sir?"

"That's the idea." Don moved close to the wall. He put his foot in Harry's hand and Harry heaved him up towards the top of the wall. Don's clutching fingers got a grip, and another heave from Harry gave him a safer purchase. He hooked his leg over the wall and clung on, balancing himself, keeping low so as not to be seen against the skyline. He looked over the tops of the trees to where he could see a big Gothic-style building set in a wide expanse of closely cut lawn.

"Looks like an old palace," he said and leaned down, offering his hand. "Catch hold. I can heave you up."

Harry gripped his wrist and he pulled him up. After a moment's struggle, Harry got his leg over the wall. He too stared across the garden at the building.

"It's big enough, isn't it? Shall we hop down and have a look-see?"

"I'm going, but you're staying here," Don said. "If I have to leave in a hurry, I'll want you up here to heave me up and over."

"How would it be if I went, sir?" Harry asked, hopefully. "I'm a bit more used to moving in the dark than you are."

"That's what you like to think," Don said, grinning, and holding on to the wall, he lowered himself as far as he could, then dropped.

"Watch your step, sir," Harry called softly.

Waving to him, Don set off towards the house. The first two hundred yards were easy as all he had to do was to follow a path through flowering shrubs that afforded plenty of cover, but when he came to the edge of the big lawn, he paused.

He looked to right and left, reluctant to cross such an expanse of ground without any cover. Anyone looking out of one of the windows couldn't fail to see him cross in the hard light of the moon.

Keeping to the shrubbery, he went around in a half circle in the hope of finding cover on the far side of the house. He moved silently, and it was as well that he did, for suddenly ahead of him he saw a



movement, and he hurriedly ducked down behind some bushes.

Out of the shrubbery, not thirty yards ahead of him, came a thick-set man, an automatic rifle under his arm, and walking at his side, a ferocious-looking wolf-hound.

Don felt the hairs on the nape of his neck prickle at the sight of the dog. The big brute was on a chain that encircled the man's wrist. It slunk along, the moonlight accentuating the rolling muscles under its glossy coat.

Don remained motionless, watching these two as they walked quietly on, and until they had disappeared into the darkness.

He drew in a breath of relief, thinking that if he had taken the risk and had crossed the lawn, the dog would have been savaging him by now.

He looked again towards the house, reluctant to retreat, but baffled as to how he could get near it without being seen.

Refusing to give up, he started forward, moving this time much more cautiously and examining every yard of the ground before leaving cover to dart to another shrub. Moving in this way, it took him some minutes to get around to the east side of the house. Here the lawn narrowed, and the shrubs encroached. There was only forty yards or so of open ground to the house. Keeping behind a tree, he looked up at the house. On this side, all the windows were in darkness, but he couldn't tell if someone was in a dark room, looking down on the lawn.

A wide, ornate terrace with a marble balustrade and wide marble steps leading to the garden ran the length of this side of the house. Don saw that he would not only have to cross the lawn, but would also have to run up the steps on which fell the light of the moon if he were to get close to the house.

If it were not for the wolf-hound, he would have gone ahead, but the thought of the dog made him decide against taking the risk.

The next step was to find out who owned the house. It shouldn't be difficult. The great thing was not to show his hand before he was ready.

Crouching, he began to make his way through the shrubbery to where he had left Harry. He hadn't gone more than thirty yards or so when looking back, he saw something that pulled him up short.

Standing on the edge of the lawn was a wolf-hound, looking directly at where Don crouched. The dog's ears were pricked and its head was on one side as if it were listening.

Don remained motionless, his heart thumping. Had the dog heard him? The slight breeze was blowing from the dog to Don: it was unlikely the dog had picked up his scent.

He saw the dog lower its head and come forward slowly until it reached the middle of the lawn, then it stopped.

Don felt a trickle of sweat run down his face, but he was careful not to move. He and the dog remained motionless for at least a minute, and it seemed to Don to be an hour.

Then from out of the shadows around the house, the thick-set man with the automatic rifle under his arm appeared. He came out into the moonlight and paused, watching the dog.

The dog looked back at him and whined, took a couple of steps forward, then stopped to look back again.

"Come here!" the man shouted roughly. He spoke in Italian.

The dog hesitated, then turning it slunk towards the man who snapped on the chain to its collar.

Don watched the man walk away towards the west side of the house, the dog obediently slinking at his heels.

When they were out of sight, Don began to move again. He was now anxious to get out of these dangerous grounds, and he increased speed. He didn't realize that as he moved from one shrub to another he had stepped on a concealed metal plate that touched off the alarm bell in the house.

He kept on, looking for the path along which he had come, but not finding it. He paused to check his position, knowing that the path had to be somewhere close by. It was then that he heard the alarm bell ringing. The sound came to him faintly, but it was unmistakably an alarm bell.

He straightened up and looked to right and left, guessing that somehow he had touched a hidden connection that had set off the alarm. Then he saw the gigantic negro coming across the lawn and he caught the glitter of a knife the negro held in his hand.

The sight of the negro, moving across the moonlit lawn with the speed of a black panther, would have unnerved most people, but Don refused to give way to nerves. He ducked down behind a shrub and waited.

The negro entered the shrubbery fifty yards or so from the point where Don crouched. He paused to listen.

Out into the moonlight came the thick-set man and the wolfhound. He caught sight of the negro and stopped, dragging the straining dog back on to its haunches. The dog was snarling and barking-and trying to get off its chain. Three other men appeared from around the back of the house, each with a struggling wolfhound on a chain.

The negro waved to them, motioning them to wait. Then he began to walk very slowly towards the spot where Don was hiding.

Through the shrubs, Don could see the four men and the dogs,-standing in a line looking towards him. He could hear the gentle swish of leaves, as the great, muscular body of the negro came towards him. Peering up, he caught sight of the negro, now within six feet of him, his brutal black face alert, the knife gripped between his thick fingers.

Don held his breath and waited. There was a long pause. He could hear the wind sighing in the trees, the heavy breathing of the negro and the snarling of the dogs as they strained on their chains. Then he heard the negro move on, passing him by a few yards. Still Don waited. He guessed his slightest move would be heard by the negro.

The negro covered several yards of the shrubbery before it occurred to him that he was wasting time. If anyone were hiding here, the dogs would hunt him out. He stood up to his full height and shouted, "Let the dawgs in here."

Even before the four men could unfasten the chains from the collars of the dogs, Don was running for dear life through the shrubbery towards where he thought the wall must be. He ran as if the devil was at his heels, crashing through shrubs, his only thought to reach the wall and grab at Harry's welcoming hand. He could hear the savage barking of the dogs as they streaked across the lawn after him. With a gasp of relief, he blundered out of the shrubbery onto the path he had been looking for. He hurtled down the path, running as fast as he could.

He could hear the dogs coming up. Their low savage snarls sent a chill up his spine. They were close, too close and he realized he was losing the race. In another few yards they would be on him, dragging him to the ground and savaging him. Just off the path and ahead of him was a big tree. One of the dogs came rushing up alongside him. It sprang up and snapped at his sleeve. Don's fist slammed against its head, sending it rolling over, yelping but he knew the race was over. He swerved, spun around and set his back against the tree.

The other dogs swerved away, pulled up and then with the precision of sheep dogs, they spread out, crouching down and completely encircled him.

Breathing heavily, Don looked at them. He knew if he made a move in any direction the nearest dog would spring at him. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. The dogs growled at the movement and edged closer.

The soft pad-pad of feet made him look beyond the dogs. The negro came running down the moonlit path, the glittering knife in his hand. He stopped short when he saw Don.

Don took out his cigarette case, selected a cigarette and put it between his dry lips. Then imitating the negro's slow drawl, he said, "Got a match on you, bud?"

# Chapter VIII

## ALSCONI

Simon Alsoni, known to the police in Europe and America only as the Tortoise, sat in a padded armchair before a blazing log fire, his feet resting on a footstool, a large black Persian cat on his lap, the picture of domesticity.

His round, fat, swarthy face, his small full-lipped mouth, his blunt fleshy nose, his deep-set dark eyes were deceptively nondescript. He could have been fifty, but in actual fact he was well past sixty. He was in evening dress and between his long, well-shaped fingers he held a cigar. With his other hand, he stroked the cat's glistening fur while he stared into the fire.

Felix stood opposite him. He was telling Alsoni of Don's capture.

Although Felix was responsible for running Alsoni's organization and was in a position of power and control, he never entered Alsoni's private suite without a feeling of uneasiness that bordered on fear.

He had repeatedly told himself that so long as he made no mistakes and carried out his orders he had nothing to fear from Alsoni, but he could not entirely convince himself of this. He could not get rid of the uneasy knowledge that he was dealing with a ruthless and dangerous lunatic who might at any moment turn on him and wipe him out as other members of the organization in the past had been wiped out.

"Don Micklem?" Alsoni said. "How very extraordinary."

"You know of him then?" Felix said. "Crantor says he is one of the richest men in England..."

"Of course I know of him," Alsoni said. "He is worth two million pounds sterling. Astonishing." He put his finger on the cat's silky nose and rubbed it gently. "What have you done with him?"

"I've put him in the cave."

"Was he alone?"

That was the question Felix hoped Alsoni wouldn't ask.

"His chauffeur was with him. He got away."

Alsoni's fingers paused in their rhythmic stroking of the cat's nose.

"Why did he get away?"

"We didn't know he was there. Willie spotted him driving away in Micklem's car."

Alsconi continued to stare into the fire. His expression was still benign, but his fingers remained still and from experience Felix knew this was a sign of danger.

"He shouldn't have been allowed to get away," Alsconi said at last. "No doubt you will take the necessary disciplinary action. However, no damage has been done. The chauffeur will, of course, go to the police. It would seem we have now reached a phase in the progress of our organization that was bound to be reached sooner or later. For the past three years I have been preparing for such an emergency. It will be interesting to see if the yearly donations I have made to the church, the police and to the various charity organizations will now bear fruit. It will be the chauffeur's word against mine. You will take all necessary precautions. I shall invite the police to search the house: in fact, I shall insist on them doing so. Make sure you don't cause them any embarrassment. They must not find anything: you understand?"

"Yes," Felix said.

Alsconi looked at him.

"A visit from the police doesn't alarm you?" he asked.

"Of course not," Felix said.

"That is as it should be," Alsconi said, nodding his head. "You and Lorelli will not be seen. But it is possible that she might be alarmed. She is highly strung. It might even occur to her that this is the end of the organization. You will see she doesn't panic?"

"Yes," Felix said stonily, his mouth turning dry.

"She is an attractive young woman," Alsconi went on. "I have known her longer than you and I know her weaknesses.

She is inclined to lose her nerve in an emergency."

"The Pasero girl's death has upset her," Felix said, trying to keep his voice steady. "She'll get over it."

Alsconi nodded.

"Yes. Since you and she have formed an alliance perhaps you will make yourself responsible for her actions?"

"She'll be all right," Felix said, feeling sweat on his face.

Alsconi looked at him.

"Or perhaps you would prefer me to talk to her? I hesitate to interfere between the two of you. A man should be able to control his mistress."

"I can take care of her," Felix said curtly.

"That is as it should be. Enjoy women, Felix; they are given to men to enjoy, but don't let them control you. It is quite fatal. I found it necessary to give up the pleasures of women years ago. They have a dangerous way of sapping one's will power, diverting one's aim in life and causing trouble."

Felix didn't say anything.

"We have rather lost sight of Micklem, haven't we?" Alsconi said, after a pause. "Did he say why he was in the garden?"

"Carlos was a little rough with him. He hasn't yet recovered consciousness."

"Not too rough, I hope? He represents a very valuable investment."

"I've asked Englemann to have a look at him. He'll be all right."

"So he asked Pedoni about the Tortoise ward?" Alsconi went on.

"Yes. He also mentioned Genga and Vaga to Pedoni."

"Did he? Now how-did he get on to that? Have you any ideas?"

"Crantor says Micklem was a close friend of Guido Ferenci."

"Ah! So that's it. You should have told me before. That would explain why Micklem has been making inquiries. He is a persistent busybody. He has too much money and too little to do. Never mind, we have him now, and we can turn that to our profit. I will see him at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. In the meantime you must find out where he is staying and who his companions are. The police are certain to visit us, but can handle that." He ran his fingers through the cat's fur. "Crantor appears to be quite a discovery, doesn't he?" he went on. "I like the way he handled the Ferenci affair. A ruthless man: a man after my own heart." His deep-set black eyes rested on Felix's face.

"You must be ruthless too, Felix. Up to now you have had an easy, comfortable time here. Don't let it soften you. You have known hardship; you have an impressive reputation. Don't let the two years you have spent here spoil that reputation."

"If you're not satisfied with my work," Felix said, stung to reckless anger, "say so."

Alsconi smiled at him.

"That is not my method, Felix. You should know that by now. I expect the people I employ to give me their best; if they don't I get rid of them." He waved his hand towards the door in a gesture of dismissal. "Bring Micklem to me at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning."

Felix went out of the room. He took with him a sick feeling of fear.

The dull, throbbing ache in his head jogged Don back to consciousness. He half opened his eyes and shut them again as the hard, bright light from an overhead lamp dazzled him.

He lay still for some minutes, then his mind began to function again. He remembered the swift rush of the negro towards him and his own body swerve. He remembered punching at the negro's throat as the great hands reached for him and the professional way the negro had shifted to avoid the punch. Then something that felt like a hammer had smashed against the side of his head and the ground on which he had been standing seemed to split open and he dropped into darkness.

He touched his aching head and felt dried, hard blood just above his right ear. He thought it was a wonder the negro hadn't broken his skull.

He made an effort and forced open his eyes. He blinked around in the hard light. He seemed to be in some sort of cave: the walls were of rock and they were damp. He found himself lying on a concrete floor on which was a thin covering of straw. When he moved he heard a rattle of a chain and looking down, he saw he was chained by the ankle to the wall.

He rested his back against the wall and waited until the pain in his head receded.

What had happened to Harry? he wondered. He had told him to remain on the wall, and Harry would obey orders. By now he was certain to have gone for help. But how would he make himself understood to the Italian police? Would he think of telephoning Dicks? If he had already done so, the police might be on their way to look for him. Did the gang know that Harry had been with him? That was an important point. If they did, they must realize that sooner or later the police would raid the building. He looked around the cave again. The single hard light in the roof of the cave shone down on him, but the rest of the cave was in heavy shadow. Was he under the house or had they moved him to another hideout?

He looked at his watch and was surprised to see it was half-past ten: presumably half-past ten in the morning. Although the blow he had received from the negro had been a violent one, Don was sure it alone would not have kept him unconscious for so long. He pushed back his right sleeve. On his forearm he could just make out the tiny scar from a hypodermic needle and he grimaced.

He now turned his attention to the band around his ankle that was fastened to a chain that was stapled into the face of the rock. The band around his ankle was of steel. It fitted tightly and was fastened by a snap-lock that didn't look to Don particularly complicated. He was an expert on locks and he was sure that if he could find a piece of wire, the lock wouldn't present any difficulties. There was time for that, he decided. Even if he was free of the chain, it didn't mean he could get out of the cave.

He was suddenly aware of a light that seemed to be far off, coming towards him, out of the shadows of the cave and it was only then that he realized that across the far side of the cave was the mouth of a tunnel. It was only by the length of time it took Carlos, the negro, to come into the cave that Don could judge how long the tunnel was. He guessed it must be at least a hundred and fifty yards long.

The negro came into the light and looked down at him: his thick lips peeled off his teeth in a jeering grin.

"How are you, bud?" he said. "You and me are going for a little walk. Take it easy. Don't start anything you can't finish."

Don looked beyond Carlos to the mouth of the tunnel. He caught sight of two of the wolf-hounds standing in the shadows watching him.

Carlos looked over his shoulder and grinned.

"Those dawgs are cute," he said. "They'll have your throat out in a flash if you start something. They're real smart.

They'll walk along as quietly as a couple of lambs, but start something and see the trouble you'll be in."

He came over and kneeling beside Don, he unlocked the band around his ankle. Don could have taken him in a ju-jitsu hold, but the dogs were too much of a handicap.

"Come on, bud," Carlos said. "Doc wants to look you over, then the boss wants to talk to you."

Don got to his feet. He felt shaky and he realized he was in no condition to start anything even if the dogs weren't there to guard him.

"Maybe you and I can get together without the dogs to help you," he said. "I have an idea for all your size you can hand it out a lot better than you can take it."

Carlos laughed, showing pink gums.

"Don't kid yourself, bud," he said. "You ain't got nothing I couldn't take." He snapped his fingers at the dogs who moved into the cave, looking at Don. "Come on; straight ahead."

Don walked into the tunnel, the dogs at his heels. Carlos sent the beam of his powerful flashlamp ahead so Don could see where he was going.

"Turn left ahead, bud," Carlos said and directed the beam of his light on to a narrow opening that had been hacked out of the rock.

Don found himself on a narrow ramp that led steeply upwards. He climbed the ramp and came to a steel door.

"Shove it open, bud," Carlos said.

Don pushed against the door that swung inwards. He came out into a narrow, brightly lit corridor, the walls painted a glistening white.

A door faced him; another- door was a few yards down the corridor.

"In there bud," Carlos said, reaching over Don's shoulder and pushing open the first door. "Go ahead and tidy yourself up. I'll wait here for you."

Don entered the luxuriously equipped bathroom. He first attended to the broken skin on his forehead,



then, using the electric shaver, he shaved himself smooth again. Stripping off his clothes, he took a shower, and twenty minutes later he stepped out of the bathroom, feeling and looking a lot better, to find Carlos lolling against the opposite wall, smoking.

"You look more like your old self, bud," the negro said.

"Now come and see the Doc. Don't get snooty with him. He can be tricky if he doesn't like you."

He ambled down the corridor, rapped on the further door, turned the handle and pushed it open. He jerked his head at Don and stood aside.

Don walked into a large room that was equipped as an operating theatre. He could see at a glance that the equipment was up-to-date, extensive and expensive.

A tall, elderly man, wearing a white coat, sat at a desk. His lean grey face was lined and coldly impersonal. He looked up at Don and there was something in the washed-out blue eyes that sent a prickle crawling up Don's spine.

"I am Dr Englemann," the man in the white coat said and got to his feet. "The wound you have is superficial, but it should be dressed. Sit down, Mr Micklem."

"No, thanks," Don said. "I've fixed it. It is fine as it is."

Englemann shrugged his shoulders.

"You must please yourself," he said and his eyes travelled over Don. "Would you like me to give you something for your headache?"

"No, thanks," Don said.

Englemann sat down at the desk.

"Then I won't detain you, Mr Micklem. We shall be meeting again I understand; only next time you won't be a voluntary patient."

"What does that mean exactly?" Don asked.

"It will be explained to you' Englemann said and waved his hand at Carlos who had moved into the room. "Take Mr Micklem away."

Carlos touched Don's arm.

"Come on, bud," he said.

Don went into the passage. Carlos followed and closed the door. The two wolf-hounds got to their feet, their ears pricked.

"The boss'll see you now," Carlos said. "Watch your step with him: he's another guy who can get tricky if anyone treads on his toes."

"What a fascinating bunch of crackpots you seem to house here," Don said.

Carlos laughed.

"Boy! you never said a truer word."

He led the way down the corridor. He paused outside a massive steel door, touched a rubber-headed button on the wall and waited. After a few moment's delay the door swung open. Facing them was a flight of stone steps that led upwards.

Carlos stood aside.

"Go on up, bud."

Don mounted the steps. He counted them as he climbed. When he reached the thirty-second step, he came to another steel door.

Carlos came up behind him, pressed on another rubber-headed button.

"I've got Micklem here, boss," he said.

Don saw then the negro was speaking into a microphone let into the wall. A moment later the door swung inwards and Carlos gave him a little push forward. He walked into a large, airy, luxuriously furnished room. The sun came in through the big open casement windows. Beyond the open windows, Don could see the wide terrace and stretching away into the distance file ornamental garden with its flowering shrubs, conifers and cypress trees. It was a tempting sight, and for a very brief moment, he had to resist the urge to dart forward and through the casement windows to the garden below, but the dogs, as if anticipating such a move, brushed past him and went out on to the terrace where they lay down in the sun, blocking the exit. Simon Alsconi, wearing a fawn linen coat, sat in his padded chair. The Persian cat lay on his lap; its blue eyes stared at Don with inquisitive insolence. The sun caught the sparkle of a large diamond on Alsconi's little finger as he waved his hand towards a chair opposite him.

"Come in, Mr Micklem," he said. "This is a great and unexpected pleasure. Forgive me for not getting up. You see I am encumbered by Balthazar. We must, I feel, always show consideration to the feelings of animals. Please sit in that chair where we can see each other in comfort."

Don crossed the room and sat down in the big lounging chair. He looked at Alsconi with interest. Was he the Tortoise?

he wondered. He looked harmless enough - or did he? There was something odd about his eyes perhaps. Don was puzzled for a moment why Alsconi's eyes should strike him as odd, then he realized they were flat like the eyes of a snake: flat, glassy and as dark and as expressionless as pools of Indian ink. A door opened at the far end of the room and a short, stocky Italian in a white mess jacket

came in carrying a tray. He set the tray down on a table between Alsconi and Don, poured out two cups of coffee and then silently left the room.

"You must need some coffee, Mr Micklem," Alsconi said. "We have had rather a busy morning, and I am afraid we have neglected you. Help yourself to a cigarette too."

Don wanted the coffee badly and he didn't hesitate to accept the invitation.

Carlos was standing by the window, watching him, and Alsconi waved him away.

"I'll ring when I want you, Carlos," he said.

The negro went out on to the terrace. The two wolf-hounds edged forward. They stared through the open casement doors at Don, their eyes watchful and alert.

Don looked into the big hearth before the empty fireplace. His eyes alighted on a heavy steel poker. He would have to get to his feet and take two quick steps forward to grab it. He would have time to do it before the dogs reached him. He had no doubt he could settle the dogs before they could do him much damage, but what then? How far away was Carlos? Were the four guards with their automatic rifles still in the garden? Even if he laid out the dogs, knocked this fat, smiling Italian over the head and reached the garden, he would still have over a thousand yards of lawn and shrubbery to negotiate before he reached the fifteen-foot high wall. There would be no Harry waiting for him to swing him to the top. By then the other two dogs would be after him. He reluctantly decided the chances of failure were too great.

Alsconi who had been watching him said, "Very sensible of you, Mr Micklem. For a moment I feared you were going to give way to an impulse. That poker is tempting. One of my other visitors attempted to make use of it. Jacopo who sits behind that tapestry on the wall - a really splendid example of the best Florentine work, don't you think? - had no alternative but to shoot him." The white fingers fondled the cat's head. "Enjoy your coffee; have a cigarette, but please don't do anything foolish."

Don lit a cigarette. He looked over at the tapestry on the wall facing him. Then he shrugged.

"Are you the man who arranged Guido Ferenci's death?" he asked quietly.

Alsconi smiled.

"I suppose you might say I was indirectly responsible. I have people who attend to the details of my organization.

Perhaps I had better introduce myself. My name is Simon Alsconi. I am the last surviving male member of the Vaga family. I understand you have been investigating our sad history."

"The police are investigating it too," Don said.

Alsconi chuckled.

"I have been disappointed that they have taken so long to discover the connection. No doubt you gave them the clue. I have never made any secret of my connection with the Vaga family. In actual fact this palazzo is built on the original site of the Vaga home. My mother was the last of the women Vagas. But your discovery is of no value either to you or to the police, Mr Micklem. There is no evidence to connect me to the organization I have built up nor can the money I have made from the organization be traced. The people I employ don't know me: the few who do can disappear and reappear at a moment's notice. Even if I admitted I was the Tortoise, there would be no evidence that would convince a jury." "Most murderers are confident they can evade the police," Don said.

"There's always the give-away, the false move or the squealer. You're just kidding yourself if you think you're going to get away with this for much longer." Alsconi laughed: he sounded genuinely amused. "My position of safety has had an interesting test this morning," he said. "I have been hopefully waiting for such a test for the past two years. Until one's plans and security measures are submitted to a worth-while test, there is always an element of doubt. This morning six police officers have been here, looking for you. You should be flattered. Rossi, who is the head of the Rome police and an extremely clever man, flew up here and conducted the search in person. He conducted it under considerable opposition from the Sienese authorities. I happen to be an important person in Siena. I am regarded by the authorities and the church not only as a benefactor, but also as a pillar of Society. When Rossi appeared at police headquarters with a search warrant, the authorities were horrified. The circumstances were, of course, fantastic. An Englishman in the lowly position of a chauffeur was complaining that I - one of the most influential as well as the most wealthy citizens of Siena - had kidnapped his master. Unbelievable and incredible. However, Rossi is a man who is not easily put off. He has been trying to break up my organization for the past three years. The arguments the authorities raised against disturbing me were brushed aside. He came here with three detectives from Rome and three from the Siena police.

Naturally I gave him every facility to satisfy himself that you were not hidden here."

Alsconi thrust his fingers deep into the cat's fur, and the cat opened its eyes to look lazily up at him and it stretched, its paws opening and closing.

"I have spent a considerable sum of money constructing a system of underground rooms here, Mr Micklem, where people I don't wish to be seen, can shelter. The entrance to these rooms has been so cleverly made that the police failed to find it. I was, of course, in a stroitig position. Why should I be held responsible for an American who breaks into my garden like a common thief? I have hundreds of acres of garden. I suggested it was possible that this American had met with an accident and was concealed somewhere in the garden. A considerable time was spent searching the garden, but the American was not found. It was then that I lost patience. I had been sympathetic, I had been co-operative, I had permitted six heavy-footed policemen to tramp over the whole of my house. I had answered questions. But now I became angry. Who was this man who complained that his master had been kidnapped by me? I asked; could it be possible that he is a maniac? Or perhaps a practical joker? Did the police know for certain if this American really was missing? What was this nonsense about me being the Tortoise? What proof had the police to offer to support such a suspicion? I worked myself up into a royal rage - and the result? Rossi apologized." Alsconi laughed. "A fascinating morning; a morning I have to thank you for."

Don concealed his dismay as best he could.

"It may have been fascinating to you," he said, "but how does it affect me? I must admit I should be depressed if I thought I was going to spend the rest of my days here."

"You are at liberty to leave whenever you wish, subject to two conditions," Alsconi said. "The first is you give me your word you will cease to bother me and you will tell no one what I have told you. You are a man of honour, and I am prepared to accept your word. The other condition is the payment of a ransom for your liberty. You are a rich man and I think it is only fair that you should pay for the trouble you have caused me. I think a contribution from you of five hundred thousand dollars would meet the case. I am in need of dollars at the moment. No doubt you could arrange to transfer that amount from your American bank to your Italian bank fairly quickly."

"And if I don't agree to pay?" Don asked quietly.

"My dear Mr Micklem, other people have said that to me. I assure you it would not be difficult to persuade you to pay.

Don't imagine you will be submitted to any torture. I have no patience with that form of persuasion. There are more subtle methods of persuading a man to do what you wish without inflicting on him physical pain. You have met Dr Englemann?"

"I've met him," Don said.

"Dr Englemann is a brain specialist. Unfortunately for him, his enthusiasm led him into a number of reckless experiments. The police are now looking for him to charge him with murder. He is happy to be under my protection. I am able to finance his experiments, and in return, he does me a number of favours. At the moment he is working on a theory that the mind can be influenced by a series of intricate nerve operations. For instance, if a man has weak powers of concentration, by an ingenious nerve graft these powers can be stimulated. Dr Englemann is only in the theory stage at the moment. He needs men and women to experiment on. Anyone who resists my wishes is handed over to him. Only a month ago I had an obstinate man who refused to pay his ransom. I would like you to see him. I must ask Englemann to show him to you. The operation the doctor attempted was ambitious and a complete failure, but the results interested me. The patient lost the use of his arms, he is unable to talk fluently and his memory appears to be impaired. He is altogether rather a miserable creature, although the doctor finds him still useful for further experiments. So you see, Mr Micklem, it might be disastrous for you if you also tried to resist my wishes. Dr Englemann is very anxious to see if he can rejuvenate the optic nerves. If you refuse to pay your ransom I will offer you to him as a guinea pig. think it is only fair to tell you that although Englemann's theories are brilliant, he has to nerve himself to perform any operation. He is, I am afraid, -inclined to drink far too heavily, and his hand is not as steady as it should be. I feel fairly certain this is the reason why he has had so many failures.

It is possible that if you have the operation you might easily become blind and very possibly paralysed."

Don stared at the fat, smiling face. His own face had lost some of its colour, and his eyes showed the

anger that made him want to jump up and get his hands on Alsconi's fat throat.

"You have the advantage now," he said, "but you may not continue to have it. You're not fit to live, Alsconi. If I get the chance I shall kill you. Remember that: you won't have a second warning."

Alsconi chuckled.

"So many people have threatened my life that it ceases to mean anything," he said. He touched a bell on the table beside him and Carlos came into the room. "I shall give you an hour to decide what you will do. If you agree to pay, you will write a letter to your New York bank, authorizing them to pay the money to your bank in Rome. When the money arrives, you will write a cheque for the amount and a covering letter to the bank, stating the bearer of the cheque has your authority to collect the money in bonds. When the bonds are in my hands, you will be immediately released." |

"And how do I know that?" Don asked.

"You have my word: a gentleman's agreement. After all, I am prepared to accept your word to say nothing about what has passed between us. You must be prepared to accept mine." He waved his hand. "Take Mr Micklem back to his room, Carlos."

Grinning, the negro came forward, the two wolf-hounds at his heels.

"Come on, bud," he said.

# Chapter IX

## THE DEAL

Soon after nine o'clock, Felix pushed open Lorelli's bedroom door and entered the small, blue and grey decorated room.

But for the fact the room had no windows and was artificially lighted, no one would have guessed it was thirty feet below ground.

Lorelli had slept late, and was now sitting before her dressing table, brushing her hair. She wore a pale-green silk wrap and her

small, well-shaped feet were in feathered mules. She swung around as Felix came in.

"What's been happening?" she asked, and he was quick to note the anxious note in her voice.

"Plenty," he said and pulling up a chair he sat astride it, resting his arms on its back. "This American we've caught turns out to be Don Micklem. In case you've never heard of him, he's worth two million pounds sterling - not dollars. The old man's pretty pleased we've got him and he's putting the bite on him for half a million dollars."

Lorelli put her hairbrush on the dressing table.

"Is that something to get excited about?" she asked. "If he's worth all that money, why stop at a mere five hundred thousand dollars?"

"This is only the first instalment. It wouldn't be possible to get a bigger sum out of him without currency trouble.

Micklem imagines he is going to go free when he pays up. Between you and me, he isn't going to leave here until there's no more two million, and when he does leave, he'll go feet first with a wreath in his hands."

Lorelli flinched. She got up and walked over to the clothes closet. Slipping off her wrap, she took from the closet a black silk frock. She made a ring of the frock and slid it over her head.

Felix eyed her compact, beautifully proportioned body.

"Doesn't Micklem guess?" Lorelli asked as she smoothed the dress over her hips. She moved back to the dressing table and opening a drawer crammed with costume jewellery, she picked out a string of black and red wooden beads.

"That's what foxes me," Felix said. "From the look of the guy, he should be full of fight, but he isn't. Maybe the old man has thrown a scare into him. He is doing exactly what he has been told to do. He's

written a letter to his New York bank, authorizing them to pay the money into his bank in Rome. The old man thought he would kick, but he hasn't. You have the job of delivering the letter to Micklem's secretary. She has to take it to New York."

Lorelli stiffened.

"I have to take it?"

"Yes," Felix said, looking at her. "There's nothing to it..."

"Why can't you take it, or Willie or Carlos?" Lorelli said, her voice rising.

"Don't ask me," Felix said sharply. "The old man said you were to take it."

"Why do I always get picked on for the dirty jobs?"

"What's dirty about this one?"

"Suppose they hand me over to the police? Look what happened in London. I was nearly caught."

"Oh, skip it!" Felix said impatiently. "This is dead easy. The police won't be there, and Micklem's staff won't dare touch you so long as we have him where we want him."

"I don't want to do it, Felix," she said. "I don't see why I should do it. I want to keep out of it."

"You don't know it, Lorelli," he said, looking at her intently, "but you are in trouble. This is the wrong time to say what you will or what you won't do. You're to take the letter to the Trioni villa in an hour from now. That's an order."

Lorelli turned white.

"What do you mean - trouble?"

"Alsconi isn't as sure of you as he was. He says in an emergency you have a habit of losing your nerve. I told him you'd be all right and I'd be responsible for you. He wasn't convinced. He's sending you with the letter to test your nerve."

Lorelli-sat down abruptly on the edge of the bed.

"There's nothing to the job," Felix went on quietly. "As a test it's nothing. You've got to pull yourself together. Alsconi is watching you. You don't want me to tell you what that means."

She didn't say anything.

"Here's the letter," Felix said. He took an envelope from his wallet and put it on the dressing table. "You know where the Trioni villa is?"



"Yes," Lorelli said.

"When you get there ask for Marian Rigby. Tell her Micklem is safe and well, and he is no longer in Siena. She is to fly to New York on the first available plane, and she is to deliver the letter to Micklem's bank. If there is a query as to why Micklem wants such a sum, she is to say he is going to build a villa out here. Tell her that if she tells the police what is happening, Micklem will suffer. Got all that?"

"Yes," Lorelli said.

"Okay. Get there at half-past two. Take the Citroen." Felix lit a cigarette. "Now I've got that off my chest, there's something else I want to talk to you about. You never told me how you got on with Crantor. What kind of guy is he?"

Lorelli stared at him in surprise.

"Crantor? I didn't like him. He's ambitious and smart and utterly ruthless. Why?"

"I'll say he's smart," Felix said. "Too damned smart. Alsconi told me to phone Crantor to get some information about Micklem. I expected to have to leave it with him, but he trotted out the facts as if he were reading from a dossier. There was nothing he didn't know about Micklem: how much he was worth, who his bankers were, what insurances he carried- the works. He said he could repeat the performance on anyone in London with an income of more than ten thousand.

That's being too damned smart."

"What do you mean?" Lorelli asked blankly.

"Already Alsconi thinks Crantor is a good man. If he knew Crantor is taking this amount of trouble on his behalf he might get other ideas about him."

"What ideas?"

"He might bring him out here and put him in my place," Felix said. "That's just the kind of efficiency that would appeal to Alsconi. That's why you've got to watch your step from now on. Alsconi doesn't approve of our alliance as he calls it.

He hinted I was turning soft."

"Then we've got to get out of here!" Lorelli cried, clenching her fists. "You must listen to me, Felix! If the police don't catch us, then Alsconi will get rid of us. We've got to get away!"

"Will you stop this!" Felix said violently, "I'm warning you! If we try to double-cross Alsconi it'll be the last thing we do. Will you get that into your head?"

"So you think it's better to wait for Alsconi to double-cross you?" Lorelli said, her voice shrill. "You'll look a fool if Crantor takes over from you, won't you?"

"If Crantor comes here, I'll fix him before he gets near Alsconi," Felix said viciously.

"If Alsconi hasn't fixed you first!"

Felix stood up and kicked the chair out of his way. He went over to Lorelli, grabbed her by her arms and pulled her to her feet.

"I've never got tough with you yet," he snarled, "but I will if I have to, and believe me, when I get tough with a woman, it's too bad for her." He gave her a hard little shake. "Listen: there's no way out for either of us. We're in this thing too deep. Do you want me to tell Alsconi that you've lost your nerve and you want to quit? You know what he'll do with you? He'll hand you over to Englemann. If you don't pull yourself together, I'll wash my hands of you. I said I'd be responsible for you, but don't kid yourself I'm going to cover you up if you ask for trouble. I'm not sticking my neck out for anyone!"

Lorelli suddenly relaxed against him.

"All right, Felix," she said. "I'm sorry. My nerves are bad, but I'll be all right."

"You'd better be all right," he said and released her. "Now, look, you have nothing to worry about. I'll take care of you.

Just do what I tell you. Do you understand?"

She nodded, not looking at him.

"Okay." He glanced at his watch. "I've got to see the old man now. I can rely on you to take that letter?"

"Yes," Lorelli said.

"Good girl," Felix said and patted her arm. "Be there at half-past two."

When he had gone Lorelli moved slowly to the dressing table and sat down. She was shocked to see how pale she was.

She picked up her rouge pad and heightened her colour. Then she lit a cigarette.

She felt trapped. She told herself she would never have mixed herself up with Alsconi if she had known he was going to start a world-wide and murderous racket like this. How could she possibly have known?

When she had first met Alsconi, five years ago, he had been an impoverished violinist in a cafe band in Rome. She had been a professional dancer at the cafe. She had regarded Alsconi as had the other members of the cafe staff as an egocentric crackpot, not to be taken seriously.

At that time, Alsconi was always bragging about his ancestors of Siena, hinting darkly that it wouldn't be long before he was back as head of the historical and notorious Vaga family, with unlimited

wealth. When he wasn't playing the violin in the cafe band, he would roam the cafe tables, looking for someone who would listen to his monotonous story of how the Vagas had been exiled from Siena and how they had sworn to return.

Then one day he cornered Lorelli and put a proposition to her. Why didn't she go into partnership with himself and Johnny Lassiter, a young American who washed dishes at the cafe? There was big money to be made playing the badger game. He had already spoken to Johnny who was willing if Lorelli came in with them. He (Alsconi) knew a number of wealthy men who would be easy prey. He would introduce Lorelli to them. Her job would be to get them into a compromising situation, then Johnny would appear as the outraged husband and the sucker would pay up to avoid a scandal.

At that time Lorelli was desperate for want of money. She was sick of being a professional dancer. She discussed the proposition with Johnny, and after some hesitation, had agreed to give Alsconi's idea a trial.

Over a period of sixteen months the three of them had made a considerable sum of money. Alsconi had insisted that he should take two-thirds of the proceeds as his introductions were not only profitable and safe, but they were also free from police prosecution. Lorelli and Johnny split the remaining third between them.

But it wasn't long before Johnny began to hanker for a bigger rake off. Why should they turn over two-thirds of the proceeds to Alsconi, he argued to Lorelli, when they did all the dirty work and took all the risks? Why not drop Alsconi and handle the set-up themselves? By then Lorelli had a vague suspicion that Alsconi was not only cracked, but also dangerous, and she hesitated. While she was hesitating, Johnny suddenly disappeared, and a few days later, his murdered body was found by the police floating in the Tiber.

Alsconi had shrugged at the news. Obviously, Johnny had made an enemy, he had said, smiling. He was a reckless, foolish fellow. What could he expect? He told her to look out for a new partner: someone more reliable than Johnny.

She had found Felix and had introduced him to Alsconi who had been impressed by Felix's record. By then the badger game was small beer to Alsconi, although Lorelli didn't know it. With the money he had saved from playing his violin in the cafe band and from the proceeds of the badger game, he was ready to begin his extortion racket and his threat of

"pay up or die" was producing quick and big dividends. He made Felix his second in command and let Lorelli into the racket. She enjoyed working with Felix. Money rolled in far quicker than it had when playing the badger game. The first dozen or so victims paid up without a fuss, then Alsconi raised his demands and he met with resistance. The first murder came as a shock to Lorelli, but by then life was too easy to think of backing out. She was in love with Felix and she was making money.

As the months went by and more murders followed and the police seemed helpless to stop Alsconi, Lorelli ceased to be shocked. She assured herself she had killed no one, so why should she worry? But Gina's death had shaken her badly and now Micklem had traced her to Siena, she felt panic-stricken. She had been mad, she told herself, to have had anything to do with either Ferenci's or

Gina's deaths. She must get away before the police moved in. If Felix hadn't the sense to get out, then she would go without him.

As she sat staring at herself in the mirror, a solution to her problem dropped into her mind. If she was to get away from the organization she must have a large sum of money and a safe hiding place. Micklem had the money. It was possible she might do a deal with him.

She sat for a long moment thinking, then she got up and went to the clothes closet. She took from it a lightweight beige coat and slipped into it. She put on a close-fitting black hat. Returning to the dressing table she pulled open a drawer and took from it a .25 automatic which she slipped into her coat pocket. Picking up the letter, she left the room and walked quickly down the corridor to the lift.

As Marian paid off the taxi that had brought her from the station, Harry came out on to the veranda and shot down the steps to take her overnight case.

"We've been trying to get you, miss," he said. "I reckon we've telephoned every hotel in Florence."

Marian looked sharply at him: his pale, worried face sent a little stab of alarm through her.

"Has something happened, Harry?"

Cherry came out on to the veranda. There was a fussed, anxious expression on his usually placid pink face.

"Mr Micklem is missing," Harry said.

They joined Cherry on the veranda and Marian led the way into the lounge.

"How long has he been missing?" she asked, making an effort to sound calm.

"Perhaps you would like a cup of coffee, madam?" Cherry said from force of habit.

Marian didn't even hear him, she was looking at Harry.

"Since last night," Harry said, and went on to tell Marian how Cherry and he had followed Carlos and had lost him when he had

driven away in his car. "The road was straight and we could see his headlights. He appeared to turn off the main road into what I thought could be a drive to a house. I reported to Mr Micklem, and he and I went out there. We found a road where this nigger had turned off. Some way up the road was a big house, surrounded by a high wall. Well, you know what Mr Micklem is. He wanted to have a close look at the house. He got into the garden, leaving me on the wall. I waited for about half an hour, then I heard dogs barking. I expected Mr Micklem to come, but he didn't. After a while I saw lights in the garden, and I thought I'd better see what was happening. I was very nearly nabbed by one of the dogs. I legged it back to the car and drove back to the villa and woke up Cherry. We decided to wait and see if Mr Micklem turned up. After a couple of hours I thought I'd better go for help."

"You don't know for certain he was caught?" Marian asked.

"One of the dogs very nearly had me," Harry said grimly. "There were three others. I don't think he could have got away. If he did, why isn't he here?"

She nodded.

"What did you do then?"

"I left Cherry here in case Mr Micklem returned and I went to the police." Harry's face darkened. "Believe it or not, not one of those perishers could speak a word of English. You'd have thought one or two of them would have been educated, wouldn't you, miss? I got nowhere with them. I very nearly got slung into jail. I went back to the villa and put a call through to Superintendent Dicks. When I finally got him, he was pretty quick to take action. He got into touch with the bloke in charge of the Tortoise case in Rome and this bloke flew up right away and Cherry and I went down to the police station and gave him the story. When I described the negro and the house, the local police nearly went mad.

They said the negro was a well-known character in the city and was completely harmless. He was the personal servant of the owner of the house, a bloke named Simon Alsoni who was a rich and respected member of the community.

They said it was ridiculous to suspect him. Anyway, Rossi made me give him the full story, I could see he didn't think much of it. I must say it did sound a bit thin when he started to pick it to pieces. I couldn't prove the nigger had anything to do with the Tortoise organization. I told him how Mr Micklem had seen Lorelli, but of course I couldn't prove she had anything to do with the nigger nor had we seen her near the house. But the fact they couldn't talk me out of was that Mr Micklem had got into the garden and had vanished. Rossi said Mr Micklem had no right to be in the garden and Alsoni could charge him with unlawful entry. He said we had no proof that he was in the house. Finally, he went out to the house. He wouldn't let either Cherry or me go and we had to wait at the police station. They came back after a while. Rossi said the house had been thoroughly searched and Mr Micklem wasn't there. He then had the nerve to suggest Mr Micklem might be suffering from amnesia and he might be wandering about the countryside. He then went back to Rome, leaving the local police to look for Mr Micklem. They don't seem to be looking very hard, and that's as far as we've got at the moment."

"If Don has been kidnapped," Marian said, "the kidnappers would have had plenty of time to take him somewhere far from this house, wouldn't they?"

"Yes, but I don't think they did. I think he's still in the house," Harry said.

"But if the police searched it..."

"You want to see the place. It's just the kind of joint that would have underground passages, secret panels and hidden rooms. It's my bet he's there."

Marian looked across at Cherry.

"What do you think, Cherry?"

"I don't know what to say, madam," Cherry said miserably. "I should have thought they wouldn't have kept him in the house."

"You haven't seen the place either," Hairy put in. "Wherever he is, we've got to find him and we've got to start looking somewhere."

"Yes," Marian said. "What are you thinking of doing?"

"Well, miss, this is a job we can't tackle alone. We've got to have help. If the police won't play, we'll have to look elsewhere.

Let's get hold of Giuseppe. He's the boy who can help us. We'll ask him to collect a bunch of his gondolier pals to come here. We could then bust into the house and if Mr Micklem is there, we'd find him."

"But, Harry, you don't know for certain he is there. You can't break in on the off chance. You'll only be arrested and that won't help Don," Marian said. "I'm sure that's not the way to handle it. The Tortoise is an extortioner. He won't pass up\_

the chance of getting money out of Don. I think it is more likely we'll get a ransom note before long. I think we should wait until the ransom note arrives and then take action. I agree we must have help. I'll see if I can get Giuseppe. He may be at the palazza now."

"Well, all right," Harry said, reluctantly. "I don't like sitting here doing nothing. I'm pretty sure if we had a bunch of Giuseppe's pals we could bust in and find Mr Micklem."

"We'll get Giuseppe first," Marian said, and crossing to the telephone she put a call through to Don's palazza in Venice.

Giuseppe Spinolo was Don's gondolier, and while Don was not in residence, Giuseppe also acted as caretaker to the small palazza Don owned on the Grand Canal. Marian was lucky to contact him and she told him briefly what had happened.

"Harry wants you here," she went on. "If you can bring some of your friends..."

"I will come at once," Giuseppe said, "and I will bring my friends. Do not worry, we will find ilsignore. We will be with you some time tonight."

"He's coming," Marian said as she hung up. "Now, Harry, I would like to see this house. Let's get the car out and explore. We'll want to know what the roads and the country are like before Giuseppe comes..." she broke off as Harry suddenly jumped to his feet.

Seeing he was staring past her, she looked quickly over her shoulder.

Standing in the doorway, a .25 automatic in her hand, was Lorelli.

The mid-afternoon sun blazed down into the garden of the Trioni villa and Willie, sitting with his back to a tree where he had a good view of the villa, struggled to keep awake.

He had seen Marian arrive, and he had been told that within an hour Lorelli would be coming to the villa to deliver the first instructions concerning Micklem's ransom.

Felix had said to him: "Your job is to cover Lorelli. Keep out of sight, but be ready to move in if they try any tricks. Use your gun if you have to."

Willie took out a dirty handkerchief and wiped his sweating face. He would have given a lot to be able to shut his eyes and have a refreshing sleep, but he knew that was more than he dared do. He looked at his strap watch. She should be here any moment now. He pulled a .38 automatic from his hip pocket and checked the clip. He balanced the gun in his hand while he looked at the villa, wishing he was in there and out of the burning sun. It seemed to Willie that he had spent all his life wishing for something. His main passions in life were women and high-power cars. Women shunned his pock-marked face and stunted body and he never seemed able to earn enough money to buy the car he wanted.

At the age of fourteen he had started life as a porter to a small disreputable hotel in Genoa. His feeble attempts to make money by stealing from the hotel's clients had eventually landed him in jail. He had spent most of his forty years in and out of prison, and it was only when Alsconi had taken him into his organization that his prison sentences ceased.

Although he was now reasonably well paid, he still could not indulge himself in the car he wanted, and women were still out of his reach. He hankered for more money. No matter how ugly a man was, he argued, women would favour him if he had money: not the kind of money he earned, but big money, and he ached to have it. If there was one thing he ached for more than anything else it was Lorelli. She bewitched him. He knew she was Felix's woman and that it would be disastrous for him if Felix knew what was in his mind. He knew too Lorelli wouldn't look at him. His face, his physique and his lack of money presented far more formidable barriers than Felix's fists. Up to now he had accepted the position, but he never gave up hoping. He

dreamed of Lorelli and hoped. Without his dreams or his hopes life wouldn't be worth living. For forty years he had lived on dreams. Sooner or later, he kept assuring himself, his dreams must turn to reality.

He was brooding about Lorelli when, looking up, he saw her.

She was making her way towards the villa through the shrubs and trees. He caught sight of her just in time. He had been told by Felix not to show himself, and he flattened out into the long grass, lying motionless as Lorelli passed within twenty feet of him.

He raised his head to watch her, and he admired the way she slipped from shrub to tree and from tree to shrub, moving silently and swiftly.

He got to his feet and went after her. He saw her run across the open space between the villa and the garden, mount the steps to the veranda and pause outside the front door.

He waited behind a tree, watching her. He saw her turn the handle of the door and open it. She looked back, but Willie, who was an expert in such matters, had anticipated such a move and had quickly withdrawn behind the tree. When he peered around the tree again, she had disappeared from his sight.

Holding the .38 in his hand, he moved towards the villa, darted up the steps and to the front door. She had left it ajar, and he leaned against the wall by the door and listened.

He heard Marian say: "We'll want to know what the roads and the country are like before Giuseppe comes..."

Then Lorelli's voice said, "Don't move - any of you!"

Willie nodded his head approvingly at the tone of her voice. She had got just the right snap in it. He could imagine her with the .25 in her hand, her green eyes glittering. It was going to be a dead easy job for him. She could handle this: he wouldn't be called on to help.

The snap in Lorelli's voice checked Harry's move forward. He looked at her hard white face, at the gun and then back to her again and decided the distance between them was too great.

"Sit down!" Lorelli said, and lifted the gun so that it pointed at Harry's eyes.

Harry sat down.

Lorelli moved into the room. She decided only Harry was dangerous. Marian she dismissed instantly, and after a quick look at Cherry who sat on the edge of his chair, his fat face startled and his eyes popping, she dismissed him too. She kept well away from the three of them and leaned her back against the wall.

"Micklem is well and safe," she said, speaking rapidly. "He is no longer in Siena so it is useless to try to find him. He has written a letter to his New York bank and you are to deliver it at once." She looked towards Marian. "If there is any query by the bank about the amount, you are to tell them Micklem is going to buy a villa in Italy."

Without taking her eyes off Harry, she opened her handbag, took out the letter and tossed it across the room where it fell at Marian's feet.

Harry said in a cold, hard voice, "You don't kid me. I know Mr Micklem is in that house, and if your gang hurts him you and they will be damned sorry."

Willie, who had moved silently into the hall, grinned. He propped himself up against the wall, his gun hanging slackly in his hand while he listened.

Marian picked up the letter. She slit it open and read the contents. She recognized Don's firm handwriting. The letter contained instructions for selling certain stocks to the value of five hundred



thousand dollars which were to be immediately transferred to the Banca de Roma. There was no message for her which she hoped to find.

She said quietly, "And when the money is paid into the bank what happens then?"

"Micklem will write a cheque," Lorelli said. "You will cash it. When the money is handed to us, he will be released."

"What guarantee have I that he will be released?"

Lorelli shrugged.

"That's nothing to do with me. I am telling you what I have been told to tell you. You are to leave for New York immediately."

Marian looked over at Harry, then she shrugged. The transfer of such a sum of money would take several days. There was time to work out what the next move should be.

"Very well," she said. "I will follow out the instructions." "If you contact the police about this," Lorelli went on,

"Micklem will suffer. Neither you nor the police will ever find him. If you try any tricks, you will never see him again."

Pretty nice, Willie thought. I couldn't have handled it better myself. He made to move back to the front door to be out of the way when Lorelli came out, when her next words brought him to an abrupt stop.

"That is what I have been told to tell you," she said, looking at Marian, "but it is a lie. Micklem will not be released. He is worth two million pounds. They intend to get all of it, and when they have got it, they will murder him."

Marian's face paled. As Harry made to get to his feet, she put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Why are you telling us this?" she asked.

"Because I intend to break away from the organization," Lorelli said. "I can't break away without money. I want to do a deal with you. I know where he is. I can get him out. I'll take half what they're asking - two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. You're getting a bargain. If you deal with them, you will go on paying until there is no more left. If you deal with me, you'll get Micklem back."

"So you're ratting on your pals," Harry said angrily. He turned to Marian. "Don't trust her, miss."

"You don't have to trust me," Lorelli said. "I'll have to trust you. I don't expect you to give me the money until he's free."

How long will it take to get the money to Italy?"

"Five or six days," Marian said.

"If I show you how to get him out will you give me your word to pay the money into a bank I will nominate and also to say nothing to the police?"

"If Mr Micklem is unhurt and we free him I will do my best to persuade him to give you the money," Marian said. "I can't do better than that: it is not my money to promise you."

"If they found out what I am doing, you don't know what would happen to me," Lorelli said huskily. "One of them is a drunken surgeon. He spends his time experimenting with animals and humans when he can get them. I've seen the results of some of his experiments. If they found out I'm betraying them I should also become one of his experiments. I am trusting more than my life to you. I must have your promise. I won't help you if you don't give me your word."

Marian hesitated, then she said, "All right. You shall have the money."

"And you'll say nothing to the police?"

"Yes."

Lorelli lowered the gun, then she slipped it into her pocket and moved away from the wall. The other three stood up.

Harry said, "He is in that house somewhere, isn't he?"

"Yes. Thirty feet below the building there is a system of underground rooms," Lorelli said. "I know where he is and how he can be reached. It will be difficult and dangerous."

"How dangerous?" Harry asked sharply.

"Any one of the passages can be flooded at the touch of a button," Lorelli said. "There are alarms everywhere. All the corridors have steel doors at either end, and they are electrically controlled. There are guards and dogs always in the grounds."

"Then how do we get him out?" Harry demanded.

"I must work out a plan," Lorelli said. "I wanted first to be sure you would give me the money. We have at least three days. I'll let you have a plan of the place so you will know where the alarms are and where the guards patrol. I'll give you all the details you want, but it will take a little time. I will come here on Thursday night with a definite plan."

Outside in the hall, Willie listened. His pock-marked face was vicious and frightened. She would be out any moment now. She mustn't see him. He stepped silently to the front door and slipped out on to the veranda.

# Chapter X

## WILLIE

Don looked ruefully at the five cigarettes in his case and decided to resist the temptation and keep them for a more pressing occasion.

He was sitting on the straw-covered floor, his back against the wall of the cave, the steel bracelet and chain attached to his ankle. It was close on half-past three in the afternoon. Since Felix had "come into the cave some three hours ago, no one had been near him. Felix had come for the letter to Don's New York banker. He was surprised when Don had written the letter without protest. But by writing the letter, Don reckoned on gaining at least four days in which to organize his escape, and he knew he would need those four days. Although the police had failed to find him, he was sure Harry wouldn't give up, and if it were possible to break into this fortress Harry would do it, but it was bound to take time. When Marian got the letter to the bank, she would know that he was alive, and he hoped she wouldn't be influenced by the unsuccessful search made by the police.

Don had no intention of paying the ransom. He had no illusions about Alsoni. He was sure Alsoni wouldn't be content with five hundred thousand dollars nor would he release him. It was a comforting thought to know that Harry would be doing his best for him, but Don knew the difficulties, and he didn't intend to rely on Harry's efforts. If he were to get out of his underground prison, he would have to rely largely on himself.

He regarded the bracelet around his ankle with disgust. Without some tool there was no way of tackling the lock. He had already tried to lever the staple to which the chain was fastened out of the wall without success.

He was considering the problem, wondering if the next time they brought him food he couldn't break off one of the prongs of the fork and use that to pick the lock when he saw a light coming down the tunnel.

He was startled to see Lorelli come out of the shadows into the pool of light in which he was sitting.

Lorelli was agitated. Her face was pale and her eyes showed the fear that gripped her.

She came over to him and dropped on her knees beside him. "I've talked to your secretary," she said in a breathless whisper. "I've told her I would get you out of here. In return I want two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Your secretary has promised me this sum, but you have to pay it, and I want your promise too."

Don saw the fear in her eyes and realized at once that she meant what she said.

"That's quite a chunk of money," he said. "Why this, sudden change of heart?" I

"I've had enough of them. I want to break away. I must have money to be safe," she said. "They won't

ever let you free.

They intend to get all your money and then murder you. I can help you escape, but you must give me your word that you will pay me two hundred and fifty thousand dollars when you are free."

"That's fair enough," Don said. "You won't get the money unless I am free so I'll give you my word. It's a promise!"

"You mean that?"

"I've told you - it's a promise. How are you going to get me out?"

"I'm working on a plan now. All the doors here are electrically controlled. The passages can be flooded. There's a control room that is guarded night and day. Before you can hope to get out of here you will have to overpower the man in charge. It'll be easier to escape during the night. Everyone will be asleep except Carlos who is in charge of the control room at night."

Don grimaced.

"You mean I'll have to overpower him?"

Lorelli nodded.

"Can you get me a gun?" Don asked.

"I think so. I'll try."

"Do more than try. Without a gun, I don't think I'm going to have a great deal of success with Carlos. What about this?"

He tapped the bracelet around his ankle.

"I could get you a file."

"I'd rather have a hair-pin," Don said and grinned. "Have you got one?"

Her hand went up to her red-gold hair and she found a hairpin which she gave to him. Then she got to her feet.

"I'll come again," she said. "I'll try to get a gun for you, but it won't be easy. If I have to I'll let you have mine." She looked down at him. "I'm trusting you to give me the money when I get you out."

"I'm not out yet," Don said, "but if I do get out, you'll have the money. Don't fool yourself, will you? The police want you. There's nothing I can do about that."

"I'm not worrying about them."

"Where is the control room?"

"Opposite Englemann's surgery. You've been there, haven't you?"

"Yes. Try to get the gun. Carlos will take a lot of stopping."

"I'll do what I can."

She went away quickly, and after a moment or so, Don lost sight of her torch down the tunnel.

He decided the occasion justified a cigarette and he lit one, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. He felt his future now was a lot more secure. He didn't waste time to wonder what lay behind Lorelli's sudden desire to get away. That was something he could think about later. He settled down to work on the lock with the hair-pin she had given him. It took him a half an hour of patient fiddling before the lock turned, and the bracelet dropped off his ankle. It was a snap lock, and he could fasten the bracelet back on to his ankle again in a matter of seconds. He was about to stand up and savour his freedom when he spotted a light coming down the tunnel and he hurriedly replaced the bracelet and slid the hair-pin under his watch strap.

Dr Englemann came out of the shadows. He lurched slightly as he walked and his lined bitter face was pallid. As he came into the light, Don could see the sweat beads on his forehead.

"Hello," Don said, "What do you want?"

Englemann looked down at him, his deep-set eyes glittering.

"There seems a possibility, Mr Micklem," he said, his words slurred, "that you may be placed at my disposal for a certain experiment. Of course the matter isn't entirely settled, but it would help me if you wouldn't object to a few preliminary tests some time this evening. I would like a specimen of your blood and your pulse rate. I would also like to examine your eyes."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Don said curtly, "but I object strongly. It is only fair to warn you that if you come within reach of me I shall take great pleasure in strangling you."

Englemann's face hardened, but he took a step back. "I am anxious not to lose time. My experiment is of the utmost importance, but if you won't co-operate, then I must wait until I have permission to force you to co-operate."

"You're going to have a long wait. I intend to pay the ransom."

"I think not," Englemann said. "I told il signor Alsconi that you are merely trying to gain time. I know your type. You are not the kind of man who can be forced to do something against your will."

"Then you had better tell Alsconi you have made a mistake," Don said. "I'm not at all anxious to be a subject of one of your experiments."

"Signor Alsconi did tell you what I am attempting to do?" Englemann said. His hands moved

unsteadily to his coat lapels and anchored there. "You realize the importance of the experiment?"

"He told me," Don said. "He also mentioned that you would probably be tight when you did the operation and it would be certain to fail."

Englemann looked at him; his eyes seemed to catch fire. "I shall take great pleasure in having you on the operating table, Mr Micklem," he said. "I don't think I shall have to wait very long."

He turned and walked away, steadying himself, his hand on the wall of the tunnel.

Don watched him go. He was annoyed to find his heart was thumping and his mouth had turned dry.

Willie sat under the shady tree where he could watch the entrance to the Trioni villa. He was in such a state of nerves and excitement that sweat ran down his face as if a sponge of water had been squeezed over him.

He felt something should be done immediately about Lorelli's treachery. His first inclination was to bolt back to Felix and tell him what he had overheard, but Felix had told him to watch the villa until Jacopo relieved him, and this put him in a quandary. Felix expected his orders to be obeyed, and if Willie deserted his post, he could run into trouble. He reluctantly decided to wait for Jacopo and then report to Felix.

Then into Willie's cunning and easily frightened mind, there dropped an unpleasant thought: Lorelli was Felix's girl.

How was Felix going to react when he heard she was selling them out? Suppose he didn't believe what Willie had to tell him? Felix had a reputation of being quick with his fists, and often, before he struck a blow, he had been known to slip on a leather glove, covered with brass studs. Willie had seen a man's teeth broken by a punch from that glove, and he flinched at the recollection. But surely, he reasoned, Felix wouldn't be such a mug as not to believe him? He wouldn't want two million pounds to walk out on him and the cops to walk in. Surely he couldn't be so besotted with Lorelli that he would let her get away with this? But he would have to be careful how he broke the news to Felix. Maybe he had better keep his gun handy. If Felix looked like starting trouble, he would show him the gun.

But what was he personally going to get out of this? Willie asked himself. Would it be a smarter idea to put the bite on Lorelli? He could keep track of her until she got the money, then move in and demand half: a hundred and twenty-five thousand bucks. His face lit up at the thought. But after thinking this idea over, he realized that he hadn't the nerve to go through with it. Alsoni would go after Lorelli, and he would eventually catch her. Willie knew enough of Alsoni's methods not to know how long his arm was. No one had quit the organization and got away with it. If he took money from Lorelli he would be putting himself in bad with Alsoni, and he wasn't all that soft in the head.

After wrestling with the problem for some minutes, he came to the conclusion that the safest way to play the hand was to tell Felix, and rely on Felix to do the right thing by him. He'd ask Felix to get him a bonus: that was the least he deserved.

It was a pity about Lorelli. She was almost certain to be handed over to Englemann. Willie grimaced at the thought. But it was her own funeral. She was asking for trouble, and she would certainly get it.

While Willie was sweating over this problem, Felix was reporting to Alsconi who sat at his desk, his hands folded on the blotter.

Within reach of those long white fingers was a small ivory button let into the desk that when pressed would fire a gun, cleverly concealed in the front of the desk, and which was pointing at this moment at Felix.

"Micklem's letter has been delivered," Felix was saying. "There was no trouble. His secretary is flying to New York right away. She believes the money will be at the Banca de Roma in five days."

Alsconi absently rubbed the top of the ivory button with the tip of his forefinger. It gave him a feeling of intense pleasure to know that he had only to press down on the button for Felix to get a bullet in his stomach.

"So they appear willing to co-operate?" he said.

"They seem more than willing."

"And Lorelli delivered the letter?"

"Yes."

"She was alone?"

"She thought she was alone," Felix said. "I had Willie watching outside in case there was trouble."

"She made it clear that if they went to the police, Micklem would suffer?"

"She followed my instructions," Felix said curtly. "She did the job very well."

"Splendid." Alsconi examined his finger-nails, a bland expression on his fat face. "Where is Willie?"

"He's still at the villa. I told him to wait until Jacopo relieved him," Felix said.

Alsconi scratched the side of his nose while he looked at Felix.

"So you have the report only from Lorelli, and no confirmation yet from Willie?"

Felix stiffened.

"Confirmation? I don't understand. I haven't yet talked to Willie, but he won't have anything to tell me. Are you suggesting we can't trust Lorelli any more?"

Alsconi lifted an eyebrow.

"Certainly not. It is always better to have confirmation of any report. For all we know Lorelli might have lost her nerve at the last moment. She might not have gone to the villa. I am quite sure she did go, but it will be more satisfactory not only for me but for her if Willie confirmed what took place at the interview."

"Willie was watching from the outside," Felix said. "He wouldn't have heard what was said."

Alsconi picked up the telephone receiver.

"Carlos? Send Jacopo at once to the Trioni villa to relieve Willie. Willie is to report to me immediately he comes in."

He replaced the receiver. "Don't let us assume anything, Felix. It is a fatal mistake. I'll talk to Willie."

Felix shrugged angrily.

"If that's the way you want it."

"Yes. We have agreed that Lorelli is inclined to get flustered. I want to be sure that she has handled the assignment well. Very soon I shall have a special job for her. Crantor has a large amount of sterling that should be brought here. I want Lorelli to go to London and bring this money back." Alsconi played a soundless tune on the edge of his desk.

"You are satisfied that she is still reliable? The money is in cash, and there is a lot of it. I wouldn't want her to run off with it."

"She wouldn't do that," Felix said. He had to make an effort to meet Alsconi's probing eyes. "Of course she is reliable, but we can't send her on that job. The London police have a description of her. It would be risky to send her to London again."

"Ah, yes. I had forgotten that. Well, someone must get the money. I need it. Would you trust Willie to do it?"

Felix shook his head.

"No. Willie's all right for the day-to-day work, but I wouldn't trust him with money."

"Then I'll have to see if Crantor can suggest anyone," Alsconi said. "We had better find some other work for Lorelli to do. She is rather lost here, I feel. No scope for her." He paused, then went on, looking fixedly at Felix. "I have been thinking that we might begin limited operations in South America: Buenos Aires, for instance. Would she mind going there, do you think?"

Felix very nearly betrayed himself. He covered his confusion by taking out a cigarette and lighting it. Was this a coincidence or had Alsconi somehow overheard their conversation?

"Buenos Aires? I don't know. I can ask her."



Alsconi smiled.

"Leave it for a moment. When I have more time I will talk to her myself. It is a long time now since I have had a chat with her. Sometimes I wonder if it is wise to employ women in the organization. They have their uses, of course, but they can be unpredictable. I don't like unpredictable people."

"You can't say Lorelli is unpredictable," Felix said hurriedly. "You seem to have lost faith in her, but you have no reason for it. After all she is one of the original members of the organization. She deserves better treatment. I have always found her reliable when it comes to carrying out orders."

"You are in a better position to judge her than I am," Alsconi said. "But I think a change would be good for her: new faces, new routines. Would you be interested in going with her to Buenos Aires and handling my business there?"

"If you told me to go, I'd go," Felix said, aware that he was beginning to sweat. "But I should have thought I was more useful to you here. I've handled the set-up for you for two years now.

It isn't an easy set-up to run. If I had the choice I would stay here."

Alsconi lifted his eyebrows.

"That would mean losing Lorelli. I thought you were attached to her."

"No woman has her hooks that deep into me," Felix said. "Do you intend sending her to Buenos Aires?"

"Perhaps not. It's an idea that occurred to me." Alsconi shrugged his shoulders. "I'm still thinking about it. I should have to be very sure that Lorelli could do the work and wanted to do it. Let us continue to think about it." He waved his hand the gesture of dismissal.

Felix was glad to escape from the staring, probing eyes.

He was badly rattled and he went to his room» took from a cupboard a bottle of whisky and poured himself liberal shot.

Then he sat down, holding the glass in his hand while he considered the situation.

After some thought, he told himself that AlsconVs reference to Buenos Aires must have been a coincidence. ft ^Vent only to show how crazy and irresponsible Lorelli's ideas. If he had thought, it was obvious that a town with so muc)i money as Buenos Aires would eventually come on Alsconi's schedule. Besides, if Alsconi had overheard Lorelli trying to persuade him to clear out, he wouldn't have put him on his guard to this. He would have struck. He knew how Alsconi worked, he was quick and ruthless.

He finished his drink and set down the glass. tfe decided the situation wanted careful watching, but it wasn't d^gerous.

The great point in his favour was there was no one to take his place. The organization didn't run itself and he had purpose underlined that to Alsconi. There were a hundred and one details to be watched and Felix had all these details at his fingers' end.

Alsconi wouldn't be so stupid as to get rid of him, he told himself. He would only saddle himself with all the dirty work that Felix now shouldered. But from now on, he would be on his guard. He would watch Carlos who carried out Alsconi's instructions.

His hand went inside his coat and his fingers touched the butt of his .45. Carlos was quick and big, but a .45 slug would stop him.

He had another drink and then got to his feet. He would go along and talk to Lorelli. He'd throw a hell of a scare into her.

She must stop this yammering about leaving the organization once and for all. That kind of talk could be fatal.

He went over to the mirror and straightened his tie. He grinned at his reflection. The whisky gave him a feeling of security. He was still smiling as he went out of the room.

But he wouldn't have felt so secure if he had known that at that moment Alsconi was talking to Crantor who sat in his hotel bedroom straining to hear Alsconi's voice that came to him over the crackling telephone line.

"I want you to fly out here at once," Alsconi said. "Take route 3 and bring the goods with you. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," Crantor said, scarcely believing his ears. This was the first time he had heard Alsconi's voice. It was a big moment for him.

"Be here by midnight tonight," Alsconi went on. "I am making changes here. I may find a better job for you."

"I'll be there," Crantor said, his nightmare of a face lighting up.

"Good," Alsconi said and replaced the receiver. He reached for the house telephone. "Carlos? Who is down there with you?"

"There's Menotto, Mr Felix and Miss Lorelli," Carlos said. "Jacopo has gone to get Willie."

"Send Menotto to me, then turn the current off," Alsconi said. "No one is to leave. Do you understand? Let me know if anyone does try to leave."

"Yes, boss," Carlos said; the surprise in his voice made Alsconi grin evilly.

A faint sound behind him as he sat with his back to the tree, made Willie's hand fly to the inside of his coat and jerk out his .38. He rolled over, bringing the gun into a firing position.

Jacopo who had come out from behind the shrubs came to an abrupt standstill.

"That's the way numbskulls get shot," Willie snarled. "Why didn't you call out, you dimwit?"

"I didn't see you," Jacopo said, moving forward again. "What's the matter with you -jumpy?"

Willie slid the gun back into its holster that was strapped under his armpit. He got to his feet.

"Nothing's the matter with me. You taking over now? You're early for a change, aren't you?"

"The old man wants you," Jacopo said; his eyes showed his curiosity. "Rather you than me. What have you been up to?"

Willie stared at him, his thin, rat-like face questioning. "You mean Alsconi wants me?"

"Who else? You'd better get moving. He said he wanted to see you at once, and he's waiting."

Willie wiped his sweating face with his dirty handkerchief. He had only spoken to Alsconi once in two years.

Excitement and fear jostled his mind. Here was his chance to get his bonus. He wouldn't have to rely on Felix. He could give Alsconi the dope about Lorelli direct. He felt a twinge of fear. But what did the old man want him for? Had he done something wrong?

Jacopo, who took a pride in his appearance, regarded Willie with contempt and disgust. Willie hadn't shaved that morning. His shirt was filthy and his shabby black suit was stained and creased.

"You'd better clean up before you see him," he said. "You look like a tramp."

"Never mind what I look like," Willie snarled. "Did he say what he wanted me for?"

"Is it likely; but you can guess, can't you? He wants to kick your teeth in for doing nothing for the past months," Jacopo said. "Or maybe Englemann's persuaded him to let him have you."

Willie cursed him.

"You'd better not keep him waiting," Jacopo said, grinning. "He said at once and that means at once."

"I'm not scared of him," Willie said untruthfully. "I've got something to tell him that'll get me a sack of dough. You'll stop grinning like an ape when you see the car I'm going to buy."

"Got a touch of the sun?" Jacopo asked blankly.

"You wait and see," Willie said darkly. "I keep my eyes and ears open. I've got information that the old man will pay big money for."

"What information?" Jacopo demanded.

"He'll tell you if he wants you to know," Willie said. "Where's the car?"

"Down the lane. What have you got to tell him?"

"Go jump in a lake," Willie said and set off at a run through the trees.

For the first time in his life Willie did not obey an order, and it was to prove fatal to him. Jacopo had said that Alsconi wanted to see him at once. Willie was anxious to make a good impression on Alsconi. He decided to sneak back to his room, have a shave and a wash and put on his best suit. The old man wouldn't know he had spent ten minutes sprucing himself up before reporting to him, and the effect of his new suit might have good results, Willie told himself.

He left the Citroen at the bottom of the drive and made his way through the shrubbery to the back entrance of the palazza. He entered the underground quarters by the concealed door a few seconds before Carlos threw the switch that put the door out of operation. Unaware that the exit was now sealed off, Willie scuttled quickly along the corridor to his room. He was opening the door when Felix appeared.

"The old man wants you," Felix said. "Have you seen him?" "Not yet," Willie said uneasily. "Thought I'd have a wash first. What's up?"

"You'd better get a jerk into it. He wants to see you right away." "I can't go looking like this," Willie whined. "What's he want?"

Felix crowded him into the small, fusty room Willie regarded as his home.

"Nothing to get excited about," Felix said, grimacing at the smell in the room. "It smells like a pig-sty in here."

"I can't smell anything," Willie said, stripping off his coat. He hung his gun holster over the back of a chair, then pulled off his shirt. He ran hot water into the toilet basin. "I'm not in trouble, am I?" He looked anxiously over his skinny shoulder at Felix.

"No. He only wants to know what happened at the villa when Lorelli delivered the letter."

Willie stiffened and the cake of soap slipped out of his hand. The old man was smart, he thought, as he bent to pick up the soap; nothing seemed to escape him.

Felix watching him, saw his start, saw the startled look on his rat-like face and suddenly felt an ice-cold chill creep up his spine.

"You saw Lorelli?" he said, making his voice sound casual.

"I saw and heard her," Willie said and tried unsuccessfully to conceal a leer. He splashed his face with water, and began to lather his prickly stubble.

"She didn't see you?"

"No." Willie hesitated. He was undecided whether to tell Felix what he had overheard. He didn't want to make an enemy of Felix. He would have to work with him long after Lorelli was forgotten, and Felix wouldn't be pleased if Willie told Alsconi the news without first telling him. It wasn't as if Felix could now stop him tilling the old man.

Alsconi was waiting for him, and that would be more than Felix dared do. And since the old man was waiting for him, Felix wouldn't dare get tough with him either. He decided to tell Felix. Two moments of sensation were better than one, he reasoned. In his position of safety he was tempted to see Felix's face when he heard his girl was selling him out. "If she had seen me," he said and leered, "she wouldn't be here now."

Felix's reaction was so quick Willie hadn't a chance to grab his gun. He found himself caught by his throat and slammed against the wall.

"What the hell do you mean?" Felix snarled, his face livid with rage and fear.

Willie caught hold of Felix's wrists and tried to lever his hands from his throat. His grotesque face covered with white lather turned purple as the steely fingers sank into his windpipe. Felix shook him, then slackened his grip.

"What do you mean?" he repeated.

Willie drew in a long, shuddering breath.

"Let go of me!" he gasped. "I'll tell the boss. Get away from me!"

Felix slapped his face very hard with his open hand. The lather flew in an explosion of wet whiteness and splashed the wall.

"Why shouldn't she be here?" he demanded. "Come on; spill it before I knock your teeth down your throat."

"She's double-crossed us," Willie panted, tears of pain starting from his eyes. "She's sold us out."

Felix lifted his clenched fist, then stopped. His face had turned the colour of snow.

"You lying rat!" he said viciously.

"I heard her," Willie gasped, trying to grind himself into the wall to get away from Felix. "She said she wanted to quit the organization. She wanted money. She said she would get Micklem out for two hundred and fifty grand."

Felix remembered what Lorelli had said: You and I have to get out of this racket before it's too late. Sooner or later the police are going to get on to us. We've got to get out!

The crazy little fool! She was committing suicide.

He stepped away from Willie.

"You heard her say that?"

Willie put his hand to his face and wiped off the lather.

"Yes. You've got no right to hit me..."

"Shut up!" Felix snapped. "Let's have it. Every scrap of it."

Willie told him how he had seen Lorelli enter the villa and how he had gone after her in case she ran into trouble.

"I did what you told me," he said, his voice snivelling. "There were three of them in the room: the guy who got away the other night, a fat old bloke they called Cherry and this girl Rigby. She said she would go to New York right away.

Then Lorelli said she was going to tell them something she wasn't supposed to tell them. She said Micklem would never be released and we were after all his dough. She said if they promised to pay her two hundred and fifty grand, she would get him out."

"Did they agree?" Felix asked.

"Of course they did, but it's my bet she'll never see the dough. She said she would work out a plan how to get him out.

She's going to see them again Thursday night. She's going to show them where the alarms are and tell them about the guards."

Felix leaned forward. There was sweat on his face.

"Listen, Willie, if you're lying, I'll kill you," he said in a low vicious voice.

Willie flinched and cringed back.

"I'm giving it to you straight'," he whined.

Felix took out his handkerchief and wiped his face.

"What are they going to do - tell the police?"

"No. Lorelli made them promise to keep the police out of it."

Felix moved away from Willie.

"You haven't told anyone about this?" he asked.

"No," Willie said.

"You didn't tell Jacopo?"

"Of course I didn't. It's not his business." Willie began to feel a little more sure of himself now that Felix seemed to have got over the shock. He picked up his safety razor and began to scrape the stubble off his chin. "The old man ought to be pleased when I tell him. I'm going to ask him for a raise. He ought to come across."

Felix scarcely heard him. This was the end of Lorelli, he thought. Alsconi would hand her over to Englemann. The thought turned him sick. He suddenly realized just how much Lorelli meant to him; the realization came as a shock.

This might be his end too. Alsconi might not believe he hadn't anything to do with it. He might even think he had put Lorelli up to asking for the money. Fie glanced over at Willie who was now washing his face. There was nothing he could offer Willie that would make him hold his tongue. He knew that. Willie was a rat, and he'd be mad to trust him.

He would take everything he was offered, and still go to Alsconi. If he was to save Lorelli, Willie had to be fixed, and he was suddenly determined to save her.

As Willie began to diy his face on a grubby towel, he said, "What do you think will happen to her? Think Englemann will work on her?"

Felix shrugged.

"I don't know," he said, forcing his voice to sound harsh, "and I don't care. She's asked for it and she'll get it."

Willie nodded.

"That's the way I figured it," he said. "It's nothing to do with me what happens to her. Think I could ask the old man for a bonus?" He opened a drawer and took out a clean shirt. "There's a car I saw in Florence the other week. If the old man shells out, I might be able to buy it."

"He'll give you something," Felix said and wandered over to where Willie's gun was hanging. He got between Willie and the gun. "Don't press him. If he doesn't offer you anything, I'll have a word with him."

Willie's face brightened.

"You will? That's fine. It's time I had a bit more money. I work hard enough for what I get."

Felix's hand went behind him, his fingers closed around the butt of Willie's gun and gently eased it out of the holster. He let the gun slip through his fingers until he was holding it by its barrel.

"You'd better hurry," he said. "The old man won't give you anything if you keep him waiting much longer."

Willie shook the shirt out of its folds and slipped into it.

"Yes," he said. "I've been too long already."

He turned to the mirror and began to comb his thin, greasy hair. He saw in the mirror Felix had moved forward. Their eyes met in the reflection of the mirror. The expression he saw on Felix's face suddenly turned him cold. He saw Felix's hand flash up. He opened his mouth to shout, but he knew he had left it too late. Then the butt of the gun smashed down on the top of his head and he fell limply forward, bouncing against the toilet basin. His dying body slid to the floor.



# Chapter XI

## THE TUNNEL

About ten minutes after Englemann had gone, Don unlocked the bracelet around his ankle and got to his feet. He knew he was taking a risk of being discovered, but he couldn't continue to sit and do nothing. He couldn't resist the temptation to explore.

He crossed the cave and stood at the mouth of the tunnel, peering into the darkness. Luck favoured him. His sharp eyes caught the glint of metal high up against the wall, and taking out his cigarette lighter, he thumbed the flame alight. In a bracket attached to the wall was clipped a long, chromium-plated flashlight; probably put there, he thought, in case of an electric power failure. The beam of the light, when he pressed down on the button, was powerful and told him the battery was comparatively new. He set off down the tunnel, passing the ramp on his left and continued on for some fifty yards before he came to a steel door that blocked any further progress. There was a rubber-covered button near the door, but although he pressed it several times, there was no response, and baffled, he stepped away from the door to examine it from head to foot in the light of his torch. It was set flush with the rock face, and when he pushed against it, it was immovable. He made his way back to the ramp, and climbing it, he reached the door he knew led into the corridor where Englemann's surgery was as well as the control room if what Lorelli had told him was correct. He pressed on the rubber-headed button he found by the door, heard a faint click and the door moved inwards. He peered into the brightly lit corridor. It was a temptation to go forward, but he resisted it. At least he knew he could get to the control room when he wanted to, but this wasn't the time. He would wait until Lorelli contacted him that night. He took hold of the steel rail on the door and pulled the door shut, then he went down the ramp to the tunnel again.

Having nothing better to do, he began a careful examination of the walls of the tunnel and he quickly made a discovery.

Let into the stone wall at eye level and roughly about twenty feet apart were a number of small steel plates with small knobs in the centre of them. He took hold of one of the knobs and found the plate slid back, making a peep-hole that looked directly into a room equipped as an office. There was no one in the room, and Don closed the plate. He went along to the next plate and moved that aside. He found himself looking into Lorelli's bedroom.

Lorelli was seated at her desk. She was engrossed with pencil and paper, and Don guessed she was preparing a plan of the underground fortress which she had promised him.

He was about to call to her, when he heard a sound from the door. Lorelli started, dropped her pencil, grabbed up the sheet of paper she had been drawing on and pushed it into the top drawer of the desk.

The door rattled impatiently and Felix called, "Open up. I want to talk to you."

"I'm coming," Lorelli said. She hurriedly undid the buttons of her dress and mussed up her hair, then

she ran over to the door and unlocked it. "I was changing."

"Since when do you lock the door when you're changing?" Felix asked, coming in and closing the door.

"I just turned the key without thinking." She moved over to the dressing table, sat down and began to brush her hair.

"What is it?"

Felix sat on the bed. He lit a cigarette and blew a thin stream of smoke towards the ceiling.

"Alsconi was asking what happened at the villa," he said.

The hairbrush she was using nearly slipped out of Lorelli's hand. She put it down and picked up a comb.

"He seemed to think it went off too easily," Felix went on. "I told him you had no trouble: that's right, isn't it?"

"Of course," Lorelli said curtly. "I told you what happened. You don't want me to go over it again, do you?"

"So it's definite the money will be paid into the Banca de Roma in four or five days?"

"Yes; anyway that's what Micklem's secretary said." Lorelli finished combing her hair. She reached for her handbag, opened it and took out her cigarette case. She lit a cigarette.

Felix saw her .25 automatic in the bag.

"That's fine," he said and got to his feet. "The old man's still a little doubtful about you, but I told him how well you carried this job out. I'm pleased with you." He came over to the dressing table. "I think I'll give you a new handbag as a reward for your cleverness." He picked up the handbag, moving a shade faster than Lorelli, whose hand had darted out to snatch the bag out of his reach. "This one's getting shabby."

"Please put it down!" Lorelli exclaimed, her voice shrill.

Felix looked at her. She saw then how cold, white and set his face was.

"You sound jumpy." He turned the bag over. "I think one of those new lizard skin jobs would suit you." He opened the bag and took out the .25.

Lorelli sat very still, staring up at him, her eyes wide open.

"You're spoiling the shape of the bag, carrying this in it," Felix went on. He put the bag on the dressing table, holding the gun in his right hand, the barrel pointing at Lorelli's feet.

She didn't say anything. She was rigid, her hands gripped between her knees.

"It's a nice little toy," Felix went on, turning the gun over. "At close quarters it could do a lot of damage." He slid out the clip, emptied the six bullets into his hand, removed the bullet from the breech, put the empty clip back and laid the gun down on the dressing table. "Safer unloaded, don't you think?" he went on and stood the seven bullets in a row by the gun.

Lorelli watched every movement, her heart beating so violently she had difficulty in breathing.

"Yes, I must see about a new handbag for you," Felix said and wandered back to the bed and sat down.

Lorelli felt sick with relief. For a horrible moment, she had wondered if Felix had guessed she was betraying him. The business with the gun shook her nerve. She picked up a nail buffer and began to polish her nails.

A long silence hung over the room. She looked out of the corners of her eyes at him. He was leaning back, his head against the wall, looking up at the ceiling. The expression on his face set her heart thumping again.

"I was worrying about you," he said suddenly. "It's a funny thing for me to worry about anyone, but I was about you."

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply. "What is there to worry about?"

"Odd, isn't it?" Felix said, ignoring her question. "You're the only woman I've really ever cared for. When I first met you, I had no idea I could get so fond of you. I sometimes wonder if you're as much in love with me as I am with you."

Are you?"

Lorelli touched her dry lips with the tip of her tongue. The expression on his face, the tension in the room and these odd words warned her something badly was wrong.

"Aren't you being sentimental?" she said huskily. "You can't measure love. How can I possibly know if I love you more than you love me?"

He stubbed out his cigarette.

"Yes, I guess that's right, but you do still love me, don't you?" "Yes, of course." He looked over at her.

"Felix! What is it? Why are you looking like that at me?" Lorelli cried. "What's the matter?"

"You know you said you wanted to go to Buenos Aires? I've been thinking about that. If we did decide to go, what would we do for money?"

Lorelli stared at him. "But you said you wouldn't go."

"I can change my mind, can't I? If I thought we could get hold of some money..." he broke off and shrugged. "It costs a lot to live in hiding. Then there are the fares. We would have to fly. That costs money."

Felix's face hardened.

"Just how much money have you?"

"A half a million lire. It would be enough to get us there and to keep us for a month until I found something to do."

Felix shook his head.

"It's not enough. Alsoni would hunt for us. We need much more than that to be safe. You wouldn't dare earn a living.

He has spies everywhere. You'd be spotted."

"It would be enough. Oh, Felix, please come with me." She leaned forward and beat her clenched fists on her knees.

"You must come with me!"

"Will you go alone if I don't come with you?" Felix asked, not looking at her.

There was a long pause. She hesitated, then controlling her agitation, she said, "No, I wouldn't leave you. Of course, I wouldn't, but you will come with me, won't you?"

Felix stood up.

"Well, at least I have the answer to my other question," he said. "Now I know just how much you love me."

"I - hope you do," Lorelli said.

He came over to her.

"So you didn't see Willie at the Trioni villa?" he said in a quiet, conversational tone.

For a moment, Lorelli didn't get the impact, then she felt as if a splinter of ice had been driven into her heart. She stared at Felix, her face blanching under her make-up, her eyes wide with terror.

"Willie?" she gasped. "Was he at the villa?"

"Of course," Felix said. "You don't imagine I'd let you go there without someone to take care of you in

case there was trouble, do you?"

"Oh!"

She jumped to her feet and looked wildly around the room as if looking for a means of escape.

"Willie has just got back," Felix said, watching her. "Alsconi is waiting for him. He wants Willie to confirm you had no trouble at the villa."

Lorelli backed away from his fixed, glaring stare.

"You mad little fool!" he went on, his voice suddenly out of control. "Do you imagine you can get away with this?" He went to her and crowded her against the wall. "Do you?" His hands closed over her shoulders, his fingers digging into her flesh. "Willie heard everything that was said."

Lorelli's knees buckled. If he hadn't held her, she would have fallen. He pulled her over to the bed and let her drop on it.

He stood over her, his fists clenched.

"You fool! So you planned to sell me out!" he went on furiously. "Two hundred and fifty grand! Do you think you'd ever have got your hands on the money?"

Lorelli shrank back.

"I had to do it! They'll pay the money. I know they will! It's our only chance to get away. The money is for both of us."

"Is it?" Felix laughed. "I gave you the chance to offer it to me and you didn't even mention it. So you wouldn't leave me? That's funny; when all the time you were planning to sneak away and lose yourself in Buenos Aires. Lose yourself?"

That's a laugh too. You're crazy to think you could get away. You wouldn't get as far as the boat. You wouldn't even get out of Siena!"

She struggled upright. Her face rigid with terror.

"You won't tell him? You won't give me away?" She scrambled off the bed and down on to her knees, catching hold of his hand. "You can't tell him, Felix! You said you loved me. You know what he would do to me! Felix! Don't do it!"

Don who was watching was shocked by her abject terror.

Felix jerked his hand out of her grip and moved away from her.

"He asked me if you would like to go to Buenos Aires. He's planning to start operations there. He thinks you should go."

Lorelli closed her eyes.

"Then he knows?"

"It's possible. It might be a coincidence, but at least it shows how crazy your idea is."

"We can find another place," she said feverishly. "There must be dozens of safe places..."

"Don't kid yourself," Felix said savagely. "You're going no place."

"If you tell him, I'll kill myself. I'll never let Englemann touch me."

"Very dramatic," Felix sneered. "Okay, go ahead and kill yourself. Do you think I care?"

She began to cry, resting her arm on the bed and her head on her arm.

Felix lit a cigarette. His hand was so shaky he had trouble holding the match steady.

"All right, all right, cut it out," he said. "I'm not telling him. I must be stark, raving mad to do this for you, but I won't tell him."

She looked up.

"You mean it?"

"I mean it. Now shut up snivelling!"

"But what about Willie?" She got off her knees and sat on the bed. "He knows! We can't trust him! He'll tell Alsoni."

Felix showed his teeth in a mirthless smile.

"I was wondering how long it'd take before the nickel dropped. I've fixed Willie."

"But you can't trust him..." Lorelli began, then seeing the expression on Felix's face, she stifled a scream.

"Willie will stay fixed." He came over to her. "We're both in this up to our necks. Alsoni's waiting now for Willie's report, and Willie's in my room with his head smashed in. You're full of bright ideas: how do we get out of this jam?"

"You've killed Willie?" Lorelli gasped, staring at him in horror.

"What else could I do? How much have you got in cash here?"

"I don't know - not much."

Felix snatched up her bag, opened it and emptied the contents on to the dressing table.

"Is that all - five thousand lire?"

"Yes."

"How much in the bank?"

"I've told you: a half a million lire."

"I have four million. That'll get us somewhere. We've got to get out and get out fast before Willie's found."

The sound of the telephone bell made him stiffen. They looked at each other.

"Answer it!" he said.

With an unsteady hand, Lorelli picked up the receiver.

"Is Mr Felix there?" Carlos asked. "The boss wants a word with him."

Lorelli looked across at Felix, sick terror in her eyes.

"Alsconi wants to speak to you," she said and held out the receiver.

Through the peephole, Don watched Felix's sweating face. This ten minutes of drama had held him rooted, but now his mind was already at work, wondering how this change of situation would affect him. If these two panicked and bolted, he would be cut off from Lorelli's help, and without her help he knew his chances of getting out of the cave were slight.

He watched Felix cross the room and take the receiver from Lorelli's shaking hand.

"I am waiting for Willie," Alsconi said softly in his ear. "Where is he?"

"I'm waiting for him too," Felix said. "Maybe he's had a breakdown. I'd better drive down and see what's happened to him."

"He hasn't had a breakdown," Alsconi said. "I sent Menotto to look for him and he tells me the car is at the bottom of the drive, but there's no sign of Willie."

"ГП come up," Felix said.

"That won't be necessary," Alsconi said. "You can stay where you are." He chuckled, a sound that made Felix stiffen.

"You'll probably have to anyway," and the line went dead.

Felix replaced the receiver. There was a look in his eyes that brought Lorelli to her feet.

"Wait here," he said curtly and went quickly out of the room.

Lorelli ran to the door and looked out into the corridor, then she turned and came back into the room. Watching her, Don saw terror was turning to hysteria. If they were to make a move, he had to do it now.

"Lorelli!" he said sharply.

Lorelli screamed and jerked around, her eyes wildly searching the room.

"I'm here," Don said, pushing the slot back as far as it would go. "It's Micklem."

She located the opening in the wall through which he was looking and she backed away.

"Pull yourself together," he said. "You want the money to get away. I have it. We must help each other. Give me the gun!"

"No!" Lorelli said. "I'm not going to help you. I'm getting out of here."

"How far do you think you'll get?" Don said. "Don't be a fool. Give me the gun. If you get in his way, he'll wipe you out as he wiped Willie out. You can't trust him. I can take care of you. Give me the gun!"

He was counting on her terror. The snap in his voice seemed to hypnotize her. She picked up the gun.

"And the cartridges - hurry!" he said.

She brought the gun and the cartridges over to the opening.

"Quick!" Don said as he saw her hesitate. "Give it to me before he gets back!"

She slid the gun through the opening, then she handed in the seven bullets.

"Don't lose your nerve," Don said. "I'll take care of you." She then seemed to realize what she had done; she had given him her only protection not only from Felix, but worse still, from Englemann.

"No! Give it to me back!" she cried. "I didn't mean to let you have it. I must have it back!" She made as if to thrust her hand

through the opening, but Don slid the plate across just as Felix came into the room.

Lorelli spun around. One look at Felix's white, sweating face sent her hands to her mouth.

"I can't open the door at the end of the passage," Felix said, the edge of panic in his voice. "The current seems to be cut off."

Lorelli shut her eyes and sagged against the wall. He went over to the telephone and lifted the receiver.



Carlos said, "Yes?"

His negroid voice was as thick and as smooth as black treacle.

"Something seems to have gone wrong with the door at the end of the passage," Felix said. He had to make a tremendous effort to keep his voice steady. "I can't open it."

"That's right, Mr Felix," Carlos said cheerfully. "Boss's orders. He told me to cut the current off."

Felix suddenly felt he wanted to be sick.

"Okay. I'll have a word with him," he said. "He can't know I'm down here."

"He knows all right." There was a jeering note in Carlos's voice. "He asked who was down here before he told me to cut off the current."

"Put me through to him!" Felix snarled.

"Right away, Mr Felix." Carlos pulled out the plug, then rang Alsconi's room.

"Yes?" Alsconi asked.

"Mr Felix wants you, boss."

"Does he? Tell him I'm busy," Alsconi said. "I'll talk to him tomorrow morning and not before."

"Yes, boss," Carlos said, his thick lips coming off his teeth in a delighted grin. He got back to Felix. "Sorry, Mr Felix, but the boss says he's busy. He'll talk to you tomorrow morning."

Felix slammed down the receiver. Sweat ran down his face as he turned to look at Lorelli.

"You clever little..." The word he used made Lorelli flinch. "We're trapped down here. Alsconi's on to us. He's cut the current off, and there's no way out. I hope you're pleased with yourself and your bright ideas."

Lorelli collapsed into a chair. She held her head between her hands.

Felix went out of the room at a run and into his room. He flung back the door and entered, not looking at Willie's body that lay half under the toilet basin. His .45 automatic lay on the top of his chest of drawers. He snatched it up, and as he was about to push it into the shoulder holster he wore under his coat, he paused. The weight of the gun in his hand told him it wasn't loaded, and yet he knew an hour or so ago, before he had killed Willie, he had checked the gun, making sure it was loaded.

With shaking hands, he pulled out the clip and found it empty. He turned swiftly, jerked open a drawer in the chest for the box of cartridges he always kept by him. It usually rested in the right-hand corner under a pile of shirts. When he moved the shirts, he saw the empty hollow where the box had been, but the box itself was no longer there.

He had used Willie's gun when he had hit him over the head. He had dropped the gun beside Willie's dead body. Now he looked for it, but couldn't see it. He kicked Willie's body aside, but the gun wasn't there.

He stood still, his heart pounding, his hands clenched at his sides. Someone - probably Carlos - had been in his room while he had been wasting time talking to Lorelli and had unloaded his gun, taken his slugs and also Willie's gun.

Well, at least he had Lorelli's gun, he thought. It was only a toy, but it was better than nothing. He could guess what would happen. When Alsconi was ready he would tell Carlos to move in and take him. Felix knew he wouldn't stand a chance against Carlos unless he had the .25 which would slow Carlos down if it didn't stop him.

He went back to Lorelli's room.

She was still holding her head in her hands. He scarcely looked at her. He went to the dressing table for the .25. He had left it there with the seven bullets arranged in a neat row beside it and he could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw it was no longer there.

"Where's your gun?" he said, his voice off-key.

Lorelli started and looked up.

"Where's the gun?" he repeated.

"Why? What do you...?"

She jumped to her feet when she saw his vicious expression.

"Where's the gun?" he snarled, moving towards her.

"Don't look like that at me!" She backed against the wall. "Keep away from me!"

Felix came up to her. He grabbed hold of the front of her dress with his left hand and pulled her against him.

"Where is it?"

"I gave it to Micklem."

"You-what!"

"He asked for it. I wasn't thinking. I - - He..."

"Micklem? Are you crazy? What are you yammering about?" Felix shook her. "I want the gun! Where is it?"

"There was an opening in the wall. Micklem was..."

She broke off and screamed as Felix's open hand struck her on the side of her face, jolting her head back.

"Where's the gun?" he shouted. "You little fool! Someone has unloaded my gun. Carlos can move in now and take us.

How do you think either of us can stop that black ape without a gun? Where is it? Do you hear? Where is it?"

Lorelli's eyes rolled back and she sagged against him in a faint.

Don had seen and listened to this scene. He now quietly closed the slot. He had the gun, and he was now on equal terms with anyone who tried to stop him. Lorelli would have to look after herself for the moment. He told himself he would do something about her later. He paused only long enough to load the gun, then he set off down the tunnel to the ramp, climbed it and when he reached the steel door, he pressed the rubber-headed button. The door moved inwards, and holding the .25 in his hand, the safety catch back and his finger on the trigger, he stepped into the lighted corridor.

He looked to right and left, then he shut the door, having first made sure he could open it by another rubber-headed button on the corridor side of the door.

Opposite to where he was standing was the door leading to the bathroom; the door further up led to Englemann's surgery. The door opposite must be the control room door. At the far end of the corridor was the steel door that led to Alsoni's room. Moving quickly and silently, Don made his way down the passage to this door, pressed on the rubber-headed button, but nothing happened. He tried once more, then gave up. He returned to the control-room door and paused to examine it. The door was of solid steel. There was no handle nor bolt to it. Don decided not to rush his fences.

He would make his bid to escape that night. It would be easier to get through the grounds under cover of darkness than now.

He looked down the corridor. There were three more doors to his left. Carlos would be in the control room. Englemann should be in his surgery. He went over to the door on the left-hand side of the bathroom, listened, then hearing nothing, he turned the handle and eased the door open. The room beyond was in darkness. He entered and closed the door.

Turning on his flashlight, he sent the beam around the small room which was furnished as a bedroom. He found the light switch and turned on the light. From the books in the bookcase that ran the length of one wall, he guessed this must be Englemann's bedroom.

The telephone on the bedside table caught his eye. He went over to it, and lifted the receiver. His face lit up with a delighted grin as he heard the dialling tone that told him he was connected to an outside line.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, the .25 in his left hand, he dialled the number of the Trioni villa.

The villa's bell had scarcely begun to ring when there was a click on the line and Harry's voice growled, "Ullo? Who's that?"

"Scarcely a respectful way to address your lord and master," Don said softly. "Can't you do better than that?"

He heard Harry gasp.

"Is that you, Mr Micklem?" he bawled.

"Sure, it's me," Don said, jerking the receiver away from his ear. "Pipe down: you nearly deafened me."

"Where are you, sir?" Harry said, slightly lowering his voice. "Blimey! We've been worried sick about you."

"I'm still underground, but I've managed to gain a little freedom, and I've been lucky to find a telephone, but I'm a long way from getting out."

"We're going to fix that, sir," Harry said excitedly. "It's all laid on for tonight. Giuseppe is coming with a bunch of his pals. That red-head's sold the gang out. Miss Rigby..."

"I know all about that, but it's come unstuck," Don broke in. "A character named Willie was listening to your plans.

He's given her away. At the moment she's trapped down here with me, the negro and another character called Felix."

"Oh!" Don could hear the excitement drain out of Harry's voice. "So what do we do?"

"You'll have to leave it to me to find my own way out," Don said. "How many men is Giuseppe bringing?"

"Six."

"Fine. Now listen, Harry, your job is to take care of the four guards and the dogs, so once I'm out of the house I'll have a clear run. The dogs will take a bit of handling. I'll leave it to you to work out how you're going to fix them. I don't think you have a hope of breaking in here. The doors are of three-inch steel and they're electrically controlled. I'll make my attempt to break out at half-past one tonight. Get your men outside the walls by then. Give me twenty minutes and then move in. I've got a gun. If you hear shooting, break into the house. If nothing happens by two-fifteen, you'll know I've come unstuck."

"If that happens," Harry said grimly, "we're coming in after you, even if we have to pull the joint apart, brick by brick."

"Don't kid yourself, Harry, it'll be a bigger job than you think. The entrance to where I am now is in the big front room with the casement windows leading to the terrace. The door is on the left-hand side as you enter the casement windows.

It wants finding. The police missed it."

"We'll find it," Harry said. "I told Giuseppe to bring some dynamite with him. We'll get to you somehow."

"Give me a chance to get to you first. If I don't show up by two-fifteen, the ball is in your court. I'd better get under cover now, Harry."

"Okay, sir, and good luck," Harry said. "We'll be right with you."

Don replaced the receiver. He got to his feet and crossed to the door.

Englemann said from behind him: "Don't move, Mr Mickle, or I'll have to shoot you."

Don stood motionless.

"Drop that gun," Englemann went on.

Don let the gun slide through his fingers. It fell on the carpet with a little thud. Then slowly, he looked over his shoulder. Part of the bookcase had swung inwards and Englemann stood in the lighted opening, a .38 in his hand.

# Chapter XII

## THE WATERTRAP

As Harry put down the receiver, Marian came hurrying into the lounge.

"That was Mr Micklem," Harry said and grinned when he saw Marian's face light up.

"I thought from the way you were shouting it must be," Marian said. "Is he all right, Harry? Where is he?"

"He's fine, miss, but he's still down there. He's managed to get hold of a gun, and he thinks he'll be able to break out. He says he's going to have a go at half-past one tonight." He looked at his watch. "It's just on six-thirty. Giuseppe should be here any moment now. We're to be in the grounds, ready to help him when he breaks out."

The sound of his excited voice brought Cherry into the room. He was told the news. Harry went on to give them a full account of his conversation with Don.

"If this man Willie was watching the villa," Marian said, "it's possible he or another of the gang is still watching us."

Harry thumped his forehead with his fist.

"You're right, miss. I should have thought of that. I'll see if I can spot anyone."

"Be careful, Harry," Marian said anxiously. "We'd better wait until Giuseppe comes..."

Harry grinned.

"Don't worry about me. If he's there, I'll find him before he finds me. We don't want him reporting back that we've got reinforcements."

Cherry said, "I'm coming with you."

"This isn't your line," Harry said patiently. "You stay here with Miss Rigby. I can handle this."

Cherry's fat face turned obstinate.

"I intend to walk down to the gates," he said. "He may try to make a bolt for it if he sees you. I shall be in the position to head him off."

"You'll probably be in the position to collect a thick ear," Harry said. "These blokes are tough. Better leave him to me."

"I shall have my sword stick," Cherry said. "I can more than look after myself."

He marched out before Harry could argue further, put on his black felt hat, picked up the walking-stick that concealed the thin-bladed sword and set off down the drive.

Harry shook his head.

"Obstinate old goat," he said, "but he's got lots of guts. I'll get off." He opened a drawer in the desk and took out Don's Beretta. "Here you are, miss, just in case Willie or his pals head this way. Shoot him in the leg if you spot him, but don't shut your eyes when you pull the trigger."

"I don't want it. You must have it, Harry."

"Not for me," Harry said. "I can get along all right with these," and he clenched his big knuckly fists, grinning.

Unaware what was in store for him, Jacopo sat in a thicket, seventy-five yards or so from the villa. The evening sun was comfortably warm, the apple he was eating was sweet and crisp, and he was contented in mind and body. Jacopo liked nothing better than to sit in the shade and relax. He was the least important member of the organization, and he was proud of it. He had no ambition, no thirst for money, women or cars as Willie had. All he wanted was a life of peace and to do as little work as possible. He was one of a dozen men Alsconi employed merely to shadow people. His job was to sit by the hour in cafes, hotel lobbies or in cars, waiting for one of Alsconi's victims to show himself. It was the job Jacopo was born to do, and apart from his ability to sit and do nothing for hours and not to raise suspicion, he had no other money-making talents.

He watched Cherry come out of the house and stride down the drive towards the gates and wondered casually where he was going. His instructions were to watch the villa. He was only to report to Felix if the police arrived. He imagined Cherry was going for an evening stroll. He wasn't given the chance of seeing Harry steal out of the villa for Harry left by the rear exit and melted into the shrubs like a ghost.

During the war, Harry had served in a Commando unit, and he hadn't forgotten his training. One of his specialities had been the knifing of German sentries. Many a time he and other members of his unit had been landed on the sand dunes of France. Harry had gone forward alone, moving soundlessly, until he had located the sentry. He had reached the unsuspecting man and had driven his knife into his neck and the sentry had died without knowing who had struck the blow.

Jacopo wouldn't have relaxed as he munched his apple if he had known that Harry was moving silently in his direction.

As it was, he flicked the core of the apple away and turned his thoughts to Willie. He wondered what information Willie had that he was so excited about. Jacopo wrinkled his nose in disgust. He had no time for Willie: all the man could think of was money, women and cars.

Jacopo's one interest in life was singing. He had a natural tenor voice, and if he hadn't been so

hopelessly lazy he might have become a second-rate tenor in some third-rate opera company. He hummed a snatch of *La donna i mobile* under his breath which was a mistake for Harry was within forty yards of him. Harry hadn't seen him, but his sharp ears caught the hummed tune and his blunt-featured, pugnacious face lit up with a grin.

Jacopo felt in his pocket for another apple. He wished now he had thought of bringing a bottle of wine along with him.

It would be another two hours before Menotto relieved him. Menotto was another of Alsoni's watchers. He and Jacopo got on well together. They were both lazy, both unambitious and both disliked violence. He found the apple, rubbed it on his sleeve and looked at it with a contented expression on his thin, swarthy face.

As he was about to bite into it, Harry who was by now within three yards of him seemed to Jacopo to rise out of the ground and drop on him.

Jacopo nearly died of fright as Harry's hands closed around his throat. He felt steel-like fingers that bruised his flesh tighten unbearably on each side of his neck. He had one brief, horrible moment as he realized he was being killed, then a red light flashed before his terrified eyes and he plunged down into darkness.

Harry got to his feet. Cupping his mouth with his hands, he bawled at the top of his voice, "Hey, Cherry!"

He then took from his pocket two lengths of cord he had purposely brought with him and set about tying Jacopo's wrists and ankles together.

Puffing and panting, Cherry came lumbering up the drive, the sword drawn and flashing in the sun.

Harry waved to him.

"I've got him all right," he said. "I didn't want you to get sunstroke standing out in the open."

Cherry snorted. He came and stood over the unconscious form of Jacopo and gave him a poke with his sword.

"Hey, steady on," Harry said. "That sticker's dangerous."

"I wish I'd caught him," Cherry said darkly. "I'd have given him something to remember me by."

Harry hoisted Jacopo up and slung him over his broad shoulder. "I bet you would, but I want this bird to talk. Come on.

Let's get back and bring him round. Maybe he'll be able to tell us how we can get in to Mr Micklem."

"If he doesn't, he'll be sorry," Cherry said, who was obviously thirsting for blood.



Harry marched off to the villa where Marian was standing on the steps watching for him. Her eyes grew wide when she saw the unconscious body hanging over his shoulder, and Cherry, his sword flashing in the dying rays of the sun, marching behind.

"I've got him," Harry said a little unnecessarily as he came up the veranda steps. He dumped Jacopo down on the boards. "A bucket of water might fit the bill, Cherry."

"I'll get it," Cherry said, and hurried off.

"Will he be all right, Harry?" Marian asked, looking down at Jacopo's slack, white face.

"Right as ninepence, miss," Harry said cheerfully. "I only just squeezed him a bit. Scared the life out of him, but no real damage done."

Cherry came back with a bucket of water and without waiting for instructions, emptied the bucket over Jacopo's head and shoulders.

Seconds later, spluttering and gasping, Jacopo was sitting up, his back resting against the veranda rail.

Harry knelt beside him.

"Listen, Joe," he said in a slow distinct tone, "can you understand English?"

Jacopo nodded, his eyes bulging.

"Right," Harry said. "I want to know how we can get to Mr Micklem. I have an idea you can tell me." He brought up his fist and touched Jacopo's nose with it. "You can either tell me willingly or I can force it out of you. That's up to you, but you'll tell me sooner or later, don't make any mistake about that."

Jacopo looked into the cold, grey eyes and what he saw there made him shudder.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know, signore" he said hurriedly.

"That's the boy," Harry said approvingly. He unfastened the cord around Jacopo's ankles and then caught hold of his sopping shirt front and hauled him to his feet. "Come on inside and tell me all about it." He led him into the lounge.

"Perhaps you'll take down what he's going to say, miss?" he went on to Marian as he shoved Jacopo on to a straightback chair. "I know where Mr Micklem is," he went on to Jacopo. "I've talked to him within the past half-hour on the telephone, so be careful what you say. The first lie you tell me I'll punch you in the right eye. Understand?"

Cringing back, Jacopo said he understood.

Alsconi was mixing himself a whisky and soda when Menotto came in through the casement

windows.

Alsconi paused, the ice tongs in his hand while he stared at Menotto.

"What do you want?" he asked softly. "I didn't call you."

Menotto's fat, swarthy face was pale, and sweat glistened on his forehead. His dark curls lay limp; his wide, dark eyes were frightened.

"They've got Jacopo," he stammered.

Alsconi selected a cube of ice and placed it in the glass.

"Who has got Jacopo?" he asked, moving to his chair. He sat down.

"The people at the villa. I went down there to take over. I saw one of them carry Jacopo into the house," Menotto said.

"About ten minutes later, two cars arrived. In them were six men, Italians. They didn't look as if they were from the police."

Alsconi drank half the whisky, then he put down the glass and scratched the side of his nose.

"I see," he said. "I see."

Menotto watched him fearfully as he stared blankly at the opposite wall.

Alsconi realized immediately that this was his end in Siena. He realized too that he had made a final mistake in sending Jacopo to watch the villa. Willie would never have been caught; he had been a professional. Jacopo was nothing better than an amateur and he would talk. He knew too much. He knew where Micklem was. He knew of Alsconi's activities.

He was the proof the police wanted: yes, a fatal mistake.

Alsconi looked at Menotto.

"You and I will leave here in half an hour," he said. "Bring the car to the side entrance. You will find in my office five wooden boxes. Put them in the car. There is a handbag in my bedroom, ready packed, put that in the car too. Pack a bag for yourself. We shall not be coming back."

"Yes, signore" Menotto said and went quickly from the room.

Alsconi got to his feet and carrying his half-empty glass to the liquor cabinet, he poured more whisky into the glass.

He had made preparations for this situation more than a year ago. He had rented a villa in Palermo, and in the villa he had installed a strong-room that now held the bulk of his fortune. He would fly

down there that night. His yacht was ready in the harbour. The money would be transferred to the yacht and he would sail for some out-of-the-way port in North Africa. It was as simple as that. Then he remembered Crantor, and he frowned. Grantor was bringing with him fifteen thousand pounds sterling in five-pound notes, and Alsconi was short of English currency.

Crantor was coming by air-taxi. He would take off from a field near Rye where no prying customs official would inquire into the luggage he was carrying. He would land on a disused American Air Force landing strip forty miles from Siena.

Alsconi decided he would have to meet the aircraft. He was certainly not going to make a present of fifteen thousand pounds to Crantor. The obvious thing to do was to take the air-taxi and land somewhere in Palermo under the cover of darkness. But the air-taxi presented difficulties. There was room for only one passenger. Crantor would have to take Alsconi's car and drive to Palermo. Menotto? Alsconi shook his head. He couldn't trust Menotto out of his sight. It was a pity for Menotto was a first-class cook, but he

would have to be wiped out. It would be fatal to let him fall into the hands of the police.

It would also be fatal to let Englemann and Carlos be caught by the police. Englemann would talk. Alsconi scratched the side of his nose. He was fond of Carlos, and yet the huge negro was too conspicuous. He couldn't keep him with him any longer. Carlos would be instantly recognized wherever he was, and his recognition would lead the police to Alsconi. No, Carlos would have to go too.

Alsconi prided himself on being able to make quick and ruthless decisions. Felix and Lorelli must be wiped out.

Englemann and Carlos must go with them. Micklem, of course, must also die. It was convenient that the five of them were underground. They could be wiped out without difficulty.

He left the room. Moving quickly for a man of his bulk, he made his way to the boiler-room at the rear of the house. In the boiler-room were the fuse boxes that controlled the whole of the elaborate electrical system of the underground quarters. He snapped down the four switches that would put the control room out of operation, then he returned to the lounge. He went to the casement windows and looked out.

Menotto was loading the Cadillac with the five wooden boxes he had taken from Alsconi's office.

Alsconi walked over to his desk and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Yes, boss?" Carlos said instantly.

"Connect me with Felix," Alsconi said. "He's with Miss Lorelli I believe. When I have talked to him, I want to talk to you."

"Yes, boss," Carlos said. "Hold on a moment."

It took a few seconds before Felix's voice came on the line.

"Ah, Felix," Alsconi said. "I had planned to talk to you tomorrow, but events appear to be moving faster than I had anticipated."

Felix said in a hard, loud voice, "What's the idea? Carlos says the current has been cut off on your orders. I want to talk to you. I have something to tell you."

"Nothing you have to tell me would interest me now," Alsconi said. "I have very little time. I am about to leave here for good. Jacopo has been stupid enough to get himself caught. I don't have to tell you what that will mean: You will not be coming with me. Since in the past your services have been satisfactory, I will waste a few moments to tell you why you will remain where you are. In your room and in Lorelli's room are hidden microphones: they are connected to tape recorders. Every now and then I check on your conversations. Lorelli's treachery and your attitude to her made interesting listening. Had you dealt with her as ruthlessly as you dealt with Willie, you wouldn't be in the position you are in now. But there it is. I warned you I should hold you responsible for her. You must now pay for your lapse. You have had a good run for your money. I am about to open the vents that will drain the lake into your quarters. People who act like rats must expect to die like rats." He replaced the receiver as Felix began to shout wildly at him.

Menotto came in.

"The car is ready, sir," he said.

"Ah, yes," Alsconi said.

There seemed no point in taking Menotto with him now. It would be easier to get rid of him here than out in the open.

"Move a little to your right, Menotto," he said.

"To the right, signore" Menotto asked blankly.

"Yes: you know your right from your left, don't you?"

"Yes, signore" Menotto said and moved a few steps to his right so that he was now in direct line with the hidden gun in the desk.

"Thank you," Alsconi said. "That will do perfectly."

His long, immaculately manicured finger rested for a brief moment on the ivory button on his desk, then smiling at the puzzled-faced Menotto, he pressed on the button.

Felix flung down the telephone receiver. His handsome face was chalk-white and there was naked panic in his eyes.

"He's wiping us out!" he said hoarsely. "He's letting the water in. He's going to drown us!"

Lorelli screamed. She darted to the door, flung it open and ran out into the corridor. Felix followed her. While she began to pound on the steel door at the end of the corridor with her fists, Felix ran the other way to the end room that was used as a store-room. He found there a four-foot crowbar which he grabbed up and running back along the corridor he shoved Lorelli out of his way and began to pound on the steel door with the butt of the bar. "Look!" Lorelli cried.

"It's coming in now!" Felix paused to look over his shoulder. Through a six-inch vent on either side of the corridor came a trickle of water.

Cursing, Felix renewed his onslaught on the door. The clanging noise he made was heard by Carlos who had come out of the control room, his great black eyes rolling, and was standing undecided, looking up and down the corridor for a way of escape. The noise was also heard by Don and Englemann as they faced each other and Englemann's lined face tightened at the sound.

"Someone appears to be knocking," Don said mildly. "Don't let me stop you if you want to see who it is." Englemann said, "Sit down in that chair." Don moved over to the chair indicated and sat down. He watched Englemann circle around him until he reached the door that led into the corridor. Then he saw water in the far corner of the room, seeping across the floor.

"Does that mean anything to you, doctor?" he asked and pointed to the rapidly increasing puddle of water.

Englemann stared, his face turning yellow, then he threw open the door and stepped into the corridor.

Don slid from his chair, picked up the .25 and holding it down by his side, he moved into the corridor. Out there, there was an inch of water on the floor. Englemann leaned against the wall, his face ghastly. Carlos was fumbling at the bolts of the door at the end of the corridor. Don took all this in with one quick glance, then he stepped back into Englemann's bedroom and closed the door. Water was coming in rapidly through the two vents in the wall and it now covered the whole surface of the floor. Don splashed across to the telephone, lifted the receiver and heard with relief the dialling tone. He dialled the number of the Trioni villa.

"Marian?" he said when he heard Marian's voice on the line. "Has Giuseppe arrived yet?"

The urgent note in his voice warned her not to waste time asking questions. "Yes, with five others."

"Tell Harry to come up here right away," Don went on. "Tell him to cancel all other arrangements we made. There are five of us down here and water's coming in fast. If we're not out quickly, we're not going to get out."

"I'll tell him."

Don heard the note of alarm in her voice.

"Keep the line open," he said. "I may be back. I want to find out what's happening."

"Yes," Marian said.

He laid down the receiver. The water was now above his ankles and rising fast. He crossed the room and looked out into the corridor.

Carlos had opened the steel door. Felix and Lorelli had come through into his section of the corridor and so had the water. It was up to their knees and rising fast.

"Get that door shut!" Don exclaimed and waded out into the corridor. "Here, you! Give me a hand with it."

The four of them stared at him blankly. Then Carlos went with him to the door he had just opened and together they tried to force the door shut against the inrush of water. It was only when Felix joined them that their combined efforts succeeded. When they had shut and bolted the door, the rise of water slackened a little.

"What's happening?" Don demanded. "We're all in this work together. Where's the water coming from?"

"It's tapped in from the lake," Felix said. "There's no way of stopping it now the valves are open."

"My men are on their way here now," Don said. "They'll be here in ten minutes."

"They won't get to us," Felix said. "If they turn on the current now to open the doors, the whole place will be electrified and we'll be cooked."

"They'll get to us all right," Don said.

The water was rising fast now. It was nearly up to his waist. He reached out and caught hold of Lorelli who was having trouble keeping upright.

"Can we get to the stairs that lead to Alsconi's room?" he asked Carlos.

The big negro, his face grey, his eyes rolling, nodded. "Well, come on then," Don said impatiently. "That's the way they'll break in, and up there we'll be out of the water."

Pushing Lorelli ahead of him, he struggled down the passage to the steel door that shut off the stairs. Carlos and Felix followed him, but Englemann remained, leaning against the wall, as if stunned by fear.

"You'd better bring your pal along," Don said to Felix as he tried to open the door.

"To hell with him," Felix snarled.

"Give me a hand with this," Don said to Carlos, but although they both put forth their utmost strength, the weight of water against the door held it fast. "Let's have the crowbar." Felix handed it to him.

While Carlos strained on the door, Don managed to get the claws of the crowbar between the door and the post. Felix joined him and they levered the door back. As the water flowed past him into the

short passage to the stairs, the strain against the door lessened, and they managed to force it right back.

Carlos and Felix made a dive for the stairs as a sudden rush of water came down the corridor, lifting Lorelli off her feet.

She screamed. Don, nearly knocked off his feet, made a grab at her and missed. He saw her go under and then reappear further down the corridor.

Englemann had been knocked down by the rush of water. He came spluttering to the surface. The water was now only three feet from the ceiling of the passage, and was rising fast.

Don went into a racing dive towards Lorelli. He had to swim past Englemann whose groping hands caught hold of Don's coat and dragged him down.

Don closed with him. For a long moment Englemann fought desperately, his hands clutching at Don's throat. Then Don broke his hold and threw him off and turning, went after Lorelli. He reached her side as Englemann came to the surface, his face livid with fear. Lorelli screamed as Englemann clutched hold of her. Don hit him in the face, pulled Lorelli clear of him and shouted to her, "Don't struggle. Let me handle you."

By now they were only a few inches from the ceiling.

"Catch hold of my coat," he went on, and swam with quick, powerful strokes to the open doorway, towing her behind him. He got her through the doorway, then turning, he pushed her ahead of him until they reached the bottom of the stairs. He hesitated, wondering if he should go back for Englemann, then seeing the water had already reached the ceiling of the corridor, decided against it. He got Lorelli on to the steps while the water swirled around them, then half-carrying her, half-pushing her, he got her up the steps to the small landing above where Carlos and Felix were.

Felix was examining the steel door.

"We're not going to get this damn thing open," he said. "It fits too tight."

Don joined him. One look at the door showed him Felix was right.

"Only if the electric current's on, and if it's turned on now, we'll probably be electrocuted."

"We'll take it in turns to signal," Don said. "We've got to let my chaps know where we are."

He picked up the crowbar and began tapping on the door.

Then suddenly the lights went out and they were left in black, suffocating darkness.

"It's a wonder that didn't happen before," Don said. "The last of the fuses must have blown."

He continued his tapping.

"The water's rising," Lorelli said suddenly. "It's round my feet."

Carlos crowded up on to the top step, pushing Felix back.

"Get out of my way," he snarled.

Felix, suddenly knee-deep in water, panicked. He grabbed hold of Carlos and tried to get back to his original position.

Don heard Carlos grunt, then there was the sound of a heavy blow and a groan, followed by a splash.

Lorelli screamed again.

Don reached out into the darkness with groping fingers. He touched Carlos's sleeve. Snarling in panic, the great negro turned on him, his hands grabbing Don's coat front. He swept Don off his feet. Don hooked his leg around Carlos's thigh and caught hold of his neck with both hands. Carlos hit him a sledgehammer blow in the body. Don's fingers slid down the great throat until they reached the artery, then he squeezed with all the strength in his hands. He got another punch that sickened him, then Carlos lost his balance, and together they fell off the steps and rolled into the water.

Under the cold, suffocating water, Don felt himself bumping down the steps into the submerged corridor. Carlos's grip slackened. Don made a tremendous effort, and threw the negro off, then he fought his way to the surface, reached one of the steps that was just clear of the water, and as he got one knee on it, he felt Carlos's fingers close around his ankle.

He kicked back, but his foot missed Carlos and he was jerked into the water again. He had just time to draw in a deep breath before he sank. He groped around in the water for Carlos, but couldn't find him, then he broke surface.

The light on the landing suddenly glimmered, making a tiny orange glow.

In the dim light he saw Carlos was standing on the lower step, his great lips drawn back, his white teeth gleaming.

Don swam towards him and as he reached for the step, Carlos kicked out at him, his boot narrowly missing Don's face as Don threw himself sideways. He looked beyond Carlos to where Lorelli stood at the head of the steps, watching. He knew in a few minutes the rising water would bring him within reach of the huge boot. Unless Lorelli did something, he had the choice of drowning or having his head kicked in.

Lorelli acted. Picking up the crowbar, she crept down the steps until she was within range, and then swinging the iron bar above her head, she aimed a vicious blow at Carlos.

The negro half-turned, threw up his arm, but was a fraction late. The bar caught him on the top of his head and he fell slackly forward, sliding into the water.

Don made a grab at him, caught his coat, but his weight was too much for Don's failing strength. As he



began to sink himself, he let go of Carlos and kicking out feebly, swam to where Lorelli, up to her waist in water, was holding out her hand to him. She pulled him, gasping, on to a submerged step. He heaved himself further out of the water. Then as he stood upright, he heard a faint shout that came through the steel door at the head of the stairs.

Catching Lorelli by her hand, Don staggered up the steps, as the shout came again.

# Chapter XIII

## THE LAST LAUGH

Water was above his knees as Don, his arm around Lorelli, reached the top step. They leaned against the steel door.

"Is that you, Harry?" Don shouted.

"It's me all right, sir," Harry shouted back. "I'm trying to get the door open. Can I use dynamite?"

"No!" Don shouted. "We're right by the door and we can't get away from it. The water's up to us and rising fast."

"Okay, I'll fix it somehow," Harry said. "Can you hang on for five minutes?"

"It'll have to be faster than that," Don said as a sudden surge of water nearly had him off his feet.

"I'll fix it," Harry said.

Lorelli clung to Don.

"They won't do it," she said. "They can't do it."

"I've never known Harry to be beaten yet," Don said, trying to sound more cheerful than he felt. He couldn't see how Harry could get them out in time. "Hold on to me and take it easy." The water had risen to Lorelli's shoulders. In the dim light, her face was drawn and white.

They waited as the minutes dragged by, the water rising inch by inch.

"You still there, sir?" Harry's voice demanded suddenly.

"Yes. What's happening?"

"I've sent three of Giuseppe's men down to the lake. They're going to blast the pipe that's taking the water in to you. They'll be as quick as they can."

"Fine," Don said. "Well done, Harry."

"I'll be back," Harry said. "It won't be long now."

Don held Lorelli above the water which was up to his shoulders.

"Keep your arms and legs moving," he said to her. "We've still got about three feet of head room. They'll fix it before it reaches the top."

By now he was swimming himself, holding on to her with one hand.

The water continued to rise, although its speed had slackened slightly. Don reached up and touched the ceiling. In another three or four minutes, the water would be over their heads.

"Turn on your back, and get your head as far into the water as you can." He supported her as she floated. "Scared?"

"Not as much as I was. Are you?"

"I guess so, but it doesn't help, does it?"

"Felix is dead, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's dead. Don't think about any of them."

"And I'm not even sorry. I feel as if he never existed."

The dim orange light flared up suddenly, lighting up the uneven surface of the rock six inches from their upturned faces, then it went out, leaving them in darkness.

"Well, Alsconi has the last laugh," Lorelli said. Her voice was steady. "What a fool I was to think I could break away from him. Would it be better just to let go and sink?"

"That's a rotten idea," Don said. "We're going to get out of this. It's like the movies. They're always rescued in the nick of time."

"They're leaving it a little late. I'm horribly cold." Don had an idea that they hadn't more than a few seconds left. He reached up for the ceiling expecting to find it within a few inches of him, but his groping fingers encountered space.

With a sudden surge of hope, he stretched higher and just managed to touch the ceiling.

"I think they've done it," he said. "The water's dropped at least a foot."

"Are you just saying that?"

"Reach up and see for yourself."

"Yes. I can't feel anything."

Don dropped his legs and his feet found a step.

"They have done it!" he exclaimed. "We can stand! I told you, didn't I? The water's going down!"

Lorelli sank down beside him. She leaned against him and began to cry.

Harry's voice bawled, "Are you still all right? We've diverted the water; now we're going to tackle

the door."

"We're okay, Harry," Don shouted back. "How are you going to get the door open?"

"I've found the switchboard. I'll turn the juice on."

"Wait a few minutes," Don said. "Let's get clear of the water first."

"Okay, sir; just give the word when you're ready."

By now the water had sunk to Don's knees and he could feel it rapidly receding.

"We'll be out in five minutes," he said to Lorelli.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked, drawing away from him. "Are you going to hand me over to the police?"

"I'm not going to do anything with you," he said. "It's what you are going to do with yourself, that'll be your problem.

As far as I'm concerned, you died down here with the rest of them, and I like to think that's exactly what you did do.

You'll have a few hours' start, but you must know sooner or later the police., will catch up with you."

She didn't say anything for a long moment, then, "Yes; perhaps Felix is better off after all."

By now they were standing on the top step free of water.

"I'm going to tell him to open the door now," Don said.

"Alsconi owns the Bazzoni villa in Palermo," Lorelli said. "As he tried to drown me like a rat, I may as well continue to act like one. He has a fast yacht in the harbour. It's called the Nettuno."

"My men may have got him."

"He's not so easily caught. I hope you won't let him get away. Before they open the door I want to thank you for what you've done for me. I should be dead now if it hadn't been for you. Felix didn't help me."

"We're quits. If it hadn't been for you, Carlos would have finished me." Raising his voice, he shouted, "Okay, Harry, see what you can do now."

Two minutes later, the steel door swung open.

An hour later, and back at the Trioni villa, Don was speaking to Rossi, captain of police at Rome headquarters, over the telephone.

Out on the veranda Cherry was administering to the needs of Giuseppe and his men, while Harry leaned against the veranda rail and listened to what Don was saying.

Upstairs, Marian was looking after Lorelli, providing her with a change of clothing.

Don was saying, "No doubt at all. I have a witness for you that no jury will shake. Alsconi is making for Bazzoni villa in Palermo. You'll have to move quickly if you're going to catch him. He has a couple of hours' start. He has a fast yacht in the harbour: it's called Nettuno."

Rossi said, "Give me your number. I'll call you back."

Don gave him the number and hung up. He got to his feet as Marian and Lorelli came into the lounge. Lorelli was wearing one of Marian's black frocks. Her red-gold hair was packed up out of sight under a close-fitting hat. She looked pale and uneasy.

Marian left them together and went out on to the veranda.

Don said, "Well, what are your plans?"

Lorelli shrugged.

"What can my plans be? I have no money." She took a cigarette from the box on the table and lit it. "I won't get far."

"I'll let you have some money," Don said. "The best thing I can do for you is to take you to Florence tonight. The police in Siena will be looking for you. You'll stand a better chance in Florence. Anyway, I won't be able to get the money for you until the bank opens. I can cash a cheque in Florence."

She stared at him.

"You'll do this for me?"

"I said I'd give you a chance. It's not much of a chance, but it's up to you how you use it. I'll give you a million lire, and I'll take you to Florence. The rest is up to you."

"If the police caught me with you, you'd get into trouble."

"That's my funeral'," Don said shortly. "Are you ready to leave now?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

"Wait here for a moment." He went out on to the veranda. "I want the car," he said to Harry. "Okay for gas?"

"She's full up, sir," Harry said and went off down the steps to the garage.

Don drew Marian aside.

"I'm taking her to Florence right away," he said. "If Rossi calls back, tell him I've gone to bed and I'm not to be disturbed. I'll be back around midday."

"You're going to help her get away?" Marian asked. "Is it wise, Don? The police want her."

"I know. It's one of those things. If it hadn't been for her, that negro would have fixed me. I owe her something. I can't just wash my hands of her."

"You'll take Hairy?"

"No. There's no point in getting him in a jam<sup>3</sup> if we're stopped."

Harry drove the Bentley to the bottom of the veranda steps. He got out and looked inquiringly up at Don.

"Ready when you are, sir."

"I wish you would take him," Marian said.

Don shook his head, walked back into the lounge and beckoned to Lorelli.

"Let's go," he said.

She followed him down the steps, not looking at the group on the veranda who watched her silently.

Harry said, "Will you drive or shall I, sir?"

"You're not coming," Don said as he opened the off-side door for Lorelli. He came around and slid under the driving wheel. "And don't argue, Harry," he went on as he saw the obstinate look cross Harry's face. "I'll be back around midday tomorrow. Keep an eye on Jacopo."

He let in the clutch before Harry had time to remonstrate which obviously he was about to do, and sent the car down the drive.

"Have you told the police about Alsconi?" Lorelli asked as they headed along the road towards Poggibonsi.

"Yes," Don returned. "There'll be a reception committee waiting for him at Palermo. He won't get away this time."

"I think he must be meeting someone. I can't understand why he killed Menotto. He hasn't driven a car for years.

Menotto always drove him. I am sure he would never plan to drive to Palermo himself. He must be relying on someone to take him."

"Don't worry your brains about him," Don said. "The police will take care of him. Jacopo didn't know about the Bazzoni villa, did he?" "No: only Felix and I."

"That's the point. He's sure you are dead. He'll think the Bazzoni villa is still safe. He'll walk right into the trap."

"I'll believe that when he is caught," Lorelli said. "He is very clever. If he does escape, you will have to be careful. I'm warning you. It is through you he is in trouble now. He won't forget. If he escapes, he won't rest until he has levelled scores."

"He won't escape," Don said, then abruptly, "Who killed Shapiro?" She looked at him.

"That's for the London police to find out if they can," she said indifferently. "Why should you care who killed him?"

Before Don could reply he saw the reflection of powerful headlights coming towards him. The road they were climbing was sinuous. He couldn't see the car, but the approaching headlights told him it was coming fast.

"This fella's in a hurry," he said and pulled well in to his right, dipping his headlights.

Then the car was upon them; well on the wrong side of the road and travelling at over fifty miles an hour, which was much too fast for such a road, it came at them with its headlights full on.

Don was completely blinded by the glare of the other car's lights. He rammed his foot down hard on the brake. He heard the squealing of tortured tyres as the other car also braked, then he felt a violent blow against the side of his car which skidded sideways, then under the pressure of the brakes, came to a stop.

Swearing under his breath, for he loved his car, Don flung open the car door and jumped out.

The other car had slewed around right across the road, its rear wheels inches from the overhang that went down into the valley of olive trees.

A man in a trench coat and slouch hat had got out of the car, leaving another man sitting in the off-side seat. He went to the front of the car to examine the damage. He took no notice of Don as he came up.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?" Don said in Italian. "You were over on the wrong side of the road."

The man in the trench coat threw the beam of a small flashlight on to the front wheel. The fender had been crushed down on the tyre, bursting it and ripping a large hole in the cover.

"We are in a hurry," he said in English. "Is your car badly damaged?"

"I don't give a damn if you are in a hurry," Don said, exasperated. "You have no business to drive like that on this road."

"I asked if your car..." the man in the trench coat began when his companion got out of the car and came into the circle of light made by the flashlight.

"I seem to recognize your voice," he said and lifted the .45 he held in his hand so the barrel pointed at Don. "Surely it is Mr Micklem?"

The man in the trench coat turned the beam of the flashlight on Don's face.

"So we meet again," Alsconi said. "You appear a difficult man to get rid of. Stay where you are." The gun moved threateningly. To Crantor he went on, "See if there is anyone with him in the car."

Crantor walked over to the Bentley. Lorelli saw him coming, opened the car door and slid out. The gun in Crantor's hand brought her to an abrupt stop.

She stifled a scream as she recognized him.

It was only when Alsconi went down to where Menotto had left the car that he had sudden doubts whether he could drive the big Cadillac, and he had immediate regrets that he had wiped Menotto out without considering that he was depriving himself of the services of a chauffeur.

He hadn't handled a car for five or six years, and even then he had been a poor driver.

Crantor was due to land at midnight. It was essential to be there when he arrived. Alsconi had less than an hour and a half to reach the airstrip. Ahead of him lay forty miles of difficult driving.

He got into the car, and spent three or four exasperating minutes trying to find out how the headlights operated. Having finally turned them on and then turned on the ignition, he started the engine. He was thankful for the automatic gear box; at least he wouldn't have to cope with a clutch or a gear change. He drove down the drive to the gates, and he found that fifteen miles an hour was as fast as he could drive without having difficulty in keeping the car to the narrow tarmac. The guard at the lodge opened the gates for him and stared curiously at him as he edged the car through the gateway. Alsconi was far too busy getting the big car on to the road to notice the curious stare. With more space to manoeuvre, he increased his speed, but he found twenty-five miles an hour was all he could safely drive at.

The hill road with its sharp bends bothered him, and he was sweating freely and cursing himself for getting rid of Menotto by the time he got to the crest. The clock on the dashboard warned him he was well behind time. It was essential that he should reach the airstrip before the aircraft landed. The aircraft would take off immediately Crantor disembarked, and Alsconi wanted to be on it when it did take off. He knew his best chance of escape was to fly to Palermo and get aboard his yacht before the police were alerted. He edged the speed of the car up to thirty-five miles an hour and almost ran off the road. If he hadn't slammed on the brakes, he would have gone over the overhang.

Cursing under his breath, he continued up the road at a greatly reduced speed.

An hour later, still crawling at twenty miles an hour, he reached the broad, straight road that led to the narrow road to the airstrip, and he pushed the speed of the car up to thirty-five miles an hour.



Wrestling with the wheel, he managed to maintain this speed until he reached the right hand turn which would bring him after a mile drive to the airstrip.

As he drove down the narrow, bumpy road, he saw, in the distance, the flares were alight, and he heard the roar of the aircraft's engine. He pushed down the accelerator, nearly swerving on to the grass. Then he saw the lights of the aircraft and he cursed. The aircraft was taking off, and as he drove on to the landing ground, the lights of the aircraft went out and the machine disappeared into the darkness.

He pulled up, sweating and furious. Now he had the long run down to Villa San Giovanni ahead of him. It would mean the loss of at least twenty-four hours before he could board the Nettuno. It was infuriating, but not a disaster. Felix and Lorelli were the only two who knew about the yacht, and they were dead by now. But he would have to be careful.

Although the police would have no idea which way he would be heading, they would be on the lookout for him.

Crantor, carrying a large suitcase, came out of the shadows and approached the car.

"Signor Alsconi?" he asked softly.

"Don't mention my name, you fool!" Alsconi snarled. "Have you the money?"

"Yes." Crantor paused by the car, trying to see Alsconi's face. This was a big moment for him.

"We're going to Palermo," Alsconi said. "I'll tell you the way as we go. You drive." He moved his bulk across the bench seat.

"Palermo?" Crantor said, startled. He opened the car door and slid under the steering wheel. "That's in Sicily, isn't it?"

"Where else, fool, could it be?" Alsconi snapped. "I wish to get there quickly. Will you stop making obvious remarks and get me there as quickly as you can?"

Crantor flushed. His own vicious temper stirred. He started the engine and drove down the bumpy road at a speed that made Alsconi's small eyes widen.

"Turn left at the bottom of this road," he said. "Then straight on."

He huddled down in the comfortably padded seat and stared bleakly through the windshield as the car swayed and banged down the road and swung on to the main road with a squeal of tortured tyres.

Crantor felt the car's great surge of power. He liked to drive fast, and he sent the car roaring down the road with the speedometer needle touching 98 miles an hour.

What did this mean? he asked himself. Why Palermo? What was inside the wooden boxes that were stacked on the back seat? Why this urgency to get to Sicily? Had something gone wrong? Was Alsconi

pulling out?

He glanced at the fat, huddled form at his side. The light from the dashboard showed up the slack, worried face, the bleak, screwed-up eyes and the black shadow of a careless shave.

He found Alsconi disappointing. After all he had heard of him, he had expected to find someone iron-hard instead of this fat, petulant, elderly man.

Alsconi felt Crantor's searching gaze and he in turn looked at him and inwardly shuddered. What a face! If he had known Crantor looked like this he would never have planned to make use of him. It was a face as easily recognized as Carlos's giant body. It was a face once seen couldn't possibly be forgotten. But the man could drive. If they continued at this speed they would be in Naples by the morning. He straightened a little in his seat.

"Very soon now," he said, "we shall come to the hill road into Siena. You will have to drive more slowly, but don't go too slow. It is essential I should be in Palermo as soon as you can possibly get me there."

"Will Felix be in Palermo? I understood he was in Siena," Crantor said as he edged up the speed of the car.

"Don't bother me with small talk," Alsconi said irritably. "I have things to think about."

Crantor drove on, his mind seething with rage at the snub. And it wasn't until they began to climb the twisting hill road and when he had to slacken speed, that he began to consider his position.

Alsconi had said there was to be a change. He had told him to come out immediately. Could that mean he was now to work closely with him? Did he want to? If Alsconi treated everyone in this way was it worth while working with such a man?

Crantor suddenly thought of the fifteen thousand pounds in five-pound notes he had brought out of England and that were now lying on the floor of the car. If he had known Alsconi was going to be like this, he would have taken the money for himself and dropped out of sight. It wouldn't have been easy, but it could have been done. It was not too late to do it now. Again he thought of the wooden boxes. What did they contain? More money?

His mind was so preoccupied with these thoughts that he came upon Don's Bentley without seeing it until it was too late. He swept around the curve in the road, then suddenly realized he was too far over to the left. He saw the Bentley's dipped headlights, and he slammed his foot down on the brake pedal.

He felt the violent impact and heard the front tyre burst. For one nerve-racking moment as the car swung broadside on, he thought it was going to crash down into the valley. He heard Alsconi cursing as he wrestled with the wheel, then the car came to a standstill. Shaken and furious with himself, he opened the car door and got out.

Lorelli looked beyond Crantor and recognized Alsconi's bulky figure. She felt herself turn cold.

Crantor said, "What are you doing here with Micklem?" He had lowered the gun. There was a puzzled expression on his face. "What is this?"

"Crantor! Bring her here!" Alsconi barked. "Don't let her get away."

Lorelli looked around wildly for a means of escape as Crantor caught hold of her wrist. She tried to jerk free, but he held her and pulled her across the road to where Alsconi was standing, covering Don with the gun.

In the reflected light from the Cadillac's headlamps, Alsconi looked white and flabby. His mouth twitched and there was fear in his eyes.

"Watch this man: shoot him if he moves," he said, then he caught hold of Lorelli's arm and pulled her into the light so he could see her clearly. "So you got away? And you have been talking, haven't you? You've been giving away my secrets." He dropped the gun into his pocket and caught hold of her by her throat, shaking her. "Haven't you?" he shouted at her.

Lorelli buckled at her knees, her hands pulled at Alsconi's wrists, trying to break his vicious grip.

"You've told him about my yacht, haven't you?" Alsconi snarled. "Haven't you?"

"Take your hands off her!" Don exclaimed. "You can't get away. The police are on the yacht now, waiting for you.

They're at the Bazzoni villa as well."

Alsconi threw Lorelli from him so she sprawled in the road. He dragged out his gun, his face murderous. Stepping back so he could still watch Don, Crantor aimed a quick slap at Alsconi's wrist, knocking the gun out of his hand.

Alsconi staggered back, his face livid.

"Wait!" Crantor said sharply. "What is this? What's happening?"

"Happening?" Alsconi cried, his voice shrill. "She's betrayed us! That's what's happening! She's given us away to the police."

"What's this about a yacht? What yacht?"

"How can I get away unless I use the yacht?" Alsconi snarled. "The police have a description of me." Fear made his face slack and ugly. "There's money in the villa. How am I going to get away now?"

This news, came as a shock to Crantor. So Alsconi was on the run and the police had a description of him! Crantor's brain worked quickly. They hadn't a description of himself, he thought, but if he were caught with Alsconi... What a mug he had been! He should have taken the fifteen thousand and dropped out of sight. Then he had a sudden idea.

"What about the motor launch?" he asked. "Have you still got it?"

Alsconi blinked, then clapped his hands together.

"Of course!" He had forgotten the motor cruiser in the harbour of Civitavecchia: the cruiser that was used to smuggle French currency into Italy. "That's it! It had gone out of my mind. While the police wait for me in Palermo, I'll take the launch to Monte Carlo. We will go at once to Civitavecchia."

He picked up the gun that Crantor had knocked out of his hand. Lorelli had got to her feet and was now standing by Don, her face white. She watched Alsconi fearfully.

"Is Micklem's car damaged? Look and see," Alsconi said to Crantor. "I'll watch these two."

Crantor went over to the Bentley: apart from a buckled rear wing there seemed nothing the matter with the big car. He opened the door, slid under the driving wheel and started the engine. He shifted the gear lever and moved the car a few yards, then cut the engine and came back. "It's all right."

"Then we'll use it. It will be safer, and they will go with us. The police won't think of looking for me in a British car with three other people in it. Get those boxes out of the Cadillac and put them in his car. Then get the Cadillac off the road. Hurry!"

While Alsconi continued to cover Lorelli and Don, Crantor transferred the boxes into the boot of the Bentley. He put his and Alsconi's suitcases in beside them.

He returned to the Cadillac, released the parking brake, then going around to the front of the car, he leaned his weight against the bonnet. The car moved, its back wheels dropped off the road, and it crashed down the steep bank and ended up some fifty yards down the hill against an olive tree.

"You will drive, Mr Micklem," Alsconi said. "You will take me with all possible speed to Civitavecchia." He looked at Lorelli. "You will sit beside him. If either of you make a move to attract attention, I shall shoot you. Do you understand?"

"You're not going to get far," Don said. "You're just kidding yourself if you think you're going to get away."

Listening, Crantor thought the same.

"Get in the car!" Alsconi snarled.

Don and Lorelli walked over to the Bentley; the other two followed. They got in the car and Don started the engine. He turned the car and headed back to Siena.

The time was now a few minutes to one o'clock. They had a hundred and twenty miles to cover to reach the port. The roads would be deserted. Alsconi reckoned they should arrive by half-past three.

"Lombardo should be sleeping on board," he said to Crantor, "but if he isn't we will not be able to wait for him. Can you handle the boat?"

"I can try," Crantor said doubtfully. "I haven't handled a big motor-boat before, but I'm pretty good with engines."

"Don't talk like a fool," Alsconi snarled. "You would have to navigate the boat. Could you get me to Monte Carlo?"

"No," Crantor said. "I don't know anything about navigation."

Alsconi thought for a moment: this could be a disaster if Lombardo wasn't on board and it was unlikely that he would be.

He leaned forward and tapped Don on his shoulder.

"Can you handle a boat? If you can and if you can get me to Monte Carlo I will refrain from shooting you when we reach Civitavecchia."

"That's comforting news," Don said dryly. "I'll take you there on condition that Lorelli and I take the boat back after I've landed you."

"Certainly," Alsconi said and smiled in the dark. "You would of course give me your word not to tell the police that you have landed me at Monte Carlo?"

"Of course," Don said gravely, knowing Alsconi would never let him go free.

"Then let's get on," Alsconi said and sat back.

It was striking three o'clock as Don drove along the sea road into Civitavecchia.

"Stop for a moment," Alsconi said. "There are a few details to be arranged."

Don pulled up.

"There is the guard at the harbour who may ask questions. I know most of the guards," Alsconi said, "but we may be unlucky."

"Have your gun ready." He looked at Crantor. "I will open the window and speak to the guard. If he seems suspicious, shoot him. You have a silencer?"

"No," Crantor said.

"I have. Take my gun and give me yours." As Crantor appeared to fumble for his gun, he said, "There may be more than one guard." "There won't be at this hour."

Crantor had slipped his gun out of sight by his side and now with one hand, and it wasn't easy, he was unloading the gun.

"Give me your gun!" Alsconi snapped. "Why are you keeping me waiting?"

"It is caught in the lining of my pocket." "You shouldn't have kept it in your pocket, you fool!" Alsconi snarled.

"Hurry!"

You won't be calling me a fool much longer, Crantor thought savagely as he jacked the bullet out of the breech. He handed the empty gun to Alsconi and took the .45 that was equipped with a silencer.

"You two in front say nothing," Alsconi said, snatching Crantor's gun from his hand. "I shall shoot Lorelli through the head if you make a false move. Now, drive to the harbour entrance. It's straight ahead, and across the railway lines."

Don engaged gear. During the drive to Civitavecchia, he had been trying to think of a way to catch these two off their guard, but as long as they had guns in their hands, there was nothing he could do. He was confident his chance would come when he got on the motor launch. Crantor, he decided, was the dangerous one for he was active and his movements were quick. He was sure he could take Alsconi by surprise, but not Crantor.

He slowed down to pass over the railway track, then his headlights picked out the red and white bar that guarded the entrance to the harbour. By the bar was a sentry box. A man in khaki uniform with a rifle in his hand, stood by the bar and blinked in the glare of the lights. "Be ready," Alsconi said. "I will sit well back. You will have to shoot him through the window."

The guard ducked under the bar and came up to the car.

"It is all right," Alsconi muttered. "I know this man." Raising his voice, he called, "Is that you, Bellini? I haven't seen you for months. How are you?"

The guard grinned.

"Il signor Tampato!" He came up to the window. "This is a pleasure! You are going perhaps to Rome? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"We are going to Rome," Alsconi said, "but as we were so near, I wished my friends to see the boat. Is Lombardo on board?"

"No, signore," the guard said. "He no longer sleeps on the boat. He married three weeks ago."

Alsconi's fat face tightened.

"Never mind," he said. "We will not be long. I just want them to see it."

"I am sorry, signore, but the harbour is closed. Less than an hour ago I had instructions from the police to let no one enter. There is some bandit attempting to escape."

Alsconi laughed.

"Do I look like a bandit? Come now; I shall not be long: a half an hour perhaps." His fingers dipped into his pocket and he took out a thousand lire note. "Here, buy yourself something to remember me by. You musn't keep my friends waiting."

"Thank you, signore, but please be as quick as you can. I will get into trouble if you are seen."

He went to the bar and lifted it. Don drove under it.

"To the left," Alsconi said and waved to the guard.

They drove past a big shed that hid them from the guard.

"Stop here," Alsconi said. "Turn off the engine and give me the ignition key."

Don obeyed.

"I will remain in the car," Alsconi said to Crantor, "and watch these two. Put the boxes and our cases on board."

Crantor got out of the car. He looked for a moment at the powerful motor cruiser that was moored nearby, then he opened the boot of the car and carried the boxes across the quay and on to the boat. He returned for the suitcases, and having put them on board, he came over to the car.

"Get out, you two," Alsconi said.

Crantor stepped back and watched Lorelli and Don, followed by Alsconi, get out of the car.

"Now, Mr Micklem, I'll be obliged if you will go on board with Crantor and get the boat ready," Alsconi said.

Don took hold of Lorelli's arm.

"You're coming with me," he said, not liking the cold, vicious expression on Alsconi's face.

"No!" Alsconi said sharply. "Just you, Mr Micklem. She stays here."

"If she doesn't come with us, then I don't take you to Monte Carlo," Don said quietly.

"She is not coming!" Alsconi said violently. "You will do what you're told or you will be shot!"

"That won't get you to Monte Carlo," Don said, watching Alsconi closely. The look of maniacal rage in Alsconi's eyes warned him that he might shoot.

"Wait!" Crantor barked. He had moved away so that he could cover the three of them with the .45.

Alsconi looked at him, saw the gun was pointing at him, and his small eyes widened.

"Don't point that thing at me!" he rasped. Crantor smiled.

"You shouldn't have told me the police have a description of you. Tortoise," he said. "It's my turn now to call you a fool! They haven't a description of me. She's going on this trip, but you aren't. I have money, a boat, a navigator and a clear field. You'd only complicate..."

Alsconi swung up the .38 and pulled the trigger, his lips curling off his teeth in a vicious snarl. The faint click of the hammer told him the gun was empty. He looked down at the gun, his face slack, his eyes staring.

Crantor shot him three times in the body. The gun made three sharp plops like someone clapping his hands. Alsconi buckled at the knees, took two staggering steps forward, the .38 falling from his hand, then he spread out face down on the cobble stones.

Neither Don nor Lorelli moved.

Crantor swung the gun to cover them.

"Get on board!" he said harshly. "Hurry!"

Don moved to the edge of the quay and dropped down on to the deck. He held out his hands to Lorelli and swung her down beside him.

Crantor scrambled aboard, keeping away from them.

"Get the engine started," he said.

Don went down into the cockpit.

Lorelli said to Crantor, "What are you going to do with me? Why didn't you let him kill me?"

"I once said you and I could be useful to each other," Crantor said, staring at her. "You didn't seem to think much of the idea then. You have until Monte Carlo to change your mind. I have fifteen thousand pounds in that bag. I think there is a fortune in lire in those boxes. We could make a new start in life together. Think about it." He motioned with the gun.

"Get into the cockpit. I'm staying here."

Don's head and shoulders appeared out of the cockpit.

"I can't see what I'm doing. Have you a flashlight?"

Crantor took his torch from his pocket and bent slightly to hand it to Don. Lorelli, with the quickness of a cat, gave him a hard, sudden push. Caught off balance, Crantor fell forward. He fired blindly as he fell. The bullet smashed against the steel floor and ricocheted out of the cockpit, narrowly missing Don. As Crantor crashed down into the cockpit, Don closed with him.

His left hand grabbed Crantor's wrist, his right hand fastened on Crantor's throat. He hammered Crantor's gun hand on the floor of the cockpit. The gun went off again, then Crantor's fingers opened



and the gun slid into the darkness.

For a few seconds the two men fought like animals. Crantor broke Don's hold on his throat and his fist thudded into Don's face, sending him backwards.

Crantor made the mistake of reaching for the gun. Don threw himself on him and slammed a punch to Crantor's jaw.

Crantor sagged. Don scrambled to his feet, and as Crantor heaved himself up to his knees, Don's fist smashed against his jaw again, sending him backwards. His head struck the wall of the cockpit and he slumped face down on the steel floor.

Don groped for the flashlight, found it and turned it on. He bent over Crantor. Satisfied that he was unconscious, he picked up Crantor's gun and backed away.

"Are you all right?" Lorelli said breathlessly.

"He won't bother us for a few minutes," Don said. He turned the beam of the flashlight on Lorelli's tense, white face.

"Nice work. It's becoming quite a habit. That's the second time you've pulled me out of a jam." He handed the torch to her. "Hold this while I tie him up."

She took the flashlight. Don put the gun on the deck and then tied Crantor's wrists behind his back with his silk tie.

Lorelli reached out and picked up Crantor's gun. As Don straightened, he found himself looking down the barrel. "Hey!

What's the idea?" he said, startled.

"Get him off the boat and get off yourself," she said in a fierce hard voice.

"You're not taking the boat, are you?" "Yes. Hurry! Get him off!"

"Don't rush your chances. I said I'd help you and I still will. Can you handle this boat?"

"Of course. I've handled it dozens of times before, and I don't want your help."

"You'll want some money, won't you?"

"Money?" She laughed. "I have all the money I want now. This is the chance I've been hoping for. Get him off the boat.

I want to get away."

"Right-ho," Don said and heaved Crantor up on to the deck, climbed on to the quay and pulled Crantor

up after him. He laid Crantor out on the cobble stones, then squatting on his heels, he looked down at Lorelli.

"You're sure you can handle this boat? You don't want me to help you?"

She shook her head.

"It's all right. I've done the Monte Carlo run before on my own."

"Well, okay. Then there's nothing I can do for you?"

Her face softened as she looked up at him.

"No, thanks. I can manage now. I'm going to make a new start. I don't suppose we'll meet again."

"You never know. Watch out for police boats. He'll give them a description of the boat when he comes to the surface."

She smiled.

"I'll be miles away by then. This is the fastest boat on the coast. They won't catch me." She swung the starting handle, and as the twin engines roared into life, she said, "Good-bye and thanks again."

"So long and good luck," Don shouted above the noise of the engines. He cast off the mooring rope.

The boat began to move. Then as Lorelli opened the throttle, the boat gathered way and went roaring out towards the open sea, leaving behind it a broad white wash of churned-up water.

She raised her hand and waved. Don waved back.

Then he lost sight of the boat as it raced away into the darkness of the night.