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CORGI

JAMES HADLEY CASE



**The
Things
Men Do**

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The Things Men Do
James Hadley Chase
1953

chapter one

The truck's headlights picked her out of the darkness the way a spotlight pinpoints a solo act on the stage.

She stood beside a 1939 Buick Roadmaster that hadn't been washed in months nor polished in years. She had on a grey flannel skirt and a wine-coloured suede jacket that zipped down the front. She raised her hand and waved to me.

I make it a rule while I'm driving not to stop when a girl tries to thumb a ride, but this was different. From the look of it, she was in trouble with her car, and trouble with cars happens to be my business.

I pulled up by her and leaned out of the truck window.

"I'm stuck," she said. "Can you help me?"

The hands of the dashboard clock showed twenty minutes past eleven. I was tired and hungry. I had been wrestling for the past two hours with a car that had broken down a mile or so beyond Northolt airfield, but I opened the truck door and got down on to the road.

"What's the trouble?"

"It's not petrol. The tank's nearly full. The engine just packed up."

I went over to the Buick and lifted the hood. A smell of burning told me all I wanted to know. I paused long enough to throw the beam of my flashlight into the works, then I shut down the hood.

"The ignition's burned out. It'll take a couple of days to fix."

"Oh, hell! Are you sure? You scarcely looked at it."

"I don't have to look at it. Can't you smell it? Besides, I'm in the racket."

She glanced over her shoulder at the truck. In the reflected light from my headlamps she could read the red lettering on the white panel:

HARRY COLLINS, LTD.

Motor Engineers.

14 Eagle Street, W.1.

A couple of years ago I had been proud of that truck.

When I had taken delivery of it I had had a struggle to keep my eyes off it, but the enthusiasm had worn thin. Now, it was my idea of a whited sepulcher.

"Would you believe it?" The girl laughed. "Any other girl would have stopped a masher, but I pick a motor engineer. I've always been lucky."

"You're not all that lucky. There's nothing I can do. I'll take you to the nearest garage if that's any good to you."

"There can't be any garages open at this hour."

"Then I can tow you until we find a place."

"No, thanks. I don't fancy being towed. Anyway, this old ruin isn't mine. I'm going to leave it right here. My friend can send out for it tomorrow."

"Your friend will be tickled pink."

She laughed.

"That's his worry. I want to get home. Will you give me a lift to the West-end?"

"If that's what you want."

She opened the truck door and got in.

I hesitated, looking at the black shape of the Buick.

"I don't like leaving that car without lights. Someone might run into it."

"For goodness' sake! Do you always worry about things like that? It's a wonder you haven't grey hair."

"I'm accident-minded. I wouldn't like to hit it myself."

I went around to the back of the truck, found a red lantern, lit it and hung it on the Buick's off-side rear door handle.

"You won't get that lantern back."

"Then I won't get it back."

I climbed in beside her and started the engine. The light from the dashboard fell on her slim, nylon clad legs. She was showing her knees, and they were pretty knees. I looked at her out of the corner of my eye. She was staring ahead, her chin tilted. The light wasn't good enough for me to see much of her. I had only had a glimpse of her when my headlights had picked her out. I had noticed she had dark hair, parted in the middle, and that it fell to her shoulders and curled inwards.

I had a vague impression that she was above the usual standard of prettiness, but I wasn't too sure of that.

"Is this your truck?" She was opening her bag as she spoke. She took out a packet of cigarettes and offered me one.

"Yes, and it's my business too."

She held a match to my cigarette. I wanted to take a look at her in the light of the match flame, but a lorry was coming, and I couldn't take my eyes off the road.

"So that makes you Harry Collins."

"That's right."

"I'm Gloria Selby."

We drove for a couple of hundred yards before she said: "Do you often work as far from your base as this?"

"What makes you think I've been working?"

"You don't seem the kind of man who'd go driving with hands as dirty as yours unless you had been working."

"You're right. One of my few clients broke down and called me out. There was a garage within five minutes of him, but he thinks so much of me, he had to drag me from a hot supper and give me a sixteen mile drive. Nice fella."

"You didn't have to turn out, did you?"

"The way business is now, I had to go all right."

"I thought all garage owners were rolling in money."

"So did I: that's why I went into the racket. I've found out otherwise."

"Isn't there any money in it?"

"Yes, I suppose there is, but I picked the wrong locality."

"I should have thought Oxford Circus was a pretty good district."

"So did I until I settled there. Don't tell me you know where Eagle Street is."

"It's a turning off Oxford Street, near Peter Robinson's."

I looked at her and then back to the dark ribbon of the road that kept coming at me out of the light of

my headlamps.

"You're the first person I've ever met who knows where it is. They've made it a one-way street and have smothered it with No Waiting signs. Customers are scared even to stop for petrol. I don't know why I'm telling you this. It can't interest you."

"Did I say I was bored?"

We drove in silence for a minute or so, then she said, "I'll bring my car to you for service. I'll tell my friends about you."

"That's fine. Thanks a lot."

"You don't believe I'll do it, do you?"

"You probably will if you remember. Maybe you don't live anywhere near Eagle Street. By tomorrow you'll have forgotten there's a garage in Eagle Street and you'll continue to go to your local man. People do, you know."

"I live in New Bond Street. That's close enough, isn't it?"

I thought she was pulling my leg.

"What kind of a car do you run?"

"I've got one of the new Jaguars. It's a peach of a car."

I was sure now she was pulling my leg.

"That won't need much servicing."

"Someone's got to keep it clean. Could I garage it at your place? At the moment I keep it in Shepherd Market—much too far from my flat."

"I've got the room, but it wouldn't be a lock-up."

I still thought she was shooting a line.

"I'm pretty late some nights."

"I live over the garage. I'm late myself."

"What would you charge?"

"Thirty bob a week: five bob for washing and polishing."

"But that's what I pay for a lock-up."

I shook my head.

"I bet you don't."

She laughed.

"Well, I'll think about it. Make it a pound and I'm on."

"Thirty bob's cheap, and you know it. Can't do it for less."

"Oh well, I'll think about it."

I was pretty sure I wouldn't hear any more about the Jaguar. I was pretty sure, too, I wouldn't see her again after I had dropped her at Bond Street.

I decided I'd let her know she wasn't getting away with all this grand talk.

"What's the matter with your car that you were using the Buick tonight?"

She leaned forward to drop ash between her feet.

"My friend's sister was catching the night plane to Paris. He had something else to do so he asked me to take her to Northolt. Ever been to Paris?"

"When I was in the Army. I was only there three or four days."

"Like it?"

"Seemed all right. It was expensive then, but I hear it's blue murder now."

"It's like everything else: if you know the ropes you're all right. I know a cheap place to stay at, and I have friends there. I get along all right. It doesn't cost me much."

"Sounds as if you go there a lot"

"About once a month."

"In business?"

"That's right. I design and make lingerie."

That surprised me.

"Is that a good racket to be in?"

"Pretty good. I'm not grumbling. I have some good connections in Paris."

"Coals to Newcastle I should have thought."

"There's a limited market, but I've got what there is."

"You're pretty young to be an owner of a business, aren't you?"

She laughed.

"You're pretty young yourself to be an owner of a business."

"I don't know about that. I'm thirty-two."

"Married?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Me? What should I want to get married for? I've a career to think of."

I swung the truck into Wood Lane and headed towards Shepherd's Bush.

I began to wonder if she wasn't telling the truth after all.

Maybe she did have a flat in Bond Street, a lingerie business and a Jaguar car. Maybe she did go trips to Paris. I realized with a sudden feeling of irritation that I had been living so long on the border line of bankruptcy that I had ceased to believe there was anyone left who made money.

Where I had gone wrong was to sink all my money into the garage. If I had left myself some working capital I could have pulled myself out of the mess I was now in. I could have bought machine tools, a lathe and stuff like that. There were plenty of contract jobs going if you had the right equipment to handle them. Instead of splashing out all my money on elaborate equipment for car cleaning, pressure greasing and the like, which I used once in a blue moon, I should have kept something in hand in case I hit a dud streak, but at that time I had been so optimistic I didn't believe it possible to hit a dud streak.

This girl, sitting at my side, could afford to go to Paris, run a Jaguar car and own a flat in Bond Street. Three things that were completely beyond my reach, and I resented it. I had studied, worked and trained for my job, and I was getting nothing out of it except a headache of worries. So far as I could see all she had was a natural talent for making pretty things, and she seemed to be sitting on top of the world.

"Is that clock right?" she asked suddenly. "Is it as late as that?"

"It's a little fast. The right time's twenty to twelve."

"Oh well, I don't have to get up early in the morning. I hate getting up in the morning, don't you?"

"Whether I hate it or not, I have to get up." My irritation sounded in my voice. "I open the garage at half-past six. That's about the only time I sell petrol. There are four or five vans near me, and they fill up before starting their rounds. If I don't get up early I'd miss their trade."

"You do sound in a bad way."

"I usually sound off like this when I'm tired, but things are pretty duff."

"Maybe you don't know the ropes."

"What does that mean?"

"I know a fellow who owns a garage. He's making a lot of money."

"I've told you: I picked the wrong locality."

"He buys and sells used cars. There's money in that racket."

"Not now there isn't. Haven't you heard there's a slump on?"

"I don't believe in slumps. A slump is an excuse for lack of enterprise. If you can't make money one way, you can make it another. Ever thought of that?"

I shifted on my seat, suddenly angry. In a moment, she would be telling me how to run my business.

"You look after your lingerie. I'll look after my garage."

She laughed.

"Have it your own way."

I drove down Edgware Road, turned at Marble Arch and increased speed along Oxford Street. Neither of us said anything until I slowed down and pulled up opposite New Bond Street "Here we are."

"I don't know what I should have done without you. Thanks a lot."

"Nothing to it."

I leaned across her and opened the truck door.

She got out and closed the door.

"I'll be around before long."

"14 Eagle Street. It's up on the right-hand side."

"I'll find it. Thanks again. So long, Harry."

"So long." I hesitated, then added, "Gloria."

She crossed the road, heading for New Bond Street I leaned out of the window and watched her go. I still hadn't seen her face properly. I wouldn't know her again if she wasn't wearing that outfit.

As she reached the corner of New Bond Street, she looked back and waved, then she disappeared into the shadows.

I lit a cigarette, engaged gear and drove to Eagle Street.

During the short drive, I thought about her. I wondered if I was going to see her again. I wondered if she was as pretty as I imagined her to be. I thought of her slim, long legs, and her knees. I hadn't thought about a girl in this way since Ann and I got married, but I was thinking this way now.

I was still thinking of her as I put the truck away and locked up, but she went out of my mind the way your fist goes when you open your hand when I heard Ann's voice.

"Is that you, Harry?"

"Coming right up."

I climbed the stairs to our four-room flat. Ann was waiting at the front door. She was wearing her lightweight wool dressing-gown that she had had on our honeymoon. It was pretty well worn by now, and I'd promised to get her a new one, but I hadn't got around to it yet: money was too short to buy dressing-gowns.

"What a time you've been, Harry."

"I thought I'd never get the damned thing to go."

Ann was twenty-six, but she didn't look it. You wouldn't call her pretty, but she had fine colouring, big serious brown eyes and a big, generous mouth. She was a little thing, nicely proportioned,

durable, and I often told her she was the kind of girl any man would want to marry and not just fool around with.

She used to say that meant she hadn't a scrap of glamour, and must look like a good cook. Maybe she didn't have glamour, but she was kind; you could see that by just looking at her, and kindness means more to me than glamour: a lot more.

"Go and have a wash, darling. I've some tea waiting. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat something if there is anything."

"I'll make you a sandwich."

When I came out of the bathroom and into the tiny bedroom she was in bed. The tea and some fish paste sandwiches were on the night table.

As I ate and got undressed at the same time, I told her about the breakdown. It wasn't until I had turned off the light and had got into bed that I mentioned Gloria Selby.

I don't know why I was so elaborately casual, but I was.

"Some girl thumbed a ride on the way back. Her car ignition had burned out. There are too many dud cars on the road."

"Had she far to go?" Ann asked sleepily.

"She came all the way. She's got a flat in Bond Street; makes lingerie. Sounds as if she has a good business. She goes to Paris once a month."

"I wish we could go to Paris, Harry."

"She must be making quite a bit of money. She runs a Jaguar."

"Does she?" Ann said without much interest.

"She said if you couldn't make money one way, you could another. You know, Ann, I'm getting a little fed up being so short of cash."

"I know you are, darling, but you mustn't dwell on it. You'll make money before long. She's probably got worries the same as we have."

"Maybe. Well, I guess we'd better go to sleep. I've got to be up in another five and a half hours."

"I'll do it tomorrow, Harry. I'd like to."

"You'll do nothing of the land. Good night, sweetheart."

"But I'd like to, Harry. I can manage the pumps. Why should you always be the one to get up early?"

"It's my job. You wouldn't like me to take over the cooking, would you?"

She laughed

"I don't think you'd like it either."

"Good night, Ann."

I was still awake long after her regular breathing told me she was asleep. I kept thinking about the garage, the money I owed, the money I needed I kept hearing Gloria's voice: A slump is an excuse for lack of enterprise. Maybe you don't know the ropes. If you can't make money one way, you can make it another.

The voice went on and on in my mind until I thought it would drive me nuts.

chapter two

A couple of days later, around four-thirty in the afternoon, Tim Greensleeves came into the cubby-hole I use for an office, wiping his hands on a lump of oily waste.

Tim was seventeen; a tall, emaciated lad with big steel-rimmed spectacles that made him look like an owl, un-tidy tow-coloured hair and an unusually sharp, shrewd mind. He had been with me a year now, and knew as much about car engines as I did.

I paid him four pounds ten a week, and he was worth twice that amount. The business didn't warrant a hired hand, but I had to have him. If I were called out on a breakdown job, someone had to be left in charge. I kept telling myself I'd have to get rid of him, but so far, I had put off the inevitable decision.

At least, he hadn't ever asked for a rise, and he had a dog-like devotion for Ann that prejudiced me towards him.

"Hello, Tim," I said, shoving aside the ledger I was working on. "Fixed those brakes yet?"

"Yes, Mr. Collins. There's a young lady out there, asking for you."

"Okay." I pushed back my chair and stood up. "You might check the petrol tanks, Tim. I don't want to buy any this week if we can run on what we've got."

He gave me a quick look and nodded. I hadn't told him how bad business was, but he was no fool. He must have guessed I was having a struggle to meet the weekly bills.

I went into the dim, big shed that served as a workshop and garage. Apart from the equipment, the ten-ton truck Tim was working on, and my own truck, it looked pretty deserted and forlorn. There was room enough in that shed to house twenty big trucks.

A girl was wandering around the tool benches: a girl in a dark blue linen dress, hatless, and carrying a lizard skin bag slung from her shoulder.

"Good afternoon," I said, wondering what she wanted.

"Anything I can do for you?"

She turned.

Have you ever tampered with a faulty light switch and got a sodden jolt up your arm? That was the feeling I got when she turned: a jolt that went through me and set my heart bumping unevenly and turned my mouth dry.

Don't jump to the conclusion that she was a beauty: she wasn't, although her face and figure compelled attention, and any man would look at her twice, maybe three times, but there was more to it than that. She had that thing men go for: call it sex if you like: it was more than sex. It was an animal sensuality; something right out of the jungle.

Her face was a little too long and narrow for any claim to beauty, but she had high cheek-bones that gave her a Chinky look, and her eyes were dark and sultry and held a half-concealed promise of unspeakable things.

Then she had a shape on her that was as provocative as it was blatant. She wore that dress not to conceal her figure but to accentuate it. Her small, heavy breasts strained against the dark linen as if trying to break loose. Her waist was small. It curved out to compact, solid hips that in turn tapered down to long, slim legs neat in nylon stockings.

"Hello, Harry," she said and smiled, showing even white teeth, and when she smiled there was a

sparkle in her eyes that was something to see.

Every so often, during the past two days, she had crept into my mind, and I had wondered if I would see her again. I had half convinced myself that she wouldn't come, but here she was, out of the darkness now, better, more exciting, and much more dangerous than my imagination had made her when I had let my mind think of her.

"This is a surprise. I didn't expect to see you again." I scarcely recognized my voice: it sounded like a husky croak. She was looking me over with the same intent curiosity as I was looking at her.

"I said I'd come."

I suddenly became aware that Tim was staring at us, and I pulled myself together with an effort.

Her eyes went from me to Tim. They stayed on Tim long enough for him to turn red and move off to the other end of the shed.

"Funny looking boy. Does he help you?"

"He's smarter than he looks."

She laughed.

"He'd have to be. I want to garage my car here."

I knew instinctively that I should tell her I had changed my mind. The way I was feeling about her now was dangerous. I shouldn't see her again. I should stop it before it went any further. I knew that. I knew if I saw much of her, there could be trouble.

"This isn't a lock-up." I sounded as feeble as I felt.

"Besides, you'll probably find something nearer you."

Her dark eyes flickered over my face. Her pencilled eyebrows came down in a frown.

"I'm not asking for a lock-up, and it's near enough, but if you don't want my car, just say so."

"It's not that I don't want it. I was thinking of your convenience."

"You don't have to worry about me. I'll pay thirty shillings a week and five shillings when I want the car cleaned. Is it on or isn't it?"

My mind was saying it wasn't on, but my voice said, "That suits me. If you'll keep it over there against that wall it won't be in my way, and it'll be easy for you to get in and out."

The frown went away and her eyes sparkled again.

"That's fine." She opened her bag. "I'll pay a month in advance. I'd like a receipt."

"Come into the office then."

We walked to the back of the shed, passing Tim who was getting the measuring rod for the tanks out from behind a lot of junk that was lying on the floor. He glanced up and stared at her after she had passed him. I saw his look of disapproval, and for the first time since he had begun to work for me, he irritated me.

I pushed open the office door and stood aside.

"I'm afraid it isn't much."

She passed me, her arm brushing against my sleeve, and I caught the faint fragrance of her perfume.

"What does it matter so long as the work gets done?"

"I guess that's right."

She put a five pound note, two pound notes and a ten shilling note on the desk.

"I'll pay for the cleaning when I want the car cleaned."

"That's all right."

I went around to the other side of the desk.

"Sit down, won't you?"

She sat on the rickety straight-backed chair and crossed her legs, a little carelessly. From where I sat I could see a knee and a small triangle of white thigh where the skirt had rucked up. My mouth was as dry as a handful of dust.

I got out my receipt book and wrote out a receipt. I had trouble to write clearly. The words looked as if they had been written by an old man of ninety.

As I looked up to give her the receipt I saw she was watching me. I had an idea she knew she had me going, but her eyes were expressionless as she smiled.

"I'll bring the car over sometime tomorrow. I don't use it much." She paused and then asked, "How's business, Harry?"

I gave her a wry grin.

"Pretty good today: pretty near a record. Two pounds in petrol, ten bob for fixing a brake lining, and seven pounds ten for garage hire. The money's rolling in."

She gave me a long look out of her Chinky eyes, closed the bag and stood up.

"If you can't make money one way . . ."

"I know: you can make it another. I heard you the first time. Not so easy as it sounds. Maybe you've got some ideas you can pass on to me."

She moved over to me. I was standing now, away from the desk. Her perfume was as sexy as her shape.

"Do you want ideas?"

"I'd consider them. I'm not proud."

She reached up and removed an imaginary speck of Buff from my lapel. There was an unmistakable invitation in the black, sparkling eyes. I found I was clenching my Sets behind my back to stop from grabbing her.

"Then I must think about it. I might have an idea for you."

"Harry!"

Ann's voice floated down the stairs.

She stepped back as if some invisible force had come between us and had shoved us violently apart.

"Are you there, Hurry?"

A little unsteadily I went to the door and opened it.

"Could you come up a moment?"

"I'm coming."

"Is that your wife?" Her voice was pitched low, and she moved close to me again.

"Yes, I've got to go up."

We were speaking like conspirators.

"I'll be in tomorrow with the car. Good-bye, Harry."

"Good-bye."

She dipped past me and walked quickly down the length of the garage. I noticed her hips rolled a little as she walked. If I hadn't been in such a fluster I would have known she was deliberately rolling them for my benefit.

I went up the stairs two at the time.

Ann was struggling with the screw-cap on a bottle of fruit.

"I just can't move it."

"Give it to me."

I twisted the cap. It didn't move at first, then when I tried again, it shifted.

"I hope I didn't disturb you, Harry."

I looked sharply at her.

She was wearing an old sweater and a pair of blue slacks that had been washed so often they had shrunk away from her ankles and were now much too tight across her seat.

A lock of brown hair fell over one eye, and she had a smudge of dirt on her chin. A half an hour ago I would have thought she looked cute, but now my eyes were still dazzled by the smart blue linen dress and the shape beneath it.

"For the love of Mike, Ann, can't you smarten yourself up a little? Those pants make your bottom look twice its size, and that old sweater is fit only for the dustbin."

I saw the look of startled surprise lump into her eyes, then she laughed.

"Sorry, darling. I know I look a fright, but I've been turning out. I'll get changed." She put her arms round my neck. "I didn't mean to look a slut. It's just that I've been terribly busy."

I felt suddenly ashamed of myself for talking to her like this and blood rushed into my face.

"I didn't mean anything, Ann. I just want you to look as pretty as you always look."

"Some husbands don't even notice what their wives are wearing. I'm flattered, Harry."

"I don't know about that." I bent and kissed her. "See you in a little while. I'm just checking the ledger."

"Found any mistakes?"

Ann kept the books, looked after the insurance stamps and the rest of the inevitable forms. Once a month I checked everything, just to be on the safe side.

"Everything's perfect." I gave her a light slap on her behind. "And get out of those pants. They're indecent."

"Only you see me in them." She looked down at them with a comic expression of dismay. "Well, all right I'll find something else. Harry, I suppose we couldn't run to a new pair? They do save my stockings."

Gloria's five pound note was burning in my pocket. I took it out, knowing that I wouldn't feel so guilty about her if I spent the money on Ann.

"Get a new pair. I've hired space in the garage for a car. This is part of a month's payment. Go ahead and get them."

Ann's eyes opened wide.

"Oh no. I was only joking. We can't afford to buy clothes just yet, Harry. We owe . . ."

"Never mind what we owe. This is something out of the blue. I'm not putting it through the books. Go ahead and get them. Get them tomorrow."

"But we must be sensible . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake! Don't argue! Get them!"

I shoved the note into her hand and went downstairs.

For some minutes I sat at my desk, feeling hot and irritable and a little sick. I never shouted at Ann before. I have never criticized her before. I could still see her startled, hurt expression as I left her. I thought of how Gloria and I had stood like conspirators when we had heard Ann's voice. The writing was on the wall. This had got to stop. When Gloria, came with her car I'd tell her I'd changed my

mind. If she garaged her car here, I'd be seeing her often. I remembered the look she had given me when she had flicked away that imaginary speck of fluff. Women don't look like that unless they mean trouble. I felt something cold and wet run clown my face.

Just to think of her that way made me sweat.

Tim Greensleeves pushed open the door.

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Collins? I've checked the petrol. There's enough for this week. If there's nothing else, I'll get off home."

"That's okay, Tim."

He looked at me, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"Well, good night, Mr. Collins."

"Good night."

When he had gone, I got up and put on a white coat just in case anyone wanted petrol, propped open the office door so I could keep an eye on the garage and started work on the ledger again.

I worked half-heartedly for half an hour. My mind wasn't concentrating. I tried to keep Gloria out of my thoughts, but she kept forcing her way in until I tossed down my pencil and pushed back my chair with a grunt of irritation.

I went down the long aisle to the street entrance and stood for some minutes watching the traffic edge past. The traffic was heavy all day, and Eagle Street was used as a backway to Piccadilly, to avoid the traffic lights of Regent Street.

Across the way was a postal sorting office: two mail vans were parked in front of the entrance, and postmen were busy loading sacks of mail into the vans.

I watched them at work without interest then suddenly spotting Bill Yates as he dumped two mail bags on the pavement I waved to him.

Bill had been in my battalion during the war. We had fought together at Caen, had been wounded on the same day, and had spent a month in the same hospital ward. We had even been demobilized on the same day, and soon after I had opened the garage, I had discovered he was one of the permanent staff at the sorting office, across the road.

He came over, a broad grin on his red, humorous face.

He was a little man, nearing forty, with powerful shoulders and short stocky legs.

"Hello, Harry: how goes it?"

"Pretty much as usual."

He winked.

"Don't kid me. Who was that piece I saw come out a while back? Blimey! She'd got a dairy on her that had me throwing myself out of the window."

"She wanted to garage her car here."

"She did? So I'll be seeing more of her, shall I? Don't often get a chance of studying form down this street. Phew! It's lucky you're a respectably married man. Between you and me, Harry, she wouldn't be safe if she garaged her car with me."

"Should have thought you had got beyond all that by now." I tried to smile, but it didn't come off. "What are you looking so pleased about?" I was anxious to change the subject. "Don't tell me you've got a rise?"

"More than that: promotion. I'm Guard Yates from Monday. No more shoving ruddy bags around. I just sit in the van and look menacing. That's right up my alley."

"Congratulations, Bill. What have you got to guard?"

"You mightn't believe it," Bill said, grinning, "but every so often we carry valuables in these 'ere vans, and when we do, yours truly in the future will look after the driver and see no one gets the wrong ideas about the stuff. It's a pretty cushy job, come to that; a lot better than what I've been doing."

"Not so cushy if there's a hold-up."

"I wouldn't mind a little excitement. Remember the old days? Remember that time when you and me . . ."

One of the postmen bawled from across the road, "Hey, Bill! What do you think you're doing? Come on and get stuck into it."

Bill's face clouded.

"The whole blooming lot's jealous of me now. Well, if these vans are going to get off tonight, I'd better do something about it. No one else but me does any work. Be seeing you, Harry."

He went back to the van.

When I returned to my office I found Ann there. She had changed into a frock and had brushed her hair. The frock was one she had made. She was clever with her needle. I don't know how I would have managed if she hadn't been able to make all her clothes.

"Where did the perfume come from, Harry?"

I felt myself change colour. Ann's eyes looked questioningly at me; surprise showing on her face.

"Perfume? I don't smell anything. Perhaps—possibly Miss Selby had perfume. I didn't notice it. I meant to tell you, Ann. You remember the girl I gave a lift to the other night: the one who makes lingerie? She came in just now and wanted to garage her car here. She's paying seven ten a month. I thought it would be a good idea."

"That's wonderful!" Ann's face brightened. "You know, Harry, we've lots of room here. Couldn't - we get other people to garage their cars here?"

I looked sharply at her.

"It's not a lock-up. Most people want lock-ups."

"Well, she didn't."

"She's not fussy. Most people want them."

I lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of the desk.

"Bit of luck really that I gave her a lift." I tried to be casual but it didn't come off. "Give the place a bit of tone to have a Jaguar here."

Ann looked at me then stared down at the floor.

"Yes."

We sat for a long moment in silence while I wracked my brains to think of something to relieve the sudden tension.

"By the way, Bill's got promotion. They've made him a guard."

"Have they? Is that good? What does he have to do?"

"Sit with the driver and keep off bandits." I grinned. "Bill says it's a cushy job. Trust him to find himself something cushy."

"It sounds rather dangerous."

"I don't know. We haven't had a mail robbery for years as far as I can remember."

"Harry . . ."

I looked at her.

"I've been making a list of the outstanding bills."

"Have you? Bad?"

She nodded.

"Eighty-nine pounds."

I whistled.

"It can't be as much as that."

"It is, Harry. I've put that five pounds in the petty cash box. We must be sensible. We'll want every penny we can scrape up."

"How about the monthly accounts? What do they look like?"

"If they all pay their bills it'll be worth about fifty pounds, a little more perhaps. We shouldn't have bought all that new oil. We're not selling it."

"That damned traveller! He'd talk a rat into buying poison. Well, they'll have to wait for their money."

"I was wondering. If you got rid of Tim, couldn't I take over the pumps?"

"You? Now look, Ann, your place is running the home. You do enough as it is. Besides, you don't know anything about car engines. No, that's not the solution. We can't afford to be without Tim. I've got to stop waiting for trade and do something about it. I've got to get an idea."

Her brown eyes became suddenly alert "What sort of idea, Harry?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

We sat in silence for a while, then she said, "Do you really mind me wearing those slacks? There's still a lot of life in them, and I've got to think of my stockings."

"No, I don't mind. Please yourself." I spoke impatiently because I was thinking what Gloria had said: I must think about it. I might have an idea for you.

"Then I'll go on wearing them."

I scarcely heard her.

Could Gloria find me something? She might put something in my way. She might know the right people. She might even have influence.

"Harry . . ."

I looked up, frowning.

"What is it?"

"Is Miss Selby smart? Does she wear good clothes?"

I felt a little chill run up my spine. I looked at her and she looked at me, and my eyes gave ground.

"I don't know. I didn't notice. Why?"

"I just wondered." Ann's Voice sounded suddenly tired, "I'll go up and get the supper ready."

I sat motionless, listening to her footfalls as she climbed the stairs. I stared down at my clenched fists, and hated myself.

chapter three

I was in a pretty sour mood when I rolled out of bed the following morning and went into the kitchen to put on the kettle before shaving.

After I had closed up the garage the previous evening, Bill Yates had looked in. He had brought with him a couple of pounds of sausages, some chips from the local fish shop and two quart bottles of beer. He announced he intended to celebrate his promotion with us in the appropriate style.

He was in a festive spirit, but we were not. I knew Ann was feeling hurt, and I had an uneasy idea she realized I had been mentally comparing her to Gloria Selby and had found her wanting. Of course she was right. I had been a thoughtless fool to have criticized her get-up. I knew she loved pretty things, and wouldn't have worn that old sweater and slacks if she had anything better to put on, but coming on her like that after seeing Gloria's smartness had set me off on the wrong foot before I could stop myself.

We had made an effort to appear cheerful for Bill's sake, but the party hadn't been much of a success. I had too much on my mind, what with my debts, Gloria, and I knowing how badly I had hurt Ann, to do more than make a feeble attempt to join in Bill's hilarity. Ann, who was obviously tired and depressed, at least did make a better showing than I did.

We were both pretty relieved when Bill finally took himself off. He was so pleased with his new job and with the supper he had provided he didn't seem to notice how depressed we were.

While I went down to lock up after him, Ann turned in.

She had her back to my side of the bed when I came up, and pretended to be asleep.

I got into bed beside her, and we lay like that in the darkness, not speaking, both pretending to be asleep, and both feeling miserable and angry with each other.

I was hoping she would turn over and come into my arms as she always did when we had a bit of a tiff, but this time she didn't, and that made me more angry, and I was still angry when I finally drifted off to sleep.

She didn't wake up when I got out of bed at six o'clock, and as I shaved, I thought miserably that I was in for a pretty grim day.

I sold the usual amount of petrol to the three vans before they set off on their routing run, then I spent the rest of the time until Tim arrived, clearing a space for Gloria's car.

I had finally decided I had to let her garage her car here.

I had taken her money and had given her a receipt. I couldn't change my mind now: I had left it too late. Besides, I couldn't go on much longer as I was going on, and I was almost sure she would do something for me. I didn't know what, but I had convinced myself she had taken a liking to me and had some idea that would help me out of the mess I was in.

Common sense told me I was fooling myself, but I stamped that thought out of my mind. She was my last hope, I kept telling myself. I had to see her again just in case she had thought of an idea that would solve my problem. But I knew all the time I was using this hope as an excuse, and my conscience was pricking me pretty badly.

It was cold and wet for a mid-June morning: a day to match my mood. Rain came in through the open doors of the garage and formed muddy, oily pools just inside the entrance.

A few minutes to eight, Tim came in, pushing his bicycle.

He was wearing a yellow mackintosh cape, and his tow-coloured hair was plastered flat by the rain.

"Morning, Mr. Collins."

"Filthy morning, Tim."

"It's pretty bad."

He put his bicycle against the wall and peeled off his cape. I saw him looking at the space I had cleared.

"You might clean the floor here, Tim. I've rented this space to Miss Selby for her Jaguar."

His owl like eyes blinked.

"I'll do it right away. Was that the young lady who came yesterday?"

"That's right."

I went into the office before he could ask any more questions. When I had unlocked the till and the desk, I went upstairs to breakfast.

The smell of coffee reminded me I was hungry.

"Hello, Ann."

She was wearing the old sweater and the slacks, but she had tied her hair up with a piece of red ribbon. I suddenly realized what a nice little figure she had: something I had forgotten to appreciate these past few months.

"Hello, Harry."

She was dishing up a couple of fish cakes and didn't look in my direction.

"Smells good."

"Yes."

I sat down at the table and waited, looking at her, wanting her to look at me, hoping she wasn't going to sulk.

She brought the plate over and set it before me.

"Sleep well, darling?"

I slid my arm around her hips and pulled her against me.

"All right, Harry. Did you?"

I looked at her.

"Not particularly. I'm sorry about yesterday, Ann. Will you try to forget about it?"

She touched my face lightly.

"I'll forget about it."

I pushed back my chair and pulled her on to my knee.

"There was nothing to it, Ann. I'm just rattled. Things aren't working out. Take no notice. It'll be all right."

"It's when things get bad, I want to be sure you need me.

I want to help you, Harry. This isn't the time for us to lose faith in each other."

"That's right. You're my girl, Ann; you and no one else."

I saw her face crease up suddenly like a child's who has been hurt. She bit her lip, turning her face away.

"It's good to hear you say that."

"I'm a damned fool, Ann, but I love you. I don't know what I'd do without you. Sorry about yesterday. Forgive me, will you?"

Her arms went round my neck and her face pressed against mine.

"There's nothing to forgive. I know you're worried, Harry. It was that that made you so funny yesterday, wasn't it? It wasn't that—that girl?"

"Of course not. There's no other girl but you, Ann: honest. You mustn't think such things."

"I know I look a fright. I know I should try to look smart, but it's awfully difficult, Harry, Be patient with me."

"Don't say things like that. It's you I love, not what you wear. It wasn't anything like that. We're in a mess. We've got to face it. If this goes on much longer well go bust. Then what are we going to do?"

"We'll sell up and well get jobs. You can get a job any day, and so can I. So long as we stick together. Harry nothing matters. Do you think we should sell now, and cut our losses?"

"Not yet." My mind moved to Gloria again. "Let's hang on a little longer, Ann. We might get a break. I might think of something."

She kissed me and slid off my lap.

"All right. Eat your breakfast now before it gets cold. Perhaps it would be an idea if I got a job. It would help, wouldn't it?"

"Well hang on a bit longer. I don't want you away from here. You're a good lad, Ann. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Around ten o'clock one of my few clients brought his car in to have a tappet fixed. I talked him into changing his oil for the stuff I had overbought, and I told Tim to take care of it.

While I was talking to Tim, Bill came in.

"Hello, Harry, got some business?"

"Not much, but it's something."

"I'd like to have a word with you."

I looked at him.

"Come into the office, Bill. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing much." He followed me into the office and dosed the door. "Have a gasper?"

We lit up. He sat on the straight-backed chair and I sat behind the desk.

"How's Ann?"

"She's fine."

"That's good."

"We enjoyed the party last night. Nice of you to have celebrated with us, Bill."

Bill took off his peaked cap, scratched his head and put tin cap on again.

"That's all right. After all you and Ann are the only people I care about."

"That, goes for you too."

Bill looked at me and gave me an embarrassed grin.

"I know. We've had some good times together, haven't we?"

"And some bad ones."

"That's a fact."

Silence hung in the little room while we smoked. I kept looking at him, but he was staring down at the floor, a worried expression on his red, kindly face.

"What's on your mind, Bill?"

"You and Ann."

I didn't say anything.

"Maybe it's none of my business, but I'm fond of you two. Things are a bit rough, aren't they?"

"Yes, they're rough all right, but you don't have to bother your brains about that."

"Don't I? You know, Harry, I was under the impression that friends are supposed to help each other. If I got into a mess, I hope you would help me."

"Well, I would, but there's nothing you can do, Bill. It's just one of those things."

"There is something I can do. Last night was a bit of a wash out, wasn't it?"

I looked sharply at him, and he grinned.

"We just weren't in the mood for a party, Bill. We hoped you hadn't noticed."

"Not noticed? Blimey! You looked like a couple of pallbearers. What do you think I am? Blind?"

"Sorry, Bill, but we've got a lot on our minds right now."

"How bad is it, Harry?"

"Bad enough."

"Now look, will you stop acting as if I was a tax collector? I've known you for eight years. We're pals, aren't we? Just how bad is it?"

"Well, we owe eighty-nine pounds, and we've only got about fifty to meet the monthly bills. If we don't settle our bills, they'll stop supplies. That's how bad it is."

"Fifty quid would put you in the clear?"

"For this month it would, but then there's next month. We're beginning to realize, Bill, Eagle Street is a wash out."

"Let's take care of this month. Next month can take care of itself." He produced a chequebook from his pocket. "I'm going to lend you fifty quid, Harry, just as you would lend it to me if I was in a jam."

"You're not! Now look, Bill, it's damned nice of you, but I've got to see this thing through myself. If I take the money from you, I shall still be as badly off. I'd worry myself sick wondering how I was going to pay you back. No, I can't take it."

"Fifty quid will hold you over to the end of the month. In the meantime something might turn up. Come on, Harry, don't be proud. I don't give a damn when you pay it back."

"But you can't afford to lend me fifty quid, Bill, and you know it."

"It may surprise you, my boy, to know I have a hundred and fifty smackers in the bank. I've been saving ever since I left the Army. I have no one to spend the money on except myself. Now come on, say you'll take it. You'd do the same for me, and I wouldn't be proud."

I hesitated. Fifty pounds would be a godsend at this moment. The thought of getting rid of all the niggly little bills that were cluttering up my desk proved too big a temptation.

"Well, all right. It's damned nice of you. You may have to wait some time before I can give it to you back."

Bill grinned

"There's no hurry. Pay it back when you like."

I watched him write out the cheque, and when he tossed it across the desk, I shoved out my hand and gripped his.

"Thanks a lot, Bill. I'm damned grateful. There's just one thing, don't tell Ann about this. She wouldn't like it."

A surprised, puzzled expression jumped into his eyes.

"Is that a good thing to do, Harry? I thought you and Ann were like one: no secrets and nothing up your sleeve kind of thing."

I felt my face turn red.

"Well, we are like one, but this is a bit different I know she wouldn't like it, and it would worry her. Women aren't like men. Men make use of their friends: women don't. You know I'd help you if you wanted help, and I'm ready to accept your help when you offer it, but Ann wouldn't. I'd rather you didn't say anything to her about it."

"All right, but I think you're making a mistake." His red face looked unhappy. "You know, Harry, I'm as fond of Ann as I am of you. You two are a great couple. The way you've been together has been an eye-opener to me. I thought marriage was a cat and dog life until I saw you together. Don't spoil it, will you?"

"You're talking a lot of sentimental bosh." I tried to laugh.

"Ann and I will always be the same to each other."

"I hope so." He put his chequebook away and got up.

"Well, I'd better get back to the grindstone. Three more days and I start my new job. If Ann and you've got nothing better to do, how about going to the local flea pit on Saturday? They've got a good film on: Hepburn. I like that girl. What do you say?"

"Okay. Come and have supper with us; about seven."

"Let's hope it won't be such a damned awful wake as last night," Bill said, grinning.

I walked with him to the entrance of the garage just as a black Jaguar swung to the kerb.

At the wheel in a smart white mackintosh, but still without a hat, was Gloria.

The sight of her made my heart lurch against my side.

She gave me a wave to indicate she was coming in. I felt Bill looking at me.

"See you Saturday," he said, and stepped into the driving rain.

I grunted something as I waved Gloria to the space I had cleared.

Tim poked his head out from under the car he was working on and stared. I frowned at him, and after one more owlsh stare, he retired under the car again.

"What a horrible morning," Gloria said, opening the car door and getting out. She made no attempt to conceal her legs as she swung them to the floor. I had a quick, electrifying glimpse of blue frills, white thighs and sky-blue garters that had me gaping like any spotty youth at a peep show.

"Morning." I watched her adjust her mackintosh and reach in the car for her handbag and umbrella.

"I'll leave it here for today. I may use it tomorrow. If it's fine, could you have it cleaned?"

"Yes. I'll fix that."

She turned to look at the car.

"Nice bus, isn't she?"

"A cracker."

"Ever driven one?"

"No."

"You must try it one of these days. It goes like a bird, and has a pick-up that'll frighten the life out of you."

"I'd like to."

She looked over at Tim's long legs that were sticking out from below the car he was working on. Then she looked at me and over at the office, raising her eyebrows.

"I'll just take down the log-book details if you'll come into the office."

She smiled and gave me a quick, mischievous wink.

When we were in the office, she closed the door and leaned against it.

"Your garage isn't very private, is it, Harry?"

"Tim's all right." My voice was husky.

She raised her eyes and looked up at the ceiling, then at me.

"She's out shopping."

"You soon cotton on, don't you?" She laughed, wrinkling her nose at me. "I don't mean to be mysterious, but some wives don't like girls talking to their husbands."

"Ann's not like that." I felt the hairs on the nape at my neck rise the way a cat's back bristles when it sees a dog.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to drop a brick." She thrust her hands into her mackintosh pockets, smiling at me. "I want you, to come to my party on Saturday night. There's a man coming who might be able to help you. He's in the radio business, and it occurred to me, it might be a good thing if you met him."

"Radio business? I don't know much about radios."

"You wouldn't have to. He told me he's looking for an agency that would carry his spare parts. The agency has to be in the West End. You have plenty of room out here. You could stock his stuff. You would be dealing with the trade. They would have to come to you if they wanted spares. Don't you think that would be a good idea?"

I saw at once it was a good idea.

"I'd jump at the chance if he would let me have the agency, but would he?"

She smiled.

"He might. I have a little influence with him. Come and meet him on Saturday. You have a dinner jacket?"

I very nearly said I hadn't but stopped myself in time.

"Is it going to be one of those parties?"

"Of course." Her eyebrows shot up. "Bring your wife too if you like, or do you think we'd better make this a business meeting? Wives can get in the way, can't they?"

"I wouldn't bring Ann."

She nodded, looked down at her neat reverse calf shoes, then up at me again.

"Then that's settled? Come to my flat. It's on the second floor above Kenwick's, the jeweller's, halfway down on the right hand side. There's a side entrance. Come about eight o'clock."

I suddenly remembered I had promised Bill we'd go to the movies with him on Saturday night. My brain worked fast. I could duck out and let Bill take Ann: in that way Ann wouldn't be alone for the evening.

"Would you do me a favour?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Would you phone me about seven on Saturday? Just call the number, and when I answer, hang up."

The black sparkling eyes studied my face.

"Preparing an alibi, Harry?"

I felt myself turn hot.

"Does it matter? Will you do it?"

She nodded. "I'll do it."

I wanted her to go now before Ann came back. I made a move to the door.

"Who was that funny little man you were talking to just now, Harry?" she asked casually as she

picked up her handbag from the desk.

"That's Bill Yates. He and I have been pals for years."

"What is he—a postman?"

"At the moment, but he's got promotion. He's going to be a guard on Monday."

"A guard? Do they have guards in post offices?"

"They have them on the vans when they're carrying valuable registered mail."

"Do they? I didn't know. He looked nice."

"He is nice. He's my best friend."

She walked with me down the garage to the entrance.

"Good-bye, Harry."

"Good-bye and thanks."

As she walked through the entrance into the street, Ann came hurrying in, sheltering under an umbrella. They passed so close they could have touched if they had stretched out their hands. I saw Gloria look at Ann's lisle stockings and stout, shabby brogue shoes, then she went on down the street.

Ann hadn't seen her, sheltering as she had been under the umbrella.

I suddenly noticed Tim's head poking out from under the car. He looked at Ann, then at me. I felt like a pickpocket caught in the act.

chapter four

Around three o'clock on Friday afternoon I told Tim I was going down to Ward's in Charing Cross Road to get a few spare Gnome bulbs.

After I got the bulbs, I went to Moss Bros, and hired an evening dress suit. I had cashed Bill's cheque so I had the necessary money and the transaction went off without a hitch.

I was also given a suitcase to take the suit, shirt and accessories, and I took it to Charing Cross Station and lodged it with the Left Luggage Office.

Don't think I was happy about this deception. I wasn't, but I couldn't bring myself to tell Ann that Gloria had invited me to a party, and I wasn't taking her with me.

This would be the first time since we had married that I was going out without her; and worse, going out with another woman. I kept telling myself that it was a business date; that it was a chance in a lifetime. I assured myself that I would be a reckless fool to have refused Gloria's invitation, but I knew I was doing the wrong thing by not insisting that Ann should come with me. But the idea of telling her that Gloria had invited me to her flat after Ann had actually asked me if Gloria had been the cause of our misunderstanding, was beyond me.

I knew I couldn't have looked her in the face if I told her.

Besides, I knew she wouldn't go: she couldn't go. She hadn't an evening dress. I took the easy way out by deciding not to tell her.

Saturday was fine, after a week of solid rain. During the afternoon, Ann made preparations for supper and spent some time pressing her only decent dress. She was getting a big bang out of going to the movies with Bill and me. We hadn't been to the movies for six months, and it made me feel pretty bad to see her excitement, knowing I wasn't going with them.

She had made a rabbit pie for supper: Bill's favourite dish, and around seven she came into the sitting-room to announce everything was ready.

She looked bright-eyed and pretty in her simple dress, and looking up at her as she stood before me for my approval, I felt a pang of conscience that dug right into my guts.

"You look terrific, Ann." I got up and walked around her.

"Who says I haven't married a beautiful girl?"

"Do I look all right?" She held out her arms and I kissed her. "Everything's ready. I hope Bill won't be late."

"It's ten to. He'll be along. Trust Bill. He won't miss the rabbit pie."

"Who's talking about rabbit pie?" Bill asked from the doorway.

He had got on his best blue suit, and his red face was freshly shaved. As he came into the room, he held out a big bunch of clove pinks with an embarrassed smirk.

"Here you are, Ann. I don't suppose they'll last long. I bent down one of the Spivs at the corner."

To see the way Ann's face lit up as she took the flowers made me feel a little sick. I was in two minds not to go to Gloria's place. I had never seen Ann looking prettier. Even Bill, who never noticed things like that, had something to say about her.

"You know, Harry, you've married a lovely girl. First time I've noticed it."

Ann laughed.

"You be quiet, Bill. That's not a bit complimentary. Come on and eat. We don't want to be late."

We sat down at the table at a few minutes to seven. Any moment now, Gloria would ring, and the phone call would start a train of lies that night to go on and on, and have no stopping.

The thought spoilt my appetite and made me ashamed of myself.

Bill was too busy with his pie to notice, but Ann was quick to see something was wrong.

She smiled at me a little uncertainly.

"All right, Harry?"

"Fine." I gave her a fixed grin. "This is terrific. Isn't it, Bill?"

"It's all right. If ever I marry, I'll make my wife learn how to make this but I bet she won't be able to make it so well as Ann does."

Then the telephone bell rang.

Ann half started up.

"It's all right. I'll take it," I said, and jumped for the door. I was in such a panic to head Ann off that I upset my chair and knocked my knife and fork on the floor.

As I opened the door, I saw surprise on Bill's face while Ann sat rigid, her eyes suddenly anxious.

I went down the stairs to the office and lifted the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Well, you told me to ring, Harry, and I've rung."

The sound of that husky voice sent a tingle up my spine.

"Thanks." I was whispering into the mouthpiece. "I'll be along just after eight."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you. Everything all right?"

Again we were conspirators.

"Yes. Good bye for now."

"Good-bye, Harry."

Slowly I replaced the receiver. I stood by the desk for some moments. I didn't have to lie to Ann. I could go up and tell her that Gloria had phoned and had asked me to her flat to meet this man. I could tell her about the agency. But I knew I couldn't face her and Bill, knowing there was more to it than meeting this man.

I went to the office door and looked down the length of the dark garage. I tried to screw up my courage to go upstairs and get it over.

"Harry? What is it?"

"Old Lewis. He's broken down again. I'll have to go, Ann."

The words came out of my mouth without me thinking.

"Oh, Harry! You can't go tonight."

I went slowly up the stairs.

"I'm sorry, darling, but that's the way it is," I said and moving forward, I put my arm around her, pulling her against me so I shouldn't have to meet her eyes. "I've got to go. I've too few clients to let one down."

"What's up?" Bill asked, getting up from the table.

"A breakdown out at Edgware. I've got to go. He's an old customer. Now look, you take Ann to the movie. I'll get back as fast as I can."

"Must you go, Harry? Damn it! Can't he get fixed up somewhere else?" Bill asked. "Edgware's a hell of a way."

"He could get fixed up somewhere else, but if he does, I shan't see him again. He's my best

customer, Bill. I've got to go."

"Harry, I don't want to go to the movies without you."

I patted her arm.

"Oh rot! Of course you must go. I haven't time to argue about it. I've got to get into my overalls and get the truck out. You go with Bill."

"No. I'm sure Bill will understand. I'll come with you, Harry." I hadn't expected that. For a moment I was thrown off balance.

"Don't be silly, Ann. You'd be in my way. You go with Bill."

The moment I had spoken I knew I couldn't have said anything worse. I saw her stiffen, and her face flush.

"I'm sorry, Harry. You're quite right, I am being silly."

She turned to Bill. "Do you mind taking me, Bill? I would like to go."

"Of course well go," Bill said.

"Is there anything I can do, Harry, so you can get off quickly?" She didn't look at me as she spoke. If she had slapped my face I couldn't have felt more sick with myself.

"It's okay. Finish your supper. I'll go and change."

As I walked into the bedroom I caught Bill's eye. I could see he suspected something was up. He didn't miss much. As I took out a pair of clean white overalls from the wardrobe I saw my hands were shaking.

I went downstairs, opened the garage doors, started up the truck and drove it into the street. Then I went upstairs again.

They were sitting at the table. Ann wasn't eating, but Bill was making short work of the fruit salad as if nothing had happened.

"Well, I'm off. Have a good time, you two."

They looked up, but I was already backing out of the room. So I shouldn't have to meet their eyes, I lit a cigarette.

"I hope you'll get on all right, Harry," Ann said quietly.

"I'll fix it. Have a good time."

"So long, Harry," Bill said.

"So long."

I went downstairs and got into the truck, feeling as if I had committed the meanest act of my life.

I parked the truck in a car park of the Strand and went along to Charing Cross Station where I picked up the suitcase.

I had a wash in the station convenience and changed there, packing my suit and overalls in the case. I returned the case to the Left Luggage office.

It was a quarter to eight by the time I came out of the station. I had plenty of time so I walked to Bond Street. I reached Gloria's flat a few minutes after eight o'clock.

The side entrance to the flat was down a mews. The front door was painted a vivid scarlet, and there were geraniums and lobelia in the window boxes, giving the flat a gay, continental air. Nearby three big cars were parked: a Cadillac, a Humber and the 1939 Buick I'd seen already.

I stood hesitating, looking up at the windows, still not sure if I should ring the bell or sneak away.

I rang the bell.

After a few minutes delay, the door opened.

"Hello, Harry."

I took a step forward, then stopped. She was in a black evening dress, cut so low I could see the tops of her breasts and the furrow between them. In the evening light her shoulders were porcelain white, and the overhead lamp in the hall lit up the brilliants around the top of her dress and sent flashes of light from a big paste diamond clip she wore in her hair.

She looked the most exciting and sensual woman I had ever seen, and just to look at her, sent a feeling through me so violent it scared me.

"My! You do look handsome." Her hand reached out and took mine. "The other boys will be green with envy."

"You look as if you've stepped straight out of a movie."

"Do I? That's the first compliment I've been paid this evening. I put this dress on specially for your benefit. Like it?"

"It's terrific: a knock-out."

"Well, come on up and meet the others."

"Is he here?"

"Yes. His name's Dix: Ed Dix. When the party's warmed up I'll find the opportunity for you to talk to him."

She led me up a flight of steep stairs and into a long, low-ceiling room that was full of tobacco smoke. The curtains had been drawn, shutting out the waning evening light and small parchment-shaded lamps, set in the walls, were alight.

"People: meet Harry Collins, my new boyfriend," Gloria said from the doorway.

That surprised me, but there was nothing I could do about it. I let her lead me into the middle of the room.

"Reading from left to right," she went on, speaking rapidly, "Betty, Connie, Paula and Madge. Don't let them get their claws into you, and girls, remember, he's my property."

The girls were expensively dressed, all, over made-up: two blondes, a red head and a platinum blonde: none of them had any attractions for me. I gave each of them a stiff little bow while Gloria slid her arm through mine and watched me with a possessive air that embarrassed me.

They all smiled. Paula, the red head, winked, while Madge, one of the blondes, rolled her eyes at me.

A slight tug at my arm half-turned me to meet the four men.

Three of them were in evening dress; the fourth was in a pearl-grey lounge suit, cut on the American style. He wore a hand painted tie of horses' heads on a yellow background. He was tall and massively built, about twenty-five or six, with small dark eyes that stared through me, a small over red mouth and a long, massive jaw.

"Eddie, I want you to meet Harry Collins."

So this was Ed Dix. I disliked him on sight.

"Hullo; how's yourself?" he asked, moving towards me with a slow, lounging gait. He spoke with a marked American accent.

"Pretty good. Glad to meet you."

He gave me a jeering little smile.

"You are? That's fine. Meet the boys: Joe, Berry and Louis."

The three men averaged about twenty-seven or eight years of age; Berry was short and thickset

with a white, hard face and flaming red hair; Joe was big; nearly as powerful-looking as Dix. He had the battered, squashed face of a fighter. Louis was fair and effeminate looking. He had a pencil-lined moustache and a carnation in his button-hole.

I didn't like the look of any of these three any more than I liked the look of Dix, but they were obviously determined to be amiable and each shook hands with me, grinning.

"Well, now you've met everyone, have a drink," Gloria said, leading me across the room to an elaborate bar. She slipped behind it. "What'll you have? Whisky?"

"Thanks."

My eyes went to her half-concealed breasts again.

While she busied herself with an ice shaker one of the girls put on a record on the radiogram. Soon all four couples were dancing while Gloria leaned against the bar, watching them, and from time to time looking at me.

I had time now to examine the room I was in. It was expensively furnished with modern, showy furniture. The floor was polished parquet, and big lounging setter arm-chairs stood against the walls. In a corner was the largest television set I'd ever seen.

"Don't you want to dance with me, Harry?"

"I'm not much of a hand at dancing now."

She came out from behind the bar.

"Don't you want to try?"

I put my arm round her, and she pressed up against me, I could feel the soft curves of her breasts against my shirt front and smell the perfume in her hair. I got that feeling again, ripping the insides out of me.

Dancing with her was like dancing by myself. At one time Ann and I used to dance quite a bit, but since I had bought the garage, there had been no time for dancing. I soon found I wasn't as rusty as I thought I was going to be, and after a couple of dances, Gloria smiled up at "Who said you couldn't dance? You're as good as Ed."

"Is that a compliment?"

"I'll say. There's nothing Ed does badly: nothing at all."

Dix was dancing with Madge. He seemed to be content to stand in a corner with her and sway his body to the rhythm of the music and not move his feet.

It was only when the record stopped and everyone came over to the bar for drinks that I suddenly thought of Ann.

I was glad and relieved that I hadn't brought her. She would have been hopelessly out of place among these smooth, over-dressed girls. Looking at them in the brighter light of the bar, as they clamoured for drinks, I wondered uneasily if they weren't prostitutes: the four of them had the hard, glittering eyes, the strident voices, the easy familiarity of the better class of street-walker. The Idea startled me.

Looking at the men, I saw now they weren't in a much better class. Berry could have been a bookie's tout, Joe a small-time boxer, Louis anything: a gigolo possibly.

I couldn't place Dix. He was obviously an American.

There was something about him that warned me he could be dangerous. As he lolled against the bar, chewing gum, a whisky in his hand, his small dark eyes glittering as he kept looking sideways at Gloria, he reminded me of a typical gangster you see on the movies.

"Harry dances divinely," Gloria announced. "Ed, you'll have to look to your laurels."

"That so? I should care." He half turned, leaning his back against the bar to stare at me. "I'll show you something you can't do, pally."

He pushed himself away from the bar, went over to the fireplace and picked up a heavy steel poker.

"Ed is about to show off," Gloria said and laughed.

He held the poker in his massive hands, bent it into a hoop, and then without any apparent effort straightened it again.

"Can't do that, can you, pally?"

I shook my head.

"That takes some doing."

He tossed the poker with a clatter into the fireplace and came back to the bar.

"For heaven's sake!" Gloria said crossly, "do you have to show off and spoil my poker? We all know you're the strongest man in the world."

An ugly gleam jumped into Dix's eyes.

"Talk when you're spoken to, smartie pants, or you'll get a slap where it'll do you the most good."

Gloria's face hardened, but she forced a laugh. "What a way to talk! Do you still live in a cave, Eddie?"

He caught her wrist, swung her round and slapped her behind all in one swift movement. The loud whack of his hand made a pistol shot noise. Gloria screamed sharply.

I felt blood rush into my face. My fists closed, and I set myself to throw a punch at him but Joe hastily stepped between us, his back to me, facing Dix.

"Aw, Ed, that's no way to treat a lady," he said mildly, moving to the right as I tried to get around him, blocking me off again.

"Forget it," Dix said, eyeing me over Joe's head. "She's too ready with her smart cracks."

"Oh, shut up, the lot of you!" Gloria exclaimed. "You're nothing better than a heavy-fisted ape, Ed." She rubbed her seat, grimacing. "I bet you've left your fingerprints on me."

"I bet I haven't," Dix said, suddenly grinning. "Let's have a look."

"Really, Ed!" She turned to Louis. "Put a record on, and let's dance."

The tension died down and the others began to dance.

Gloria slipped into my arms and I steered her away from the others.

"Did he hurt you?"

She laughed.

"You mustn't mind Ed. He's a bit free with his hands, but he means nothing by it. You looked as if you were going to start a fight."

I was still pretty steamed up.

"I was going to sock him."

"Don't ever do that Harry. He's much too strong and slick. He's been in the ring with men like Bakshi and Mauriello back in the States. Don't ever think you could handle him. Even Joe, who used to be a pro wouldn't fight him."

"All the same, if he hits you again, I'm going to hit him."

She looked up at me, her eyes sparkling.

"I believe you would, Harry, but he didn't mean anything."

We had more drinks, more dancing and still more drinks.

Berry got a little tight. I was getting a little tight myself. I wasn't used to drinking whisky, and every time a record stopped, I found a fresh drink standing on the bar for me; and they were powerful ones.

An argument started up suddenly in a corner between Berry and Madge. She was as tight as he was, but not as tight as he seemed to want her to be.

He was trying to pull her into another room when Gloria saw what was going on.

"Ed! Please go over and break that up. I don't care what he does to her outside my flat, but I'll be damned if he does it in my bedroom!"

Dix grinned lazily.

"So what? Let the man alone."

"If you don't break it up, I'm going to!"

He shrugged and went over to Berry.

"He's just an animal when he gets liquor in him," Gloria said to me, wrinkling her nose.

Dix said something to Berry, who let go of Madge and sat down, scowling. Dix came back to the bar.

"Ed, isn't it time you had a talk with Harry?"

"Okay. Let's go into the other room, Harry."

"Don't lie on my bed, please, like you did last time,"

Gloria said.

"What's a bed for but to lie on?"

He jerked his head at me and I followed him across the room. As I passed Berry he said with a sneering grin, "Are you two girls going to powder your noses?"

Dix turned and reached Berry's side with the swiftness of a streak of lightning. He slapped Berry's face before Berry could get his arm up to protect himself. He hit Berry so hard, Berry fell off the settee on to the floor.

"Ed!" Gloria screamed.

The other girls backed quickly against the wall, out of the way. Louis and Joe stood motionless. Louis looked scared, while Joe grinned, thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets.

Dix stood over Berry who lay on his side looking up at him, one side of his white face a flaming red.

"What did you say, you punk?" Dix asked in a dangerously quiet voice.

"I didn't say anything," Berry said, not moving.

"Then don't say anything."

Dix eased his massive shoulders under his full draped coat and toned to me.

"Come on; let's talk."

He went into the other room without looking back. Still startled and a little shaken by the unbelievable speed at which he had moved across the room to hit Berry, I followed him and shut the door.

I found myself in a lavishly furnished bedroom of blue and silver decor. A double bed with a quilted headboard of blue satin stood by one wall. Walnut built-in cupboards covered another wall. There was a huge mirror, lighted by strip lamps that took up most of the third wall, and a dressing-table, covered with bottles of lotions, perfumes and boxes of creams faced the bed.

Dix was wandering around the room, his hands in his pockets.

"Some joint, isn't it? How would you like to sleep in all these frills?"

"I wouldn't, but most girls would."

"Yeah. I guess that's right. Park fanny somewhere. I want to talk to you."

He went over to the bed and stretched out on it. He groped for a cigarette, threw me one and lit up.

"Gloria tells me you own a big garage in Eagle Street. Did she tell you I'm looking for a West End Agency?"

"She mentioned it."

"Eagle Street would suit me. Think you could handle it?"

"I don't see why not. What exactly would I have to do?"

"Not much at first. Later, you'd have to keep a stock of all parts my company manufactures, and be damned sure you didn't run out of stock of anything. There are about a hundred and fifteen spare parts to the television set we manufacture, and each part has a code number. The trade will order the part by its number and you'll supply it. That's all there's to it. You get ten per cent of the gross."

"What would that be worth?"

He shrugged.

"Depends, of course. It couldn't be less than fifty quid a week."

I tried not to show surprise, but he was watching me closely, and I knew I had shown him this was much more than I had been hoping for.

"Sounds all right."

He gave me his lazy, insolent grin.

"It is all right. This is going to be a life saver for you if it comes off, isn't it?"

"Well, things are pretty duff at the moment."

"Suppose I come down and look the place over? If it's big enough we might do business. Can't promise anything just yet, but I don't see why we shouldn't work together. Do you?"

I wasn't at all sure about going into partnership with a man of his violence. Within the past half hour I had seen two examples of his temper. I didn't like him. There was something about him that made me distrust him. But I thought of the money he was offering, and that more than outweighed my prejudice against him. With fifty pounds a week coming in steadily, I should be out of the red and into the black.

"I'll look after my end of it if you'll give me the chance."

He gave me a sideways look.

"You'll have to, pally. If you pull your weight, we'll get on. If you don't, you'll get out."

"Fair enough."

"Okay, that's settled then." He rolled off the bed, leaving an impression of his big frame on the pillow and the pale blue eiderdown. "I'll be along some time Monday afternoon to look the joint over. Then well have a final discussion."

"I'll be expecting you."

We went back into the big room again.

Berry, Louis, Madge and Connie were playing cards.

Gloria and Joe were matching coins at the bar. The other two girls weren't in the room.

"Where'er Paula and Betty?" Dix asked, going over to the bar.

"They've gone home," Gloria said.

"That's good. You other guys go home, too. Take your skirts with you. The party's over."

I expected Gloria to protest, but she didn't say anything.

The four at the table put away the cards and got up. The girls went into the bedroom for their coats. Berry and Louis stood a little uncomfortably by the door. Berry's face was beginning to show a bruise where Dix had slapped him.

"See you guys tomorrow," Dix said. "Usual time."

"Okay," Joe said.

I looked at my watch. It was half-past eleven. Ann would be home by now. I hadn't realized how quickly time had gone.

"I must be moving myself."

"Take it easy. Let's get rid of these punks first," Dix said, unwrapping a stick of chewing gum.

"Give him a drink, Gloria."

"I won't have another."

"Give the guy a drink!"

While Gloria was fixing a whisky, the girls came out with their coats on. Their leave taking was uneasy, and they seemed glad to be going.

When they had gone, Dix said, "Looks like Harry and me are going to work together, Gloria. If his place is right, we'll fix it on Monday."

Gloria smiled at me, her eyes lighting up.

"I'm glad. It'll be fun for you and Ed to work together. I'll see more of you, too."

"Gloria's nobody's fool," Dix said, apparently in a high good humour. "She's given me some pretty good ideas in the past, and this one may work out right too." He raised his glass.

"Here's hoping, Harry."

I finished my whisky.

"I've got to get off home now," I said, looking at my wrist-watch uneasily.

"What's the hurry?" Dix asked, raising his heavy eyebrows. "Come with us to the Millionaire's Club. We're going to make a night of it."

"No, I'm sorry. Thanks all the same, but I've to get back."

"He has a wife, Ed," Gloria said, smiling. "You wait until you are married. You won't be able to stay out late just when you think you will."

I felt my face turn hot.

"Won't I?" Dix said. "Don't kid yourself. I'll stay out as long as I want to, and if she doesn't like it, you know what she can do."

"You cave men give me a pain."

Dix grinned.

"I gave you a pain just now, and if you don't watch it, I'll give you another."

Gloria backed quickly away, laughing.

"No more of that, please. I'm a mass of bruises as it is.

Well, Harry, if you must go, you must."

"I get up early. I've got to get some sleep tonight."

"Well, so long," Dix said, and gave me a jeering little smile. He pushed out his massive hand. His grip nearly cracked my fingers joints and made me wince. "See you Monday."

"Yes."

"I'll come down with you," Gloria said.

We went down the stairs to the dimly lit hall.

"It's going to be all right, Harry. He's taken a liking to you. I know the signs. He doesn't shake hands with people he doesn't like."

"Thanks to you."

She smiled up at me.

"I've taken a liking to you too, Harry."

We stood looking at each other. There was that thing in her eyes again, and it suddenly set me on fire. She moved forward slightly, and I had her in my arms.

"Better not, Harry," she murmured, but she raised her face, her arms sliding round my neck.

My mouth came down on hers. I felt her lips tighten against mine, then soften and open. We stood in the dim light, straining against each other.

Kissing her was like being caught up in the vortex of a tornado. When she pushed me away, my breath rasped at the back of my throat, my heart was slamming against my side, and there seemed to be an iron band around my chest that was suffocating me.

"Good night, Harry."

She opened the front door. In the light of the moon I saw her breasts were rising and falling rapidly, and her eyes were glittering.

I moved unsteadily through the doorway. I tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come. I was still standing there, trying to control my breathing, looking at her, when she quietly closed the door, shutting me out in the moonlit mews.

chapter five

As I walked from Gloria's flat to Charing Cross Station to collect my suitcase, I worked out a plan of campaign.

That good night kiss, plus the whisky, had hopped me up as if I had swallowed a handful of Benzedrine tablets. I was chock full of confidence that I could handle the situation now. I was going to make fifty pounds a week! Ann would have to know about it, of course, but that could be taken care of without hurting her. It was essential she shouldn't be hurt. I couldn't understand why I had been such a damned fool as to have lied to her. In my present mood, it now seemed ridiculous not to have told her I couldn't go to the movies with her because I had an important business date. I had to straighten that out as soon as I got home. It would mean telling her a few more lies, but that couldn't be helped.

Then there was Gloria. I didn't love her, of course, but I was certainly infatuated with her. Men get infatuated with girls, I argued to myself, in spite of being genuinely in love with their wives. It happens every day of the week; it has always happened, and it will always happen. You pass through this life but once, I said to myself, and you would be a mug to miss such an opportunity. Gloria wants you to make love to her.

You want to make love to her. Of course it isn't strictly playing the game with Ann, but men are doing that kind of thing every night, so why shouldn't you? What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve about. So long as Ann doesn't find out, and I'll take damned good care she doesn't find out, where's the harm?

Have an affair with Gloria, I said to myself, and then finish with it. You'll settle down with Ann all the better for getting Gloria out of your system. I didn't kid myself that Gloria was in love with me: nothing like that. Love didn't come into it.

This was a physical storm through which we were both passing. Get it over, and there'd be nothing more to it.

I really believed what I was telling myself. So long as Ann didn't find out, all would be well. Go ahead, I thought, don't take any chances, but don't miss this opportunity.

As I walked down Eagle Street, I felt het up and emotional about Ann. She was a good kid. No one better. I loved her more than anyone else in the world. This thing with Gloria wouldn't make any difference to my feelings towards Ann. I'd get it over and out of my system. The thing to do was to get it over as quickly as I could, and then forget about her. It would be as easy as that.

The light was on in the bedroom when I pushed open the door. Ann was in bed, her hair about her shoulders, her eyes serious and worried as she looked at me.

"Well, I'm back."

"Yes, Harry."

I came into the room and closed the door.

"Did you enjoy the movie?"

"It was all right."

I came to the foot of the bed and grinned at her. The whisky was still hitting me, and I felt right on top of the world.

I'll take that soared, worried look out of your eye in a minute, darling, I said to myself. Wait 'til you hear what I'm going to tell you.

I saw her flinch.

"It's late, Harry. Hadn't you better get undressed?"

"I said I had a confession to make. Aren't you curious?"

"What is it?"

I saw her hands clench into fists, and she quickly put them under the sheet.

"Old Lewis didn't call tonight: I was lying."

She continued to stare at me for a long moment, then: "I knew that, Harry."

That jarred me. It spoilt my opening. I stared back at her.

"You knew? How did you know?"

"Does it matter? It was rather obvious, Harry. You'd better get undressed."

"Now look, you're thinking things you have no right to think. I only lied to you because I didn't want to raise your hopes. I shouldn't have done it, but I wasn't sure if this offer was going to come off. I didn't want you to be disappointed."

She was still staring at me, still worried, but suddenly not so scared.

"I don't know what you mean."

I sat on the bed by her side.

"Of course you don't! Remember I told you I had to think up an idea to get us out of this mess? Well, I thought of one. There's a company making television sets. As a matter of fact old Lewis mentioned the company to me when I was fixing his breakdown. He said they were looking for a West End Agency. I decided to do something about it. I made inquiries and got into touch with the right man. His name's Ed Dix. You remember when I went out yesterday afternoon to get those auto bulbs? Well, I went to see him. At first he didn't seem interested, but I kept at him, and finally he said he would have to talk to his people, and he would phone me. That was him phoning tonight when I said it was Lewis." That's what a lot of whisky did to me. The lies came so convincingly they almost convinced me. "He asked me to come over to his place right away. He still sounded doubtful, but I had an idea I could make him come down on my side. I couldn't be sure, of course, so I didn't tell you or Bill. I wanted to be absolutely sure before I broke the news. Well, it's in the bag, Ann, if he thinks the garage is big enough, and of course it is big enough. He's coming to look at it on Monday, and I'm sure now I'll clinch it. And listen, Ann, this is something big: it could really grow with any luck. He says I couldn't make less than fifty pounds a week! Think of that! Fifty a week! Why, damn it! I'll buy you a dozen pairs of slacks now: anything you like!"

She sat up, the scared, worried look gone, and her eyes were sparkling.

"Oh, Harry! You worried me so!"

I put my arm round her and pulled her close.

"I know I shouldn't have lied to you, Ann, but how did I know you would see through me? I thought I had you and Bill properly fooled. If I had even guessed you didn't believe I was going out to Lewis I would have told you the truth. Damn it! Why didn't you tell me? Why pretend you believed me when you didn't? You've been thinking all kinds of nonsense, haven't you?"

"I'm sorry, Harry. I really am sorry."

"I think you should be, Ann. Not so long ago you were saying we mustn't lose faith in each other. Well, you couldn't have had much faith in me tonight."

"Oh, Harry, forgive me. I was so worried. I did think . . ."

"Never mind what you thought." I didn't want to hear her say she thought I was going to Gloria. "It's

all right now. Monday, if we have any luck, I'm going to be the boss of an agency that'll pay fifty quid a week. Think of it!"

"This is the answer to my prayer," she said, and threw her arms round my neck. "I know you think I'm silly about this, Harry, but God is being good to us. I prayed last night for us. I prayed for us just now before you came in. I couldn't believe anything could be badly wrong: not between you and me, Harry."

chapter six

Just when I was beginning to think he wasn't coming, Dix drove his big blue and red Cadillac into the garage.

I had been like a cat on hot bricks all day. I had put on my best suit after I had finished serving petrol first thing in the morning, and I had sat in my office, waiting while the hours dragged by.

Dix was at the wheel. Beside him lounged Berry. Dix was wearing a black suit with a white pinstripe, and a pearl-grey slouch hat. His dazzling hand-painted tie was out of place with a suit like that: come to that, it would have been out of place with any suit.

Berry wore a grey suit with a black slouch hat pulled down over one eye. They looked as if they had just stepped out of a Humphrey Bogart gangster picture: the car, the clothes, the way they spilled out of the car, leaving the doors hanging open, was the nearest thing to Hollywood I'd seen off the movies.

"Hello there," Dix said, catching sight of me. "So this is the joint." He stood with his hands in his pockets and stared around. "Got power laid on?"

"Yes: there's ten power points."

"The light's lousy, isn't it?"

"Well, we use inspection lamps when we work. It saves juice, but I could have something rigged up if you think we should have more light."

He grunted.

"There's plenty of room, anyway: the damn place's like a barn. Look, pally, mind if we wander around and take a look at the place? When we're through, I'll come to your office. That it there?"

"Yes."

A little deflated, I returned to the office and sat down. I watched them wandering around the garage through the office window.

Ann put her head around the rear door.

"Have they come?"

She was wearing her best dress for the occasion, and her face was flushed with excitement.

"They are out there now."

"Goodness! Is that their car?"

"Terrific isn't it? He must be rolling in money."

She moved to the window and peered into the garage.

"Don't let them see you."

"He's rather flash-looking, Harry."

"He's an American. You know how Americans look."

"I wish he didn't look quite so flashy. Who's the other man?"

"One of his pals, I think. His name's Berry. I don't know anything more about him."

Ann moved away from the window. She now looked worried.

"Are you quite sure they're all right?"

I stared at her.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's something about them . . ."

"For goodness' sake! Of course they're all right. Now look, be a dear and leave this to me. There's no point in you meeting them. As a matter of fact, I'm not anxious to get too friendly with them. It's much to keep this on a business footing."

She gave me a puzzled look.

"All right, Harry, but don't rush into anything. Let's discuss it before you commit yourself."

I pushed her towards the door, leading to the stairs.

"Run along, Ann. You talk as if they were a couple of crooks."

When she had gone, I went to the window and watched Dix and Berry as they stood in the entrance to the garage, looking across the street.

I didn't want to admit it to Ann, but these two made me also uneasy. I thought of the four girls I had met at Gloria's party. I was pretty sure they were no good, perhaps not exactly prostitutes, but not much better. Why on earth was Gloria associating with such women? Maybe Dix had brought them along with the other three men, and Gloria hadn't known they were coming. How friendly was Gloria with Dix? The way he had slapped her that night pointed to a familiarity between them that disconcerted me.

Just then Dix came walking quickly down the garage towards me, leaving Berry at the entrance. I opened the door of the office.

"Come on in."

He stood in the doorway, looking around.

"Hell, this is no better than a rabbit hutch."

"It doesn't have to be," I said, suddenly annoyed by his criticism. "It's big enough for me to keep a set of books in, so why should I want it any bigger?"

He gave me a sideways glance, then grinned.

"Take it easy, pally; maybe you're right at that."

I pushed a chair towards him and he sat astride it, pushing his hat to the back of his head, his fingers dipping into his waistcoat pocket for a packet of cigarettes. He offered me one, lit it for me and then his.

"What do you think of it?" I asked impatiently.

"It's okay. Park your fanny. I want to talk to you."

I sat down, my heart beginning to bump against my ribs.

If the garage was all right, then there was nothing to stop us going ahead, I thought Fifty pounds a week! My mind began to race over the things I could buy with that money.

"Maybe I gave you a wrong impression on Saturday night," Dix said, his small bright eyes on my face. "I think I said something about starting an agency here for spare parts. Right?"

I stiffened to attention.

"Why, yes: that's what you said."

"Yeah, I thought I did." He gave me his lazy, insolent grin. "Well, that's the general idea, of course, but it may take nine months to a year before we're in the position to supply spare parts."

"You didn't say that on Saturday."

"I know I didn't. I wanted to see this dump first. The fact is, pally, we're only in the experimental stage as yet. Our set is going to revolutionize the trade. Until we get it going properly, we're keeping it a secret. The less people talk about it the better for us. I had to mislead you on Saturday until I was sure this was the place I was looking for."

"I see. Well, that's a bit of a letdown. I was banking on starting right away."

He shook his head.

"Can't do that. The set isn't working right yet."

"Then we don't do business? The agency's off?"

"No, it's not off. In a year, maybe less, it'll be very much on."

"By that time, I shan't be here."

"You won't?"

"My business is shot to hell. I was hoping the agency would pull me out of the red. I can't wait a year."

"I'm not asking you to wait a year." He leaned forward too flick ash into the top of a tin I keep on my desk for that purpose. "I'm prepared to rent a piece of this garage for fifteen quid a week. That any good to you?"

I stand at him.

"Why do you want to rent it if you're not starting the agency for a year?"

"It's like this. Our works is at Maidenhead. I'm fed-up with going backwards and forwards to Maidenhead every day. Too much of a waste of time. My idea, until the agency starts up, is to set a small experimental station here. It'll save me time and it'll help you hang on until we get going. Would fifteen quid a week hold you?"

"Well, it would help. How much space would you want?"

"Come outside and I'll show you."

We walked down the garage to the entrance.

"I want the whole of this side, including the window, back to thirty feet."

"It would be more convenient for you to have the rear end of the garage. If cars came in for service, they'll disturb you, and besides, you'll be in my way here."

Dix shook his head.

"I want to be as near to the traffic as I can get. Our set aims to cut out all traffic interference, and that's why I pinked on Eagle Street. The traffic's more or less continuous, and if we can put up a performance here, we can put a performance anywhere. Fifteen quid a week's not bad considering you can't pay much more than five for the whole of this dump."

He wasn't far out. My actual rent was just under five pounds, plus rates.

Well, it was certainly a letdown after expecting fifty pounds a week, but fifteen was better than nothing: a lot better.

"Would you want me to do anything?"

Dix shook his head.

"This is an expert's job. Berry and Louis will be working on it. They've been doing the experimental work at Maidenhead."

I stared at him, an uneasy feeling of suspicion running through me. No one would ever convince me that Berry and Louis were radio experts: especially Louis.

Dix was quick to see my expression of disbelief.

"Look, pally, you needn't go ahead if you don't want to. I'm offering you seventy-five pounds in cash for a month's rent, but I don't want you looking at me like that. This is my business, not yours. All you're doing is renting me a piece of this dump. Do you want to make the deal or don't you?"

Seventy-five pounds! I could repay Bill half what I owed him and still have enough to square the

more pressing accounts. As he said, it wasn't my business if his story sounded a little thin. Anyway, I could always watch Berry and Louis, and if they got up to any tricks, I could call the whole thing off.

"All right, it's a deal. When do you want to move in?"

An odd expression jumped into Dix's eyes, a mixture of gloating triumph and excitement.

"Fine. Before we can move in, I'll have to make a few alterations. I can get things sorted out in the morning. We'll move in on Friday."

"What alterations are you going to make?"

"I want privacy. I told you our work is secret. I don't want every Tom, Dick or Harry sticking his nose in where it's not wanted. Then we've got to bring our electrical equipment down here, a work bench and other stuff."

"Will you use much electricity?"

He grinned.

"Scared you're not going to make a profit. Send the bill into me. I'll square it. Want your money now?"

"Friday will do."

"Have it now, pally."

He walked back to the office and I followed him. After I had closed the door, he pulled out a roll of five-pound notes nearly as thick as my fist. He counted fifteen of them on to the desk.

"I'll make you out a receipt."

"I don't want one. I never pay a second time so what should I want a receipt for? Don't be a mug, pally: stick that lot in your pocket and forget to pay tax on it."

"Well, thanks."

I walked with him to the entrance where Berry had just got through measuring up the floor space. He had marked the space out with chalk, and looked inquiringly at Dix.

"That what you want?"

"Yeah. Be on the job first thing in the morning. I want everything ready by Friday."

"It'll be ready."

Dix turned to me.

"So long, pally. Start counting the days. You'll be running the most prosperous agency in the West End by next year."

"Let's hope so."

He climbed into the Cadillac.

"See you've got Gloria's bus here. Nice job, isn't it?"

"A cracker."

He gave me a jeering little grin.

"Be seeing you."

I walked slowly back to the office and sat down.

Something was wrong, I told myself. I was willing to bet none of these three were radio experts. What then was the idea?

What was behind this business?

I wondered if Gloria knew, and if she did, whether she would tell me. I slipped my hand into my trousers pocket and fingered the five-pound notes.

I don't want every Tom, Dick or Harry sticking his nose in where it's not wanted, Dix had said.

That was a blunt enough hint I was getting well paid, and it was none of my business.

I'd better start right now by not sticking my nose where it wasn't wanted.

Ann came into the office.

"I saw them go."

I reached out and pulled her on to my lap.

"It didn't work out as good as I hoped. The agency isn't going to start for a year."

"Oh!" Her look of relief irritated me. "Perhaps it's just as well, Harry. I don't like the look of those two."

"Now wait a minute. It's not as if we're having them to live with us. I don't like them much myself, but they've got money and they're free with it. I can't afford to pass up any opportunity, Ann, and you know it. They're working on a new television set that'll cut out traffic interference. It will revolutionize the trade once it's on the market, but at the moment, they're having a little trouble with it. They've rented a piece of the garage and they're going to turn it into a workshop. As soon as they've perfected the set, it goes on to the market, and the agency will start with me on the ground floor."

"But that wasn't the original idea, was it? He led you to believe . . ."

"I know. But he didn't want to tell me about the set until he was sure this was the right place. You've got to be damned careful when you're handling new and important apparatus, Ann. You'd be surprised at the number of people ready to steal ideas."

I was actually defending Dix, when all the time I was thinking as she was thinking.

"But surely, Harry, that isn't quite right. They could take out a patent, couldn't they?"

I began to get irritated.

"I don't know. Don't bother your brains about it. The fact is he's willing to pay me fifteen pounds a week to rent this space, and that's good enough for me."

"Fifteen pounds a week?"

I produced the roll of five-pound notes and dropped it into her lap.

"There you are: a month's rent in advance, and it needn't go through our books."

"Harry! Seventy-five pounds!"

I looked at her, hoping she would be excited, or at least pleased, but I might have known she was too cautious, too shrewd, to be taken in any more than I was being taken in.

"There's something wrong about those two. Please be sensible, Harry. Please give them back this money and have nothing more to do with them."

"For heaven's sake! We want the money."

"No, we don't. Not this kind of money."

"You're imagining things. Just because Dix wears a flashy tie . . ."

She got off my lap and faced me.

"It's not that. Fifteen pounds a week for a small piece of this garage is ridiculous, Harry, and you know it! Why, there's an empty shop at the top of the street going for six pounds a week. Why didn't he take that? Why come here? Why should he pay all this money to rent a tiny space here?"

I began to get angry.

"Now look, Ann, I appreciate you don't want me to get into any sort of trouble. I understand that. Well, I'm not a fool, and I'm not getting into any trouble. Maybe these two are fakes, but what harm can they do? I need the money. I need it damned badly. Look at the bills we owe. I don't have to tell you our position. I'm going to keep it so don't let's argue about it anymore."

"Please, Harry . . ."

"I'm running this business, Ann. You're running the home. Please don't interfere."

"But don't you see, darling . . ."

"Oh, stop it!"

She looked at me for a long moment, then turned and went slowly out of the office.

I reached out and picked up the five-pound notes. For a minute or so I sat staring at them.

I had been a mug long enough, I told myself. I was going to keep this money. It was high time Ann learned to mind her own business, and let me mind mine.

I sat in the office brooding for some time. No one came near me. At half-past six I decided to call it a day and shut up.

As I went down to close the doors, Bill walked in from the sorting-office.

"Hello there."

"I was just calling it a day. Come on in. How do you like the new job?"

He helped me close the double doors.

"The job's all right. Not much doing at the moment, but next week we've got an important consignment to take care of. Keep that under your hat, Harry."

"I couldn't care less what goes on over there. I'm glad you came over, Bill. I've got some money for you."

"There's no hurry. I don't want it yet."

"You're going to have it while I've got it. I've had a bit of luck."

He gave me a quick, searching look.

"I'm glad to hear that. It's time you had some luck."

"Come into the office."

When we had settled in chairs, I slid five five-pound notes across the desk.

"I'll let you have the rest of it next month. I've leased a bit of the garage to a radio firm and, believe it or not, they're paying fifteen quid a week for the privilege."

Bill whistled.

"Nice going. Sure you won't hang on to this a little longer?"

"Take it, Bill. I don't like owing you money."

"Please yourself." He put the notes into his pocket "What was up with you on Saturday night, Harry?"

I grinned, but I couldn't meet his eyes. I lit a cigarette to cover up my embarrassment.

"Made a bit of a fool of myself, didn't I? I was just telling Ann. You see I was fixing up this radio deal. They wanted to see me on Saturday night. I didn't want to tell Ann until I was sure it was going through. So I pretended I had a breakdown call. Damn silly come to think of it. Ann spotted I wasn't telling the truth."

Bill gave me an old-fashioned look.

"So did I. You're not cut out for those stunts, Harry. You didn't make our evening a very pleasant one. Ann was worried sick: so was I."

I began to feel irritated.

"You two fuss too much about me. I just wasn't sure if I was going to pull off the deal. I didn't want Ann to be disappointed."

"Don't get your shirt off," Bill said and smiled. "Well, you did pull it off. Congratulations. They

must be suckers to pay all that money for a piece of this garage. Why, there's an empty shop up the street . . ."

I was getting fed up hearing about this empty shop.

"I know. Ann was telling me. It's their business if they want to come here, isn't it?"

He was quick to spot my irritation.

"Lucky for you, anyway. By the way, Harry, who are these people? What's the firm's name?"

I suddenly realized with a sense of shock that I didn't know the name.

"The chap's name's Dix: Ed Due. The company's making a new kind of T.V. set. It's secret at the moment. They'll be doing experimental work here."

"But what do they call themselves?"

"I don't know." I felt my face redden. "They're a small company: just starting."

"Doesn't sound as if they'll last long, paying out all that money for a piece of this garage. Well, I suppose they know their own business best. Probably a racket to evade paying excess profits or something like that."

"That's the way I figured it."

He stubbed out his cigarette, stroked the side of his blunt nose, and then looked up with an apologetic grin.

"Sorry if I'm butting it, Harry, but I shouldn't pull that stunt of yours again. Ann was pretty sick about it."

Again I felt a wave of irritation run through me.

"Don't drive it into the ground, for goodness' sake. Ann and I have talked it over. You don't have to worry about it."

"Just thought I'd mention it." He got to his feet. "Well, I'm off home now. Be seeing you, Harry."

I walked with him to the entrance to the garage.

He paused by the Jaguar.

"So she is garaging her car here," he said.

"That's right." I tried to sound casual, but I knew I wasn't making a job of it.

He looked at me.

"Some girl, Harry. The sort of girl that would give any man ideas: she gave me a few myself."

"Did she?"

"A girl like that wants watching. Take my tip and watch her."

"You buzz off, Bill." My smile was fixed and my irritation was fast turning to anger. "Watch her yourself if you want to."

"I've got a business to look after."

"Did you meet Dix through her, Harry?"

"What the hell do you mean?" I said, feeling blood rush to my face.

"It's obvious, isn't it? You don't think you fooled me on Saturday, do you?"

"Now look, Bill

"I'm looking and I don't like what I'm seeing. See here, Harry, you're due for a straight talking to. You're shaping to make an ass of yourself over that girl."

"I don't know what you mean. If you can't talk sense you'd better clear off!"

"Don't let's get angry about this, Harry. It sticks out a mile. You saw that girl on Saturday, didn't you? Maybe you did see Dix, but she was there too. I know the signs. When a man wants a woman as

badly as you want her, he looks the way you looked on Saturday. I'm going to tell you something. You've got to think of Ann before you do anything you'll be ashamed of. If you don't want to keep your self-respect, you've got to make an effort for her sake."

I stood rooted, glaring at him.

"You've got it all wrong! You can't talk this way to me!"

"Don't get hot under the collar. It won't get you anywhere to glare at me. I know what you're up to. Leave that girl alone: she's no good, and make her leave you alone. You've got Ann who's worth a hundred girls like this one. You're a married man with responsibilities. Try and act your age, Harry."

I closed my fist and swung at him. I was so furious I forgot he had been the light-heavyweight champion of our battalion. He moved inside my wild swing and caught me a crisp clip on the jaw.

I scarcely felt it, but I went down as if I'd been pole-axed.

He bent over me.

"Sorry, Harry, but you asked for that. You should know better than to lead with your right." He grabbed hold of my wrist and pulled me to my feet.

I was shaking with rage and wrenched myself free.

"You go to hell!"

"Now look, Harry, I said I was sorry. Don't let's fall out . . ."

"Get out!"

I turned and walked back to the office. Harry went inside and slammed the door.

chapter seven

Soon after nine o'clock the following morning, Berry arrived with three workmen and a lorry load of timber.

I kept clear of him as I was in a poisonous mood, still furious with Bill and irritated almost to exasperation by Ann's worried quietness.

I knew the main reason for my mood was because I hadn't seen Gloria since the party. I expected her to come in for her car, and every time anyone did come into the garage, I dived out of the office, hoping it would be her, until I was ready to walk up a wall.

I was also worried that Bill had seen through me so easily. If I were as transparent as all that it wouldn't be long before Ann ceased to be taken in by my lies, and then I didn't like to think what would happen.

The noise of hammering didn't help my nerves, and the racket the three workmen made was really something to hear.

But it was surprising the progress they made during the day.

By evening all the uprights were in position and a work bench had been assembled.

They knocked off work around six o'clock, and after they had gone, I went down to have a word with Berry.

"You certainly kept them at it. They've made a pretty good start, haven't they?"

He gave me a long stare, then nodded.

"It's got to be ready by Friday. When Ed wants a thing, he gets it."

"Looks as if it will be ready by Friday."

He grunted. I could see he didn't particularly want to talk to me.

"I never asked him: what's the name of your outfit?"

His eyes shifted.

"Then you'd better ask him. I'm just a stooge around here." He pushed his hat to the back of his head and grimaced. "Well, I guess I'll be shoving along."

"Come across the road and have a quick one before you go."

He shook his head.

"No, thanks. I've got a date."

He began dusting himself down as he moved towards the Humber he had parked near Gloria's Jaguar.

"Seen Gloria lately?"

He shot me a blank stare.

"Who?"

I felt my face go hot.

"Gloria Selby."

"Saw her last Saturday, same as you. Why?"

"Just wondered. She doesn't use her car much, does she?"

"Worry you?"

I forced a laugh.

"No: just seems a waste of a nice bus."

"That's her business, isn't it? Well, I'll be shoving. So long."

He got into the Humber, backed it out and drove away, leaving me feeling foolish and angry.

That had been a mistake, I told myself, as I walked back to the office. I shouldn't have mentioned Gloria to him.

I sat down, lit a cigarette and stared at the top of the desk. I sat like that for several minutes, then my hand went out and I picked up the telephone book. I thumbed through it.

Selby. A Selby, George. Selby, Gloria. I repeated her number half aloud, then I got up, went to the door leading to the stairs, opened it a few inches and listened. I could hear Ann moving about in the sitting-room. I listened for several minutes, then closed the door again, and returned to the desk. My heart began to bang against my ribs as I dialled Gloria's number. I sat listening to the burr-burr-burr on the line. Then I heard another sound: footsteps on the stairs, and in a panic, I dropped the receiver back on its cradle.

The office door opened and Ann came in.

"I'll take the ledger upstairs. I can start it while I'm waiting for the potatoes to boil."

"It's over there."

I felt her eyes on me although I didn't look up.

"Is anything the matter, Harry?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry, there's no need to shout, darling. I thought you looked . . ."

"I wasn't shouting." I got up. "May as well close for the night."

Still without looking at her, I walked out of the office. I hadn't taken more than four steps when the telephone rang. I turned quickly, then stopped myself from making a mad rush to the desk.

Ann picked up the receiver.

"Harry Collins: can I help you?"

I stood watching her, my mouth suddenly dry. I saw her frown.

"Hello? Hello?" She looked up and met my eyes and shrugged. "Hello?" She waited a few seconds, then replaced the receiver. "Must have been cut off. There's no one there."

Had Gloria tried to get through? Had she hung up when she had heard Ann's voice? Why couldn't Ann keep out of the office? Why the hell had she come in at this moment?

I walked down the garage. She followed me. I didn't look round. As I began to pull the double doors shut, I saw she was looking at the work that had been done during the day.

"They have got on well, haven't they?"

"I suppose they have."

I had shut the doors now, and we stood side by side in, the gloomy barn-like garage, looking at the white, new-timber and the work bench.

"Harry, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. What do you mean?"

She looked at me, smiling uneasily.

"But, darling, there must be something wrong. You've been so strange: not a bit your usual self. I know I annoyed you yesterday: I'm sorry about that. Don't let's go on like this anymore."

"There's nothing wrong. For goodness' sake, don't fuss. Hadn't you better get cracking on that ledger? It's nearly twenty to seven."

"All right." I knew she was looking at me, but I wouldn't meet her eyes. I was still wondering if it

had been Gloria who had rung, and if she would ring again. "Harry, darling . . ."

I realized she was close to me, holding her face up to be kissed.

"Come on. Ann, it's getting late."

She put her arms round my neck and pressed her face against mine.

"Harry, please, don't let's go on like this."

Then the telephone began to ring.

I pushed her from me. Maybe in my excitement to get to the phone before she did, I used unnecessary violence for she went staggering back.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ann." I reached out to steady her, but she avoided me. "I'll get it."

I ran to the office and lifted the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Harry."

I felt a prickle run up my spine at the sound of that low, husky voice.

"Hello, there."

I looked over my shoulder. Ann was coming towards the office.

"Are you alone?"

"No."

"Shall I ring off?"

"No. Is there anything I can do?"

Ann came into the office. I leaned forward to pick up a pencil so she couldn't see my face. She crossed the office to the rear door.

"If you haven't anything better to do I was wondering if you'd like to drop in."

My heart gave a lurch.

"Why, yes: I could manage that. About what time?"

Ann had gone up the stairs. I heard her shut the door at the head of the stairs.

"It's all right now. She's gone."

Gloria laughed.

"I shouldn't have called you, but I was so damned bored with myself. I wondered if you were bored too and if you'd like to come on over. There's a good movie on at the Plaza or do you have to stay at home?"

"Of course I don't. What time shall I come?"

"Oh, about eight. Sure you don't mind leaving your wife?"

"She's working on the books at the moment. It's all right."

"Then about eight Harry."

"Yes."

The line went dead and I slowly replaced the receiver. I reached out and took a cigarette. As I lit it I saw my hands were shaking.

You can't do this to Ann, I said to myself. You can't leave her like this. But I was scarcely listening to myself. This could be it Gloria was alone. She had asked me to come over. This could be what my mind had been thinking of ever since she had kissed me.

Get it over, I said to myself. Get her out of your system.

Don't let an opportunity like this slip through your fingers.

I looked at my watch.

It was ten minutes to seven. I had plenty of time to change, have a wash and get over to Bond Street by eight.

I went upstairs and into the sitting-room.

Ann was working at the table, entering bills in the ledger.

"I've got to go out after supper, Ann. That was Dix on the phone. He wants me to meet the other directors."

I wasn't full of whisky and confidence this time, and I found it pretty hard to lie to her. I kept moving as I spoke, knowing I couldn't look her in the face.

She didn't say anything, and that made me more uneasy than if she had come into the bedroom and told me she knew I was lying.

"Did you hear, Ann?" I said, raising my voice as I took off my coat and shirt. "I have to go out after supper."

"Yes, I heard."

She spoke quietly and she didn't move from the table. I felt a sudden rush of rage go through me.

I went into the bathroom. After I had shaved and washed I returned to the bedroom. I could hear her moving about in the kitchen, and I was suddenly sorry I hadn't said I had to go out at once. It looked as if supper was going to be a difficult meal.

I had put on my suit again by the time she had dished up the supper.

"Looks good," I said, sitting down at the table. "Sorry I have to leave you, Ann, but Dix wants me over to meet these other two. They only come to Town occasionally."

She didn't say anything, but sat opposite me while I served the bacon pie she had made. I gave her a quick sideways look. Her face was pale and expressionless, and she kept her eyes down.

"For the love of Mike, you're not going to sulk because I have to go out, are you?"

She looked up then, and I was startled to see anger in her eyes.

"I'm not sulking, Harry. I don't want you to go out tonight, but I'm quite sure that won't stop you. I only hope you realize what you are doing."

"This is ridiculous! I stand a chance of making some money, and you're doing your best to make it difficult for me. Just because Dix wears a flashy tie, you dive off the deep end. We're in a mess and we've got to get out of it, and this is the way to do it. So please don't be quite so free with your criticism. This is business, and you must leave it to me."

"Is it business? How can you talk like that, Harry? Don't you realize I can see through you? Do you think I'm an utter fool?"

"What do you, mean? Of course it's business!"

"Is this Selby girl a friend of Dix?"

I felt myself change colour.

"What on earth makes you say that? Why bring her into this?"

"Didn't she introduce you to Dix, Harry?"

"She doesn't come into it. Can't you get her out of your mind?"

She looked at me, her face white and set.

"Are you going to lie to me, Harry? You don't have to. All I want is the truth. If you want this girl, say so. Don't be underhanded about it. She rang you up just now, didn't she? It wasn't Dix."

I looked at her. I felt cold and sick. I suddenly saw the danger and it frightened me.

"Now look, Ann . . ."

"Harry! Will you stop trying to evade the issue? I'm asking you a straightforward question and I want an answer. Did she or did she not phone just now?"

"Yes; she did."

"She wanted you to go to her?"

"Yes."

"All right, Harry, go if you want to, I'm not going to stop you. If she means all that to you, go to her. I don't want you if you feel like that about her."

"For God's sake, Ann . . ."

"Don't look so frightened. It's all right. I want you to be happy. If you think this girl will make you happy . . ."

"Stop it! It's nothing like that. Ann! Don't say such things. I've been a rotten fool. If it comes to a choice between you and her, you must know who I want. I'm sorry. I won't go. You have only to look as you're looking now to bring me to my senses. I wouldn't hurt you or make you unhappy for anything in the world."

"Don't say that, Harry, if I've frightened you. I didn't mean to frighten you. I just want to be sure that you want me. If you don't, say so. I'll go away. I can look after myself. Only I'm not going to share you with anyone."

"She means absolutely nothing to me. You must believe me, Ann. This was a physical thing. I went off balance. It'll never happen again. I promise. Honest, darling, it's never going to happen again."

She sat down suddenly and put her hands over her face.

"Ann, darling, don't cry. Forgive me. It's over now. It won't ever happen again."

I went to her and put my arms round her.

"Harry, you don't know how I hated doing that," she said, clutching hold of me. "But we had to settle it one way or the other, didn't we? Oh, darling, try and fight against it. Don't let her spoil all we've built up together. It's so easy to destroy."

"It's all right, Ann, I swear it's all right. I've been a mad fool. It won't ever happen again." She pressed her face against mine.

"Only you can make that come true, darling. I trust you. Please never lie to me again. If I can do anything to help you, tell me. I love you so, Harry, but I can't share you."

I lifted her and carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed.

"It'll never happen again, Ann. You're the only girl who means anything to me. Oh, Ann, I'm crazy about you."

"But, Harry, your supper's getting cold."

"Damn the supper."

"Here, let me. I'll do it. No, darling, you'll tear it Oh, Harry The clock on the bedside table showed twenty minutes past eight when the telephone bell began to ring.

"You'd better answer it."

Ann stiffened and her fingers gripped my arm.

"Let it ring."

We lay side by side, listening to the steady ringing, our hearts pounding.

"It might be important, Harry."

"Nothing is as important as you."

The telephone bell rang for a long time, but after a while I didn't hear it

chapter eight

Thinking about it in my office the next morning, I realized what a mad, stupid fool I had been. I had nearly broken up my marriage for a girl I scarcely knew. I had been stupidly confident I had been getting away with it when all the time Ann and Bill had seen through me. I must have been out of my mind.

Well, it was over! I was lucky Ann had handled it the way she had. If she hadn't had the moral courage to bring it out into the open, the chances were our marriage would have been washed up by now.

I lit a cigarette and pushed back my chair. What could Gloria have thought of me when I hadn't shown up? Had she realized that Ann had found out or did she think I had purposely stood her up? I shifted uneasily. What did it matter what she thought? She had no right to 'phone up like that, and she only had herself to blame. All the same I dreaded the thought of her coming to the garage for her car, and hoped when she did come, she would take the car away. I decided if I saw her before she saw me, I'd let Tim handle it, and keep out of her way.

The workmen, under Berry's directions, were hard at it when I went into the garage. The partitioning was finished, and they were now adjusting the door.

"Looks like you'll be finished tonight."

Berry grunted.

"There's a lot to do inside yet."

He moved away. Taking the hint that I wasn't wanted, I went over to the work bench and gave Tim a hand with the tricky job of retiming a magneto.

Later in the day Joe and Louis arrived in the Buick. They carried two heavy leather cases into the partitioned room and shut themselves in.

I kept expecting Gloria to appear, and as the day passed and there was still no sign of her, I became more and more jittery. Every time the telephone bell rang I nearly jumped out of my skin, and yet I had an uneasy feeling of disappointment when I answered it and found it wasn't she who was calling.

Berry came into the office around five o'clock.

"We're going to work late. We shan't be through until ten o'clock."

"That's all right. I'll lock up and when you're ready to go, let me know and I'll let you out. How's it going?"

"All right"

He returned to the partitioned room and shut the door.

At half-past six I shut the garage doors. Then I went over to the partitioned room, turned the door handle, but the door was locked.

"What do you want?" Berry's voice snapped.

"I've closed up. I was wondering how you were getting on. I felt a fool standing outside the locked door.

"It's okay. We're busy."

I turned away and walked back to my office, angry at the snub. All right, I thought as I turned out the light and went upstairs, if they want to be mysterious, let them get on with it.

Ann greeted me with a smile.

"Supper's just coming up."

"I'll have a wash and be with you."

As I washed I began to wonder what was going on in that locked room. I was quite positive none of the three men could possibly be radio experts. I was now regretting having let the space to Dix, and I was pretty certain that the promised agency wouldn't materialize. It had been offered to me as a bait, but why? For some reason Dix had been anxious to get into my garage. The fact that he could have taken over the empty shop at the top of the street at a much cheaper price indicated that he wanted my garage only because of its position. Next door to me was a small jeweller's and on the other side was a tobacconist. Were these four planning a robbery? Were they going to try to break into the jeweller's shop through the dividing wall of my garage? It was unlikely. I had taken my watch to be repaired there, and the shop carried scarcely any stock, and what stock there was could have had no value. The tobacconist? There again the shop was only in a small way, and the owner who I knew had told me he was thinking of closing down.

Maybe I was letting my imagination run away with me.

But I was curious. When they went tonight I was going to see if I could open the door to the partitioned room and have a look round.

It was while we were having supper that Ann said suddenly, "I shall be going to mother's tomorrow, Harry."

I stiffened and looked up.

Once a month Ann went over to Leytonstone and spent the night with her mother. I had forgotten tomorrow was the day. Immediately my mind jumped to Gloria. It was a reflex action beyond my control, and I hastily stamped it out of my mind, but the thought had come so spontaneously and violently it frightened me.

"I'd forgotten," I said, trying to speak calmly. "Well, that's all right, Ann."

"If you rather I didn't go, I won't."

"Of course you must go. She'll be expecting you."

"I could send her a telegram."

I looked up, frowning.

"What on earth for? You always go, Ann."

"Yes."

There was a long, awkward pause.

"If you think it would be better for me to stay, Harry, I'll stay."

I felt myself turn red.

"Don't you trust me then?"

"Of course I do, darling. I just don't want to make things difficult for you."

"I know I've been a damned fool, but I hope you don't think I'm weak in the head. I said it wouldn't happen again; it's not going to happen again."

"All right, darling." She put her hand on mine. "Are you and Bill doing something?"

Whenever Ann went to her mother's Bill and I had a night out together. We went over to the Regimental Club and had a game of billiards and a few drinks. It gave me a chance of keeping in touch with some of the boys I had met during the war. I looked forward to those evenings, but I realized now I didn't want to go to the club tomorrow night.

"I'll fix up something with him."

"We haven't seen him since Saturday. Is he all right?"

"He came in Monday for a moment. Yes, he's all right."

Although I had caught a glimpse of Bill from time to time across the road I had kept out of his way, and he hadn't come to the garage. I was still angry with him for hitting me, although I knew I had asked for it by swinging at him first.

Around ten o'clock, Berry shouted up the stairs that they were going. I went down to lock up after them.

The Humber was parked outside and I caught a glimpse of Louis at the wheel.

"So long," Berry said. "See you in the morning."

I watched the Humber drive away, then closed the doors of the garage.

I went over to the door of the partitioned room. It had been padlocked on the outside, but it would be a simple matter to unscrew the hasp. I moved over to the work bench and found a screwdriver; as I picked it up, I suddenly heard a faint sound and I stiffened to attention.

I looked about the dimly lit garage, but couldn't see anything moving. I stood motionless for several minutes, listening, then thinking I had imagined the sound I went over to the locked door.

Then I remembered I hadn't seen Joe leave in the Humber. Had he gone previously or was he still here behind the locked door?

I put my ear to the panel and listened. For some moments I didn't hear anything, then a faint scraping sound came to me as if someone on the other side of the door who was listening as I was listening had moved his foot.

I stepped back silently. So Joe was still in there. I hesitated, then rapped sharply on the door.

The silence that followed was a little unnerving.

"Is there anyone in there?" I said, and rapped again.

Nothing happened, but I was certain now Joe was in there; I could feel his tension coming through the door panels.

I walked over to the bench and put down the screwdriver, then I went back to my office, turned out the garage lights and went upstairs treading loudly.

Ann was running the bath.

"Have they gone?"

"Yes. I've locked up. I think it's beginning to rain."

I wasn't going to tell her that I thought Joe was still in the building. There was nothing she could do about it, and it would only worry her.

"I shan't be long, Harry."

"That's all right. Don't hurry. I haven't looked at the paper yet."

I sat down in the dining-room and glanced at the evening newspaper. It didn't hold my attention. When I heard Ann splashing in the bath, I got up, turned off the light, took off my shoes and went down the stairs again, making no sound I stood just inside the doorway of my office, looking down the length of the garage that was faintly lit by the light of the moon.

I listened. After a while I heard the scrape and splutter of a match lighting and then I smelt tobacco smoke. There was no light showing under the door of the partitioned room. What was Joe doing there in the dark? I stood listening for some minutes, but for an occasional creak of a chair or the sound of feet shifting on the floor. I could hear nothing. He wasn't doing anything. He was just sitting in the darkness.

I went back upstairs. Ann had finished her bath and was running mine. I turned off the dining-room light again, went into the bedroom and undressed.

After my bath I told Ann I couldn't remember if I had turned off the light in the office and I went downstairs again. I stood listening, I could hear nothing. The partitioned room was still in darkness.

I gave up. There was nothing I could do. The only explanation I could think of at the moment was that Berry suspected I would try to get into the locked room and had left Joe on guard to keep me out.

I went upstairs again.

My mind was too active for me to sleep. Long after Ann had fallen asleep, I lay in the darkness, staring across the room at the faint moonlight coming through the window. The rain had ceased now. Eagle Street was silent.

Tomorrow night I should be alone. Try as I could I wasn't able to keep Gloria from creeping into my thoughts. I struggled against the temptation of thinking about her. Even if I did decide to get into touch with her tomorrow, she would be certain to have nothing more to do with me. I had let her down badly, and she wasn't likely to give me another chance to do it again.

I felt bad about the way I had told her I would come to her flat and then hadn't even telephoned her to say I couldn't come. At least, I should telephone her tomorrow, I told myself, and explain. I wouldn't go further than that. I would tell her Ann knew about her, and I couldn't meet her again. That was the least I could do. Once I had made this decision, my mind relaxed and I went to sleep.

I must have slept four or five hours. I woke suddenly to find the grey light of dawn coming through the curtains. I heard a car engine start up, and I instantly thought of Joe.

I slid out of bed and went over to the window and parted the curtains.

There was a mail van standing by the opposite kerb. Two postmen were waiting by it, and as I watched, I saw Bill come out of the sorting office, nod to the other two who got into the van.

Bill then consulted his watch, made a note of the time, and climbed in beside the driver.

The van drove off.

I peered at my wrist watch. It was half-past three.

"What is it, Harry?" Ann asked sleepily.

"It's all right. I thought I heard a car drive up, but it was only a mail van."

I got back into bed and settled down once again. Then suddenly I recalled what Bill had told me when he had announced his promotion:

You mightn't believe it, but every so often we carry valuables in these 'ere vans, and when we do, yours truly in the future will look after the driver and see no one gets the wrong ideas about the stuff.

Then on Monday before we quarrelled, he had said: Not much doing at the moment, but next week we've got an important consignment to take care of. Keep that under your hat. Harry.

I found myself, wide awake now. Was it this consignment that Dix was after? Was he planning a mail robbery? That would explain why he had taken space in my garage and not the shop at the top of the road-My garage was directly in front of the sorting office. That would also explain why Joe was in the partitioned room. He could be checking on the movements of the mail vans. I remembered that Dix had insisted on that particular space in the garage: the one with the window that looked right on the sorting office.

I felt a trickle of cold sweat run down my face. If Dix was planning a hold-up, then Bill would be in danger. I knew Bill well enough to be sure he wouldn't submit tamely to a hold-up: he might get badly hurt.

My heart was bumping unevenly against my side. I also could be involved in this. If the police discovered that Dix had used my garage to watch the movements of the vans and had paid me seventy-five pounds for the use of my place, might they not imagine I was one of the gang?

My first reaction was to tell Bill and let him decide what was best to do. Then another idea occurred to me. I wasn't anxious for Bill to find out I had been so easily duped by Dix, always supposing I had been duped. The best way surely would be to talk first to Gloria. If I told her bluntly what I suspected, she might have information about Dix that would confirm my suspicions, and then if I was sure Dix was planning a robbery I could go to Bill.

I would see Gloria tomorrow, I decided, and have it out with her. I suddenly wondered if she were one of the gang.

Surely not: she had her own business, was well off, had a flat in Bond Street. No, it was absurd to think she was one of them. Dix just happened to be a friend of her. She couldn't be held responsible for her friends. But she might know something about him once I had told her what I suspected.

I tried to stifle the elation I felt at the thought of seeing and talking to her again. There was nothing to be elated about, I told myself. I had to see her. There was no question of going back on my promise to Ann. There would be no nonsense between us, I would talk to her about Dix, hear what she had to say, and then leave. If it hadn't been that I didn't want to worry Ann about my suspicions of Dix I would have told her I had to see Gloria again. But if I were wrong, if Dix were all right, and my suspicion a mistake, there was no point in getting Ann worried over nothing.

There would be time to tell Ann all about it when I had some proof.

chapter nine

Ann left just after lunch. She took with her a small overnight case, and as we walked down the garage, I spotted Berry looking at her out of the corners of his eyes as he topped up the radiator of his car.

I made no move to introduce him, and as we passed, he deliberately turned his back on us.

We paused on the pavement just outside the garage.

"I'll be back about eleven tomorrow, Harry," Ann said, keeping her voice low. "You will be all right?"

I forced a laugh.

"Of course I will. I expect Bill will be over some time this afternoon. We're almost sure to go to the club."

"All right, darling. Then I'll get off." She kissed me and gave me a worried little smile.

"So long, and remember me to your mother."

"Good-bye, Harry."

I stood in the doorway and watched her out of sight then I started back to the office.

Berry swung round and eyed me with a jocular grin.

"Going to be a bachelor tonight?"

I liked him even less in this mood.

"That's right. She's going to see her mother."

"Sometimes mothers-in-law have their uses," he said, and winked. "Well, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I went on towards the office, feeling hot and angry. I shut myself in the office, lit a cigarette and wiped my damp hands on my handkerchief. I sat hesitating for several minutes, then I reached out and pulled the telephone towards me. I dialled Gloria's number. As I listened to the ringing tone, my heart bumped unevenly. I sat listening for over a minute before I decided she must be out. With a feeling of intense irritation I dropped the receiver back on its cradle.

I tried to get her four times during the afternoon, but each time the telephone remained unanswered.

As I was about to try for the fifth time, a knock came on the door and it was pushed open.

I looked up sharply.

Bill stood in the doorway, his red face wreathed in smiles.

"What-cheer, Harry; thought I'd look in. It's our night out tonight, isn't it?"

I wasn't expecting him, and for a moment I was taken aback. My mind worked swiftly. The last thing I wanted to do was to go to the club with Bill, but I knew if I didn't go, Ann would hear about it.

"That's right." I pushed back my chair. "Same time?"

I saw a look of relief jump into his eyes.

"Why not? I'll pick you up here about seven. We'll have a bit of supper before we go to the club."

"Suits me."

We were both embarrassed and uneasy. Bill took refuge in offering me a cigarette. I lit one and then his.

"No hard feelings, Harry?"

"Don't be an ape. I asked for it and I got it."

"I shouldn't have done it all the same. Okay, let's forget it. I just looked in to see if tonight was still on. I've got to get back. See you at seven."

I heard a sound at the door and turned. Berry was standing in the doorway, his grey cold eyes on Bill.

"Got a match? I seem to have used my last one."

Bill handed over his box of matches. I noticed he was looking intently at Berry.

"This is Mr. Berry," I said. "He's to do with the radio firm I was telling you about. Mr. Yates."

Berry thrust out his hand.

"Glad to know you," he said, smiling expansively. "You two boys going to paint the town red tonight?"

"That's the idea," Bill said.

"I've seen you across the road, haven't I? Aren't you a guard or something?"

Bill's shrewd eyes twitched.

"That's right: just got appointed."

"Like it?"

"It's all right."

"Don't get much chance for any action I bet."

"That's a fact."

Berry leaned against the doorway.

"What happens if you do happen to run into trouble? You boys aren't allowed to carry arms, are you?"

Bill grinned.

"You bet we are. I've got a machine-gun, a box of grenades and a couple of automatic rifles. Anyone who starts messing about with me will know all about it."

"Aw, stop kidding," Berry said and laughed. "I hear you take nothing with you except a club and a prayer."

I stood aside, listening to all this, certain now that my suspicions were right. Why should Berry have toned the conversation to this subject unless he was after information?

"Don't believe all you hear," Bill said good humouredly.

"We can look after ourselves all right. We have a surprise for any hold-up thug."

"I don't know why you aren't equipped with armoured cars like they have in the States. They carry guns over there, and if they have to, they shoot."

"So do their cops," Bill returned. "Our cops don't carry guns, but we've got a lot less crime here than they have. Work it out for yourself." He turned to me. "Well, so long, Harry, see you at seven."

"If you two boys haven't anything special to do tonight,"

Berry put in quickly, "why don't you come along to my place? I'm throwing a little party. Nothing special; a few girls, a few drinks, a bit of fun. What do you say?"

"No, thanks," I said before Bill could speak. "We're fixed up for tonight. Thanks all the same."

Berry lifted his shoulders.

"Well, if you change your mind, it's 3a Queen's Avenue: top flat. Look in any time." He flicked ash on the floor before adding, "Ed'll be there, and so will Gloria."

I felt Bill look at me.

"Sorry; we can't make it tonight."

"I've got to move," Bill said. "Be seeing you."

He nodded to Berry and walked quickly back to the sorting office.

Berry began to pick his nose as he gave me a long, hard stare.

"Was he kidding, would you know?"

"Kidding about what?"

"Carrying guns."

"Worry you?" I said, taking a page out of his book.

He laughed, although his eyes hardened.

"Just curious, that's all. Well, I can't waste any more time. Ed'll be in tomorrow."

"What was the idea leaving Joe here all night?"

I was watching him closely and saw his eyes flicker.

"He was on the job."

"In the dark?"

"Why not? Good time to work at night, pally. No interference." He turned away and walked back to the partitioned room.

A few minutes to seven o'clock, Bill returned. I had changed and was waiting for him. Berry had gone, but I knew Joe was in the partitioned room behind the locked door.

"All set?" Bill asked.

"Coming now."

He helped me close the double doors. I locked them, and then we walked down Eagle Street to Oxford Circus, caught a bus to Soho, and walked along Greek Street until we came to the small Greek restaurant where we usually had supper on our nights out.

While we were waiting to be served Bill said suddenly, "That bloke Berry doesn't look like a radio expert."

"Well, you don't look like a guard on a mail van: so what?"

Bill grinned.

"He looked like a Spiv to me, Harry."

I very nearly told him then about my suspicions, but on second thoughts checked myself. Gloria would be at Berry's party tonight. She would probably get back to her flat around midnight. I would be able to get rid of Bill by that time, and I planned to go to her flat after I had left Bill and have it out with her. It would be unwise, I argued to myself, to tell Bill what I suspected until I had talked to Gloria.

"Newly everyone looks like a Spiv these days," I said carelessly, and was glad when the waitress brought the first course.

After the meal, we walked over to the club that was in a street off Tottenham Court Road.

"When's this big consignment of yours coming off, Bill?" I asked, as we waited on the kerb for the traffic lights to change to green.

"What consignment?" he asked sharply.

"Didn't you say you were expecting to escort something big this week?"

"That's right, but I'm not supposed to talk about it."

"So they have security even in the Post Office. Seriously, Bill, do you carry a gun? I know you were kidding, Bill, about the grenades, but do they let you have riffles?"

"Not a hope. I have a club that's about as good as a sick headache, and my wits: that's all."

"Doesn't it worry you?"

Bill laughed.

"Not a scrap. We take precautions. If we've got anything really big, we alter our routes and our times. Anyone planning to rob a van would have to know when we start and that's something they just don't know. We haven't had any trouble in years."

"You were up and about pretty early this morning."

He looked a little startled.

"Did you see me?"

"I heard the van and I looked out of the window."

"Between you and me, Harry, that was a rehearsal for the big day: keep it under your hat."

"When's the big day?"

Bill shook his head.

"That's something I can't tell you. I don't know myself. We'll have it jumped on us without any warning." He abruptly changed the subject and began talking about Middlesex's chances against Surrey. I took the hint and entered into a heated discussion with him. He had always supported Middlesex, but I fancied Surrey had the edge on them this year.

It was ten minutes past twelve when we came out of the club.

We stood on the pavement while we lit cigarettes.

"Well, I'm off home," Bill said, stifling a yawn. "I was up at half-past one this morning. Thank goodness I have a day off tomorrow. Can you see yourself home?"

"Just about. I was wondering about you."

Bill grinned.

"I can manage on my own steam. If I don't get into bed soon I'm going to fall asleep on my feet. See you tomorrow afternoon."

We parted at the bottom of Greek Street. I caught a bus to Oxford Circus and then walked quickly along Oxford Street to Bond Street.

I arrived outside Gloria's flat about twenty-five minutes past midnight. The flat was in darkness. I wondered if she had already got back and had gone to bed. It was unlikely, but to be on the safe side, I rang the bell. There was no answer so I decided she hadn't come back yet. I walked over to a dark comer of the mews and, leaning against a wall, settled down to wait.

I waited for some time. It was close on one o'clock when I heard a car coming. A moment later a taxi slid into the mews and pulled up outside the flat.

My heart began to hammer against my side as I saw Gloria get out of the car. She was wearing a white strapless evening gown and carried a fur coat on her arm.

She paid off the taxi, and while she was hunting in her bag for her latch-key and before I could change my mind, I went quickly over to her.

At the sound of my footfalls she turned sharply.

"Hello, Gloria," I said, my voice husky.

"Well, for goodness' sake! What are you doing here at this time of night?"

"I'm sorry to be so late, but I had to see you. It's important Gloria. Could I come in and talk to you?"

"But it's nearly half-past one," she returned, her eyes looking at me from under their lashes. "You can't come in now."

"It's important."

Suddenly she laughed.

"Oh, all right Harry. Come in. I bet this is a gag, but I'll fall for it."

She unlocked the door and together we entered the small hall. She went past me up the stair and I followed her into the big lounge.

She snapped on the lights and crossed over to the radiogram and turned on some swing music, lowered the sound so it was scarcely above a whisper.

"Hell! I'm tired," she said, dropping her fur coat on chair. "Get me a drink, Harry. A whisky, and have one yourself."

"I don't want anything, thanks."

"Of course you'll have a whisky."

She went to the bar, poured two large whiskies and pushed one glass towards me. She drank half hers in one thirsty swallow.

"I don't know why I'm talking to you," she said, setting down the glass. "After the way you stood me up the other night."

"I'm sorry about that. My wife . . ."

"For heaven's sake don't start making excuses," she said and laughed. "I guessed your wife found out. It's amazing how wives do find out isn't it? Never mind; it's just one of those things."

"There's something I must ask you, Gloria."

"It'll wait, won't it?" She lit a cigarette. "I want to get out of this thing. Come into the bedroom with me while I change, Harry."

My heart skipped a beat.

"I—I'll stay here."

She smiled.

"Scared of me, Harry?"

"Maybe. Anyway, I'm not looking for trouble."

"Aren't you? I wonder

She gave me a long inquisitive stare, then went into the bedroom, leaving the door open.

I drank some of the whisky and tried to keep my eyes from straying to the open door, but after a minute or so I looked. I saw her standing before the long wall mirror, clad only in a white brassiere and panties, and the sight of her, like that, set my heart racing and turned my mouth dry. I watched her slip into a flame-coloured silk wrap. She came out, fastening the wrap and I saw her smooth, naked thighs and long legs before she flicked the wrap into place.

That glimpse and what I had seen in the bedroom had a devastating impact on my good intentions, and I had to take a grip on myself to stop grabbing her in my arms.

"How do you happen to be here tonight?" she asked, coming over and sitting on a stool by the bar.

"My wife's gone to see her mother."

"So you thought you would come and talk to me."

"Yes."

She lifted her glass.

"You've come at the right time, Harry. I'm just in the mood for you."

And I was in the mood for her.

"I—I want to talk to you about Dix."

"Are you sure?"

"Gloria, what do you know about Dix? Did you know he's a crook?"

She finished her drink and set it down on the bar. Her face was expressionless. Then she slid off the stool and came close to me.

The look in her eyes had me going. Seeing her, the orange wrap accentuating her black hair and eyes, she seemed to me to be the most desirable woman I had ever seen.

"I must know, Gloria," I said, scarcely knowing what I was saying.

She took my hand. The feel of her flesh against mine sent a shiver down my spine.

"Let's go into the other room, Harry."

I was beyond resisting. I went with her across the room and into her bedroom. She clicked on the lights. Instead of the two shaded lamps coming on that I had seen previously, lights came on everywhere; in the ceiling and around the big wall mirror which reflected down on to the white rug that lay by the enormous bed.

"I love lights," she said and went over to the mirror and stood before it looking at herself. "Why do people always make love in the dark? I want lights, and lights and more lights. I want you to see me and I want to see you." She turned, looking at me, her eyes glittering, "Do you think I'm beautiful, Harry?"

"The most beautiful woman I've ever seen," I said huskily.

"I believe you mean that. But you haven't seen me yet as I want you to see me."

She undid the clasp at her waist and slipped out of her wrap, letting it fall to the floor at her feet. Her hands moved quickly, shedding her other garments. In the blaze of light, her skin had the lustre of pearls.

For a few seconds she stood motionless, letting me feast my eyes on her, then she held out her arms to me.

chapter ten

Okay, okay, you two, break it up."

Dix's sneering voice sounded as if he were in the room.

Gloria slid away from me. She snatched up her wrap and slipped into it.

I lay on the bed, paralysed, and stared around the room, trying to see from where the voice had come.

"What was that?" I said. The words came out of my mouth in a croak.

"Oh, shut up!" Gloria said, and went over to the mirror and fluffed up her hair, then she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand with such a grimace of disgust that it turned me sick to see.

"Who was that talking?"

"Who do you think, you dumb, stupid ox?"

I was off the bed by now.

"Was that Dix?"

She ignored me as she touched up her lips in the mirror.

My hands were shaking. I could scarcely breathe.

"Gloria! He's not here, is he?"

"Oh, shut up!"

I went across the room and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her round.

"Is he?"

She wrenched herself free and hit me three times across my face so quickly and violently I had no change of avoiding the blows.

"Don't touch me, you stinking lout!" she said shrilly, her face white and as hard as granite. Her eyes looked like holes in a sheet.

I heard the door open and I spun round.

"Take it easy," Dix said, coming into the room. "Okay, Gloria, beat it. I want to talk to him."

Gloria pulled her wrap about her and walked out of the room. Dix shut the door behind her.

He was wearing his black suit with the white pinstripe.

His hat was thrust to the back of his head, and there were beads of sweat on his face.

"Well, pally, you seemed to be giving yourself a good time."

Rage that I had never known before took hold of me. I wanted to maim him, to tear out his throat, to trample and stamp the blood out of his body.

I moved towards him, my hands thrust out, my fingers hooked.

"Better not, pally . . ."

I was within distance now. I sent over a swing to his face that had every ounce of my weight and strength behind it. He moved his head a fraction and my fist shot past, bringing me on to a short punch that landed solidly under my heart. It made my knees buckle. I closed with him, my hands reaching for his throat, but he threw me off with one tremendous shove, and as I came in again, he dug his fist into my body under the heart and I went down on all fours. I felt as if my ribs had been pushed in; as if I had been kicked by a horse.

I remained like that for several seconds, and then I slowly pushed myself upright. He stood waiting, his hands down at his sides, the sneering grin on his face, his eyes watchful and gloating.

"I'm way out of your class, pally. Take it easy. I want to talk to you."

Those two awful body punches had sapped most of my strength. I had trouble in keeping upright, but rage drove me towards him. I wanted to smash his sneering face even if he killed me while I did it.

He let me come on, then as I hit out, he again swayed away, and again his fist that felt like a mahogany hammer buried itself into my body. I went crashing over backwards and measured my length on the floor. I felt as if my body had fallen apart. I squirmed on to my knees, but that was as far as I got. I had no strength left to push myself upright. I remained there on my knees, my head on my chest, my breath coming out of my open mouth in short, wheezy gasps. Three punches to the body had smashed me and reduced me to the feeble helplessness of a child.

She had warned me not to hit him. Well, at least that hadn't been a lie.

Dix went over to the bed and sat on it. He took out a cigarette, lit it and flicked the match into the fireplace.

"Take it easy, pally. There is plenty of time."

I remained kneeling on the floor. I don't know how long I stayed like that, maybe ten minutes, maybe longer. Then slowly I reached out and grabbed hold of a chair and pulled myself into it. Every movement sent pain through me. I sat forward, bent in half, my arms folded across my belly. I had a horrible idea that if I didn't hold on to myself, my guts would pour out on to the floor.

"I'll get you a drink." He got up and went out of the room.

The radiogram continued to play. The whole business was completely unreal: a deadly kind of nightmare. He didn't come back for some time. I vaguely heard a murmur of voices.

I sat there, holding on to myself, staring down at the white rug, my mind congealed and blank.

He came in after half an hour or so and shoved a, glass of whisky into my hand. I took it and swallowed the whisky in one long, convulsive gulp. My rage had drained out of me. All that was left now was a sick horror of myself and a sicker fear of him.

He sat on the bed again.

"You know, pally. I thought you were going to turn out smarter than you are. When you didn't show up after Gloria had 'phoned you I began to wonder if you had spotted the setup. I don't mind telling you I got a little worried. Up to now the bait has never failed to land a fish. Well, never mind, better late than never. It worked in the end."

The door opened and Berry came in. He was in his shirt sleeves. He looked hot and his hair was lank with sweat "Here they are, Ed. They're still wet, but my stars! aren't they pippins!"

He handed Dix a big white enamelled dish, gave me a cold blank stare and went out, shutting the door behind him.

Dix examined the contents of the dish.

"They're damned good. Here, pally, take a look. How's that for art?"

He came over and put the dish on my knees. The dish contained three quarter-plate sized photographs, fresh out of the hypo bath. When I looked at them I nearly threw up. I didn't have to look twice to see who the man was in the photographs: it was me.

I threw the dish from me, struggled to my feet and let fly a punch at his race.

He blocked the punch with his forearm, then gave me a shove that slammed me back into the chair.

"Relax, pally, or I'll have to hurt you again."

I looked at him. If I had had a gun I would have killed him.

"Take it easy. I want to talk to you." He sat on the bed again. "See that little black disc in the middle of that mirror?

Didn't you ever ask yourself why it was there? I bet you didn't.

No one ever does. It conceals the lens of a sixteen millimetre movie camera. The film in it is worth a couple of thousand to me. Copies of it will go all over the world. You're going to be a well-known and much appreciated movie star, pally." He flicked ash on the white rug, and grinned. "Believe it or not, this room cost me a thousand to equip, but it certainly has paid dividends. I'm telling you all this, pally, because you're one of us now. If you think different, say so, and I'll send some of these pictures to your nice little wife. They should surprise her, and I don't reckon you'd want her to be all that surprised."

I knew he had me. There wasn't a thing I wouldn't do to keep those pictures away from Ann: not a thing.

"That's the set-up, pally," he went on. "You've had a good time, now you've got to pay for it. One false move out of you and I start handing those pictures around. I'll have a job for you in a little while, and you'll do it or else." He leaned forward, his small bright eyes on my face. "I have an idea you have already guessed what I'm up to. Just in case you haven't, I'll tell you. Towards the end of the week, maybe on Saturday or Sunday, a big consignment of industrial diamonds are being sent to the Continent. The consignment will arrive at Eagle Street sorting-office. From there it will be taken to Northolt Airfield by van. I want these diamonds, pally. Everything's laid on, and I expect to get them. Your garage is our operations headquarters. The Jaguar Gloria left with you is one of our get-away cars. We have tapped your phone and Joe is ready to phone a message to me as soon as he sees the van leave. But there's just one little job we haven't take care of. It needs technical knowledge, and that's something you have got. On Friday night you're going to get into the sorting-office and you're going to put the alarm bell that's inside the van out of action. How you do it is up to you, but you'll do it. If you don't I'll call on your wife and give her the pictures. If there's a leak; if you don't pull out the job, I'll know who's been talking out of turn, and I'll fix you and I'll fix your wife. You mightn't think so to look at him, but Louis is one of the best acid throwers in town. Ever seen a girl who's had acid thrown in her face? That's what will happen to your wife if you talk, but I'll give her the pictures first."

He got to his feet.

"Well, I guess that's all, pally. Today's Wednesday. You've got until Friday morning to work out an idea how to put that alarm bell out of action. I'll be in Friday afternoon to hear how you are going to do it. I'll bring one of the pictures with me just in case your brain hasn't worked." He walked over to the door and threw it open. "On your way, pally."

I got up slowly and painfully. I had nothing to say: there was nothing to say. I had walked into a trap with my eyes wide open and the trap had snapped shut. This wasn't the time to look for a way out.

Each step I took to cross the room sent a jar of pain through me. I went slowly into the lounge.

Berry and Louis were sitting up at the bar, whiskies before them. Gloria was lying on the sofa, smoking. Her flame-coloured wrap had fallen open, and her long legs sprawled, one on the settee, and the other dangling to the floor. She didn't look at me as I moved like a cripple across the room to the door.

"See the gent out, Berry," Dix said, following me into the lounge. "Treat him nice. He's a partner in

the business now."

Berry slid off his stool and opened the door.

"On your way, sucker," he said, his thin mouth twisting into a sneering grin. "Mind how you fall downstairs."

I groped my way down the stairs to the front door and opened it.

"Just a minute," Berry said, "there's something I want to say to you."

I turned.

I saw his fist coming, but my reflexes were too slow to avoid it. I took a bang in the mouth that sent me reeling into the mews, and before I could regain my balance I went sprawling.

"That's from Gloria with her compliments," Berry said.

"So long, sucker," and he slammed the door.

chapter eleven

Ann got back soon after eleven o'clock the following morning.

She came briskly down the garage to where I was working with Tim, putting on a new cylinder gasket.

"I'll be up in about ten minutes," I said, waving my oily hands at her to show her I couldn't kiss her. "Did you get on all right?"

"Yes, fine. Did you?"

I knew she was looking searchingly at me, and I knew my white face with the dark shadows under my eyes I had seen when shaving this morning had given her a bit of a shock.

"Had a night out with Bill. Got a head on me this morning, but I'm all right." I smiled at her, meeting her eyes.

"I'll be up in a moment."

She nodded to Tim, and then went on through the office and up the stairs.

It took a little more than half an hour to fix the gasket.

"That does it," I said, and picked up a lump of waste and wiped my hands on it. "I'll leave you to clean up. Don't forget to clean the tools."

"No, Mr. Collins."

I walked back to the office and lit a cigarette.

Around nine-thirty in the morning, Berry had come in to relieve Joe, who had driven away in Berry's Humber. Berry hadn't looked in my direction. He had locked himself in the partitioned room, and I hadn't seen him since then.

My mouth was a little puffy where he had hit me, and I had two big purple bruises under my heart from Dix's punches.

Outwardly I looked like a man who has had a late night and perhaps three or four drinks too many. Inwardly I was like a frozen block of stone.

By betraying Ann I had landed myself into a trap from which there seemed to be no escape. If it wasn't for Ann, I might have been able to do something about it, but with Dix's threat to throw acid at her and to show her those pictures, I was ham-strung.

Thinking about it, I realized now the trap had been sprung from the moment I had first met Gloria on Western Avenue. She must have followed me in the Buick when I had left the garage to go to Lewis's help out at Northolt, and had staged her breakdown where she knew I would have to pass her.

If I had listened to Ann and to my own conscience I wouldn't be in this trap now. I had deliberately done the wrong thing, and now it looked as if both of us would have to pay for it.

But oddly enough, I had got my second wind. Last night, after I had returned to the empty flat, I was nearly out of my mind with funk. I couldn't see any way out. At first I had decided the only thing I could do was to tell Ann the truth, then go to the police and tell them the whole sordid story and ask for protection.

But the more I thought about it, the more impossible such a solution became. I knew I couldn't go to Ann and tell her I had broken my promise not to see Gloria again. I couldn't admit that I had been unfaithful to her. I had walked up and down the sitting-room until dawn, wracking my brains for a way out, and after a while I began to recover my nerve.

I had been played for a sucker and I had been fooled all along the line. The realization of this made me viciously angry.

The situation was now something personal between Dix and myself. I hated him as I had never thought it possible to hate anyone. I became determined to beat him at his own game. I had no idea how I was going to do it, but sooner or later, the chance must come and I would take it.

I don't want you to imagine I have always been such a weak, despicable fool. Since the war, I admit I had become soft, but during the war, I had built for myself a reputation as an individual fighter. Then I had been pretty tough. When a patrol went out after prisoners I was always chosen to lead it.

If there was a sentry to be silenced before a raid, I was given the job. Towards the end of the war Bill and I had been transferred to the Burma patrol where we specialized in ambushing and killing Japs. Killing became my business, and it was only when I got out of the Army and met Ann that I began to relax. Five years of marriage and civilian life had made me soft: one night in Dix's company had turned the clock back.

I wasn't soft any longer. I wanted to kill Dix. Nothing less would satisfy me. He had got me into this trap. He was going to send that film throughout the poison spots of the world for degenerates to snigger at. He was forcing me to put Bill into danger. He had threatened to throw acid at Ann. By these four things he had given me the right to take his life.

At the moment he held all the cards, but sooner or later, he must play one badly, and then I'd step in. In the meantime I had decided to let him imagine he had got me where he wanted me. I intended to lull his suspicions and wait for my chance, and when it came, I would take it.

It was odd, too, that I had no misgivings about looking Ann in the face. The set-up was too serious for me to feel guilty about something that was already in the past, and which would never happen again. Her happiness and mine were involved now. I had got us into the trap, I had to get us out of it. It was now between Dix and myself. Ann didn't come into it.

I went upstairs where Ann was preparing lunch. As I stood at the kitchen sink, washing my hands, I felt she was watching me anxiously. I turned to smile at her.

"You look pale, Harry."

"I feel pale," I said, wiping my hands on the roller-towel.

"I don't think my supper agreed with me. It was too greasy and then I drank too much beer. Otherwise I'm fine."

I knew she wanted to believe me, and the fact I could meet her eyes quieted her misgivings.

"You look odd somehow, Harry. You remind me of how you used to look when we first met: tough and angry with the world."

I laughed.

"I'll be angry with you if you don't get my lunch ready."

I slid my arm round her and hugged her.

"Harry, when are those men going? Are they going to be here much longer?"

"They've paid for a month, so I suppose they'll stay a month. I don't know."

"Will you let them stay on after the end of the month?"

I knew there was no chance of them staying on: they would probably be gone by next week.

"Not if you don't want them to."

"I know the money's important . . ."

"Now, stop worrying your brains about them. Let's eat."

After lunch I did something I had never done before. I crossed the street and walked into the sorting-office. I found myself in a big concrete floored shed full of mail vans. Men in brown overalls were piling mail bags into several of the vans.

Everyone seemed busy, and for a minute or so no one noticed me.

During that time I had looked around and summed up the geography of the place.

"You can't come in here, mate. What do you want?"

I turned. A short, thickset man in a brown overall was staring at me suspiciously.

"Sorry," I said, grinning. "I was looking for Bill Yates. I'm from across the road: Harry Collins. Maybe Bill's told you about me."

The short, thickset man's face cleared and he nodded.

"That's right. Bill often mentions you. He's not around at the moment. It's his day off."

"Of course it is! I remember now he told me last night. I'll be forgetting my own name next." I took out a packet of cigarettes and offered him one. "We painted the town red last night. Bill can still drink a dozen pints in a night."

"Always could drink beer. My name's Harris." He took the cigarette and lit it. "He said you and he were going out last night."

"I'm glad he's got promotion. He's just the man for the job."

"He is at that," Harris said. "Used to be a boxer, didn't he? You can always tell by the look of a man if he's had the gloves on."

"He was the light-heavy-weight champion of the Battalion. He might have gone far if he had taken it up professionally."

"Doesn't talk a lot about himself, but I spotted he had done some boxing. Used to do a bit myself, but I never got anything out of it except a black eye."

I laughed

"Nor me. Is that Bill's new van over there?"

"What? That old ruin? No fear, that's not Bill's bus. That's it over there; in Bay 6."

"He was telling me about it. Well, I'd better get back. Sorry to have taken up your time. I should have remembered it was Bill's day off."

"That's all right," Harris said, shaking hands. "I've heard a lot about you. Glad to have met you."

I walked back to the garage, aware that Berry must have seen what had been going on from his vantage point at the window. I looked towards the window, but someone had covered it with a piece of muslin.

Around six o'clock, Bill came in.

"Got home all right?" he asked as he walked into the office.

"Yes; did you?"

"Just about made it. I've got some kippers here. How about Ann cooking them and us having supper together?"

"All right. Take them up to her, and when you're through persuading her, come down. We might nip across the road for a beer."

"That's an idea."

He went upstairs.

I knew he would assure Ann I had spent the night with him, and I was glad he had come in. After

about ten minutes he came down again.

"All under control. Let's go."

I had already closed up the garage, and together we walked over to the Four Feathers that was next door to the sorting-office.

"Two pints, Miss," Bill said to the barmaid and took the cigarette I offered him. He stared at me suddenly. "Blimey! You look a bit of wreck. What's happened to your mouth?"

"Spanner slipped and nearly knocked my teeth out. It hurt at the time, but it's all right now. By the way, I met Harris this afternoon. He showed me your van."

Bill looked surprised.

"Did he? That's against regulations."

"I forgot you weren't coming in today, and I asked for you. We got talking and I saw the van and asked him if it was yours."

"Oh. Well, it doesn't matter. Got some gadgets in it we like to keep quiet about."

"I didn't get within ten yards of it," I said, and laughed.

"Do they equip you with a siren, Bill?"

"An alarm bell; it works off the battery. If we run into trouble the first thing I have to do is to touch it off. Once it's started there's no stopping it. Good idea. It makes a hell of a racket."

I had learned all I wanted to know now, and I changed the subject to cricket. Once launched on the possibilities of Middlesex winning the championship there was no stopping Bill.

While he talked, I completed my plan of action. Granted a little luck, I didn't think it was going to be too difficult to put the alarm bell out of action. There was no question of not doing it. It was too early yet to make a false move. If I were going to beat Dix, I had to make him believe he had me cornered.

I had to work hard during supper and until it was time for Bill to go, to keep pace with the conversation and to appear at ease. I had a lot on my mind, but I knew it would be fatal to let either Ann or Bill suspect that there was something wrong.

It was with relief that I went downstairs to lock Bill out.

Lights were still on in the sorting-office, and the big doors stood open.

"You never seem to shut up for the night over there," I said as I stood on the kerb with Bill.

"We don't shut up. Vans are always coming in and out. Of course the rest of the place is shut up, but the garage remains open all the time."

"Who looks after it?"

"Harris has night duty this week. He's about the biggest milker we've got. He sleeps most of the night in his office. I've been in after midnight and I could have pinched a couple of vans under his very nose if I wanted to.

"Who wants to steal a mail van?"

"If it's empty they don't," Bill said, grinning. "That's what Harris is always saying. He says he'd wake up if anyone started one of the engines. I suppose he's right. Takes a little manoeuvring to get a van out of its bay. Well, I'm off home. So long, Harry."

"See you tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow. I've got another early morning rehearsal, worse luck. Look you up on Sunday."

I watched him walk down the street towards the bus stop, then I shut the garage door and shot the bolts.

Joe came out of the partitioned room.

"How are you making out, pally?"

"All right," I said curtly, and walked past him.

He reached out and grabbed hold of my arm, pulling me round. The feel of his hand on me sent a vicious spurt of rage through me. I very nearly swung at him, but checked myself in time.

"Ed will be in tomorrow afternoon. He expects some news from you," Joe said, his small eyes watchful.

"He'll have some," I said, jerked free, and continued to the office.

They were so sure they had me where they wanted me.

All right, let them think that. Only let them make one slip, and then they'd soon find out I wasn't the sucker they imagined I was.

Dix came in on Friday afternoon. I saw him swing the big Cadillac into the garage as I sat at my desk. I got up and went down the garage to meet him. He remained in the car.

"Hop in, pally," he said. "Well go for a little run in the park."

"Shan't be long, Tim," I said, opened the car door and got in.

Dix drove swiftly down Regent Street, along Cockspur Street and through the Admiralty Arch into the park. He drove brilliantly, keeping on the move all the time, tie seemed to have an uncanny knack of beating the traffic lights, and his judgment of distances as he cut in through the traffic was hair raising.

Neither of us said anything until we were rolling towards Buckingham Palace.

"Got a plan yet, pally?"

"Yes. When do I do it?"

He shot a quick look at me. I saw surprise in his eyes.

"Tonight. What's the plan?"

"The sorting-office remains open all night. The man in charge sleeps most of the time. The van is at the far end of the garage away from his office. If he spots me I'll tell him I'm working late, made myself some tea and thought he would like a cup. I'll take tea with me in a vacuum flask. Then I'll clear out and try again. If he's asleep, I'll go straight to the van. I think I can get to the van without him seeing me. The alarm bell works from the car battery. It shouldn't be difficult to disconnect one of the leads."

"Suppose they check the leads? That's not good enough. How about muffling the bell?"

"Even if they check the leads they won't spot what I've done unless they test the bell itself. If they do that, muffling won't help either."

"Okay. I'll leave it to you so long as you make a good job of it. I don't threaten twice. You know what'll happen to you if you play your cards wrong."

"I know."

"Now listen, pally, looks like the job is fixed for Sunday morning. I've had a tip the stuff will arrive at King's Cross about one o'clock Sunday morning. I'm telling you this so you'll be ready to handle the cops when they come, and they'll come to you, make no mistake about that. As soon as we've pulled the job, the heat's going to be tuned on good. The cops will take the town to pieces. Sooner or later, they'll come to you to find out if you've seen anything. Well, keep your trap shut. You're in this as much as I am now."

"Tim Greensleeves might tell them you three have been in and out of the garage."

"That's up to you. You've got to keep the cops away from him. If he talks, those art pictures are going to be put in the post."

"I'll take care of him."

"That's the idea, pally. Handle this right and by Monday morning, you'll have seen the last of us. Talk out of turn, slip up somewhere, and I'll fix you so you won't forget me in a hurry."

"I won't slip up."

He slowed down.

"Okay. This is as far as you go. So long, pally. It's been nice and profitable meeting you. I don't reckon to see you again. For your sake I hope I don't."

I walked slowly up Eagle Street, my mind busy.

Somehow I had to get Bill out of the way. If the hold-up was to take place on Sunday morning I had to make certain Bill wasn't on the van. Whatever happened to me, I didn't intend he should run into any danger. I had no idea who would take his place, and I didn't care, but I had made up my mind he wasn't going to run into Dix and his mob.

But my first job was to fix the alarm bell. Ann, of course, was the major snag in an otherwise fairly easy job. I couldn't tackle the bell until after midnight, and she would wonder what I was up to.

As luck would have it a Vanguard had come in while I was out to have its brakes adjusted.

I told Ann the Vanguard had carburettor trouble, and I might have to work late.

"The chap's going away tomorrow on holiday, and I promised to fix it for him," I said as she served up supper. "I don't know how long it'll take me, but it may be some time."

After supper I went down to the garage and took off the carburettor. I got a length of copper tubing and began to bore a hole through it. I was still fiddling about with the tubing when Ann came down about ten forty-five to see how I was getting on.

"I'll be a couple of hours yet. The whole set-up's gone haywire. You go to bed, darling. I'll be up as soon as I've finished."

"Would you like me to make you some tea?"

"Not now. I might make some myself later. You go on to bed. The longer we stay nattering the longer I'm going to be."

"All right, Harry. I'll have my bath and come down again."

"Don't do that. I'd rather work without interruption. This damn thing's tricky."

"All right. I don't suppose I'll be asleep when you come up."

A few minutes past midnight I went quietly upstairs and put the kettle on. The light in the bedroom was cut, and I decided thankfully that Ann was asleep. I made some tea and filled a vacuum flask, then I went downstairs again. I put a screwdriver and a pair of pliers in pocket, and taking the vacuum flask with me, I unbolted the garage door and looked across the street at the lighted doorway leading to the sorting-office.

Joe suddenly appeared in the doorway of tip, partitioned room.

"He must be asleep," he said. "I haven't seen a sign of him for the past hour."

I grunted, and moved out on to the pavement.

Eagle Street was deserted.

Moving quietly I crossed the street, my rubber-soled shoes making no sound. I walked into the sorting-office.

One powerful light lit up the front entrance, but the rest of the place was in dark shadows.

My past experience of jungle fighting came in handy now. I had been in far tighter spots than this. Time and again I had had to lead a patrol into dense jungle to winkle out Jap snipers who were as dangerous as rattlesnakes. This job was a romp after jungle fighting.

My heart was beating normally, my feet made no sound as I walked straight down the length of the dimly lit shed, making no attempt to conceal myself.

If Harris was watching me, he would have no suspicion that I was up to no good. I was behaving like a man who had legitimate business in the place.

When I was within ten yards of Bill's van, I stopped and looked around as if wondering where Harris was.

To my right I spotted a small glass:-partitioned room lit by a blue electric lamp. I could just see Harris. He was slumped forward in a chair, his head resting in his hands, his elbows on the desk.

He didn't move.

I had no idea if he was asleep or not, but at least he hadn't seen me.

I moved a yard or so towards the van, still watching him.

Still he didn't move. I took four quick steps sideways that took me into the darkest shadows where he couldn't see me even if he did look up.

The rest was easy. I opened the van door and slid in, pulling the door shut.

I took out a small electric torch and examined the dashboard, shielding the light with my fingers. Close to the driver's seat was a small knob painted red and marked 'Alarm'.

I worked quickly, tracing the wires down to the floorboards. I cut one wire where it entered the floorboards, stripped back the insulating cover, cut the wire away, inserted a match into the cover and slid the other end of the match into the other end of the cover, joining them neatly. Even a careful examination of the wire wouldn't show where it had been cut.

The whole job took less than a minute.

I slipped the pliers and screwdriver into my pocket, then I took out my handkerchief and wiped everything I had touched in case I had left any fingerprints. As I opened the van door I heard a car engine, and a moment later a mail van swept in, fighting up the inside of the shed with its headlights.

I ducked down out of sight, squirmed over the gear lever and opened the off-side door. I kept it ajar and waited.

The van pulled into an empty bay about ten yards from where I was crouching.

"I bet you've been asleep, you lazy devil," I heard the driver say.

"I haven't, you know," Harris said indignantly. He came hurriedly out of the office. "I might have been resting my eyes, but I haven't been asleep."

"Well, come on. I want to sign off."

I heard them walk over to the office.

I slipped out of the van, shut the door and edged out of the bay. It seemed a long way now to the street entrance. I could get within twenty feet of it in safety, but the last twenty feet were in full light from the overhead lamp.

I made my way towards the light, keeping close to the wall.

The sound of voices wade me dock down behind a van.

The driver and Harris came out of the office. They began to walk slowly down the shed towards the entrance.

At the entrance the driver said, "Well, sweet dreams. Mind you don't snore."

"Hop it," Harris said, grinning good-humouredly. "See you tomorrow. Don't do anything I wouldn't do in the meantime."

He stood just inside the entrance, looking after the driver as he walked away, then yawning, he came slowly back into the shed. He stood looking into the darkness, scratching his head, then he walked back to his office and shut himself in.

I didn't move. I knew he would see me if I walked into the light. I leaned against the wall and waited. I waited over a quarter of an hour, then I saw him rest his face in his hands again.

I moved then. Silently and swiftly, I dodged past the pool of light and into the street. I kept going, crossing the street to the garage, drawing a deep breath of relief as I reached the darkness without hearing any shout of alarm.

Joe was waiting for me. In the dim light coming from my office I could see his sweat beaded face.

"You took your time. I thought he had spotted you."

"He didn't spot me."

"Have you fixed it?"

"I've fixed it."

I closed the garage doors and shot the bolt, then I walked quickly down the garage to my office, turned off the light and went upstairs.

"Harry?"

I stiffened as I opened the bedroom door.

"Aren't you asleep?"

"No. What were you doing across the road? Why did you go over there?"

I felt a little chill creep up my spine.

"I made some tea. I thought Harris would like a drop. My voice was unsteady. "Did you see me then?"

"I thought I heard something and looked out of the window. Is Harris Bill's pal?"

"That's the fellow. I'm going to have a wash, then I'll be with you. Don't turn on the light."

"Was the carburettor all right?"

"I fixed it in the end. It was quite a job."

"Hurry up and come to bed, Harry."

"I'm coming."

chapter twelve

I had spent a week's holiday with Bill's father and mother after I had been demobilized. They lived in a remote village near Anton, some ten miles from Berwick-on-Tweed. The old boy was getting on for eighty, and Mrs. Yates was only a few years younger, but they lived alone and managed for themselves, and Bill thought the world of them.

I decided to use them as a bait to get Bill out of London. I didn't like doing it, but I knew they were the only people, except for Ann and myself, he cared about. They were not on the telephone and their cottage was a good mile from their nearest neighbours, something that was always worrying Bill.

"If ever one of them got ill," he used to say, "I don't know how they would get on. But they won't move. I've argued myself black in the face, but it makes no difference."

Soon after four o'clock on Saturday afternoon, I happened to have a telephone call from one of my customers.

Knowing Ann had heard the telephone bell, I used the call to set the ball rolling.

After I had hung up, I raced upstairs to find Ann.

"I've just had some pretty bad news," I said, coming into the kitchen. "It's Bill mother. She's been taken ill. The doctor says Bill must go at once."

"Oh, Harry! Do you know where Bill is?"

"I haven't an idea. The doctor didn't know if he was on the phone. Bill's father told him to get in touch with me. I've got to find Bill. Tim can hold the fort. Maybe they'll know where he is over at the sorting-office."

"Is it bad?"

"It could be. She's had a fall. Could be serious at her age."

I went downstairs and over to the sorting-office where I found Harris sunning himself in the doorway.

"I've got to find Bill," I said. "Just had news his mother's taken ill. They want him to go home. Know where he is?"

"I'm sorry to hear that," Harris said, looking startled. "He's at his lodgings. He's on night shift tonight. I expect he's having a bit of a kip."

"Will he be able to get time off?"

"Shouldn't be any trouble about that."

"Now look, I'm going down to his lodgings right now. I'll drive him to the station. There's a train in an hour I think he can catch. Could you report this for him? He won't have time to ask for leave himself, and he'll be easier in mind if he knows you're taking care of it for him."

Harris hesitated.

"Well, he should report it himself by rights. He should get permission before he goes."

"But he's got to catch that train. Even now he may arrive too late. This is a matter of life and death. You can't expect him . . ."

"Okay, okay," Harris said. "Leave it to me. I'll fix it."

"Good man! Then I'll get off."

I went back and told Ann what I was going to do, then got out the truck and drove fast to Bill's lodgings; a small house off the Fulham Road.

His landlady said he was in his room having a sleep. She knew me and told me to go on up.

As I climbed the stairs, I wondered if I were going to pull this off. Bill was shrewd, and a difficult man to panic.

I had to stop him from checking my story. I had to get him on the train without telephoning. Once on the train I knew he couldn't get back until late Sunday afternoon. By that time the hold-up would be over.

I rapped on the door and pushed it open.

Bill was lying on the bed in shirt and trousers, smoking and reading a paper-backed novel. He gaped at me and sat up.

"Hello, Harry, this is a surprise."

"I've got some bad news, Bill," I said, coming into the room and shutting the door. "It's your mother. She's had a bad fall, and they want you to go up right away."

Alarm jumped into Bill's eyes as he scrambled off the bed.

"Is she badly hurt?"

"I do think so: it's more a question of shock. There's a train in forty minutes. You can just make it if you hurry. I've got the truck outside, and I'll run you to the station."

"I can't catch that. I've got to get permission to go. I'm on night duty. What's the next train?"

"You've got permission. I fixed all that with Harris. There's nothing to worry about. He's doing all that's necessary. Now come on, and stir your stumps. We haven't much time."

"This is damned good of you, Harry." He sat on the bed and struggled into his shoes. "How did you get mixed up in this?"

"Your dad told the doctor to phone me. He hoped you might be across the way."

"Who's the doctor? Is it the hospital?"

"No. She's at home. He did tell me his name, but I can't remember it."

"Mackenzie?"

"It might be. Come on for goodness' sake."

He was now putting on his collar and tie.

"I wonder if I should call him first?"

"You haven't time. I told him you'd be on the five-fifteen. He said she was dangerously ill and she's asking for you."

That galvanized him into action. In under three minutes he was ready. I felt pretty sick deceiving him in this way, but it was for his own good. Nothing else would have got him to chuck up his work at a moment's notice.

We ran downstairs and to the truck.

Fortunately the traffic was fairly light as it was Saturday afternoon, and we made good time to King's Cross. Bill couldn't hope to reach his home before one o'clock in the morning, and even if he turned around immediately, he couldn't get back to London before nine-thirty. By then he should be safe.

I hustled him along the platform, not giving him a chance to think, to where the train was waiting.

"Do you want any money?" I asked, taking out two five-pound notes I had brought with me. "Better take these. Here's a corner seat. Hop in here."

"I can't say how grateful I am, Harry." Bill climbed in, his usually cheerful face worried and anxious. "I wouldn't like the old lady to go without seeing me."

"She'll be all right as soon as she sets eyes on your ugly mug," I said, gripping his hand. "Let me know what happens, Bill, and keep your pecker up."

We had a few minutes to wait before the train left, and I talked desperately, giving him no time to concentrate. I was scared stiff he might want to put through a priority call to the doctor. Being a member of the Post Office he wouldn't have any trouble doing that, so I didn't give him a chance even to think of it "Looks as if you're off," I said as the guard waved his flag. "Good luck, Bill."

"Thanks for all you've done. I'll let you know how it goes."

The train was moving now, and I stepped back with a sigh of relief. Bill hung out of the window, waving. I stood on the sunlit platform watching until I lost sight of him.

As I drove towards Eagle Street, my mind was busy. I felt I had won the first trick against Dix. I had got Bill out of trouble.

Now I had to wait to see what my next move should be. It depended on Dix. What would he do after the robbery? Would he leave the country or hide in London? If he hid in London would he use Gloria's flat? Could I get at him through Gloria?

Sooner or later he must make a slip or give me an opportunity to wreck his plan. I knew I was running a risk. The wisest thing to have done would have been to have told Bill what was going to happen, but Dix might slip through the net, and I knew he would get those photographs to Ann if it was the last thing he did.

The thought of her looking at those pictures brought me out in a cold sweat. No matter what happened to me, no matter what risks I had to run, those photographs were not to get into her hands.

I got back to the garage and told Tim to go home.

Ann came running into the office as soon as she heard me come in.

"Did you find him?"

"It's all right. He's on his way by now. He said he'd let us know what happens."

"Oh, good. I do hope she'll be all right."

"Seeing Bill will cheer her up. I don't envy him his Journey."

We talked about Bill for a few minutes, then Ann went upstairs again.

I went into the office and began to sort out the more important bills that had to be paid.

I had paid the seventy-five pounds Dix had given me into my bank. I had been tempted not to put the amount through the books, but I couldn't pay my bills in cash, and finally I had decided it would be too risky to try to gyp the income tax people. I had completed writing out the more important cheques when I saw Joe come out of the partitioned room and go over to the Jaguar. I watched him check the petrol and oil.

He then inflated the tyres with my pressure pump.

Their get-away car, Dix had said.

I felt an angry wave of resentment run through me as I thought how easily I had been fooled, and how clever they had been.

"Harry," Ann called from the head of the stairs.

"Right here." I pushed back my chair and went to the door.

"Where have you put the vacuum flask?"

"The—what?"

"The vacuum flask, darling. It's not in the cupboard."

"I haven't seen it"

"Didn't you take it when you went over to Harris last night?"

Cold fingers suddenly closed around my heart. I had difficulty in breathing. Luckily the light was bad, and Ann couldn't see my face.

"I—I didn't take the flask. I took him a cup of tea."

"That's very odd. The flask's not here."

I was trying to think what I had done with the flask, but for the moment my brain was paralysed.

"I was going to take it but I couldn't find it," I said, my voice husky.

"It must be somewhere. I'll look again."

I heard her go into the kitchen.

I stood still, cold sweat on my face while I wracked my brain to remember what I had done with the flask. I had it with me when I went across to the sorting-office. I had it in my hand when I spotted Harris in his glass-partitioned office. I had it with me when I got into the van to cut the wire, but after that I couldn't remember what I had done with it.

I couldn't have left it in the van?

I couldn't have done such a mad, stupid thing as that?

I suddenly felt weak at the knees, and I sat down. I must have brought it back! Maybe it was in the garage. If I had been mad enough to have left it in the van would it eventually be traced to me? It would have my fingerprints on it.

I went out into the garage and began to hunt feverishly, but I couldn't find it.

"It's not in the kitchen, Harry," Ann called.

I went to the door at the foot of the stairs.

"It'll turn up. Don't worry about it."

"I'll have one more look."

You won't find it, I thought, sick and shaking. I remembered now. I had put it on the floor of the van just before I cut the wire. It was there now: a blue and white flask, easily identified, and with my fingerprints on it.

chapter thirteen

It was a sweltering hot night, and although the window, overlooking Eagle Street, was wide open and the curtains pulled back, the room seemed like an oven.

I lay sleepless. At my side Ann slept quietly.

It wasn't only the heat that kept me awake. My mind was darting about like a rat in a trap, as I tried to think of the best way out of my predicament. At first I decided to tell Joe about the vacuum flask so he could consult Dix, but on second thoughts I realized they wouldn't put off the hold-up, and they were certain to blame me for being so stupidly careless.

I then wondered if it would be possible to go to the sorting-office after dark and try to recover the flask, but I gave up that idea as soon as it entered my head. Joe would be watching the place and he would see me. I might just as well tell him and be done with it.

It was only after I had lain in the semi-darkness in a fever of anxiety for over an hour that I began to get my nerve back.

It was possible that the guard, the driver, or the man who handled the mail bags might think one of them owned the flask and say nothing about it. I might be working myself into a panic for nothing.

But even with this thought to comfort me, I couldn't sleep. I was afraid to move in case I woke Ann. There was nothing for me to do but to lie in the half-darkness and wait for the dawn.

Somewhere around three o'clock, I heard Joe moving about in the garage. He must have gone over to the Jaguar for I heard a car door shut.

Then at twenty minutes to four I heard another sound that made me stiffen and set my heart racing.

Across the way, a car engine started up.

I moved aside the sheet that covered me, silently swung my legs off the bed and very cautiously stood up. I looked at Ann but the car engine hadn't disturbed her and she slept on.

I crept over to the window and looked down into Eagle Street.

Lights showed in the sorting-office. A postman was standing by the entrance talking to Harris. I could hear the van engine ticking over.

The postman walked back into the garage and disappeared from view. Harris continued to stand in the doorway.

After a few minutes I heard the van door slam, and the engine accelerate. The van appeared out of the darkness and pulled up beside Harris.

I was looking down on top of it. I couldn't see who was in the van. Harris spoke to the driver, consulted his watch, then waved the van on.

As it drove into the street, I saw it was Bill's van. I hadn't any doubt now that the consignment of diamonds Dix had planned to grab was in the van, and at this very moment, Joe was phoning a message to Dix to tell him the van was on its way. Probably Dix was waiting with Louis and Berry in a side street on the route the van would take. Within a few minutes the hold-up would take place.

The van moved swiftly down Eagle Street towards Oxford Street. I leaned out of the window and watched its red tail light disappear around the corner, heading towards Marble Arch.

I looked over my shoulder at Ami. She was still sleeping.

I crept across the room, eased open the door and went silently downstairs.

In the dark garage I could hear Joe moving about. I stood just inside the office doorway and

watched.

He came out of the partitioned room, a flashlight in his hand and went over to the Jaguar. He put the flashlight on the car roof so the beam fell directly on the door of the partitioned room, then he went back and came out again, staggering under the weight of a big suitcase. This he put in the boot of the car.

I walked down the garage towards him.

"What are you doing?"

He swung round.

"Clearing out. Come and give me a hand."

"You're not leaving now? There's a fellow standing in the doorway across the street. He'll see you if you take the car out."

"Who said I was going to take the car? Do you think I'm that dumb? I'm leaving the car. Gloria will fetch it first thing tomorrow."

So Gloria was coming here!

"Come and give me a hand," Joe went on impatiently.

"Has it started yet?"

He grinned at me in the light of the torch.

"You bet it's started. They're waiting for them in Shepherd's Bush."

I followed him into the partitioned room. Together we carried the second suitcase to the car and put it alongside the other in the boot.

"What the hell have you got in these two cases?" I asked.

"That's Ed's cockeyed idea. He's too damned thorough, that's his trouble. They're full of television parts, just in case you shot your mouth off and the busies got curious. "That stuff's hot too. Louis knocked it off from a factory, and then there's the telephone Louis knocked that off too."

"You're not leaving this stuff here for tonight? Suppose the police find it? They could trace it, couldn't they?"

"You bet they could trace it, but don't get windy. The cops aren't coming here until tomorrow. By that time Gloria will have shifted the car. Well, I'm shoving. Keep your trap shut and remain healthy."

In spite of this assumed nonchalance, I could see he was jumpy and his heavy battered face was glistening with sweat.

"Open up. I want to get out of here."

As I slid back the bolt and opened one of the double doors, I said, "I don't like that stuff being here. The police would pin it on me if they found it."

"That'd be just too bad, wouldn't it?" he sneered, pushed past me and peered up and down the street. "So long. Keep your nose clean. If you don't it'll be just too bad for you."

I watched him walk quickly and silently away, then I bolted the door, and as I went back to my office I wondered what had been happening. Had the hold-up succeeded? I lit a cigarette and almost immediately stubbed it out. There was a sick sensation inside me of excitement and uneasiness. Would the police come here? I suddenly realized just how dangerous Tim could be. As luck would have it, he worked this Sunday as it was my Sunday off. If the police questioned him, he was sure to tell them about Joe and Berry. I would have to get rid of him. I didn't want to lose him, but I had to keep him from talking to the police.

I went upstairs. As I quietly slipped into the bedroom Ann said, "Where have you been, Harry?"

She gave me a start.

"I've just had a drink. Can I get you one?"

"No, thank you. Couldn't you sleep?"

"It's still damned hot. It feels like an oven in here."

"What's the time?"

"Getting on for five."

"You had better rest. It's too early to get up just yet."

"I don't want any more sleep. I'm going to dress."

She half sat up.

"There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"Wrong? Of course there isn't. Now, go to sleep."

I collected my clothes and went into the bathroom. After I had shaved I went into the kitchen to make some coffee.

I took the coffee downstairs to the partitioned room and sat at the window where I could look across the road and watch the entrance to the sorting-office. My nerves were screwed up and my heart was thumping.

It was now half-past five: an hour and forty minutes had gone by since the van had left the sorting-office. Any moment now the alarm would come through.

I could see Harris sweeping the floor of the shed opposite. He was smoking, and swept slowly as if he had all the time in the world to get the job done.

At ten to six I heard a telephone bell ring across the way.

Harris put down his broom and walked with infuriating slowness to his office.

I felt a trickle of sweat run down my face. I leaned forward to crush out my cigarette.

Minutes ticked by, then Harris appeared. He came quickly to the entrance and looked up the road. There was a dazed, startled expression on his face that told me the hold-up had taken place.

I watched him as he moved out on to the pavement. He stood on the kerb for two or three minutes, then turned and went back to the office as the telephone began to ring again.

The time was just on six, and I went to open the garage doors. I would have given a lot to cross the road and ask him what had happened.

I swung back the double doors. Then I strolled out on to the pavement in the hope that Harris would reappear, but he didn't. I waited several minutes, staring up at the blue sky, then reluctantly I went back into the garage.

The hands of my watch crept on to six-fifteen. Then one of the trucks that called regularly for petrol drove up. I nodded to the driver as I unscrewed the tank cap.

"Going to be hot."

"Phew! What a night! Couldn't sleep a wink."

"Nor could I."

A dark blue car suddenly slid to a standstill outside the sorting-office.

"'Ullo," the truck-driver said. "Busies: what do they want?"

Two plain clothes officers got out of the car and talked into the sorting-Office. The uniformed driver remained at the wheel.

"Bet you someone's pinched a tuppenny-halfpenny stamp," the truck-driver said scornfully. "That's all these cops 'ave got to do: joy ride at the taxpayers' expense and stick their noses where they're not

wanted."

"Better get moving or they'll be pinching you for obstruction," I said, wanting to be rid of him.

"That's a fact. See you tomorrow, mate."

I stood back while the truck-driver drove into the street.

When he had gone I walked to the partitioned room where I could watch through the curtained Window without being seen.

There wasn't much to see.

The police car remained outside the sorting-office for a good half-hour. I saw neither Harris nor the two plain clothes officers. A few minutes to seven one of the plain clothes men appeared, got into the police car and the car drove away.

"Harry?"

I came quickly out of the partitioned room, closed the door and walked down the length of the garage.

Ann was calling from upstairs.

"Yes?"

"What's going on over there? That was the police, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I have no idea."

I was standing at the foot of the stairs now and Ann was leaning over the banisters.

"Do you think something's wrong?"

"I don't know," I said, speaking casually. "They're probably checking up on an anonymous letter or something like that."

"Oh; I see." She looked doubtfully at me. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"I'm getting it. Will you have something, Harry?"

"I've had all I want. I'm going to look at the brakes on the truck. I should have tackled them weeks ago."

"You—you don't think there's anything wrong over there?"

I laughed.

"I haven't the slightest idea, Ann. Go and get your breakfast."

My indifference seemed to reassure her and she went back into the kitchen.

As I returned to the garage I saw two police cars pull up outside the sorting-office. Two uniformed policemen took up positions either side of the door while three plain clothes men and a sergeant in uniform went inside. One of the plain clothes men carried a black box and a tripod.

Would they come here? I wondered. Not yet anyway.

The hold-up had taken place in Shepherd's Bush. It would be in that district that they would start their inquiries.

For something better to do and to occupy my mind I drove the truck to the door and then set about adjusting the brakes. From where I worked I had a good view of the sorting-office, but there was nothing to see except the two policemen at the entrance.

Ann came down a little after half-past seven.

"There is something wrong over there, Harry," she said coming to the entrance of the garage and staring across the road at the two policemen.

"Looks like it," I said indifferently. "Well, it's not our business."

"Do you think there's been a robbery?"

"I don't know. Look, darling, I want to get this done before Tim comes in." I crawled under the van again and began tightening the nut on the brake drum.

"Couldn't you ask Harris, Harry?"

"I will if I see him. What are you getting so excited about?"

There was a long pause. I could see her small feet and slim ankles as she stood near the truck.

"I'm not getting excited. I'm worried, Harry."

"Oh, forget it, and let me get on with my job!"

She went away then, and I worked until eight o'clock. I had just finished when Tim came in wheeling his bicycle. By this time there was a small crowd standing in front of my entrance, gaping at the sorting-office. Several Press cars had arrived and three men with cameras were taking photographs.

"Morning, Tim," I said, wiping my hands clean on a lump of waste. "Looks as if there's some excitement across the way."

"There's been a robbery, Mr. Collins," Tim said, his eyes round behind his spectacles.

"One of the mail vans?"

"That's right. No one seems to know if they got away with much. It's not in the papers yet. I asked one of the reporters."

"Well, never mind that for a moment. Come into the office, Tim. I want to talk to you."

Surprised, he reluctantly dragged himself away from the activity going on outside and followed me into the office.

I knew it would be too dangerous to let him stay in the garage a minute longer than necessary. I didn't want to get rid of him, but I had to. I couldn't let him tell the police about Dix and the others.

I sat on the edge of the desk and to cover my embarrassment. I lit a cigarette.

"Look, Tim, I'm not going to beat about the bush. Business is rotten. I've got to economize or I'll go bust. I'm sorry, but I can't afford to keep you on."

His face fell.

"Oh. Well, I was rather expecting it, Mr. Collins. There doesn't seem any work coming in, does there?"

"That's a fact." I flicked ash on to the floor, went on without looking at him. "I'm not going to stand in your way, Tim. You can pack up right away. I'm going to give you two weeks' money."

He stared at me.

"I'll work my week out, Mr. Collins. I wouldn't like to leave you in the lurch."

"I can manage all right, and I'll feel happier if I knew you were looking for something else instead of wasting your time doing nothing here."

"I can get another job easily enough. I'd like to work out my week here."

"There's no point in that. There's no work to do. You get off right now, Tim."

He shuffled his feet. I tried to meet his eyes, but I couldn't.

"I—I haven't done anything wrong, have I, Mr. Collins?"

"Don't be an idiot, Tim. It's just that I want you to get fixed up right away, and also, if I've got to do without your help, the sooner I get down to the job the better." I took out my wallet and counted nine pounds down on to the desk. "There you are, Tim. Now you get off. I'll send you a cracking fine reference. You'll get it tomorrow."

"I can't take that, Mr. Collins," he said with a dignity that surprised me. "I'll take a week's money, but not two weeks. That wouldn't be fair."

"Please yourself," I said, beginning to get irritated. I was anxious to get rid of him in case Ann came down. "It's due to you."

"No, it isn't."

He took four pounds and a ten shilling note and left the rest of the money on the desk.

There was a long, awkward pause, then as he still showed no sign of going I said, "Well, Tim, thanks for all you've done. I can't say how sorry I am this has happened. You get off now."

"If you're sure you want me to go, I suppose I'd better go. I'd like to say good-bye to Mrs. Collins, please."

I was expecting that

"She's busy right now, Tim. I'll tell her you wanted to say good-bye. She'll understand." I forced a laugh. "It's not as if we shan't see you again. I hope you'll look us up one of these days."

I knew this would be the trickiest part of getting rid of him. He was devoted to Ann. The worried, unhappy look went out of his eyes, and something like anger showed in them.

"Does Mrs. Collins know I'm going?"

"Of course she does." I had to stop this, and stop it quickly. "As a matter of fact, Tim, it was she who suggested you should go. Don't let's embarrass her with a lot of good-byes."

He went as red as fire.

"Oh, I see."

I got up and began to crowd him out of the office.

"Of course she doesn't want you to go any more than I do, but we've got to be sensible about this."

"I'd like to say I have been very happy here, Mr. Collins. I'm sorry this has happened. If there's anything wrong, I'd like you know you can rely on me to help."

"There's nothing wrong. Now get off. I've a lot to do this morning, and I can't stand here nattering all day."

I spoke more sharply than I intended to, but my patience was rapidly running out.

He turned even redder.

"Well, then, I'll say good-bye."

"So long, and good luck."

I watched him put on his coat and cross over to where he kept his bicycle. As he wheeled the machine to the entrance to the garage, he looked back over his shoulder.

"And good luck to you, too, Mr. Collins."

And I'll need it, I thought. How I'll need it!

"Thanks, Tim."

The miserable, dejected look on his face made me feel bad. We had got along together, and I liked him, but he was too dangerous now. He had to go.

I watched him push his way through the crowd, mount his bicycle and pedal away.

Now I had to cook up some explanation for Ann.

I went to the foot of the stairs.

"Ann?"

She came out on to the landing. Sunlight coming through the landing window fell directly on her. I was startled to see how pale and anxious she looked.

"I think you must be right, Ann, Tim says there has been a hold-up."

"Yes."

"Well, thank goodness Bill wasn't mixed up in it. Bit of luck him being called home like that."

"Yes."

We stood looking at each other.

"It never rains but it pours," I said, making an effort to sound casual. "Tim has had to go home. His father's ill."

"Ill, Harry? I'm sorry. Is he bad?"

"He said something about a heart attack."

"Has he gone now?"

"Yes. I told him to take the week off." I began to move back into the office. "I think I'll shut up for the day, Ann. With all these crowds outside there won't be any business."

"All right, Harry."

She turned and went into the kitchen. I listened to her moving about. My hands were damp and I felt a little sick. The lies were piling up now. I could see nothing but lies ahead of me: lies to Ann, to the police, to Bill.

"Mr. Collins?"

I turned quickly, my heart skipping a beat. A squat, red-faced man in a shabby brown suit and a slouch hat pulled down over his eyes was standing in the office doorway.

"That's right." I got to my feet "Sorry, I didn't see you come in."

"That's okay, Mr. Collins. My names Norton: Evening Mail. I wanted a word with you about the robbery across the way."

I felt a cold chill run up my spine.

"What robbery?"

"Haven't you heard? There's been a hold-up of a mail van. The van left the sorting-office over the way about half-past three this morning. It was ambushed off Shepherd's Bush on its way to Northolt Airfield. It's big news. They got away with a lot of industrial diamonds, and one of the Post Office guards was killed."

"Killed?"

"That's right. Must have been quite a scrap. Two of the bandits were laid out, and one of the guards was killed."

"One of the guards was killed?" I repeated stupidly; my mouth was so dry the words came out in a whisper.

"Yes. Now, look, Mr. Collins, you're right opposite the sorting-office. I was wondering if you saw anything suspicious."

"I didn't see anything."

One of the guards was killed! If I hadn't got Bill out of the way, it would have been him!

"The way I figure it, Mr. Collins," Norton went on, "the bandits must have been watching the sorting-office for some time. The van left at an unusual hour, and yet they were waiting for it. That must mean they had someone watching for the van to leave. Do you happen to remember seeing anyone or a car even hanging about Eagle Street during the past few days?"

"No. I don't remember seeing anyone."

I don't know how I managed to sit still or even speak. I wasn't only involved in a hold-up, I was

now involved in a murder!

"Think a moment," Norton urged. "Are you sure you didn't notice anyone? Didn't you hear something unusual around half-past three this morning?"

I sat looking down at my desk. After a long pause, I said, "I'm sorry, but I don't remember seeing anything suspicious or hearing anything either."

He let out a long, sighing breath of disgust.

"Oh well, it can't be helped. I thought I might strike lucky with you, seeing the position you have here. Never mind. Most of my work consists of asking questions and getting the wrong answers. I'd better have a talk with the other people down the street. They may have seen something. Thanks, Mr. Collins, for giving me your time. If you do remember anything you think might help me, give me a ring, will you?" He put his card on the desk "We'll make it worth your while. So long, and keep thinking, won't you?"

I didn't say anything. I just sat still, looking beyond him at the crowd standing in front of the sorting-office.

"By the way, that young fella I saw leaving just now." Norton said. "Would he have seen anything, do you think?"

I kept a grip on myself with an effort.

"No. He's not working here."

"Oh, isn't he? I imagined he was. My mistake."

"My wife and I run this place."

"Could I see her for a moment?"

"She didn't see anything, Mr. Norton. She would have told me if she had. She's busy right now."

"Well, okay. Talk to her, will you? You never know. She might remember something. Give me a ring if she does. So long, Mr. Collins."

"So long," I said.

I watched him walk slowly down the length of the garage.

I could tell by the way he held himself and by his slowness that he wasn't satisfied, and that his mind was busy. He suddenly snapped his fingers, turned and came back.

"I knew there was something. Weren't you a friend of Guard Yates? I fancy one of the blokes over at the sorting-office said something about you and Yates being pals."

I looked at him, and a sudden cold wind seemed to blow through my brain.

"What do you mean?"

"The guard who was killed," Norton said patiently. "Guard Bill Yates. Weren't you a friend of his?"

chapter fourteen

For a long moment I sat still staring at him. I felt as if someone had hit me a violent blow on the top of my head. I couldn't move nor speak.

"Didn't you know?" Norton said. "I'm sorry. I thought someone must have told you. This'll be a bit of a shock for you."

I got slowly to my feet

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry," Norton said, and I could see by his startled expression I must have looked as if I were going out of my mind. "I quite thought you knew. It was Bill Yates who was killed in the hold-up."

I came around the desk and caught hold of his coat-front and shook him.

"You're lying! Bill wasn't there!"

"Here, steady on!" His eyes bulged and his face went red. "Take it easy, Mr. Collins."

"You're lying!" I said, my voice off key. I shook him again.

"Bill was up north. He left on Saturday. It wasn't he who was killed. Do you hear, you damned liar?"

"Take your hands off me!"

"Don't you dare come here and tell any more lies! Now get out!"

I shoved him away so violently he crashed against the wall.

"You're crazy!" he gasped, straightening his coat. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Get out!"

"All right, if you know so much, then it wasn't Yates. To hell with you!"

He walked down the garage without looking back.

I watched him go, my heart hammering, my whole body shaking.

It couldn't be Bill! Bill was with his people, miles away.

He couldn't have got back in time to go with the van.

That fool of a reporter must have got the names mixed.

Someone must have told him Bill was the regular guard on the van, and he had jumped to the conclusion that Bill had been on the van at the time of the hold-up.

I wiped my face with my handkerchief. I had been reckless to have acted the way I had. I shouldn't have treated him like that. It was unwise to make an enemy of a newspaper man. I half started down the garage to stop him and apologize, but he had already gone.

He had given me a fright: a hell of a fright, but I was over the first shock now. At least, Bill was safe, but what of the guard who had been killed?

This was murder!

I walked down to the garage doors to close them, my mouth suddenly dry. This was murder!

Then I stopped short and looked at the Jaguar standing against the wall. I felt a little chill run up my spine as I thought of those two suitcases in the boot. I had forgotten about them.

If the police found them they would have an excuse to arrest me. If they believed I was handling stolen property, the next step would be to hook me up with the mail robbery.

Joe said Gloria would collect the car this morning, but would she? Would she have the nerve to come here with the police outside the door and the Pressmen taking photographs? I doubted it.

I didn't hesitate for more than a few seconds. I had to get rid of those suitcases and at once. I was undecided for a moment whether to take the Jaguar or my truck. I knew the police opposite wouldn't fail to see me drive out. If I went in the Jaguar they might be curious, but I should be fairly safe in the truck.

Moving quickly I closed the garage doors and bolted them, then I opened the boot of the Jaguar and hauled out one of the cases.

It was as much as I could do to carry it over to the truck. I heaved it up on the tailboard and shoved it out of sight. Then I went back for the second case. It took me several agonizing seconds to drag it to the back of the truck. It was far too heavy for me to get it up on the tailboard single handed. I got two planks and a rope. Laying the planks on the tailboard so they formed a ramp, I tied the rope to the handle of the case and hauled it up the ramp into the truck.

Sweat was running off me by the time I had got the case into the truck, and I was gasping for breath. But I couldn't afford to waste a second. I stood the planks against the wall, found a large tarpaulin which I tossed over the cases, then I went quickly to the foot of the stairs.

"Ann?"

She came out on to the landing,

"I'm just going to take a run around the block. One of the brakes is grabbing and I want to test it. I won't be long, and I've shut up."

"All right, Harry."

I opened the garage doors and drove out the track.

The crowd had thinned out by now, but I was very conscious of the two policemen standing in front of the sorting-office. Both of them looked sharply at me as I jumped out of the truck to close the garage doors.

But neither of them made any move as I got back into the truck.

It wasn't until I turned the corner that I let out a long breath of relief. I drove along Oxford Street towards Holborn.

The long street was empty of traffic and I made sure no one was following me.

There was a big rubbish tip near Moorfields underground station. I decided to drop the cases there. At this hour of the day and on Sunday, I didn't think anyone would be about.

It took me a quarter of an hour to reach the rubbish tip.

As I had imagined the place seemed deserted but I cruised around for a few minutes to make sure. Then I quickly backed the truck up the ramp so the tailboard overhung the dump.

I spent a few seconds wiping the cases carefully to remove any fingerprints on them, then I put on a pair of gloves I always kept handy in the truck and heaved the cases down on to the tip.

I watched them bump and roll down the pile of rubbish until they vanished in a cloud of dust. I wasn't kidding myself they would remain undiscovered. They would be found all right, but at least, they wouldn't be found in my garage.

I headed back to Eagle Street.

As I pulled up outside the garage I glanced at my wrist-watch. The time was now eight-thirty. It had taken me a little over half an hour to get rid of the cases.

I opened the doors and drove the truck in. As I did so I saw one of the policemen outside the soiling-office turn abruptly and walk inside.

As I shut the garage doors, Ann appeared in the office doorway.

"Harry, come upstairs!"

The urgency in her voice startled me. I shot the last of the bolts and walked quickly down the length of the garage.

She had already gone up the stairs and I followed her.

I found her in the sitting-room. She had been crying, and one look at her white, frightened face brought me to a standstill.

"What's the matter?"

"Have you heard about Bill?"

"Bill?" I reached forward and caught hold of the back of a chair to steady myself. The muscles in my legs began to flutter. "What do you mean?"

"They killed him, Harry."

For a moment I thought I was going to be sick.

"They couldn't have! He wasn't there! What are you trying to do to me?"

"He got back in time to go with the van. He's dead, Harry."

I moved slowly and stiffly around the chair and sat down.

"How do you know? I don't believe it! There's a mistake, Ann. He can't be dead!"

"The police told me."

My heart seemed to stop and then race madly.

"The police? Ann! The police haven't been here, have they?"

"Oh yes," she said in a flat, tired voice. "They came just after you left. They wanted to see you. They wanted to ask you about Bill."

"But Bill couldn't have got back in time! I saw him on to the train. There's been a mistake . . ."

"Oh, Harry! Do you think I'd say it was Bill unless it was Bill? He's dead! They killed him!"

I stared at her.

The room suddenly spun before my eyes, went dark and I had a horrible feeling I was going to faint. I got hold of myself, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes.

"Did you have anything to do with this robbery, Harry? You've got to tell me! I must know!"

Bill dead! If I had only told him what I had suspected he would be alive now. Ann was still speaking, but I didn't hear what she was saying. There was a dead feeling inside my head. They had killed Bill! In spite of all my precautions, all my planning, Bill was dead.

"Harry!"

I started, shook my head and stood up.

"Leave me alone, Ann. I've got to think. Don't talk to me for a moment."

"But I've got to talk to you!" she cried. "Don't you understand the police have been here? They've been asking questions. I trusted you, Harry. I told them the truth, believing you were telling me the truth. Now, I'm not sure any more. Don't you understand? I may have said something to give you away. You've got to listen!"

"What have you told them?" I went up to her and caught hold of her arms, peering into her white face. "What have you told them?"

"They wanted to know about Bill; about the telephone call from the doctor. They asked if you had ever been to the sorting-office."

"What did you tell them?"

"I said you went over there last night to give Harris a cup of tea."

I let go of her and stepped back.

"Harry! Didn't you give him a cup of tea? You went over there—I saw you!"

"No, I didn't give him the tea. I didn't see him."

"But you said you did give it to him!"

"Did I? I don't remember what I said. I didn't give him any tea. I looked for him, but I didn't see him so I came back."

I wasn't thinking of what I was saying. All I could think of was that Bill was dead, and it was my fault that he had died. If I had warned him at the beginning and hadn't thought only of myself, he would be alive at this moment "Harry! You're lying to me!" Ann tried, beating her fists together. "Oh, Harry, for God's sake, tell me the truth. At least tell me the truth. You know I love you: you know I will do anything for you; but I must know the truth. What were you doing over there last night?"

The first shock was passing. I felt a cold, murderous rage against Dix growing inside me. If it was the last thing I did I was going to find and kill him.

"Harry!"

I looked at her, and she stepped back, catching her breath.

"Don't look like that! What is it? What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking it's time, Ann, I did tell you the truth," I said quietly, "I went over to the sorting-office last night to put the alarm bell out of action: the alarm bell on Bill's van."

She closed, her eyes. Her hands went to her breasts, and she stood for a long moment, motionless. Then she opened her eyes and looked at me.

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I hadn't the guts to refuse to do it, Ann. That's why I did it."

"Dix and the others are responsible for the robbery then?"

"Yes."

"And that girl: she is one of them?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Harry, how could you?"

"I broke my promise to you, Ann. I went to see her when you were away at your mother's. Dix blackmailed me. If I didn't put the alarm bell out at he was going to show you proof that I had been with that girl: and it wasn't pretty proof. I hadn't the guts to face you, so I did it."

She sat down suddenly, her fists clenched tightly in her lap.

"I thought I had got Bill out of the way. I wouldn't have gone through with it if I had any idea that Bill might run into that mob."

"His mother's not ill then?"

"No. I told him that lie to get him out of London. I still can't think how he could have got back. I saw him on the train."

"He did get back, Harry."

"Ann, I don't expect you to forgive me, but I want you to know I'm sorry. She didn't mean anything to me: it was a physical something I hadn't the guts to control."

She got up then and moved over to the window and rested her forehead on the window pane.

"What are you going to do, Harry?"

"I'm going to find Dix. You'd better go to your mother, Ann."

She turned quickly and stared at me.

"Why do you want to find Dix? Let the police find him! You've got to think of yourself now, Harry. Don't you understand, you might get into serious trouble?"

"You mean I could go to prison? All right, then I'll go to prison, but I'm finding Dix first."

Something attracted her attention in the street and she turned quickly to look out of the window.

"They're coming now, Harry."

I joined her at the window with two quick strides. I was in time to see two plain clothes officers enter the garage.

"It's all right, Ann," I said, wanting to put my arm round her, but not doing so. "Don't be frightened. I'll go down and talk to them."

I went across the room, opened the door and without looking back, went down the stairs.

The two detectives were standing just outside my office as I pushed open the door at the foot of the stairs.

"Mr. Collins?"

"That's right."

"I'm Detective Sergeant Hollis, and this is Detective Constable Davies. I am making inquiries concerning a mail van robbery, and believe you may be able to help us. I understand you are a friend of William Yates, the postal guard who was murdered in the early hours of this morning."

I looked at the two men: both dark, both massive, both wearing nondescript dark suits. The Detective Sergeant was the younger of the two. His square-shaped face was expressionless, his eyes alert but impersonal.

"That's right."

"Mr. Collins, I would be glad if you would come to the station with me. The Chief Superintendent is anxious to talk to you."

I felt a sudden sinking feeling inside me.

"I can't very well leave my business. Couldn't he come here?"

"Haven't you anyone to look after your business for an hour or so?"

I hesitated. I didn't want to go with them, but I knew they could force me if they wanted to, and there was no point in getting on the wrong side of them.

"I suppose my wife could manage."

"I have a car outside. I'll see you are driven back. We won't keep you long."

"Well, all right. I'll just tell my wife." I looked at them. "Do you want to come up with me?"

The Detective Sergeant allowed himself an impersonal smile.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Collins."

I went up the stairs, a little shaky at the knees. At least they weren't arresting me. They wouldn't have let me out of their sight if they suspected I had something to do with the robbery.

Ann was waiting on the landing.

"They want me to go to the station," I said, pitched my voice so the two detectives could hear what I saying. "I won't be more than an hour."

She looked at me, and I was shocked to see the terror in her eyes. I shook my head at her, and managed to force a smile.

"They're going to drive me back."

She took hold of my hand and pulled me into the dining-room and shut the door.

"Do they suspect anything?" she whispered.

"I don't think so. They would have come up if they did. Don't worry, Ann, I'll be back soon."

"Harry, we must stay together. I'm not going to leave you. Nothing matters now, darling, except what lies ahead. Nothing matters. I mean that."

I looked at her, not sure if I had heard right.

"I've done you a great wrong, Ann."

"Don't talk about it. I'm frightened, Harry. Be careful what you say. I'll pray for you."

I pulled her to me and kissed her. Her lips felt as cold as ice.

"It'll be all right. There's no one in the world but you, Ann. I love you and will always love you."

She clung to me.

"It'll be all right." I said, kissed her again, then pushed her gently away. "I'll be back."

I went quickly downstairs.

"All ready, sergeant."

We climbed into the police car parked outside the garage. It took us only a few minutes to reach the police station.

"This way, Mr. Collins," Hollis said, getting out of the car.

He hurried me into the big grey stone building, up a flight of stone stairs, along a passage to a door on which was printed a notice which read: Chief Superintendent J. V. Rawson. He rapped on the door and pushed it open.

"Mr. Collins, sir."

I walked into a small office. Facing me was a big desk, covered with files and papers. A Windsor chair stood by the side of the desk. Another chair stood by the window. One side of the room was taken up by filing cabinets.

Behind the desk sat a broad-shouldered man, going bald, who might have been any age between fifty and sixty. He had the most piercing blue eyes I had ever seen.

He stood up, leaned across the desk and offered his hand, and his grey complexioned face lit up with a friendly smile.

"Thanks for coming, Mr. Collins. I'm sorry to have taken you away from your business, but this is a pretty serious affair, and I'm relying on you to help us."

"I'll do what I can."

"Sit down." He waved me to the Windsor chair, then glanced at Hollis. "Think it's too early for a cup of tea, sergeant?"

"I'll see what I can do, sir."

When Hollis left the office, Rawson took out his cigarette case and offered it. I took a cigarette.

"I seem to be out of matches," he said, fumbling in his pockets.

"I have one."

I lit his cigarette and then mine and dropped the match into the ash tray.

"You couldn't spare that box, could you, Mr. Collins? I shan't get out until after lunch, and I'm a heavy smoker."

"That's all right," I said, and pushed the box across the desk.

"I'm much obliged. Thank you." He put the box in his pocket and grinned at me. "They call me Scrounger Rawson here. Looks as if I'm living up to my reputation."

He had the knack of making me feel at ease, and I relaxed back in my chair.

"No fun being without a light."

"That's a fact. Well, now, Mr. Collins, I understand Bill Yates was a friend of yours?"

"He was my best friend: we served together during the war. I've only just heard of his death. What happened?"

Hollis came in at this moment with two cups of tea. He put them on the desk and went out again.

"What happened, Mr. Collins?" Rawson said, pushing one of the cups towards me. "I'll tell you. The mail van was ambushed in Wood Lane. A car overtook it and pulled in front of it. Three men jumped out, carrying revolvers and wearing masks. They ordered the driver, Mackson, who helps load and unload the van, and Yates to get out. Yates touched off the alarm bell, but it failed to operate. The driver and Mackson got out of the van; then Yates got out. One of the bandits covered them while another moved the car out of the way. The third man got into the mail van." Rawson paused to sip his tea, frowned, went on. "It was while the car was being moved that Yates attacked the gunman. It was a damned plucky thing to have done. The driver who told us the story said Yates moved so fast the gunman seemed bewildered. Yates got a judo hold on him and threw him across the street. He landed on a gravel bin and seemed badly hurt.

"The man in the mail van jumped out and went for Yates, but Yates knocked him down. While this was going on Madison ran down a side street, shouting for help. The driver, an elderly man, remained where he was, his hands still raised.

"If he had gone to Yates's help or if Mackson hadn't run away, I believe the ambush would have failed. Two of the bandits were out of action: one permanently, the other knocked silly for the moment. Although the remaining man was armed he might have lost his nerve if the three of them had rushed him. Unfortunately, Yates had to tackle him alone.

"Yates had been provided with a new anti-bandit weapon. It's a pistol firing a special cartridge. The contents of the cartridge is a chemical that leaves a bright blue stain which can't be removed.

"Yates was determined to mark the bandit. He ran across the road. The bandit pointed a revolver at him and shouted to him to stop, but Yates kept on. He discharged the contents of the cartridge in the bandit's face as the bandit shot him through the head. He was killed instantly, but the driver of the van says the bandit's head and shoulders were covered with the blue stain.

"The driver didn't wait to see what happened next. He bolted. Well, that's how your friend died, Mr. Collins. He was a very brave man. I shouldn't be surprised if they don't give him the George Medal."

"That won't do him any good, will it?" I said, looking down at my clenched fists. "Did you get a description of the man who killed him?"

"He was a big fellow, wearing a black suit and a black slouch hat. He won't be difficult to find now, Mr. Collins. Thanks to Yates, we should pick him up pretty quickly."

Dix!

"We have reason to believe," Rawson went on, "that this gang must have spent some time watching the movements of the vans from the sorting-office. Did you happen to notice anyone hanging about in Eagle Street during the past few days who might have been a member of the gang, Mr. Collins?"

I looked up.

"No, I can't say I did."

"Or did you happen to notice a man answering the killer's description. He was exceptionally big and massive."

"No, I'm afraid I didn't notice anyone like that."

Rawson stubbed out his cigarette.

"That's a pity. Well, never mind. Now, Mr. Collins, tell me about this telephone call you received. It was from Anton?"

"Yes."

"Would it surprise you to learn there is no record of a call to your garage from Anton?"

"Isn't there?"

"No. Mr. Collins. Did the operator say anything to make you think the call was coming from Anton?"

"No. It didn't occur to me that the call wasn't from Anton. The man said he was a doctor. I think he said his name was Mackenzie, and he said he was phoning from Anton. I accepted his word for it."

"Quite so. It's obvious an attempt was made to get Yates out of the way. I don't know why because if he wasn't on the van, someone else would have taken his place. It's rather odd, Mr. Collins: almost as if someone was anxious he shouldn't run into trouble."

"Yates was a champion boxer," I said steadily. "They may not have fancied coming up against him."

Rawson nodded.

"That's possible, but how would they know he was a boxer, do you think, Mr. Collins?"

"I don't know."

There was a long pause while we sat looking at each other, then Rawson said, "Is there anything else about the 'phone call you would like to tell me, Mr. Collins?"

I stared at him, not knowing what he meant: it was almost as if he were inviting me to tell him that I had invented the phone call.

"I don't think so, but perhaps you could tell me something. I saw Bill on to the train. How did he get back in time to go with the van?"

"Dr. Mackenzie happened to be on the train, and they met in the corridor," Rawson said. "At the next stop Yates telephoned to a neighbour who went out to his home and found his parents were all right. The neighbour phoned Yates who waited at the station, and he took the next train back to London. Where he went wrong was in thinking it was a practical joke. He should have told us, Mr. Collins."

He should have told me, I thought bitterly. If he had told me he was going on the van I would have taken the risk and given Dix away.

"I see," I said.

"I understand, Mr. Collins, on Friday night you went over to the sorting-office with tea for one of the night workers, a man called Harris."

Here it comes, I thought, and although my heart was beating rapidly, I was outwardly calm, and I forced myself to look Rawson in the face.

"I intended to give him a cup of tea, but as he wasn't about I gave up the idea."

Rawson gently tapped on the edge of his desk.

"What happened exactly, Mr. Collins?"

"Exactly? I don't understand. Is it important?"

He smiled and his blue eyes crinkled up, giving him a boyish expression that somehow reassured me.

"The smallest trifle is important in dealing with a murder case, Mr. Collins. Please tell me exactly

what happened."

"I was working late . . ."

"How late?"

"It was after midnight."

"Do you usually work so late?"

"No, but I had a job I wanted to finish."

"What sort of a job, Mr. Collins?"

I looked at him. The friendly smile was still there; the blue eyes showed benign interest.

"A chap left his car to be checked. I found he had a blocked carburettor. He wanted the car next morning as he was going on holiday so I worked late on it."

"Who was the chap?"

The question took me by surprise. I had told Ann this glib lie knowing she couldn't check it; now, like a fool, I had repeated the lie to Rawson who could check it.

For a moment my brain refused to function and I stared stupidly at Rawson until he repeated the question.

"I was trying to remember. I think his name was Manning. He came out of the blue."

Rawson nodded.

"I see, and what was the make of the car?"

"A Vanguard."

"And what was the registration number?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea," I said sharply, getting a grip on myself. "You'll excuse me, Superintendent but what has this to do with the robbery? Aren't we wasting time?"

He laughed and rubbed his hands together as if what I had just said was one of the best jokes he had heard.

"I'll be frank with you, Mr. Collins. Someone put the alarm bell on the van out of action. This must have been done before this morning. The bell was tested on Thursday afternoon, so between Thursday night and Saturday night someone got at the bell. I am trying to find out who did it. Very few strangers are allowed in the sorting-office. I have a list of those who did go there during the past few days and I'm checking them. One of these strangers put the bell out of action and I hope to catch him, and when I do I shall have cracked this case."

I felt myself change colour.

"You don't think I put the bell out of action, do you?"

"Five unauthorized people entered the sorting-office between Thursday night and Saturday night, Mr. Collins. You were one of them. One of the five put the bell out of action; each one of them is a suspect until he proves he didn't do it. Can you prove you didn't do it?"

I sat motionless, staring at him.

"I don't think I can," I heard myself say. "But of course I didn't do it."

Rawson smiled.

"I would be very surprised if you said you had. Now, let's get back to the Vanguard. What colour was it, Mr. Collins?"

"It was grey."

"Was this Mr. Manning a local chap, would you know?"

"I don't know. I've never seen him before."

"It would help you as well as me, Mr. Collins, if we could trace him and get him to support your statement."

"I'm afraid you'll have to take my word for it."

He gave me a quizzical look before scribbling something on a pad.

"The police don't take people's words for anything, Mr. Collins. We're a suspicious lot. However, it shouldn't be difficult to trace Mr. Manning. We must see what we can do about it. Now, Mr. Collins, tell me some more. You were working late on this Vanguard: what happened then?"

My mouth turned dry and I would have given anything for a drink of water. I had finished the tea, but I knew I didn't dare ask for water: it would have been a complete give away.

"I made myself some tea just after midnight. I thought Harris might like a cup so I took him one over."

"You took him a cup of tea?" Rawson asked, making patterns with his pencil on the blotter that lay before him.

"That's right. I crossed the road and looked into the sorting-office, but I couldn't see him. I called, but he didn't answer. I decided, to let it slide and went back to the garage."

"You didn't go into the sorting-office?"

"I went in about two or three yards, no farther."

Rawson nodded to himself, drew another complicated pattern on his blotter before saying, "Then what did you do?"

"I went to bed."

I looked up and his piercing blue eyes seemed to be boring right through me.

"Well, that's all right, Mr. Collins. That's a satisfactory explanation. Harris has admitted he very often dozes during the night. He must have been asleep when you looked in."

I drew in a long breath. Rawson was smiling again, and his eyes were friendly once more.

I looked at my watch.

"Well, if that's all, Superintendent, I'd be glad to get back to the garage. My wife . . ."

"I won't keep you longer than necessary," he said. "There are just one or two other questions I'd like to ask you. Was it the only time you visited the sorting-office, Mr. Collins?"

I felt a trickle of sweat run down the back of my neck.

"I—I think so. Maybe I've been there with Bill. I don't really remember."

"Didn't you go over there on Thursday morning, Mr. Collins? I believe you wanted a word with Mr. Yates, and you were told he wasn't there. Isn't that right?"

I touched my dry lips with my tongue.

"Yes, come to think of it, I did go over there."

"Didn't you ask Harris where Mr. Yates's van was, and didn't Harris point it out to you?"

I felt the jaws of the trap were closing. I got hold of myself with an effort.

"I think something was said about the van."

Rawson nodded, then seemed to lose interest in the subject.

"Would you say your business is a profitable one, Mr. Collins?"

The sudden switch startled me.

"Things are a bit duffy at the moment, but they'll pick up."

He nodded again.

"Right, now let's get back to last night again. You are quite sure, Mr. Collins, it was a cup of tea

you took across to Harris?"

I felt there was a catch in this question, but as I had already answered it I had to repeat the answer.

"That's right."

He bent down to pick up something that was hidden from me by the desk.

"It wasn't this flask you took over by any chance, was it?"

And he put on the desk the blue and white vacuum flask I had left in the van.

chapter fifteen

Detective Sergeant Hollis swung the police car to the kerb and pulled up outside my garage.

"If we should want you again, Mr. Collins," he said, as I opened the car door, "I'll come down and pick you up. You won't be out of reach for the next twenty-four hours, will you?"

"I'll be here. If I happen to get called out I'll tell my wife where you can find me."

He gave me a quick searching glance.

"That would be helpful." He smiled impersonally. "We may need you in a hurry."

I watched him drive away.

"That was a bad move, my friend," I said to myself as I stood on the edge of the kerb. "You've had your chance. You won't find me next time quite so easily."

It had surprised me that Rawson had let me leave the police station. It seemed to me that he had enough evidence to arrest me out of hand. I was no longer taken in by his friendly smile nor his benign interest. Nor had I been fooled when he had apologetically suggested that Hollis should take my fingerprints.

"One of the gang may have handled this vacuum flask, Mr. Collins," he had said. "We may find prints on it. As you and Yates have handled it it would help us to have your prints so we are not led astray."

He appeared to accept my explanation that I had lent the flask to Bill some weeks ago, and that Bill had forgotten to return it but I wasn't fooled. I had a growing conviction that he was playing with me like a cat plays with a mouse.

The final straw that convinced me he must be sure I was a member of the gang was when I remembered, as Hollis drove me back to Eagle Street, how Rawson had persuaded me to part with my box of matches. All along I had felt there was some reason behind his request, and now I realized why.

The match I had used to hold together the two cut ends of the wire to the alarm bell was from this box. I had read enough about the scientific methods of detection to know the police would soon prove the match they had found in the mail van came from the box I had given Rawson.

I was pretty sure too that in spite of my care to wipe off my prints when I had been working in the van, the chances were a thousand to one, that I had left a print somewhere on the van and the police would find it.

I suppose they would wait until they had compared the match they had found in the van with the matches in the box and until they had found one of my prints on the van before they pounced. Or perhaps they wouldn't pounce. Perhaps they intended to watch me in the hope I would lead them to the rest of the gang.

But the chances were I had only a few more hours of liberty left to me and that worried me. I wasn't thinking of myself. I was worried I wouldn't have time to find Dix, and if it was the last thing I did, I was going to find him.

I unlocked the garage doors and entered the dark, silent garage. As I shot the bolts I heard Ann coming down the stairs. I realized now that Ann presented a problem. For the first time since I married her I was sharply aware that she was in the way. I had a job to do, and a job had to do alone.

"What happened, Harry?"

"Let's go upstairs."

We walked silently down the dimly lit garage, her hand in mine, through the office and up the stairs into the sitting-room.

I dropped into an arm-chair and looked up at her white, frightened face.

"It isn't good, Ann."

She knelt down beside me.

"Tell me."

I told her. I kept nothing back. I told her how Bill had died. I told her about the Vanguard and my stupid lie about the imaginary Manning. I told her how I had left the vacuum flask in the mail van, about the match and how Rawson had got the box of matches out of me.

"They found the flask in the van," I concluded. "Rawson pretended to believe me when I told him I had lent the flask to Bill, but it gave him the excuse to take my fingerprints."

Ann caught her breath sharply.

"They've got your prints?"

"Yes. I couldn't refuse. I know I must have left a print somewhere on the van. They're bound to find it. I don't want to scare you, Ann, but we've got to face facts. They will arrest me very soon."

"I can't believe this is happening to us. How could you have done this, Harry? What are we going to do?"

"It is happening to us. We've got to face it, Ann. It's all my fault, and you're going to suffer. The best thing we can do now . . ."

"Wait! There is only one thing to do," she said urgently.

"You must go back to the police and tell them the truth. You must tell them exactly how it happened. You must go now."

"It's a little late for that. This is a murder case. They would arrest me and keep me in jail, and what would happen to you? Dix said he would take it out of you if I gave him away, and he would. He threatened to throw acid at you. I can't tell them the truth."

"Do you think I care what he does to me? Our happiness is far more important. You must tell them the truth. They'll believe you if you go to them now. Can't you see that by telling them what happened they are bound to treat you leniently? But if you let them find out before you tell them, they'll treat you like the others."

"It's too late, Ann. I should have told them at once. They'll only think I've lost my nerve if I go to them now."

"You've got to do it!" she cried, clutching hold of my hand. "If you don't, I will!"

"No, Ann."

She stared up at me.

"You're planning to do something, aren't you? There's something about you, Harry, that worries me."

"I'm going to duck out of sight."

"You can't do that! You mustn't! Where would you go? Don't you see, darling, they will think you are as guilty as the rest of them if you run away. You couldn't get far. They'd find you: they always do."

"I'm going to duck out of sight, Ann," I repeated "I've got a job to do. I'm sorry, but it's a job I've got to do alone."

"A job? What do you mean?"

"I'm going to find Dix."

She stared at me blankly.

"But this is ridiculous. The police will find him. You can't do it, Harry. If you run away . . ."

"I want you to pack a few things, Ann, and go to your mother. You'll be safe in Leytonstone. Dix doesn't know where your mother lives. I want you to go right away."

"But, Harry, you can't be serious. You're frightening me. I'm not going to leave you. I'm sure you're going to do something reckless."

"You're wasting time, Ann. Please pack what you want, and please don't argue about it"

"But, Harry, do you realize what you're saying? If you run away we may never see each other again. How can you hope to remain long in hiding? You must go to the police now and tell them the truth."

"It's too late for that, Ann. You must let me handle this my way."

She caught hold of my hand.

"For my sake, darling, face up to it. Don't run away," she cried. "I'll come with you. Oh, Harry, don't break up our life together! Please do what I ask."

I realized now that she wouldn't be put off. Time was running out. I had to take another line of action.

"Give me a few minutes to think about it, Ann," I said, getting to my feet. "I'm going down to the office. I want a little time to get things straightened out in my mind. Give me half an hour, Ann."

She looked searchingly at me.

"Exactly why do you want to find Dix?" she asked.

"I want to have the satisfaction of wrecking his plans. He made a fool out of me; he killed Bill. I'd like to even things up with him before I go to jail, but maybe you're right. Maybe the best thing I can do is to leave him to the police. Give me half an hour to make up my mind, Ann."

She hesitated.

"Very well, Harry. I'll wait here. Please be sensible about this. You must go to the police and tell them the truth. It is the right and only thing to do."

I put my arm round her and kissed her.

"Let me think about it."

I went down the stairs and into the office. As soon as I shut the door I opened the petty cash box and took from it eight pound notes, two ten shilling notes and some silver. I put the money in my pocket. Then I examined my cheque book. I had a balance of £52. I hastily wrote out a cheque in Ann's favour for the full amount, then I took a sheet of notepaper and wrote her a note.

Darling Ann,

This must be good-bye. I haven't time for long explanations. I can't let Dix get away with Bill's death. I've got to find him and square the account. Bill and I shared so much of the past that you know nothing about that he became part of me. It was due to my own selfish and uncontrolled act that he is dead. I feel the best part of me died with him. What's left of me isn't important. I spoilt our lives when I broke my promise to you, and it can never be the same. I'm not going to prison for a few years, knowing you are waiting for someone who doesn't exist any longer. This has got to be a clean break. The enclosed cheque clears my account. Sell up here: you should get about two thousand for the equipment and the truck. It's all yours.

Please go at once to your mother and keep under cover.

This gang is dangerous, and if they could get at me through you, they will do so. So for my sake as well as your own, don't let them find you.

Forgive me for doing this to you if you can. It is better for us to break clean now. You will always be in my thoughts. I shall always love you. I have a job to do that must be done, and only I alone can do it.

Good-bye, darling,

Harry.

I read this through quickly, feeling it was quite inadequate; so inadequate that I had to add a note below my name.

I will get in touch with you before long to say a better good-bye. I will write or telephone you at your mother's place.

It would have to do, I thought, as I reached for the envelope. A feeling of urgency occupied my mind. I must get off before she came down or the police arrived. I put the note and cheque in the envelope and put the envelope on the desk where she would find it. It was a nuisance having to leave like this. I would have liked to have taken a rain-coat and overnight things, but I couldn't risk going upstairs again. Besides, I told myself, if the police were watching me, a handbag would arouse their suspicions and they might make a quick arrest.

I glanced at my wrist-watch. I had been seven minutes making my preparations. It was time to be off. I walked quietly down the garage, past the Jaguar. For a moment I hesitated beside it wondering if I should take it or not, then decided it would be too easily traced.

I opened one of the garage doors and walked into the bright sunlight.

I pulled the door shut then paused to light a cigarette while I looked out of the corner of my eye at the two policemen outside the sorting-office.

They studiously ignored me, so studiously that I knew at once they had been told to ignore me. That could mean only one thing: Rawson had already decided to have me shadowed, and the shadower was waiting for me somewhere out of sight. I walked at a fast pace towards Oxford Street. I didn't look back. My one concern was that Ann might come down to the office and find the note and run after me. I wanted to get as far away from Eagle Street as I could before she discovered the note.

A bus came along Oxford Street as I reached the corner of Eagle Street. I sprinted towards it and swung on board.

I looked back as soon as I sat down on one of the side seats by the conductor's platform. No one ran after me, but after a minute or so when I looked back again, I spotted a police car about fifty yards in the rear, keeping pace with the bus.

It wasn't going to be easy to shake them off, I told myself. If they lost me all they had to do would be to warn a police car in the district by short wave radio and they would be after me. Every policeman on beat or controlling the traffic would be warned to look out for me. No, it wasn't going to be easy but I had been in more difficult spots during the war, and I was confident that I would be able to shake them off.

I bought a ticket to Hyde Park Corner and got off the bus by the underground and went down to the booking office. I was pretty sure a detective, possibly two, had jumped out of the police car as soon as I was out of sight, and was coming after me.

I paused to buy a newspaper at a kiosk, then bought a ticket to Knightsbridge and went down to the

trains.

There were only three or four people on the platform, and I walked to the far end and sat down on the wooden bench against the wall.

I looked up the platform, but no one came to join those already waiting. I guessed the detectives were waiting just out of sight. The time to spot them would be when the train came in.

I opened my newspaper, my eyes going to the Stop Press.

MAIL ROBBERY

Early this morning, a mail van was ambushed in Wood Lane, and three masked men got away with £300,000 worth of industrial diamonds en route from the Eagle Street Sorting-Office to Northolt Airfield. A Post Office Guard, attempting to foil this biggest mail grab of all time, was ruthlessly shot to death. Scotland Yard anticipates an early arrest.

£300,000!

The size of the sum stunned me for a moment.

No wonder Dix had taken such elaborate precautions.

No wonder he hadn't hesitated to commit murder. For a man in the know, industrial diamonds were as good as ready cash.

It would be to his advantage to get the diamonds out of the country where they would be worth considerably more than their face value in the black market of foreign currency.

I wondered if he planned to leave the country. For all I knew he might already have left in a chartered plane and was at this minute somewhere in Europe. If he had gone, then he was lost to me.

What was my first move to be?

Before I could go after him I had to shake off the police.

When I had succeeded in shaking them off I realized the hunt for me would be immediately intensified. Rawson wouldn't give me a second chance to slip through his fingers. If they caught up with me a second time, they would arrest me.

I had to get hold of a change of clothing. I had to alter my appearance so I wouldn't be easily recognized. I thought of Berry's flat: 3a Queen's Avenue. By now Berry would have gone into hiding with the rest of the gang. The chances were he had left some clothes in the flat. He was about my build. If I could get to his flat without being seen I was sure I could fit myself out well enough to avoid detection.

I folded the newspaper and got to my feet. I could hear the train approaching. I walked slowly along the platform and joined the four other people who were waiting.

As the train banged and clattered out of the tunnel and swept along the platform, I saw a tall, heavily-built man move out from the archway leading to the emergency stairs.

I looked closely at him, making an attempt to disguise my scrutiny. I wanted to be sure I should recognise him again.

He was wearing a brown suit and slouch hat, and I knew by the way he held himself and by his studied casualness as he moved over to the train that he was a police officer.

He got into a compartment next to mine.

I had to play my hand carefully, I told myself. There was no question of making a bolt for it when I reached the station. I had to lose the detective in such a way that he couldn't be sure whether I had deliberately given him the slip or whether he had lost me by his own carelessness. If he suspected I was trying to get away, he would probably arrest me.

I got out of the train at Knightsbridge and walked quickly along the platform to the escalator. I rode up on it, and as I was nearing the top I glanced back.

The detective was halfway up the escalator, about ten yards behind me. He was leaning against the moving rail, looking at a newspaper.

Knightsbridge was almost deserted. I realized I had picked a bad time to play cops and robbers. Sunday morning, with its deserted streets and shut shops, wasn't like a week day.

I decided to wait until I got close to Queen's Avenue before I made my first move. I walked briskly towards Brompton Road, turned up Exhibition Road that stretched long and deserted to Hyde Park.

I was now within a few minutes' walk of Queen's Avenue.

I could hear the detective following me, but I resisted the temptation to look back. I could tell by the sound of his footfalls that he must be at least fifty yards behind me.

I crossed the road, slowing down my pace a trifle. At the corner of Imperial Institute Road I stopped and took out a packet of cigarettes.

The footfalls ceased abruptly.

I lit a cigarette, put the packet away, and then moving even more slowly I turned the corner.

I guessed I would be out of the detective's sight for about six seconds. The moment I turned the corner, I threw away the cigarette, and sprang forward in a mad, tearing run, my crepe-soled shoes making no sound on the pavement as I rushed across the road to the Imperial Institute. I darted up the steps and into the shadow of the big porch leading into the main building.

I pulled up, panting a little, and flattened myself against the wall. I waited a moment or two, then I peered cautiously into the street.

The detective appeared round the corner. He wasn't hurrying, and by his attitude he seemed quite confident that he would see me strolling ahead of him, but when he saw the deserted street and no sign of me, he came to an abrupt stop.

I stepped back into the shadows of the porch and waited.

I heard him coming down the street. He suddenly broke into a run, and moving fast, he reached the far end of the street and looked up and down Queen's Avenue.

I remained where I was, watching him.

He stood hesitating, then he turned and began to walk back towards me.

There was a public telephone booth just inside the porch, and moving over to it I opened the door and stepped inside, closing the door behind me.

I still had a good view of the street through the glass panel of the door, and I watched the detective pass. He looked up at the porch, hesitated, then came up the steps at a quick run.

I ducked down below the level of the glass panel, and waited, my heart banging against my ribs. I heard him reach the top of the steps and I could almost feel his eyes probing the shadows.

I expected any second he would pull open the booth door, and I got set to hit him if he did, but after a moment or so I heard him run down the steps and back to the street again.

I stood up, wiping the sweat from my face, and watched him as he paused at the foot of the steps to look up and down the street.

His heavy face was red and angry, and I guessed he was cursing himself for taking his job too lightly. After some hesitation, he set off towards Queen's Avenue, turning the corner and disappeared from my view.

I settled down to wait. I waited twenty minutes. The hands of my wrist-watch seemed scarcely to

move, but I had to make certain the detective was sure in his mind that he had lost me. He wouldn't be in too great a hurry to make a report, but when he did, two or even three patrol cars would sew up the district, and then my task of avoiding capture would be much more difficult.

At the end of twenty minutes, I went to the top of the steps and looked to right and left. There was no one in sight, and without hurrying I walked down the steps and along the street toward Queen's Avenue.

I didn't hurry in case the detective had concealed himself somewhere and was watching me. I felt naked as I moved along the sunlit, deserted street.

I didn't even pause at the corner, but turned into Queen's Avenue without hesitation.

The detective was within twenty yards of me, moving away from me, a disconsolate slouch to his shoulders.

He couldn't fail to see me if he looked round, and for a moment I very nearly panicked. Then I got hold of myself and looked quickly at the number of the house near me. It was No. 7. Berry's flat was in the house next door but one to No. 7, thirty yards or so farther up the road.

The detective kept on, and with my heart in my mouth, I walked silently behind him. He passed No. 3. I was walking now on tip-toe, scarcely breathing, praying that he wouldn't look round.

He didn't look round, but kept on up Queen's Avenue towards Hyde Park.

I reached the steps leading to No. 3 and ran up them into the shelter of the open doorway.

For a moment I stood still while I recovered my breath, then I turned to examine the indicator board in the hall. The top flat was the one I was looking for.

3a Jack Berry, 5th floor.

There was no lift and I started up the stairs. On the second landing I went over to the window and looked into the street.

I had only just got under cover in time. A police car was swinging to a standstill fifty yards or so up the road, and the detective who had shadowed me was running towards it.

I moved away from the window and continued up the stairs. There were five flats in the building, and five flights of stairs to climb. I met no one and heard nothing. It was still early: a few minutes after ten o'clock. The tenants probably were still in bed earning their Sunday rest.

I stopped outside Berry's front door and putting my ear to the panel I listened for some seconds, but I heard nothing.

I turned the door handle and pushed gently, expecting the door to be locked, but it opened and I stepped into a small hall.

The first thing I saw brought me to an abrupt stop. By the door stood two suitcases and over them lay an overcoat and a brown slouch hat.

It looked as if Berry were still here, and it was then I wished I had a gun.

I closed the front door quietly and moved over to a door across the hall. I listened against the panels, but again heard nothing. Very gently I turned the handle and pushed the door open just wide enough for me to see inside.

The room was a large one, well furnished with lounge settees and arm-chairs, and against the far end of the room by the windows was a well-stocked bar.

I moved cautiously into the room, my eyes going to a half-open door facing me which I guessed led into the bedroom.

I crossed to the door, making no sound and peered into the room.

Berry lay flat on his back on a divan bed. He was fully dressed. His face was the colour of old tallow. His eyes were closed and he seemed scarcely to breathe.

By his side, within reach of his hand, was an automatic pistol.

chapter sixteen

I moved silently across the room, and as I reached the bed, Berry's eyes opened. We looked at each other. Then he made a desperate clutch at the gun, but I beat him to it. My hand closed over the butt as his hand closed over the barrel. I jerked the gun out of his grasp and stood back.

"Hello," I said.

He stared up at me. I could see a damp patch on the pillow surrounding his head, and looking more closely, I saw he had sweated right through his clothes.

"Collins!" he gasped in a husky whisper. "I thought it was the cops."

"Not this time, but they're outside. They're looking for me."

"Am I glad to see you," he said. "I've been waiting hours. Gimme a drink, will you? You don't know what I've been through."

"What's the matter with you?" I sat at the foot of the bed, holding the gun with the barrel pointing down at the floor.

"It's my back. That bastard threw me. I must have fractured my spine."

"What have you got to grumble about? The bastard as you call him is dead. Dix shot him."

Berry's eyes narrowed.

"That's nothing to do with me. What are you doing here?"

"The police are hunting for me. They imagine I'm one of your crowd. Funny, Isn't it? You fellows collect three hundred thousand pounds' worth of diamonds and I get the blame. They might even hang me if they catch me."

"They wouldn't do that," Berry said quickly. "They wouldn't hang me either, I didn't kill him."

"The diamonds don't seem to be doing you much good now, do they?"

"Never mind about the diamonds. Get me a drink, will you? And get me a doctor. Don't sit there staring at me. I've been lying here for hours. At first it hurt like hell, but it's stopped hurting now." His voice shook. "It scares me. I can't feel my legs anymore."

"Bill Yates can't feel anything anymore."

"What are you talking about? Look, for the love of Mike, give me a drink!"

"Can't you move?"

Barry swore at me.

"Don't I keep telling you! I've busted my back. I can't feel my legs. I can't even raise my head. You've got to get to get a doctor to me."

"Why didn't Dix or Joe or Louis send for a doctor?"

Berry closed his eyes.

"Joe said he was going to. Maybe he couldn't get hold of one."

"Are you trying to kid me?"

"What do you mean?"

"They've left you here to die, that's what I mean."

"No! They wouldn't do a thing like that," he gasped.

"Maybe they're in a jam themselves. What does it matter now? You're here. Get me a doctor. Use the phone over there. Call a hospital."

"They might hang you."

"Don't talk crazy. They don't know who I am. They don't know I pulled the job. I can say I had a fall. Get on the phone, damn you!"

"Where's Dix?"

He stared at me, his thin, hard mouth working.

"How do I know? Will you get a doctor?"

I took out a packet of cigarettes, lit one and put the packet back while he lay snarling at me.

"For God's sake! Can't you see how bad I am? Gimme a drink. There's Scotch in the other room. I haven't had a filing for hours. Gimme a drink and call the hospital!"

"Where's Dix?"

A furious, trapped expression came into his eyes.

"I'll fix you, Collins, if you don't do what I say! If you don't get on to a hospital I'll see your goddam wife gets those art pictures!"

I leaned forward and smacked his face hard enough to jerk his head to one side. He gave a sharp, stifled scream, his eyes rolled back and he went limp.

I got to my feet, and bending over him, I felt his pulse. It was beating feebly. By the look of him I didn't think he was going to last long. I didn't want him to die before he told me where Dix was. He must know. If he didn't, then I was sunk.

I went into the other room and over to the bar. I mixed a weak whisky and water. Before returning to the bedroom, I paused to look out of the window.

The police car had gone, and there was no sign of anyone in the street below.

I went into the bedroom, and poured a little of the whisky and water between Berry's lips. He gasped, opened his eyes and looked dazedly up at me.

"Come on," I said. "You wanted this, so drink it."

He drank what was in the glass and then closed his eyes again. I didn't like the look of him. The flesh on his face sagged, and his breathing came in slow, laboured gasps.

I decided to let him rest for a few minutes before asking him again, and turned my attention to the big wardrobe by the door.

It contained several suits. I took down a fawn-coloured sports coat and a pair of dark brown whipcord trousers. I tried on the coat. It was a little loose on me, but the fit was good enough. I found a yellow linen shirt and a hand-painted orange and red tie.

I stripped off my own clothes and changed into the clothes I had chosen. On a shelf in the wardrobe I found a grey, slouch hat. It was a shade too big for me, but by jutting a strip of newspaper behind the hat band it fitted well enough.

I surveyed myself in the mirror. I had been wearing a blue double-breasted suit without a hat. This gaudy outfit I know had on changed my appearance from a distance in a startling way! I looked like an American tourist, and so long as I could keep a fair distance between myself and any detective, I had no misgivings that I would be recognised.

I next unearthed a pair of brown and white, reverse calf shoes which fitted me as if they had been made for me.

Hunting through the drawers in the wardrobe I came upon a pair of dark green sunglasses, and when I put them on and put on the hat I was satisfied my disguise was complete.

I took off the hat and glasses and went back to Berry.

He lay watching me, his face lined with pain.

"Where's Dix?" I asked, bending over him.

He closed his eyes.

"If you want a doctor you'd better tell me."

"I don't know."

"You must know where he was heading. Where did you plan to meet him before you were hurt?"

His eyes shift.

"We were going to meet here."

"You're lying. He wouldn't come here." I reached out and took hold of his shirt front. "You're going to tell me. If I pull you upright it'll kill you, and that's what I'm going to do if you don't tell me."

"Leave me alone!"

"Where's Dix?"

I tightened my grip and moved him slightly.

Sweat jumped out of his face and he screamed out.

"Stop it! Don't do it!"

"Where's Dix?"

He put his hand on my wrist and his nails cut into my skin as he tried feebly to break my hold. Again I lifted him a fraction of an inch. His eyes started out of his head and he screamed out again.

"I'll tell you."

Very carefully I relaxed my grip.

"Where, is he?"

"Monk's Farm, Ilmer," he groaned.

"That's near Princes Risborough, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Come on," I said roughly, "you're washed up, Berry. Don't kid yourself they'll come back for you. Why should they when they can get away with all that money and leave you to carry the can. Where do they go from Ilmer? Are they planning to leave the country?"

All resistance seemed to have gone out of him.

"Yes. When it's dark a hover plane's going to pick them up. There's a field at the back of the farm. They're going to Paris."

I stood away from the bed. I couldn't be absolutely sure he was telling the truth, but I had an idea he was.

"Where are the negatives of those pictures you took of me?"

"Get me a doctor," he groaned.

I caught hold of his shirt front again.

"Where are they?"

His eyes snapped open.

"Don't touch me. They're in the desk in the other room. Get me a doctor, Collins. I'll do anything you say if you'll get me a doctor."

I smiled at him.

"Didn't you hear what I said? The police are outside watching for me. I don't want a doctor to find me here. You'll have to wait."

I went into the other room, searched through the desk and found a wooden box packed full of negatives and prints.

The pictures of Gloria and me were on top of the rest of them.

I had to go through a lot of muck before I found the negatives.

I carried the box over to the fireplace, emptied the contents into the grate and set fire to it.

I thought of the misery that was going up in those flames; of the men like myself who had stepped out of line and had been blackmailed probably for years.

I wondered if there were any more-prints of the negatives in existence. There would be time to go into that later on. Even though I had told Ann what I had done, I still couldn't bear the thought of her seeing those pictures.

I returned to the desk and wait through every drawer. I found about thirty pounds and some odd silver in a tin cash-box which I didn't hesitate to put in my pocket. I also found an ignition key I guessed belonged to Berry's Humber and another larger key with a label attached on which was scrawled: Garage No. 3.

That gave me an idea. I went into the kitchen that overlooked the back of the building. Below in the mews I could see a row of garage lock-ups.

I returned to the bedroom.

"Is your car in the garage?"

"You're not going to leave me!" he gasped. "You're going to help me, aren't you?"

"Is your car in the garage?" I repeated.

"Yes, but before you go, you'll call a doctor, won't you?"

"If you want a doctor so badly, call him yourself," I said, coming to the foot of the bed and looking down at him. "I wouldn't raise a finger to help a rat like you. I was going to kill you, but now I don't have to. You haven't much longer to live. A doctor can't do anything for you." I waved my hand towards the telephone. "If you think he can, go ahead, and call him. I'm not stopping you." I picked up the grey hat and the sunglasses and made for the door.

"Collins!" he gasped. "Don't leave me! I'm sorry for what I did to you. Don't leave me to die here alone."

"So long," I said, opening the door. "If you're lucky your pals will do something for you, but I doubt it. You're not fit to live. While you're waiting to die, think of all the mugs you photographed and blackmailed. It'll take your mind off yourself."

I went out of the room and shut the door.

In the hall I opened and examined the two suitcases. I repacked one, taking the most useful articles such as a suit of dark brown material, some shirts, shoes, shaving kit, another automatic, a half-pint flask of brandy and about ten thousand francs, from the two cases.

I could hear Berry feebly calling, but I paid no attention.

I had a gun, money, a car and a change of clothes. I was ready now to settle my score with Dix.

chapter seventeen

I drove the big Humber along the narrow mews and out into Queen's Avenue.

At the top of the avenue I spotted the police car drawn up by the kerb. The detective who had been following me stood by the car, talking to the driver. Both of them glanced at me as I drove towards them. I kept on at a Steady pace. I had the slouch hat pulled well down over my eyes and I was wearing the big sunglasses. Although I was confident they wouldn't recognize me, it was a tricky moment as I passed them.

Neither of them seemed interested in me. I glanced into my driving mirror. They hadn't moved, and the detective had resumed his conversation. I was aware that my hands were damp as I drove into the Park and headed for Queen's Road.

The clock on the dashboard showed five minutes past eleven. I reckoned I would be in Ilmer at noon. The traffic at this hour was light, and I got down to Shepherd's Bush without the usual crawl through the bottleneck at Notting Hill Gate.

Once on Western Avenue, I sent the Humber along at a fast clip, and I reached Princes Risborough a few minutes after eleven forty-five. A mile or so beyond the little town, I turned left where the sign post indicated Ilmer, a mile and a half down the road.

Ahead of me and walking towards me was a woman pushing a pram. I slowed down and pulled up near her.

"I'm looking for Monk's Farm," I said. "Can you direct me, please?"

"Take the first turning on the right. It's up a narrow lane," the woman told me. "About a couple of miles from here. You can't miss it. It's the only farm up the lane."

"Thanks. I hear it's for sale."

She shook her head.

"It was for sale; about six months ago. It's been sold now."

"Someone told me it's coming into the market again. I thought I'd look at it. You don't happen to know the owner's name, do you?"

"I haven't seen them. I don't believe they've moved in yet. The place was empty the last time I passed it; that would be last Saturday."

"Well, now I've come so far I might as well look at it. Thank you for your help."

I engaged gear and drove on. About two and a half miles farther on I spotted the turning on the right. About fifty yards beyond the turning was a public house. I drove to it and pulled into the car park.

A big, red-faced man came out of the pub and nodded to me.

"All right to leave my car here?" I asked. "I feel like a long walk. I may not get back until late."

"That's all right sir," he returned, and gave me a friendly grin. "Bless me if I'd want to walk if I had a car like that."

"You would if you'd been cooped up in London all the week." I pointed back to the lane. "Where does that lead to?"

"Monk's Farm, but there's a footpath beyond the farm that'll take you to Thame if you're planning to walk that far."

"Sounds fine. Thanks." I took five shillings from my pocket and gave it to him. "Just in case I don't

see you again."

"Thank you, sir." He looked surprised. "I hope I'll see you in the bar before you go. You should have a thirst after a walk like that. It's going to be hot this afternoon."

I waved to him and set off towards the lane. When I was out of sight of the pub, I checked Berry's automatic I had been carrying in my hip pocket. The clip held six .38 bullets and one in the breech. I snapped on the safety catch and transferred the gun to my coat pocket.

I walked up the narrow, twisting lane for perhaps half a mile, then through the trees I caught sight of a white, thatched roof farmhouse standing a hundred yards or so back from the lane.

I climbed up the bank, and holding on to a tree trunk to steady myself, I studied the building.

As far as I could judge it was a seven-room house in a wilderness of a garden which offered plenty of good cover. Tall grass, straggling shrubs and several old shady trees surrounded it. The concrete drive was moss-covered and was still caked with the hard mud of last winter.

Opposite the house, forming two sides of a square were dilapidated farm buildings: a barn, a cow shed, three pig sties and stables.

At the back of the farmhouse was a small, overgrown kitchen garden, and beyond that a dense wood of silver birch and nutstems.

I scrambled down the bank and continued up the lane. I moved cautiously, my ears pricked for the slightest sound. The lane twisted every few yards, and anyone coming down the lane would be on top of me before I saw them.

At the last twist in the lane I saw the white farm gate, and I stopped, just out of sight. For some moments I studied the ground ahead of me, deciding the quickest and easiest approach.

Finally I pushed my way through the hedge that lined the lane into the tall, overgrown grass of a paddock that flanked the house. My army training in jungle warfare now came to my aid. I moved forward, bent double, slowly and carefully until I reached the hedge that divided the kitchen garden from the paddock.

I was safe there as the hedge was high, and I straightened up. I had trouble in finding a gap in the hedge, but after moving some yards to my right I found one that gave me a good view of the side and front of the house.

I sat down, close to the hedge and surveyed the house. I remained there for over half an hour without seeing any sign of life, and I began to wonder if Berry had lied to me.

They might have changed their minds about coming to this farmhouse, although to the right of the paddock in which I was sitting, I could see a big field that would be suitable for a helicopter landing.

Suppose the helicopter had already picked them up? I thought this unlikely. It would be too risky to make such a landing in daylight.

The local police all over the country must have been warned to look out for an unauthorized aircraft making a landing. Escape by air was the most obvious way out for Dix, and the police must have realized it.

I wondered if I should take a chance and go up to the house. I was pretty sure I could approach within yards of it without being seen. I might get an opportunity to see into some of the rooms if I got closer.

I was about to get to my feet when the front door opened and Joe came out.

The sight of him sent a tingle down my spine.

He was wearing a short-sleeved sports shirt and grey flannel trousers. Over his shoulder he carried

a leather holster from which protruded the butt of a heavy automatic. He moved slowly down the drive to the farm gate and looked down the lane. Then he glanced at his wrist-watch, scowled, and again looked down the lane. It was, pretty obvious he was expecting someone who was late, and I wondered who it could be.

After a few minutes, he turned and walked back to the house. As he reached the front door, Louis appeared. He was in a baggy flannel fit, and I could tell by the bulge under his coat that he too was carrying a gun.

"No sign of them yet?" he asked, stepping out into the bright sunlight.

"No. What the hell can have happened to them?" Joe said uneasily.

In the quiet of their surroundings their voices came clearly to me.

"Think anything's wrong?" Louis asked. His thin effeminate face was pale and there were dark circles around his eyes.

"How the hell do I know?" Joe snarled. He looked at his watch. "They should have been here an hour ago."

"Well, come on in and eat. The stuffs getting cold."

They went into the house and shut the door.

I got quickly to my feet.

Were they waiting for Dix and Berry? I wondered as I crawled through the gap in the hedge. Were they the only two in the house?

I decided to take a chance and get into the house to overhear more of their conversation.

There was plenty of cover up to four or five yards of the house, and I crawled forward silently without the slightest misgivings of being seen.

The window of one of the rooms at the back of the house was open. I would have to cross a path to reach it, and the path offered no cover.

I had no intention of being spotted so early in the game, so I changed direction and began to crawl towards the front of the house.

I kept on until I had a good view of the front windows, I spotted Joe and Louis in the room by the front door. They were sitting at a table, eating lunch.

Satisfied that I stood little chance of being seen, I retraced my steps to the back of the house, crossed the path to the open window and peered in.

The room was small and empty of furniture, and dust lay thickly on the floorboards. I swung my leg over the sill and climbed quietly into the room. Crossing over to the door, I turned the handle and very carefully eased the door open. I looked into a long passage that connected the front door with the back door.

From the front room I heard a murmur of voices, but the door was closed and I couldn't hear what was being said. I moved out into the passage. To my left was a flight of stairs that led to the upper rooms. I decided it would be safer to be upstairs than down. I moved swiftly to the stairs and began to mount them. Halfway up I trod on a loose board that let out a squeaking creak that jerked my heart into my mouth. I took the rest of the stairs two at a time on tip-toe, and had just reached the landing, out of sight of the hall, when I heard the front room door jerk open.

"Didn't you hear something?" Louis asked, a quaver in his voice. "It sounded as if someone was in the house."

"For the love of Mike, pipe down," Joe growled. "You're as jumpy as a kangaroo. This damned

house is full of rats. I saw one as big as a cat in the kitchen."

"A rat wouldn't make that noise. It sounded. . . ."

"Aw, shut up! Go and have a look if you're that scared."

"I keep thinking of Berry."

"Think his ghost is here?" Joe sneered and laughed.

"You don't have to worry about him. He's dead by now."

"We shouldn't have left him, Joe. That was a hell of a thing to do."

"I didn't stop you. You could have stayed and held his hand if you wanted to. Why didn't you? You were the first out of his place. You couldn't get out fast enough."

"We should have brought him here."

"Don't talk wet. His back was broken. We couldn't have brought him all this way. He would have screamed his head off. We were crazy to have taken him back to his fiat. We should have put a bullet through his head and left him in the street."

I heard Louis walk back into the room.

"I wouldn't have stood for that Joe."

"It's because you've been so damned chicken-hearted about Berry we're in this mess now. When a guy breaks his back, he's had it. Ed would have shot him, but no, you wouldn't wear it. Okay, now we wonder where Ed is. If we had stuck together instead of rushing off to Queen's Avenue, he would have been with us now."

"What are we going to do if he doesn't show up?"

"What do you think? We get out at ten tonight whether he's here or not."

"Maybe Hacket won't take us without Ed."

"You leave Hacket to me. He'll take us," Joe said grimly.

"Shut that damned door and come and finish your grub."

I heard the door shut and their voices died to a murmur.

At least, I learned something. Dix wasn't here, but there were expecting him, and they were due off tonight at ten.

I wondered about Dix. If his face had been stained blue as Rawson suggested, then I couldn't see how he could get to the farm. Every policeman in the district would be on the lookout for him. The chances were he would hide up somewhere in London.

I put him out of my mind for the moment, and moving very cautiously, I explored the upstairs rooms. The front room, over the room Joe and Louis were in, offered the most likely hiding place. It still contained some furniture: a bed, a cupboard, grimy curtains at the window and a plush covered arm-chair with the springs on the floor.

The cupboard was large enough for me to stand in, and I left it open so I could step inside if I heard anyone coming.

I went over to the window which overlooked the drive in and the white farm gate. I could see some way down the lane.

As I stood looking down the drive, Joe and Louis came out and walked towards the gate.

Moving quickly I went into the passage, and looked at the other room on the same landing.

In a small back room I found a suitcase, lying on a bed. I tried the catch and it flew up. I opened the case. Among a jumble of clothes were twenty or thirty wash-leather bags. I undid the string around one of them and peered inside. It contained a handful of small diamonds. A quick examination of three

other of the little bags told me this was part of the loot from the mail van.

I closed the case and snapped down the lock, then I stood hesitating, wondering what I should do.

The sound of footsteps in the hall made me move silently to the door and into the passage.

"One of us ought to go into the village and get a newspaper," Joe was saying. "We ought to know what's going on."

"Then you go," Louis said sharply. "I'm not moving from here until the plane arrives."

"Maybe there'll be news of Ed," Joe said.

"Maybe there will. If you're so anxious for news, get the paper yourself."

"I'd go if I was sure the papers had something," Joe said.

"Come to think of it, they must have been printing when we pulled the job."

"That's what I call a bright brain," Louis sneered. "Did you think I was going to fall for that wet gag?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm not all that of a mug. I'm not leaving you alone here with all those diamonds. They might get up and walk."

"You're crazy!" Joe's voice sharpened with anger.

"Where do you imagine I'd go?"

"I don't know and don't care. There's a hundred thousand pounds' worth of diamonds up there, and there's the car in the barn. I'm taking damn good care neither the diamonds nor the car moves out of here."

"Aw, shut up! You make me sick "

"I hate those diamonds being out of my sight for a minute. I'm going up to look at them now."

I moved quietly along the passage to the front room. As I stepped into the cupboard I heard Louis and Joe mounting the stairs.

"You wouldn't trust your own mother," Joe said angrily.

"Oh, yes I would. She's dead," Louis returned. "I trust dead people so long as I'm sure they're dead."

As they came along the passage, I pulled the cupboard door shut, and my hand went into my pocket and closed over the butt of the gun.

I heard them go into the back room.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," Joe said.

"We'd look a couple of mugs if Ed has already skipped.

He's got the bulk of the stuff," Louis said, coming back along the passage. "What's to stop him meeting Hackett some other place and leaving us flat?"

"How's he going to get into touch with Hackett, you dope?" Joe growled. "Pipe down! I'm sick of listening to you belly aching."

I heard the door of the room in which I was hiding, pushed open.

"What do you expect to find in here?" Joe went on.

"Just checking," Louis said as he crossed the room to the window. He passed a foot from where I stood, hidden by the cupboard door.

"Come on, for the love of Mike. It's like an oven in this house. Let's park under the trees."

"Might as well," Louis said as he recrossed the room. I leaned against the back of the cupboard, holding my breath, expecting him to open the cupboard, but he didn't. "All this hanging about's driving

me nuts."

I heard them go down the stairs and I stepped out of the cupboard and crossed over to the window. My heart was banging against my ribs. That had been a little too close for my liking.

I saw the two men, each carrying a couple of bottles of beer, walk through the long grass to the shade of a big elm tree. They sat down with their backs to it. They had a clear view of the front of the house, but were out of sight of anyone who happened to pass the farm gate. They lit cigarettes, and Joe opened one of the bottles and took a long pull.

I moved away from the window and stood thinking for a moment or so. Then I walked quickly along the passage to the back room where the suitcase was.

I looked out of the window.

Just below was the flat roof of the kitchen. I pushed up the window and got out on to the roof. Below the grass was thick and tall. I decided it would make a thick enough carpet to deaden the sound of the suitcase if I dropped it from the roof.

I climbed into the room again and carried the case to the window and lowered it gently on to the roof. Then I got out on to the roof myself and lowered the window.

I stretched myself flat on the roof, holding the case in my hand and let it hang the length of my arm in space. It had about six feet to fall to reach the ground. Would they hear it? If they did and if they came round the side of the house quickly I would be trapped before I could get under cover. I had to take the risk and I opened my fingers and let the case drop.

It landed in the thick grass with a thud, but I didn't think the sound would carry to the front of the house.

Then I swung my legs over the roof, and holding on to the drain pipe, I slithered down.

I had to make sure they hadn't heard me before I attempted to move the case farther, and I crept along the path, keeping to the side of the house, the gun in my hand, until I reached a point where I could see the front garden.

Some fifty yards from me, Joe and Louis continued to lounge in the shade. Louis was smoking and Joe was taking another pull from his bottle of beer.

I retreated back out of sight, paused for a moment to wipe my face and hands with my handkerchief, then returned to where the suitcase was lying.

I carried it across the kitchen garden to the gap in the hedge, leading into the paddock, and dumped it by the gap.

I don't suppose more than a minute or so had elapsed since I had heaved the case out of the window. I slid the case through the gap, crawled through myself and laid it in the deep ditch on the other side of the hedge. The long grass closed over it.

Satisfied that it couldn't be found unless someone actually walked on it, I crawled back through the gap and went around to the side of the house to see if Joe and Louis had moved.

Louis was now stretched flat on his back, his hat over his eyes. He appeared to be asleep.

Joe smoked, his back resting against the tree, his eyes in a fixed stare on the farm gates.

I thought with grim satisfaction what a shock they would get when they went upstairs for the suitcase. The first move in my plan had worked out successfully.

There was nothing more for me to do now but to wait as Joe and Louis were waiting.

I settled down in the long grass, lying flat, in a position where I could watch the two men.

The red-faced pub keeper had been right when he had said it was going to be a hot afternoon. As

the hands of my wrist-watch crawled on, the heat of the sun increased. There wasn't a breath of air in the sheltered garden. I could see Joe was having difficulty keeping awake. He stretched and yawned and mopped his sweating face, and every now and then, he looked at his watch.

Two hours crawled by. Then at five minutes past four, I heard a sound that stiffened me to attention: the sound of an approaching car. Joe heard it too for he reached out and shook Louis.

The two men started to their feet and ducked back behind the elm tree. Both of them pulled out their guns. They waited.

I half rose to my feet, keeping behind an overgrown shrub. I was aware of a tense feeling of excitement. Was this the moment I had been waiting for?

The car came on. Then a horn sounded three sharp blasts.

The two men came out from behind the tree and ran down the drive to the gate.

I moved out of my hiding-place, crossed a patch of bare ground ahead of me in three strides, and ducked behind the elm tree they had just left. From there I had a good view of the drive. Dix's big Cadillac swung through the gateway as Joe opened the gate.

Gloria was at the wheel, but I couldn't see anyone else in the car.

"Where the hell's Ed?" Joe demanded as Gloria pulled up.

She jerked her thumb to the back of the car, opened the car door and slid along the bench seat to the ground.

As she did so I saw a rug tossed aside and a man's head and shoulders appeared from behind the driving-seat.

It was Dix.

chapter eighteen

In the hard sunlight, Dix looked grotesque and frightening as he got stiffly out of the car. Both Joe and Louis took a quick step back when they saw his face. It was stained a violent sky blue, and it looked like some gruesome mask you might dream about in a nightmare.

"For God's sake, Ed!" Joe gasped. "Haven't you got that stuff off your face yet?"

"Shut up!" Dix snarled. He seemed beside himself with rage. "Get the car into the barn. Snap it up! We don't want anyone to spot us here."

"No one's passed all day," Louis said. He was staring at Dix curiously. "What happened to you? We've been waiting and waiting . . ."

"Get that car out of sight!" Dix said violently. "Here, Gloria . . ." He turned and put out his hand.

She moved over to him. I saw her look at Joe and shake her head slightly. She took Dix's arm.

"Get him a drink, Joe. He's had a bad time."

"You're not hurt, are you, Ed?" Joe asked, staring at him "I'm all right. Get me a drink, damn you!" Dix snarled.

Louis got into the car and drove it over to the barn.

"It's as hot as hell in the house," Joe said. He glanced at Gloria, raising his eyebrows. "Go and sit over there in the shade."

Dix hooked his fingers in his collar and pulled savagely.

"I sweated blood in the goddam car."

"Come on, Ed," Gloria said. "Well sit down. Hurry with that drink, Joe."

Joe set off at a run.

Dix and Gloria came towards the tree behind which I was hiding. Quietly I slid back into the long grass and lay flat. They sat down with their backs to the tree. I wasn't more than ten feet from them.

"How are your eyes now, Ed?" Gloria asked, and she looked searchingly at him.

Dix pulled off his coat. Under the coat he wore a shoulder holster. He put his hand on the gun butt and eased the gun in the holster.

"Not too good. I'm glad I shot that bastard. He had it coming to him." He reached out and caught hold of Gloria's wrist. "You're going to stick by me, aren't you, Gloria? I don't trust those other two."

"Don't talk like that," Gloria said. "They're all right. You couldn't help it, Ed. It could have happened to anyone."

"That doesn't answer my question," Dix said. His grip tightened on her wrist and I saw her bite her lip to stop from crying out.

"You're hurting me," she said. "You don't have to ask. Of course I'll stick by you. I love you, Ed."

"Do you? I sometimes wonder. You never liked that movie set-up of mine, did you?"

"No, but I got paid for it. I'd do anything for you, Ed. You know that."

He showed his teeth in a mirthless grin.

"You stick to me, Gloria, and you won't regret it. There's still some money left; I'll give you a good time in Paris. Just watch those other two. I don't trust them."

"Joe's coming now," she said in a whisper.

Joe came over the grass carrying a bottle of Scotch, glasses and a siphon of soda. Louis joined him. They sat down a few feet from him.

"What happened to Berry?" Dix demanded.

"We took him to his flat," Joe said. He poured out a big whisky, splashed in soda and offered it to Dix.

"Is he dead?" Dix said. He paid no attention to the glass of whisky.

"Here—don't you want your drink?"

Dix put out his hand. His fingers groped six or seven inches from Joe's hand. Joe put the drink into the questing fingers and looked at Gloria, his face startled.

"Is he dead?" Dix repeated.

"He must be by now."

"What do you mean—by now?" Dix snarled. "Didn't you finish him?"

"He was dying," Louis said indignantly, "There was no need for that."

Dix stopped his drink as he half started up.

"You spineless fools! He knew our plans! You mean you left him within reach of a telephone? Do you imagine he'll keep his trap shut?"

"He couldn't move," Joe growled. "I wouldn't have left him if I hadn't been sure he couldn't get help. Take it easy, Ed. It's okay. He's dead by now."

"You should have put a slug through his head."

"Someone would have heard the shot. You don't have to worry about him, Ed. Take it easy."

"You make me puke. You could have smothered him or opened his veins . . ."

Gloria put her hand on his arm.

"Don't talk that way, Ed."

Dix pulled away from her. He drank the whisky, dropped the glass on to the grass, and fumbled for a cigarette.

"Why haven't you got that stuff off your face yet, Ed?"

Louis asked, after a long pause.

"I can't get it off!" Dix said furiously. "Do you think I haven't tried? What the hell do you drink I've been doing all this time? I've scrubbed my goddam face until it's raw. I can't shift it!"

There was a sudden sharp silence.

"But you can't go round with a face like that," Joe said slowly. "They'll spot you a mile off, and if we're with you, they'll spot us too."

"Shut your trap! I tell you I can't get it off. It's some chemical. It'll have to wear off."

"Well, that's fine," Louis said sarcastically. "How long do you reckon it'll take to wear off?"

"How do I know? Shut up talking about it!"

Again there was a tense silence, then Joe said, "What happened to you after you left us, Ed?"

"Don't keep asking me questions," Dix snarled. "Ask her if you must know: she'll tell you." He got uneasily to his feet. "I want some sleep. I've been on the go since last night. Is there a bed in there?"

"I'll show you," Louis said, getting to his feet.

Dix reached out and caught hold of Louis's arm.

"My eyes hurt," he said. "Some of that stuff I got on my face got into my eyes."

I heard Joe draw in a sharp, quick breath.

"You mean you can't see, Ed?"

"I can see all right. It just smarts." He wouldn't let go of Louis's arm. "Come on. Show me a bed."

The two went off together.

Joe sat crossed-legged, staring down at his big hands.

"Got a cigarette, Joe?" Gloria asked. She stretched out her long, shapely legs and leaned her back against the tree.

"Sure," Joe said, taking out a packet of Players. He dropped them into her lap. "How bad is he, Gloria?"

"Pretty bad. He was blind when I found him."

Joe looked at her, then looked away.

"With that face and not being able to see, he should be a big help when we get to Paris, shouldn't he?"

"I've thought of that."

"Well, he's your funeral, Gloria. You're his girl."

"Am I?" She moved her legs so her skirt rode up a little to show her knees. "I could be your girl if you felt that way about it, Joe."

"Ed would love that."

"He mightn't have much choice."

Joe moved restlessly.

"Better not let Louis hear you say that."

"You haven't heard the whole story yet."

Louis came out of the house and walked back to where the other two sat under the tree.

"He's practically blind," he said excitedly. "I had to put him on the bed."

"Sit down and shut up," Joe snapped. "Gloria's got something to tell us. What goes on, Gloria?"

"When Ed left you," she said, speaking rapidly, "he got as far as the White City, then he went blind. This stuff he's got on his face worked into his eyes."

"He's just told us that," Louis said impatiently.

"But he didn't tell you he crashed the car. He drove it up on the pavement and through a wall."

Joe and Louis stared at her.

"What happened to the diamonds?" Joe said, clenching his great fists.

"I should have thought you'd've asked that before now,"

Gloria said, lighting her cigarette.

"What happened to the diamonds?" Joe repeated, leaning forward, his small eyes glittering.

"He left them in the car."

Joe jumped to his feet

"You're lying! This is a goddam double cross! No one would leave two hundred thousand . . ."

"Don't be a fool, Joe!" Gloria said sharply. "He was blind. The car went into a wall. How could he do anything about the diamonds? There were four mail bags. He didn't know which one they were in. Do you think he should have carried four mail bags on his back?"

"For God's sake!" Louis said driving his fist into the palm of his hand "They were our diamonds!"

"No, they weren't," Joe said quickly. "We've got our diamonds upstairs, Louis. Those diamonds belonged to Ed and Gloria."

Louis stared at him.

"We were going to have seventy-five thousand each," he said. "There's only a hundred thousand worth upstairs."

"Fifty thousand's better than nothing," Joe said.

"Twenty-five thousand," Gloria said quietly. "We cut it four ways now, Joe."

"Who says so?" Joe demanded.

"Ed says so."

Joe started to say something, then stopped. He looked uneasily at Louis.

"Go on, Joe, don't be shy," Gloria said. "You're among friends."

Joe sat down.

"They're our diamonds," he said "We looked after them. We didn't lose them. Ed's got no claim on them."

"Don't tell me," Gloria said, flicking ash on to the grass.

"Tell Ed."

"You'll only run into trouble, Joe," Louis said. "He's too fast for you."

Joe didn't say anything. He scowled down at his hands, then he looked over at Gloria.

"What do you think?"

"Suppose Ed agrees to drop out," Gloria said quietly.

"What happens to me?"

"Do you want to throw in with me, Gloria?"

"What's going on?" Louis demanded suspiciously. "She's Ed's girl. Have you gone crazy or something, Joe?"

"Shut up!" Joe snarled. "What about it, Gloria?"

She gave him that exciting look that had got me going.

"I said you could have me if you wanted me, Joe."

He leaned over and grabbed her.

Louis watched them, white-faced and scared.

"If Ed catches you, he'll kill you."

"Now now, Joe," Gloria said. She pulled away from him.

Neither of them took any notice of Louis. "In a little while, but not now. What are we going to do about Ed?"

Joe looked suddenly wary.

"We'll ditch him. We three will take the money and leave him here."

Gloria smiled.

"He may have other ideas. Remember what he said about Berry?"

"A shot might be heard," Joe said.

"Something about opening Berry's veins," Gloria said.

Joe looked at her, then over at Louis who was staring, his face now as white as a fresh fall of snow.

"Yes, but it won't be easy."

"The two of you could do it, Joe."

Joe shook his head.

"He's too damned fast with a gun. He wouldn't let us get near him."

"But he can't see, Joe. If you rushed him . . ."

"Not as long as he's got the gun."

Gloria lifted her shoulders.

"All right; then what are you going to do?"

Joe sat down again. He lit a cigarette, blew a long stream of smoke down his nostrils, and then looked over at Louis.

"What do you say, Louis?"

Louis wiped his face with his coat sleeve. "I'm not splitting my share three ways, Joe. If you want Gloria, you split with her, but I'm not going to."

"I didn't ask you to, did I?" Gloria snapped "No, but that doesn't mean you weren't hoping I would," Louis returned, scowling at her.

"We're talking about Ed," Joe said sharply. "Think we ought to put him out of the way, Louis?"

"Couldn't we risk a shot?" Louis said after a long pause.

"No!" Gloria said. "We've got to remain here until the plane comes: we have another five hours. If someone heard and told the police . . ."

"Yes, she's right," Joe said. "You've got a knife, haven't you, Louis?"

"Do you think I'm crazy enough to get that close to him?"

"The two of us. I'll jump him, then you finish him."

"Not as long as he has a gun."

Joe nodded.

"That's sense," he said, looking at Gloria. "Get his gun, Gloria, and we'll do the rest. It'll be easy for you to get it. Go in there now and give him some love. We'll fix him if you get the gun."

Gloria looked from Joe to Louis, her eyes calculating.

"I'll see what I can do," she said, getting to her feet. "I don't promise anything."

"Get the gun and we'll fix him," Joe repeated.

Again she looked at them.

"Wait here. It may take some time. I don't promise anything."

"It'll be easy for you," Joe said. "It's not as if he can see."

She walked across the grass. Her hips moved under the thin material of her dress. Joe watched her, a fixed grin on his face.

"You must be nuts to fall for her," Louis said uneasily. "I wouldn't trust her farther than I could throw her. I wouldn't trust her that far."

"You don't trust anyone, do you, Louis?"

"She'll run through your share before you know you've even got it. I know her type, and when the money's gone, she'll leave you flat. You're not kidding yourself you mean anything to her, are you, Joe?"

Joe shook his head.

"She'll never get near my share."

Louis stared at him.

"What's that?"

"Don't be a mug. Do you think I want a second-hand piece like her?" Joe said impatiently. "We can't tackle Ed so long as he's got a gun. She's the only one who can get it without getting shot. And another thing, she knows Hacket. We may have trouble with Hacket when he finds Ed isn't with us. Gloria will take the curse off it. Hacket has always been crazy about her. She'll handle him and we'll ride along on the band wagon."

Louis suddenly grinned.

"I'll be damned! That's smart. I thought you had fallen for her. When we get to Paris you'll ditch

her?"

Joe nodded.

"A couple of nights with her will be all I'll want, then a quiet flit when she's not looking. I'll meet you in Rome, Louis. I've always wanted to see Rome."

Louis looked towards the farmhouse.

"Think she'll be long?"

"She said so." He got to his feet. "I think I'll keep an eye on her. It wouldn't suit us if she made a slip and Ed broke her neck."

Louis also got to his feet.

"I'll come with you."

They walked over to the house and went around the back.

I remained where I was in the long grass, and as I lay there with the hot sun on my back, I thought of Bill.

I wasn't going to raise a finger to stop any of this. It was poetic justice, and it was a relief to know that the score was going to settle itself without my intervention. If they succeeded in killing Dix, then my job was being done for me. If they slipped up, I would finish the job myself, but I didn't think they were going to slip up: three against one loaded the dice against Dix.

I waited.

The hands of my wrist-watch crept on. Only the drone of bees disturbed the complete silence that brooded over the hot garden.

I waited.

A half an hour crawled past. It was now nearly five-forty-five.

Suddenly from around the back of the house Joe and Louis appeared. They looked expectantly towards the front door, and after a few moments, Gloria came out.

She walked towards the elm tree and made a little motion with her head for them to join her.

They hurried over the grass and reached her as she dropped on her knees in the shade of the tree a few yards from where I was lying.

"Did you get it?" Joe demanded.

She smiled, her black eyes glittering with excitement.

"I've done better than that." She put out her hand. "I've got the bullets."

"Well, I'll be damned. How did you manage that?"

"It took time. It took me twenty minutes to get the gun out of the holster. He was asleep, but he hadn't taken the holster off. I got the gun out at last without waking him. I thought it would be better to take the bullets and leave the gun. If he had found the gun gone he would have been on his guard so I put the gun back. It took even longer to put it back, but I got it back." She raised her hand and threw the bullets into the shrubbery. "I've drawn his teeth, Joe."

"Is he still asleep?"

She nodded.

Joe looked at Louis.

"What are we waiting for?"

Louis got to his feet. His hand went behind him and reappeared holding a short, stabbing knife. The broad blade glittered in the sunlight.

"Come on then," he said huskily. "Let's take him."

chapter nineteen

Even from where I was lying I could almost feel Gloria's intense excitement. She knelt on the grass, her fists clenched and gripped tightly between her thighs, her face white and her eyes glittering. She seemed scarcely to breathe as she watched the two men moving towards the farmhouse with an intent savagery that was horrible to see.

Joe held a short length of lead piping in his hand. He walked a little ahead of Louis, his great shoulders hunched, his head thrust forward.

Louis kept the knife out of sight, down by his side. He took short, mincing steps, hesitant in his attitude and uncertain of himself.

They got as far as the moss-covered drive when the front door opened and Dix came into the sunlight. He came out slowly, his hand outstretched, groping his eyes half closed.

Both Joe and Louis came to an abrupt stop.

Dix stood in the doorway, peering at them.

"Is that you, Joe?"

"Yes," Joe said. "I was just coming to see if you were awake." He began to move forward again, keeping the length of lead piping out of sight.

"Stay where you are, Joe!" Dix snapped, a rasp in his voice.

Joe stopped.

"What's up? What's the matter?"

"Just stay where you are. Where's Gloria?"

"Over by the trees. She's having a sleep."

He began to move forward again, and Louis began to circle away to come in on Dix from the side.

Dix suddenly showed his teeth in a mirthless grin. His hand slipped inside his coat and he pulled out the heavy .45.

"Keep your distance, you two!"

Joe laughed.

"That peashooters not going to help you now, Ed."

"You'll get a slug in the gut if you come another foot nearer," Dix said, and snapped back the safety catch.

"Okay," Louis," Joe shouted. "Let's take him!"

He jumped forward, swinging his length of pipe. Louis broke into a run. He held the short stabbing knife thrust forward. There was a wild, frightened expression on his face.

Gloria sprang to her feet.

"Watch them, Ed!" she screamed.

I saw Dix's finger turn white as he took up the slack on the trigger. Joe was within six feet of him, rushing at him like a charging bull, his right hand flashing up.

I waited for the click of the hammer and to see Dix's expression change. I waited to see him struck down and to see Louis stab him to death. My heart beat so violently I felt suffocated.

The crash of gunfire when it came was so unexpected that I half started to my feet, but dropped back into my hiding-place as the realization flashed into my mind that Dix's gun wasn't empty and that Gloria had trapped these two into attacking him.

Dix's heavy .45 spurted flame. The noise of the shot echoed round the silent farm like a thunder clap.

Joe stopped running as if he had slammed against a brick wall. The front of his forehead disappeared into a spongy mess of blood and hair. He fell face forward and rolled over, his hands twitching. The lead pipe pitched at Dix's feet Dix swung round towards Louis. There was a devilish expression of glee on his face.

Louis had stopped moving as Joe fell. For a second or so the shock of seeing Joe fall paralysed him. Then he swung round, his face twisted in a grimace of fear and rage. He began running madly towards Gloria.

"You bitch!" he screamed at her, waving his knife as he ran. "You double-crossing bitch!"

Gloria watched him come, her hands over her breast, her face pale and tense.

Louis hadn't taken more than a dozen strides when Dix lifted the .45 and fired again.

The top of Louis's head flew off. He plunged forward, blood spurting from his scalp as he measured his length not more than four or five feet from where Gloria stood. She jumped back, shuddering, and hid her face in her hands.

"Well, we made it," Dix cried, grinning. "The suckers fell for it. Goddam it! I thought they would be smarter than that."

He walked over to Joe, bent and looked at him. Then he walked over to Louis, kicked him over on to his back and looked at him.

"That's it." he said. "Now there are only two of Gloria."

She came over to him.

"I was scared, Ed. You let them get too close."

He grinned.

"I couldn't afford to miss them." He put his arm round her and gave her a little hug. "Did you see the way Joe looked at me? He thought I was blind and defenceless! Did you see the expression in his eyes when he died?" He laughed savagely. "I wouldn't have believed he could have been such a goddam sucker!"

"Do you think anyone heard the shooting?" Gloria asked anxiously.

"If anyone did they'd think it was a poacher. There's no one within a mile of this place. You'd better take it easy. Go and sit down, kid. You're looking as white as a ghost. I'll get these stiff's out of the way."

She pulled herself together with an effort.

"I'm all right," she said sharply. "I'm not soft. I'll help you, Ed. You know I'll do anything for you."

He grinned at her.

"I believe you damn well would, you little dope."

"Ed! Kiss me."

"I'll do more than that in a moment. Let's get these stiff's out of the way."

She went up to him and threw her arms round his neck.

"I love you, Ed. It'll be all right when we get to Paris, won't it?"

He pushed her away.

"Who said you weren't soft?" he sneered at her. "Let's get these stiff's out of sight. Then we'll celebrate."

She looked questioningly at him then bent and caught hold of Louis's right foot.

"Let's get him into the barn," Dix said, catching hold of the dead man's other foot. "Come on—heave."

I watched them drag Louis's body through the thick grass, across the drive and into the barn. When they had disappeared into the barn, I took out my handkerchief and wiped my face with an unsteady hand.

There was a sick feeling now inside me. The score, after all, was not settled. My hand groped for Berry's gun. I pulled it out of my pocket, jacked the shell from the breech and slipped out the clip. I then carefully reloaded the gun. I, too, couldn't afford to miss if I had to shoot.

Gloria and Dix were now dragging Joe's great body towards the barn. They moved slowly, leaving a broad trail of blood on the grass. When they had disappeared again into the barn, I got up and ran quickly round to the back of the house.

The next stage in this drama would take place inside the house, and I didn't intend to miss any of it.

I climbed in through the open window at the back, and took up my position at the door which I opened a few inches.

Then I waited.

After a few minutes I heard them come into the house.

They went into the front room.

"Give me a drink, Gloria," Dix said. "A good stiff one. Have one yourself."

"I wish we didn't have to wait so long," she said uneasily.

I heard the chink of glasses and the sound of liquor being poured. "We have nearly three hours and a half to wait. I wish Tom Was coming sooner."

"It's got to be dark. If he's spotted coming in, they might send a plane after us."

"Yes, but I wish we didn't have to wait so long. I shan't be happy until we're in Paris, Ed."

"Don't be too sure you'll be happy then," Dix grunted.

"What the hell am I going to do in Paris with this goddam face of mine?"

"We'll stay at Tom's place. It'll wear off in time, Ed. Don't worry about it."

"That's one place we're not going to stay at," Dix snarled.

"Tom's too keen on pawing you to please me. If I catch him . . ."

"Ed! Don't talk like that. Please."

"Give me another drink," Dix said irritably. "I'm warning you, Gloria. If Tom starts his tricks with you again, he's going to run into a pile of grief and so are you."

"Ed, do you think we should wait here?" Gloria asked after a short pause. "I keep thinking of Berry."

Dix swore.

"I was forgetting Berry. Okay, we'll get out to the field. There's plenty of cover in the woods. Maybe it will be safer than staying here."

"Let's do that," Gloria said eagerly. "I'll do it now."

"Give me time to finish my drink. No need to start a panic."

"If anything went wrong now . . ."

"Aw, shut up! Nothing's going to go wrong."

I heard Dix come out into the passage.

"Didn't they say they left the case in the back room upstairs?"

"Yes."

"I'll go up and get it."

I heard him mount the stairs. I peered around the door.

Gloria was standing in the passage, her back to me, looking up the stairs. I pulled back out of sight and waited.

I heard Dix suddenly curse obscenely and vilely, then his heavy tread thudded along the upper landing to the front room.

"What is it, Ed?" Gloria exclaimed.

There was a crash as he slammed back the cupboard door in the front room.

"What's the matter?" he shouted violently, coming on to the landing again. "It's not here!"

"It must be!"

"It damn well isn't!"

She ran up the stairs.

"Let me look."

"Go ahead and look," Dix said, his voice shaking with rage. "It's not up here!"

I heard her run into the back room, then along the passage into the front room

"It must be downstairs then," she said after a long pause.

"I'm sure Joe said it was in the back room, perhaps he meant the downstairs back room."

I moved over to the window and slid through it on to the path. Silently I crossed the path and took cover behind the screen of shrubs facing the window.

A minute or so later Dix entered the room and stood looking round.

"Nothing here."

"The kitchen then," Gloria said, her voice unsteady.

Dix shoved past her and went into the kitchen. He came back immediately, his eyes like chips of ice.

"Nothing there."

They looked at each other. Gloria was shaking.

"It must be in the barn."

"Then let's look in the bam," Dix said in a low, savage voice. I had the impression he was only holding himself in with a great effort. "Come on; let's look in the barn."

As they went along the passage to the front door, I ran around the back of the house and took up a position in the long grass where I could see all the out-buildings.

They came out of the house at a run. Gloria's face was white and drawn. She was the first to reach the barn. A few seconds were long enough to convince them the suitcase wasn't in there, and they came out.

"In one of these buildings," Gloria said frantically. "It must be, Ed."

"Go and look!"

He stood in the sunlight by the barn, his face now a mask of controlled rage. He watched her run to the cowshed, from the cowshed to the pig sties, from the pig sties to the stables.

She came out of the stables slowly, her face bewildered, her eyes frightened

"Not there," she said, shaking her head. "It's not anywhere."

"You'd better find it, Gloria," Dix said softly.

She gave a little start and stared at him.

"What do you mean, Ed?"

"What I say. You'd better find it and quick!" His voice came across the still quietness that hung over the hot garden quietly but full of menace and danger. "Where have you hidden it, Gloria?"

She stiffened as she faced him.

"Hidden it?" she repeated hoarsely. "Are you crazy? I haven't hidden it."

"Haven't you? You can't fool me. When I was asleep you shifted it from upstairs to where you think I won't find it. You and your goddam Hacket! I can see through your clever little plan. You got me to finish Joe and Louis; now you plan to finish me. Then you and Hacket will have the time of your lives. You don't think I know about you two. I've watched you. I know what you and he were up to last time you were in Paris.

"I've watched you two together." He leaned forward, his blue-stained face contorted with rage. "Where have you hidden it, damn you!"

She started back. Fear and rage made her look suddenly old and ugly. I scarcely recognized her.

"That's a lie, and you know it! Tom means nothing to me! It's you who have hidden it. You're trying to gyp me out of my share the way you gypped Joe and Louis and Berry out of theirs. But you're not going to do it! I've stood by you, Ed. I saved you when you were blind and wandering about the streets. I fooled Joe and Louis so you and I could have their share. I've always stuck to you, Ed. You can't treat me like this now."

"Where have you hidden that case, Gloria?" Dix repeated and moved slowly towards her. "You'd better tell me."

She began to tack away.

"I swear I haven't touched it Ed! I Swear it!"

"Where have you hidden it damn you?"

He suddenly made a dart at her, but she slipped past him and began to run frantically towards the house. He went after her, his long legs taking one stride to her three. She began to scream wildly as he overtook her. He caught up with her and grabbed her, dragging her round to face him.

"Where have you hidden it?" he shouted, shaking her. "Or do you want me to beat it out of you?"

"Let me go!" She swung at him and clawed his face, ripping his flesh near his eyes. "Let me go!"

He caught hold of her throat and forced her down on her knees.

"No, don't, Ed!" she gasped. "I swear I didn't touch it. Those devils must have hidden it!"

He bent her back, his thumbs moving over her throat and settling into her windpipe. His expression was murderous.

"Where've you hidden it?"

She tried to scream, but his thumbs sank into her throat, cutting off the sound.

"I'll find it!" he snarled, shaking her savagely. "It can't be far away. I'll find it without you, you bitch!"

He bent her back, his blue-stained face glistening with sweat, his drawn-back lips showing his big, white teeth. He looked like something from the jungle.

She clawed desperately at his wrists, her eyes staring out of her head, her face congested I made a move to get up, but I had left it too late. In the hot silence I heard a bone snap, and I saw her go limp. Blood ran suddenly from her nose and spilt over Dix's great hands.

He threw her from him, straightened and stared down at her.

My hand was steady as I lifted the gun.

This act which I was about to do was what I had come here to do. It was no use thinking of Ann any

longer. I had already lost her when I had gone back on my promise, and had sneaked round to Gloria's flat that night which now seemed so long ago.

I had a score to settle. I felt that when I had settled the score I should have succeeded in part in putting my house in order. I didn't care anymore what happened to myself. After this was over I would take the diamonds and drive back to London. I would see Rawson and tell him the story and give him the money. It was up to him then to do what he liked with me. I had no idea what he would do, nor did I care.

"Here he comes, Bill," I said softly. "He's in your charge now."

The gun sight was centred on the blue-stained face. It was steady; not a movement, as if the sight had been cemented to its target.

It was a long, tricky shot with a pistol, but I knew I wouldn't miss.

The blue-stained face suddenly turned and looked in my direction as if Dix had had a sudden premonition that he was only a heartbeat away from death. I saw the sudden fear in his eyes. His hand groped for the gun he had dropped; his fingers touched Gloria's dead face.

I looked along the barrel of the gun, then I gently squeezed the trigger.

The End