

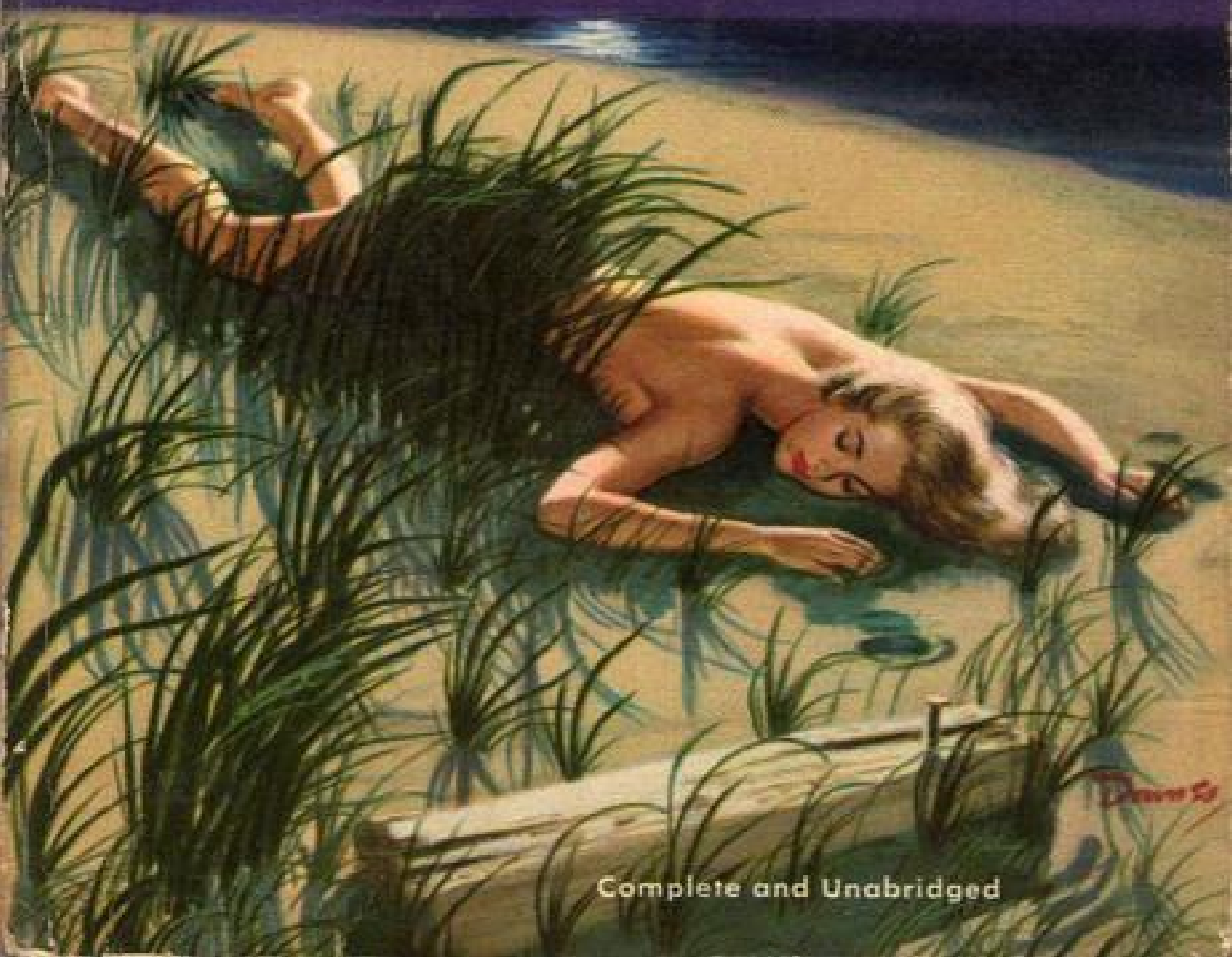
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Her Kisses Were A Prelude To Death

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You're LONELY when you're DEAD

JAMES HADLEY CHASE



Complete and Unabridged

You're Lonely When You're Dead

James Hadley Chase

1949

chapter one



I

On a nice sunny morning in mid-March, around eleven o'clock, I drove over to the Santa Rosa Estate where the owner, Jay Franklin Cerf, was expecting me.

I had been out when he had called the office, but Paula Bensinger, who runs the business and me too if I don't watch out, had told him I would be over within the hour. He hadn't volunteered any information except the matter was urgent and confidential, but the fact that he owned the Santa Rosa Estate was enough for her. You had to have money to run a place that size and money always got Paula steamed up.

By the time I arrived at the office she had dug up some dope about Cerf, and while I made myself presentable she rattled off the facts from news clippings we keep on all the big shots in Orchid City. Cerf was the President of the Red Star Navigation Company, a gigantic wholesale lumber and shipping business operating along the Pacific Coast. He had been a widower for the past two years — his wife had been killed in a car accident and up to now, his private life had been a lot less exciting than the mummy-room of the Park-Livingstone Museum. Recently he had married a mannequin, and that, Paula thought, was probably why he wanted to see me. When a man of his age and wealth falls for a mannequin, she went on cynically, and is sucker enough to marry her, the writing goes up on the wall.

But if it wasn't his wife troubling him, she continued - she always liked to have an alternative theory then it was probably his daughter, Natalia, a forbidding piece in her early twenties, crippled in the same car accident that had killed her mother, and who made enemies as easily as her father made dollars.

‘The guy’s made of money,’ she concluded, with that wistful look in her eyes the thought of vast wealth always brings. ‘Don’t let him think we’re anything but expensive, and get over there quick. We don’t want him to change his mind about hiring us.’

‘To hear you talk,’ I said bitterly, moving to the door, ‘anyone would think you owned this joint, not me. Thread a new ribbon in your Remington and leave this to me.’

‘I’ll have you know I’m the only one who does any work around here,’ Paula said heatedly. ‘If it wasn’t for me...’

But by then I was halfway down the stairs.

The Santa Rosa Estate was a hundred-acre paradise that embraced the raced lawns, formal gardens, a swimming pool and fountains. It was a pretty lush spot if you like lush spots: I don’t. Whenever I happen on one of these gold-plated, millionaire’s caravanserais my bank balance pokes up its head and jeers at me.

The drive up to the house was along a winding avenue of trees, and on the way I caught a glimpse of a distant lawn, big enough to play polo on, and flowerbeds that were packed with colour bright enough to hurt your eyes. The avenue opened out on to a vast stretch of tarmac on which were parked five or six cars. The smallest of them was a Rolls-Royce convertible in cream and sky blue. Two Filipino chauffeurs were flicking it over with feather dusters, and sneering to themselves as if what they were doing was against their religion.

To the right of the parking lot was the house, a modest little affair of about twenty-four bedrooms, a front door through which you could drive a ten-ton truck and a terrace of french windows overlooking an esplanade broad enough to use as a runway for a B25.

On my way to the front door I came upon a concealed loggia before which stood two big tubs of red and yellow begonias. I paused to admire the flowers as an excuse to get my breath back, and found myself gaping at a girl in a wheel chair, sunning herself in the loggia. She showed no surprise at my sudden appearance, and her deep-set eyes regarded me so searchingly I had an uneasy feeling she could read the letters in my wallet and count the small change in my pockets.

She was about twenty-four or five, small and as hard as an uncut diamond. She had that pale, pinched look cripples have, and her thin, neat mouth drooped a little at the corners, hinting at a sneer that might or might not be in her thoughts. Her dark, glossy hair was shoulder length and curled inwards at the bottom, and she wore a pair of fawn-coloured slacks and a blue Cashmere sweater which was too loose to show off her figure, if she had a figure, which I doubted.

I took off my hat and gave her a polite grin to show her I was a friendly sort of guy if that was what she was looking for, but apparently she wasn’t. There was no answering smile, no bonhomie, just a plain, straightforward freeze.

‘Are you from Universal Services?’ she asked in a voice you could slice bread on. A book lay in her

trouser lap, and one thin finger held down a word as if she was scared it would slip off the page.

‘Lady,’ I said, ‘I am Universal Services.’

‘Then you shouldn’t come to the front entrance,’ she told me. ‘The tradesmen’s entrance is to the right and at the back.’

I thanked her, and then as she lowered her eyes to the book I started off again towards the front door.

‘Where are you going?’ she demanded, looking up sharply and raising her voice. ‘I said the tradesmen’s entrance...’

‘Is to the right and at the back,’ I broke in. ‘I know. I heard you the first time. Between you and me and the begonias Miss Cerf, it could be to the left and in the front. It could be on the roof or under a fountain. I’m not particularly interested. One of these days, when I have time, I’ll have a look at it. Maybe it’s worth seeing. I’ll put it in my duty book for a wet afternoon. Thanks for the suggestion.’

But by now she was bending over her book again, apparently not listening. Her long dark tresses fell forward in her face. A pity. I bet she looked as if she had swallowed a bee.

There seemed no point in staying. So far as she was concerned I just wasn’t there anymore, so I continued the long trek to the front door, a shade hotter under the collar than I had been before I met her, thinking she was definitely not the type of girl you took to a gin palace in the hope she’d snap a garter at you.

The butler who opened the door was a tall, regal-looking person with the face of a retired statesman and the manners of a bishop. When I told him my name he said Mr. Cerf was expecting me. He led me through a hall that was smaller than the Pennsylvania station but not much, along a passage lined on either side with suits of armour and crossed swords, down a flight of stairs, past a billiard room to an elevator that whisked us up two floors. From the elevator I followed his stiff back along another mile of corridor to a room overlooking the front lawn and the distant ocean, and which was obviously the great man’s study.

‘I will tell Mr. Cerf you are here, sir,’ he said with a formal bow. ‘He is unlikely to keep you very long,’ and he went away with no more commotion than a snowflake makes to settle on your hat.

II

Jay Franklin Cerf looked what he was: the President of a six-million dollar Navigation Company. There was an arrogant and authoritative air about him that brooked no non-sense, and it was pretty obvious he had been expensively fed from the time he had got on to solids. He was tall and massive.

His complexion was just the right blend of mauve and suntan, and his eyes were as blue as forget-me-nots and as impersonal. He was, at a guess, on the wrong side of fifty, but hard still in mind and body. From the crown of his thinning hair to the welts of his glossy shoes he was a blueprint of the boy who made good.

He came briskly into the room, closed the door and looked me over the way millionaires look over any proposition that might cost them money.

‘Are you Malloy?’ he barked abruptly, and I could imagine anyone who depended on him for a living would buckle at the knees at the sound of that voice.

I said I was and waited, for I have done enough business with millionaires to know if there’s one thing they hate more than being bitten by a dog it’s to listen to any other voice except their own.

‘From the Universal Services?’ he went on, making sure of his facts.

‘That’s right, Mr. Cerf.’

He gave a little grunt and stared doubtfully at me. He began to say something, but changed his mind, and instead went over to the window and peered out for no reason at all so far as I could see unless maybe he had paid for the view and wanted value for money.

Then suddenly he said without turning, ‘About this organization of yours. I have some idea what you do, but I have had it only second-hand. I’d like details.’

‘Sure,’ I said, wishing I had ten dollars for every time I’d run through this spiel. ‘Maybe it’ll interest you to hear how the organization began. Someone once told me millionaires want service: The richer you are the more dependent you are on other people, this guy said, and he was right. When I came out of the army I had no prospects and no money but I remembered what this guy had told me. I decided to give the millionaires a service to end all services. The result is Universal Services that celebrates its third birthday next week. I’m not pretending the idea has turned out to be a ball of fire. It hasn’t, but it’s made me a little money and it’s been a lot of fun.

‘My organization will take on any job any client wants done. It doesn’t matter what the job is so long as it’s legal and ethical: from arranging a divorce to procuring a white elephant. Since we’ve started, I and my staff have handled blackmailers, watched drug addicts, taken a bunch of college kids on a world tour, fanned out illegitimate babies, bagged a grizzly bear for a client who wanted to boast he had shot one, and ironed out a little trouble for a young woman who walked in her sleep once too often. Those are the kind of things we do because they are the kind of things people want done and can’t do themselves. Once I accept a client I protect him. Once the fee is paid, and it’s a big one, there are no other expenses and no other payments. It’s a millionaire’s service, and every job we do carries with it a guarantee of secrecy.’

While I was pausing for breath, he said impatiently, ‘Yes, I heard it was something like that.’ He came away from the window. ‘Sit down. What will you drink?’

I sat down and said I wouldn't drink anything, but maybe he knew I was kidding because he went over to a well-equipped cocktail cabinet and mixed two highballs with the ease and speed of constant practice. One of these he put within my reach. The other he held in his hand and stared at as if he wasn't sure what he was to do with it.

'If there's anything I can handle for you,' I said to get him going, 'I'll be glad to do it, and you can be sure of a confidential and efficient service.'

He looked up, frowning.

'I wouldn't have sent for you if I hadn't been sure of that,' he said curtly. 'I have a job for you. It is nothing out of the way. At least, nothing out of the way to you. It is to me, I'm afraid.'

While he went off into another long, brooding silence, I sampled the highball. It was strong enough to knock over a fair-sized mule.

'But before I go into details I would like your reactions to an odd discovery I have made,' he said suddenly. 'Come with me. I want to show you something.'

He took me into a big airy bedroom, halfway along the corridor: a woman's room I guessed from the elaborate toilet-set on the dressing table and the various feminine bric-a-brac lying around.

He went to one of the big built-in cupboards, an impressive affair of walnut and bevelled glass, opened the door and dragged out a pigskin suitcase. This he dumped on the floor at my feet and then stood away.

'Open it,' he said abruptly, 'and take a look at the contents.'

I squatted down on my heels, slid back the two catches and opened the case. It was half-full of the oddest collection of articles I have ever seen in one throw. There were cigarette-cases, a number of leather wallets, a couple of diamond rings, three shoes that didn't match, a collection of spoons with the names of a number of swank restaurants embossed on them, a half a dozen cigarette-lighters, some of them bearing initials, several pairs of silk stockings with the price tags still attached, a pair of scissors, a couple of pocket-knives, one with a gold handle, three fountain-pens and a statuette of a naked woman in jade.

I pawed over this odd collection, and then as Cerf didn't volunteer any information I put the stuff back and returned the suitcase to the cupboard.

'That was what I wanted you to see,' he said in a flat voice. 'We may as well return to the other room.' When we were back in the study, and had sat down, he asked, 'Well, what do you make of it?'

'If it wasn't for the odd shoes and the spoons I wouldn't make anything of it,' I said. 'But as it is, it could be a kleptomaniac's hoard. I don't say it is, but it could be.'

‘Yes, that’s what it looks like to me,’ he said, and drew in a deep breath.

‘Unless, of course, it’s some kind of joke,’ I suggested.

‘It’s no joke.’ His voice went acid. ‘My wife and I have had numerous invitations to private houses since our marriage. Most of those articles come from people we know. The statuette in jade belongs to Mrs. Sydney Clegg. I remember seeing it in one of her rooms. The gold penknife is the property of Wilbur Rhyskind, the novelist. The spoons come from some of the restaurants we have visited. No, I’m afraid it’s no joke.’

‘Is this what you want me to work on?’

Before replying he took out a cigar, pierced and lit it with a hand that was noticeably unsteady.

‘Yes, I want you to work on it,’ he said at last.

There was a long pause.

‘This is a very unsettling and unpleasant discovery,’ he went on, frowning at his cigar. ‘The fact is I don’t know a great deal about my wife.’ The words came slowly and the harsh voice was deliberate and impersonal. ‘She was a mannequin at Simeon’s in San Francisco. I met her at a dress show.’ He paused to smooth down his already smooth hair.

‘We were married within three weeks of our meeting, about four months ago. The wedding was a quiet one: secret if you like. The news is only just beginning to leak out.’

‘Why was the wedding secret?’

He sat forward and stubbed out his cigar. It was an expressive movement and told me he was in the mood to crack skulls.

‘My daughter is a highly strung, neurotic sort of girl. Her mother was devoted to her. It was a great shock to Natalie when she died. Anita - that’s my present wife — and I decided for Natalie’s sake to have a quiet wedding.’

I chewed this over.

‘I take it your daughter and Mrs. Cerf don’t exactly get along together?’

‘No, they don’t get along together,’ he returned, and the corners of his mouth turned down. ‘But that’s neither here nor there. What I want to find out is whether my wife is a kleptomaniac.’

‘Have you asked Mrs. Cerf for an explanation?’

It was pretty obvious by the blank way he stared at me the idea hadn’t occurred to him.

‘Certainly not, and I don’t intend to. She’s not a particularly easy person to handle.’

‘This might be an attempt to discredit Mrs. Cerf. I don’t know if you have considered that angle. It would be easy to plant that stuff in her cupboard.’

He sat very still, looking at me.

‘And who do you suggest would do such a thing?’ he asked in a voice like the splintering of ice.

‘You would know that better than I. It’s my job to point out the angles. You and Mrs. Cerf and your daughter didn’t get on. It’s an angle.’

His face took on a deeper hue and an ugly glitter came into his eyes.

‘You’ll leave my daughter out of this!’ he said angrily.

‘I’ll do that, certainly,’ I said. ‘If that’s the way you feel about it.’ I gave him a moment or so to cool down, then asked, ‘What made you go to Mrs. Cerf’s cupboard in the first place? Were you expecting to find that suitcase or did you happen on it by accident?’

‘I believe my wife is being blackmailed,’ he said, steadying his voice with an effort. ‘I went through her things in the hope of finding some sort of proof and I came across the suitcase.’

‘What makes you think she’s being blackmailed?’

‘I give her a monthly allowance,’ he said as if each word stuck in his throat. ‘Far more than she needs. She isn’t used to money, and I took the precaution to arrange with her bank to send me a duplicate of her passbook. I felt I should keep a check on her expenditure, anyway for the first year or so of our married life. She has drawn out three very large sums of money during the past month.’

‘How large?’ I asked, thinking it couldn’t be much fun to be married to a man like this.

‘Five, ten and fifteen thousand dollars.’

‘Made out to anyone in particular?’

He shook his head.

‘Bearer cheques.’

‘And you think someone may have found out that Mrs. Cerf has stolen these articles and is blackmailing her?’

‘I think it’s possible.’ He scowled out of the window. ‘I want you to keep track of Mrs. Cerf when she goes shopping. I don’t want a scandal. If she has a tendency to pilfer I want you to see she isn’t arrested. I want her watched night and day, and her movements reported to me. I want to know who

she meets: particularly who she meets.'

'I can do that all right. I have a girl who's been trained for just this kind of work. Her name is Dana Lewis. She can be on the job this afternoon. Is that what you want?'

He said it was.

'You'll get an estimate for the work we intend to do by tomorrow morning. In the meantime I'll tell Miss Lewis to report to you at three o'clock this afternoon if that'll suit you. She had better not come here, had she? Where should she meet you?'

'At the Athletic Club. Tell her I'll be in the ladies' lounge.'

I got up.

'I'll do that. There's just one more thing,' I said as he pressed the bellpush. 'I take it you're anxious that no one, including Mrs. Cerf and your daughter, should know you are hiring me for this work.'

He stared at me.

'Of course. What do you mean?'

'When you telephoned my office this morning did you use the phone in this room?'

He nodded, frowning.

'And there are extensions in other parts of the house?'

'There are.'

'I'd be careful what you say on the phone, Mr. Cerf. I ran into your daughter on my way up here. She knew I was from Universal Services.'

A wary look came into his eyes.

'All right, Malloy. You get on with your job. I'll look after this end of it,' he said evenly.

'Just so long as you know,' I said and turned to the door as the butler came in.

I made the long trek down to the front door in silence, and when the butler gave me my hat and a bow I said, 'Is Mrs. Cerf around?'

He looked sharply at me, a frosty expression in his eyes.

'I believe she is in the swimming pool, sir,' he said distantly. 'Did you wish to see her?'

‘No. I was just wondering. Big place for three people to get lost in, isn’t it?’

He didn’t seem to think that called for an answer. He opened the door.

‘Good day, sir,’ he said.

‘So long,’ I said and set off along the esplanade wondering if Natalie Cerf was still sunning herself in the loggia. But she wasn’t. There was no sign of her.

As I was descending the broad flight of stone steps to the parking lot a girl in a bathing wrap came briskly along a path that led away to the back of the house. She was tall and ash-blond, and there was a sultry, don’t-give-a-damn expression on her face that had too much character to be labelled pretty. At a guess she was twenty-seven or thirty, not more, and she had beautiful, wide-set grey eyes.

I looked at her and she looked at me. A half-smile came to her full red lips, but I wasn’t sure if she were smiling at me or at something she was thinking about: a difficult kind of smile to classify.

As she ran up the steps towards me she let her wrap swing open. She had a shape under that wrap to set a man crazy, and the two emerald-green handkerchiefs that served as a sun-suit were just a shade too small for the job.

She went past me, and I pivoted around on my heels.

Halfway along the esplanade she looked back over her shoulder, raised pencilled eyebrows and smiled. There was no mistake about the smile this time.

I was still standing there, pointing like a gun dog, when she turned the corner of the terrace and I lost sight of her.

III

The offices of Universal Services occupied two rooms on the tenth floor of Orchid Buildings, the biggest of all the palatial business blocks in the city. At the back of Orchid Buildings runs a narrow alley that is used primarily as a parking lot for the cars belonging to the executives and their various staffs working in the building, and at the far end of the alley is Finnegan’s Bar.

After I had talked over the Cerf assignment with Paula, I went across to the bar, and as I expected, found Dana Lewis with Ed Benny and Jack Kerman grouped around a table in one of the alcoves.

Dana, Benny, Kerman and I worked as a team. I handled the administrative side of a job while they did the legwork.

‘Hello, Vic,’ Dana said, patting a chair beside her.

‘Come and sit down. Where have you been all the morning?’

She was a nice-looking kid, well put together, and smart.

‘I have a job for you,’ I said, sitting down. ‘Hi, boys!’ I went on to the other two. ‘You’ll be in on this if it works out the way I think it will, so take your brains out of pickle and show some intelligence.’

‘Listen, kiss of death,’ Benny said, helping himself to a slug of Irish, ‘We were working last night so lay off us will you?’

‘One of those jobs Sourpuss Bensinger keeps up her girdle specially for us,’ Kerman said with a grimace. ‘We had to escort a couple of old mares to the Casino. And when I say old, they made Rip Van Winkle’s mother look like Margaret O’Brien. Can you imagine?’

Kerman was tall and dapper; dark, lazy looking and distinctly handsome. He had a broad streak of white in his thick black hair and a Clark Gable moustache. Benny was just the opposite. He was short and thickset, and his red face looked as if it were fashioned out of rubber. He seemed to pride himself on dressing like a scarecrow, and was the most untidy-looking guy I have ever seen.

But they were both good operators, and we got along fine together in spite of a lot of kidding.

‘Never mind these two,’ Dana broke in impatiently. ‘They’re a couple of no-good rats. They wanted to shoot craps for my frillies and the dice was loaded. How’s that for meanness?’

‘Aw, forget it,’ Benny said, giving her a shove that nearly sent her off her chair. ‘I don’t believe you wear frillies anyway.’

‘That’s no way to treat a lady,’ I said severely.

‘I treat her the way I treat my sister,’ Benny said, putting a large hand on top of Dana’s cute little hat and pushing it over her nose. ‘Don’t I, pally?’

Dana promptly kicked his shin, and as he jumped up wrathfully, Kerman grabbed him by the throat and threw him on the floor where they began to wrestle furiously, upsetting the table and smashing the glasses. I just managed to save the whisky and get myself out of range as Dana, with a whoop of excitement, threw herself on Herman’s back and began to tug at his hair.

No one else in the bar room took any notice. These three were always horsing around. After a while they got tired of rolling about on the floor, and giggling breathlessly they came back to the table and sat down.

‘I’ve broken my suspender,’ Dana complained, examining the damage. ‘I wish you two hogs would learn to behave like gentlemen. Every time I come out with you I land up on the floor.’

Kerman ran a comb through his hair while Benny peered under the table.

‘She does wear suspenders!’ he reported excitedly. ‘I thought she kept her socks up with glue.’

‘Will you three pipe down?’ I pleaded. ‘I have business to talk about.’

Dana hit Benny over the head with a rolled newspaper.

‘Keep your eyes to yourself or I’ll slit your guzzle!’ she said fiercely.

‘Miss Lewis!’ Benny said, shocked. ‘What a way to talk!’

I rapped on the table.

‘If you don’t listen to me . . . ‘ I began threateningly.

‘All right, darling,’ Dana said. ‘Of course we’ll listen. What’s the job?’

I told her.

‘I want you to go over and meet Cerf at the Athletic Club at three this afternoon. Keep your eyes open. There’s a chance the daughter’s mixed up in this. Anyway, stick close to Mrs. Cerf. If she does lift anything in a shop you’ve got to cover her. I want this job handled nice and smooth.’

‘What’s this Cerf frail like to look at?’ Benny asked, pushing the whisky over to me.

‘Lush,’ I said, and made curves with my hands. ‘All hills and valleys. Very, very lush indeed.’

‘Are we in this?’ Kerman asked with sudden interest.

‘We’d better help Dana, hadn’t we? You know how dumb she can be.’

Dana pushed back her chair and stood up.

‘But not so dumb as you’d like me to be,’ she said pertly.

‘Well, I guess I’ll run along. Don’t let these two degenerates drink too much, Vic,’ and she whisked her tail out of reach as Benny took a slap at it.

‘Degenerates!’ Kerman said indignantly as she left the bar. ‘After all we’ve done for that woman. Hey! Leave some of that whisky for me, you drunken rat!’ he went on excitedly as Benny poured himself another slug. ‘I have a half-share in that bottle I’ll have you know.’

‘You two guys will follow up the blackmail angle,’ I said, grabbing the whisky and putting the cork in. ‘Stick around until Dana gets something to work on. And listen, you’d better sober up. I have a job for you this afternoon. Some old guy wants to catch marlin. It’s an easy job, and besides the old guy

has a nice long beard. If you get bored you can always set fire to it.'

'Old guy, huh?' Benny said in disgust. 'Why not a dame? Why not the lush Mrs. Cerf? Here we have the perfect setup for a breakdown miles out at sea, and it has to be an old guy with a beard.'

'Maybe you'll catch a mermaid; then you can throw the old guy overboard and have your breakdown after all,' I said encouragingly.

There was a long, ominous silence.

'You know what?' Benny said to Kerman. 'I love this guy, the way a fly loves Flit.'

IV

On the evening of the second day after my interview with Jay Franklin Cerf I sat on the verandah of my four-room beach cabin, keeping a highball company and reread Dana's report I had picked up at the office on my way home.

It was a concise job, and contained several points of interest. So far, Dana reported, Anita Cerf had shown no kleptomaniac tendencies. She had gone shopping in the morning, and there had been nothing suspicious in her behaviour. All purchases she had made had either been paid for or charged account. But that meant nothing as kleptomaniacs very often have their impulses in cycles, and it might take a little time to catch her red-handed.

What did mean something was the discovery that Anita was secretly meeting a guy named George Barclay, and had been seen by Dana with him twice in two days. By their attitude to each other they were obviously on an intimate footing, and both of them had taken care not to be seen together on the streets.

They had met at a lobster-bar a couple of miles outside the city's limits, and again the next day, for lunch at a Greek restaurant away from the swank district where Cerf or Anita's friends would be unlikely to run into them.

Dana had got Barclay's name and address from his car's registration card. He lived on Wiltshire Avenue in a small chalet-style house set in its own grounds. He was the playboy type, looked and dressed like a film star, ran a Chrysler convertible and seemed to have plenty of money. He was lead number one.

Lead number two was Ralph Bannister, the owner of a swank nightclub, L'Etoile, out at Fairview. Anita had gone out there around six o'clock the previous evening and Dana had overheard her asking the commissionaire who guarded the entrance if she could talk to Bannister on urgent business. She

had been admitted, and had remained in the club the best part of an hour, then had driven back to the Santa Rosa Estate in time for dinner.

I knew Bannister by reputation, although I had never met him. He was a smart crook who had made a big success of the nightclub, catering for millionaires and running a couple of roulette wheels that must have cost him a lot of money in police protection.

I was deciding to turn Benny and Kerman loose on these two leads when I saw the headlights of a car coming slowly along the beach road. The time was ten-fifteen, and it was a hot night, and quiet. I wasn't expecting visitors, and I thought the car would go on past, but it didn't. It pulled up outside the wooden gate and the headlights went out.

It was too dark out there to see much. The car looked as big as a battleship, but I couldn't see the driver. I slipped Dana's report into my pocket and waited. I thought someone had got the wrong house.

The latch of the gate clicked up and I could just make out a shadowy figure that looked like a woman. The sitting room light was on and the verandah doors open, but not much light spilled into the garden.

It wasn't until she was right on top of me that I saw my visitor was Anita Cerf. She came slowly up the three wooden steps that led to the verandah, her full red lips parted in that half-smile that had fooled me before. She was wearing a flame-coloured evening dress, cut low to show plenty of cleavage, and an impressive collar of diamonds encircled her throat like a ribbon of fire. There was something in the way she looked at me that had that thing: it came across like an invisible ray and was strong enough to lean against.

'Hello,' she said in a low, husky voice. 'Where's everyone, or are you alone?'

I was on my feet now, just a little rattled, as she was the last person I expected to see. I looked past her, wondering if Dana Lewis was out there, watching, and she was quick to read my thoughts.

'It's all right,' she said. 'I gave Miss Sherlock the slip,' and before I could stop her she walked into the sitting room and sat in one of the easy chairs. I followed her in, and to be on the safe side, pulled the curtains across the windows.

Up to now I hadn't opened my mouth. I was too busy trying to make up my mind how to handle this visit to bother to be polite. There would be trouble if Cerf heard about it. She knew that, of course; that was why she had come out here alone, and when she knew I would be alone.

'What do you want, Mrs. Cerf?' I asked, walking around her chair and standing before her.

We looked at each other. There was a jeering expression in her wide grey eyes.

'I don't like being spied on,' she said. 'I want to know why.'

I was surprised she had spotted Dana, who was as near a thing to the invisible woman when on a job as makes no difference. But there's always the risk when only one operator is put on the job, and I blamed myself for not teaming Benny up with Dana.

'That's something you'll have to ask Mr. Cerf,' I said, 'and incidentally, speaking of Mr. Cerf, he wouldn't approve of you coming here.'

She laughed. She had good, strong, white teeth and wasn't ashamed of showing them.

'Oh, there are lots and lots of things Mr. Cerf doesn't approve of,' she said lightly. 'You have no idea how many. One more won't make any difference. May I have a cigarette, please?'

I gave her a Lucky Strike and my lighter, and while she was tapping the cigarette on her scarlet thumbnail I said, 'I wasn't expecting visitors. I'm busy.'

'Then let's be quick,' she said, lighting her cigarette. 'Why is this woman spying on me?'

'You'll still have to ask Mr. Cerf.'

'You're not being very polite, are you? I thought you would be pleased to see me. Most men are. Could I have a drink, do you think?'

I went over to the row of bottles that stood on a table against the wall. While I fixed a couple of highballs the silence became thick enough to slice up with a hacksaw.

As I handed her the drink she smiled up at me. Being on the receiving end of that smile was like stepping on a live cable.

'Thank you,' she said. Her long spiked eyelashes flickered. 'There's no one here, is there?'

'That's right. How did you run me to earth?'

'Oh, that wasn't very difficult. I saw your car and found it belonged to Universal Services. The butler told me your name. I turned up the telephone book and here I am.'

'No wonder private detectives go out of business.'

'Are you a private detective?'

'No, nothing like that.'

'What exactly is Universal Services?'

'An organization that undertakes any conceivable or inconceivable job that happens along, providing it is legal and ethical.'

‘And spying on a woman is ethical?’

‘That depends on the woman, Mrs. Cerf.’

‘And my husband has asked you to spy on me, is that it?’

‘Is it? I don’t remember saying anything like that.’

She drank some of the highball, put down the glass and stared at me. I don’t know if she found my face fascinating or if she were trying to hypnotize me, but she was certainly doing a lot of staring.

‘Why is this woman following me about?’

This seemed to be where we had come in so I give her the same answer.

‘Mr. Cerf will tell you if he wants you to know.’

She lifted her shoulders a little impatiently and looked around the room. It wasn’t anything a millionaire’s wife would get excited about. Tony, my Filipino boy, kept it cleaner than a pigsty, but not much. The furniture was no great shakes, and that went for the paintwork and carpet too. The only pictures on the walls were Vargas’s pinups I had ripped out of Esquire from time to time, but I had to live in the joint and it was all right with me.

‘It can’t be a very paying job, can it?’ she asked.

‘You mean my job?’ I said, turning my glass around in my hand so I could admire the amber liquor from all angles.

‘Yes. You don’t make much money, do you? I was judging by this room.’

I made believe to give the matter serious attention.

‘Well, I don’t know,’ I said at last. ‘It depends on what you call much money. I can’t afford to wear diamonds, but I reckon I make a bit more than a mannequin would make, and I have a lot of fun.’

That hit her where it hurt. Her mouth tightened and a faint flush rose to her face.

‘Meaning you don’t have to marry money to get along, is that it?’ she asked, her eyes snapping.

‘That would be the general idea.’

‘But a thousand dollars would be useful to you, wouldn’t it?’

She was lovely to look at, and too dangerous to be alone with, and I had had all I wanted from the Cerfs for the time being. I stood up.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs. Cerf, but I’m not in the market. I have my job to think of. It may not be much, but oddly enough I like it. I don’t sell my clients out. It wouldn’t do. One of these days you might want me to help you. You wouldn’t like me to sell you out, would you?’

She drew in a deep breath, but after a struggle she managed to switch on the smile again.

‘You’re quite right,’ she said. ‘Putting it that way I suppose I shouldn’t have come here, but no one likes to be followed about as if one were a criminal.’

Before I could think of anything to say to that one, she went on brightly, ‘That was a lovely highball. Could I have another?’

While I was mixing the drink she got up and walked over to what I call my casting couch. It was a big, comfortable settee I had bought at an auction sale, thinking it might come in handy, and over a period of years, it had, from time to time, come in very handy indeed. She sat down and swung up her legs, and in doing so managed to get her long, full skirt caught up. From where I was standing I could see one long, silk-clad leg up to her knee.

I carried the drink over to her.

‘Your skirt’s up around your neck,’ I said and pointed. ‘It’s your affair, of course, but you don’t want to catch cold.’

She flicked her skirt into place. If her eyes had had teeth they would have bitten me.

‘I don’t want to hurry you, Mrs. Cerf,’ I went on, handing her the drink, ‘but I have a lot of work to do before I turn in.’

‘There’s time for work and time for play,’ she said. ‘Don’t you ever play?’

‘Sure, but not with the wives of clients. You may not believe it, but I’m not all that fond of sudden death.’

‘He doesn’t care a fig for me,’ she said, staring into the glass, ‘and I don’t care a fig for him.’ She looked up suddenly, and there it was in her eyes as plain as a poster on a wall. ‘But I like you. Come and sit down,’ and she patted the settee.

I nearly did.

‘Not tonight,’ I said. ‘I have work to do. It’s time you went home.’

She was a trier. I’ll say that for her. The smile was just as inviting as she put the glass down and stood up. She came close and I could smell her perfume.

‘I don’t have to go yet,’ she said, and put her hand lightly on my arm. ‘I could stay a little while if you want me to.’

All I had to do was to step up and take her in my arms. It was the kind of push over you dream about if you have those kind of dreams, and the kind of girl too.

I gave her hand a sympathetic little pat. I was as sorry for her as I was for myself.

‘If you did stay I still wouldn’t tell you what you want to know. Ask Cerf. Maybe he’ll tell you. I’m off duty now, and I like to get away from my clients. Be a nice girl and go home.’

She still smiled, but her eyes had hardened.

‘Change your mind,’ she said, and slipped her arms round my neck. Before I could stop her, and I didn’t try very hard, she was kissing me. Her lips were cool and experienced, and we stood like that maybe for a couple of seconds as a sort of workout. As I saw it, the idea was to push her away at the last moment to show her what a strong-willed, well-controlled guy she had to deal with, only somehow something went wrong: a cog slipped and I forgot to push her away. I found myself kissing her mouth, hard, and bending her back the way they do on the movies, with my hand supporting the small of her back.

She knew how to kiss all right, and her arms felt cool against my neck, and she gave a faint, sighing little moan that got me going the way nothing else would have got me going.

We were down on the couch now and I could feel her breath beating against the back of my throat and her hand inside my shirt, touching my chest. But just before I was going down for the third time I took a look at her and she wasn’t expecting it. The cold, calculated expression in those wide grey eyes was like a smack in the face. I jerked away from her, stood up, and tried to get my breathing under control. We looked at each other for a long minute.

‘We must try that again when your husband has paid me off,’ I said in a voice that sounded like I had run a couple of miles uphill. ‘I’m a lot more enthusiastic when there are no strings tied to it. Let me see you to your car.’

She shifted her eyes from my face to the carpet, the half-smile flickered on, and her hands gripped her evening bag so tightly her knuckles showed white. She sat like that for perhaps ten seconds, then she got up.

‘All right,’ she said suddenly. ‘If he wants a divorce he can have it, but only on my terms, and it’ll cost him plenty. You can tell him it’s no use having me watched. I won’t be caught that easily, and you can tell him I only married him for what I could get out of him, and if I’d known he was going to be such a goddamn awful bore even his money wouldn’t have bought me.’ She didn’t raise her voice, and her anger and disappointment was nicely controlled. ‘You can tell him if he wants to watch someone he’d better start spying on that sour-faced bitch of a daughter of his. He’ll get a surprise.’ She laughed suddenly. ‘And as for you - you should warm up a little. You don’t know what you’re missing,’ and still laughing she went across the room, jerked back the curtains and took herself and her diamonds down the wooden steps into the darkness beyond.

V

The telephone bell, ringing like an hysterical fire alarm brought me out of a heavy sleep with a start that nearly capsized the bed.

I groped for the light switch, turned it on, and as I grabbed at the receiver I looked at my bedside clock. It was four minutes past three.

‘Is that you, Malloy?’ a voice barked in my ear. This is Mifflin, police headquarters. Sorry to wake you, but a guy’s just brought in a handbag that belongs to Dana Lewis. She’s one of your operators, isn’t she?’

‘You didn’t wake me up to tell me that, did you?’ I yelled.

‘Take it easy. We’ve called Miss Lewis but can’t get an answer. Besides, there’s something wrong. There are bloodstains on the sand near where the bag was found. At least that’s what the guy says. I’m going out there right away. I thought maybe you’d want to go with me.’

I woke up then.

‘Where was it found?’

‘On the sand dunes about a mile from your joint. I’ll be over in ten minutes, and I’ll pick you up.’

‘Right,’ I said, slammed down the receiver back on its cradle and scrambled out of bed.

By the time I had dressed I heard a car pull up outside the cabin. I snapped off the lights and ran down to the gate.

Mifflin and two cops in uniform were waiting for me in a big radio car.

Mifflin was a short stocky guy with a flat, red battered face and a nose like a lump of putty. He was a good, tough cop, and we had worked together off and on for some time. I liked him and he didn’t exactly hate me, and whenever we could we helped each other. He opened the car door, and as soon as I was in, the driver sent the car jolting along the beach road.

‘It may be a false alarm,’ he said as I settled beside him, ‘but I thought you would want to be in on it. Maybe the guy’s talking through the back of his neck about bloodstains, but he seemed pretty definite about it.’

‘What was he doing out there at this hour?’

‘Snooping around. He’s quite a character in these parts. A guy named Owen Leadbetter. He’s a bit queer in the head. One of these nuts who spy on courting couples and makes out he’s bird watching. But he’s harmless enough. We know him well. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.’

I grunted. I wasn’t interested in flies.

‘Was Miss Lewis on a job?’ Mifflin asked.

‘Not to my knowledge,’ I said cautiously.

When I told Cerf I guaranteed secrecy I wasn’t fooling. I had made it a rule, no matter what happened, never to mention a client’s name without his permission.

‘We’re about there,’ the driver said suddenly. ‘He said the first line of sand dunes, didn’t lie?’

‘That’s right. Put on the searchlight, Jack, so we can see what we’re doing.’

The small but powerful beam of the auxiliary spotlight went on and lit up the stretch of sand dunes before us. It was a lonely, forlorn spot. Coarse, scrubby bushes grew out of the sand in big clumps. To our right, and in the distance, we could hear the sea beating on the reef, and there was a chilly wind that whipped up the sand every now and then into scurrying whirls.

We got out of the car.

‘You stick right here, Jack,’ Mifflin said to the driver. ‘If I shout, turn the light on me.’ He handed me a flashlight.

‘We’ll keep together. And you, Harry, you start looking to the right. We’ll go to the left.’

‘Why didn’t you bring Leadbetter with you?’ I asked as we tramped over the loose sand. ‘It would have saved time.’

‘I didn’t want to be bothered with him. You have no idea how that guy talks once he lets his clutch in. He’s marked the spot with a pile of stones. It shouldn’t be hard to find.’

It wasn’t. We found the pile of stones about a couple of hundred yards from the car.

Mifflin shouted to the driver, who focused the searchlight on the spot. We stood a little to one side and examined the ground. The sand had been trampled flat in places, but was too loose to hold footprints. Near the pile of stones was a patch of red. It looked like blood, and the flies seemed to like it and it gave me a hollow feeling. Dana was a fine kid. She and I had been pals for some time.

‘Looks as if someone’s been around,’ Mifflin said, pushing his hat to the back of his head. ‘The stuff’s no good for prints. That’s blood, Vic.’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

The other policeman, Harry, came over.

‘If she’s anywhere around she’ll be in there,’ he said, pointing with his nightstick to a large clump of shrubs.

‘There’s been a trail to that clump, but it’s been smoothed over.’

‘Let’s have a look,’ Mifflin said.

I stayed right where I was while the other two went across the sand and began to search among the shrubs. My mind was a blank as I watched their bright flashlight beams probing among the thick undergrowth.

Both of them suddenly stopped and I saw them bend down. I took out a cigarette, put it between my dry lips but forgot to light it. They remained bending for a minute or so.

It seemed like a year to me. Then Mifflin straightened.

‘Hey, Vic,’ he called. His voice was sharp. ‘We’ve found her.’

I threw away the unlighted cigarette and walked stiff-legged across the sand and joined them.

In the hard glare of their flashlights she looked like a doll.

She lay on her back, sand in her hair and eyes and mouth.

She was as naked as the back of my hand, and the front of her skull was smashed in. Her hands were like claws, stiff in death, held before her face. From the look of her scratched, sand-smeared body she had been dragged along face down by her feet and dumped there the way you would dump a sack of garbage, and with as much feeling.

The stark horror on her face turned me cold.

chapter two



I

The grey dawn light was showing above the line of skyscrapers as I came out of Police Headquarters. It was five-fifty-five, and I felt low enough to walk under a duck's tail.

While the prowl boys were bringing Dana in, I had put through a call to Paula. She had asked me to go over to her place as soon as I was through with the police, and I said I would. I could tell by the sound of her voice how shocked she was, but neither of us said much. We were both aware we were talking through the police exchange board and pretty sharp ears were certain to be listening in to what we were saying.

Mifflin had asked a lot of questions, but without telling him about Cerf I couldn't be of any help, and I didn't tell him about Cerf. I said I had no idea why Dana had been shot and that she wasn't working on a job for me. He went over the ground again and again, but it didn't get him anywhere.

Finally he said he would have to talk to Brandon, Captain of Police, when he came in, and that I would hear from them during the morning. I said I'd be around and made tracks for the door. He seemed reluctant to let me go, but he hadn't any reason to keep me there.

The policeman guarding the entrance scowled at me as I walked down the steps. There was nothing personal about it.

The cops of Orchid City were picked for their meanness. I scowled right back at him and went on to the end of the street, where I picked up a taxi to take me to Paula's apartment on Park Boulevard.

I was surprised to find her dressed, and looking as neat as a new pin when she opened the front door.

'Come on in,' she said. 'I have coffee for you. I bet you need it.'

Paula was a tall, dark lovely with cold, steady brown eyes and a mouth as business-like and as hard as a rattrap. She was quick on the uptake, unruffled and easy to work with, and it says a lot for her force of character that during the years we had worked together I had never made a pass at her, although once or twice I had been tempted. Maybe it was because we had worked together during the war. She had been a cypher officer attached to the O.S.S. where I worked with the cloak-and-dagger boys. It was she who had encouraged me to launch Universal Services and had lent me money to tide me over the first six months. We had taken the rough with the smooth together for about five years. We had seen each other at our best and worst. It got so I didn't look on her as a girl any more, not that she wasn't attractive, she was, but we knew too much about each other to encourage a romance, and she had a way of nipping that sort of thing in the bud with a sarcastic remark that I or any other guy wouldn't risk running into a second time. But for all that, we got along fine together.

'Never mind the coffee,' I said. My nerves were still jangling from the shock of finding Dana. 'I want you to go over to Dana's apartment. She may have left duplicate of her reports there. I'm off to see Cerf.'

'Take it easy, Vic,' she said calmly. 'That's all been taken care of. I'm just back from seeing Cerf, and Benny's over at Dana's place now.'

'I might have known you would have got going,' I said, and sat down. 'So you went to see Cerf. Was he up?'

'No, but he soon got up,' she said, pouring a large cup of black coffee. She went over to the sideboard and fetched a decanter of brandy and floated a spoonful of the liquor on the coffee. That was one of her fads. She maintained black coffee was a better stimulant than whisky. 'This is a dreadful thing, Vic. That poor kid....'

'Yeah,' I said. 'What did Cerf say?'

'He's acting like a crazy man. You didn't tell the police Dana was working for him?'

'No. I stalled Mifflin, but I don't know how long it'll be before he finds out. Mifflin's nobody's fool. Cerf's holding us to our guarantee, of course?'

'Is he not!' Paula said, pouring a second cup of coffee. 'If we tell the police Cerf hired us to watch his wife we might just as well go out of business.' She went through the brandy ritual and came over to sit opposite me. 'He swears he'll deny anything we say, and if we do talk he threatens to sue us for libel.'

'He doesn't care a damn that we're heading for an accessory rap, I suppose?'

'Of course he doesn't.'

'Well, we've given him the guarantee so we can't go back on it. I don't like it, Paula. That rule wasn't intended to cover murder.'

‘Any ideas why she was killed?’

‘Nothing solid. Maybe she came upon this guy who’s blackmailing Anita and he silenced her.’

‘How was she killed?’

‘Shot through the head with a .45 at about fifteen yards range by someone who could shoot. What beats me is why he took her clothes.’ I finished the coffee, stood up and began to pace up and down. ‘We’ve got to find this killer, Paula.’

‘You mean we’re handling this on our own?’

‘You bet we are. From now on we’re not taking any other job until we’ve got this guy. When we’ve found him we’ll have to work out how we’re going to fix him without involving Cerf.’

‘Couldn’t we take Mifflin into our confidence?’ Paula asked. ‘You get on well with him. He might be prepared to keep Cerf under cover.’

‘Not a hope. He would have to report to Brandon, and you know how Brandon loves us. No. We can’t tell the police anything. They’d want to interview Mrs. Cerf. That’s something Cerf wouldn’t stand for. If he says he’ll swear he didn’t call us in, that’s what he’ll do. We have no proof that he did call us in. He hasn’t paid our fee yet, and by the look of it, he won’t. His first contact with us was by phone. All we’d get from him would be a libel suit that’d break our backs.’

‘I don’t like it, Vic. If the police find the killer and he talks we’re going to be chopped.’

‘Yeah, but I don’t see how they will find him. They have nothing to work on. We hold all the clues and that’s why we’ve got to clear up the mess. And besides we have a personal interest in this killing. No one’s going to shoot one of my operators and get away with it.’

‘What’s the first move then?’

‘I’m going to talk to Mrs. Cerf right away.’

Paula shook her head.

‘It’s not going to be that easy. She’s skipped.’

I stared at her, the flame of my lighter hovering before my cigarette.

‘She has?’

‘I asked to see her, but Cerf refused. He said he was arranging for her to leave town right away. She’s gone by now.’

‘We’ll have to find her. She knows the killer.’

‘That’s what I told Cerf. He said she knew nothing, and if we interfered with her or tried to find her we’d be answerable to him.’

‘We’ll find her all right,’ I said quietly.

‘Don’t be too sure the blackmailer is the killer, Vic,’ Paula said. ‘We have only Cerf’s word for it there is a blackmailer. She may be helping a lover.’

‘I’ll have a word with the daughter. She hasn’t any time for Anita and might be glad to talk.’

‘That’s an idea. Who else is there to work on?’

‘There’s the guy who found the handbag: Owen Leadbetter. I don’t know whether to let the police milk him and get the information from Mifflin or have a go at him myself. If Mifflin finds out we’re making inquiries he might smell a rat. Leadbetter might give us away.’

‘You’ll probably stop his mouth if you pay him,’ Paula said. To her way of thinking money could do anything.

‘Yeah. Well, I’ll try him. Then there’s this guy Barclay, been around with Anita, and according to Dana’s report they were acting like lovers. I’ll dig into his background. He may be our man for all I know.’

‘If there is a blackmailer at the bottom of this,’ Paula said, ‘I’d pick Bannister. He’s touched everything crooked since he’s been here. Why did Mrs. Cerf call on him the night before last, and what was her urgent business? If we could find that out we might get places.’

‘I’ll turn Benny on to Bannister and Kerman on to Anita,’ I said, lighting another cigarette. ‘I’ll get Kerman to dig into Anita’s background. We may turn something up to help us. I’ll go along and have a talk with Natalie Cerf.’

‘You’ll have to work fast, Vic,’ Paula said. She was quiet and calm. It took a lot to rattle her. ‘If the police find the killer before we do...’ She pulled a face.

The front-door bell rang sharply, making us both jump.

‘That’s probably the cops,’ I said, getting to my feet.

‘More likely Benny,’ Paula returned. ‘I told him to come here as soon as he was through looking Dana’s apartment over.’

She went to the front door and returned a moment later with Benny, whose usual humorous face was hard and set.

‘Can you beat it, Vic?’ he said, closing the door. ‘We’ve got to find the lug who killed her. It’s knocked me. One of the nicest kids I’ve ever worked with.’

‘Did you find anything to hook Cerf up with the killing?’ I broke in sharply.

Benny controlled his feelings.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I found her report book and the duplicates of her last report. And something else. I don’t know what to make of it. It can’t be hers. I found it under her mattress,’ and he fished out Anita Cerf’s diamond necklace from his pocket and dangled it before us.

II

Benny and I went over to Finnegan’s bar for breakfast. Although it was only a few minutes after seven-thirty, Kerman was already there, impatiently awaiting us.

As we sat down at the table, Finnegan, a great lump of a man, his face battered and scarred from innumerable fights in his logging-camp days, came out from behind the bar and joined us.

‘Bad business, Mr. Malloy,’ he said, leaning over to wipe the tabletop. ‘I’ve only just seen the paper. We’ll miss her. You got any idea who did it?’

‘No, Pat, but we’re going to find out,’ I said. ‘Let’s have some ham and eggs and a lot of coffee. We have work to do.’

‘Sure,’ he said. His shoulder muscles bulged under his grey flannel shirt, straining the seams. ‘If there’s anything I can do...’

‘Thanks. If there is I’ll let you know.’

When he had gone into the kitchen, Kerman said impatiently, ‘What are you going to do?’

‘The three of us are going to work on this, Jack. It’s got to be played smooth and fast, and Cerf’s to be left out of it.’

‘If Brandon catches up with us it’ll be nice,’ Kerman said, shaking his head. ‘I knew this guarantee of secrecy would land us in trouble one of these days. What do we do?’

‘We have enough leads to keep us busy for a day or so. I don’t think Mifflin has a thing to work on, but he’s a lucky cop and may turn up something. We’ll have to move fast. There are a lot of odd angles to this business. The oddest is why Anita’s necklace was under Dana’s mattress.’

‘Under her mattress?’ Kerman repeated, looking over at Benny.

‘Yeah,’ Benny said. ‘I was poking around. The bed looked disturbed and I lifted up the mattress and there was the necklace. Vic says it belongs to the Cerf frail.’

‘Anita called on me last night and she was wearing it,’ I said, and went on to tell them of Anita’s visit. ‘I reckon the necklace is worth twenty grand, if not more. Ed’s going to work on that angle. We’ve got to find out how it got into Dana’s room.’ I broke off as Finnegan came over with plates of ham and eggs.

‘I’d like to send flowers, Mr. Malloy,’ he said as he set the places before us. ‘You’ll tip me the time of the funeral, won’t you?’

Thinking of Dana in terms of a funeral got me, but I knew he meant well. I said I’d tell him and wished he would go away. He began to say something else but Benny gave him a friendly shove and told him to get the hell out of it.

‘I know how you gentlemen feel,’ Finnegan said dolefully.

‘I feel that way myself. She was a fine girl.’ And he went back to the bar where he stood watching us, shaking his head from time to time and getting on our nerves.

‘I want you to check on Dana’s movements,’ I said to Benny, turning my back on Finnegan so I couldn’t see him.

‘Right up to the time she was shot. Have a word with the commissionaire at L’Etoile. He may have seen her, but don’t let on anything about Mrs. Cerf. Any idea how Dana was dressed?’

‘I checked her wardrobe while I was there,’ Benny said with his mouth full. ‘That blue coat and skirt thing she was always wearing wasn’t in the cupboard. I guess she must have had that on.’

Kerman poured himself out a cup of coffee, pushed the pot over to me.

‘What have you done with the diamonds?’ he asked.

‘I’ve locked them in the office safe for the moment. I’m going to use them as a lever to make Cerf talk. I’m seeing him this morning.’

‘What do you want me to do, Vic?’

‘Get after Leadbetter. According to Mifflin the guy’s a nut: a Peeping Tom. He may have seen more than he’s told the police. Have a go at him. If you think a little folding money will loosen him up, go ahead. I don’t care what this costs. I want results.’

‘Right,’ Kerman said. ‘I’ll see the guy, but I can’t help feeling there’s something wrong with this setup.’ He pushed his empty plate aside and lit a cigarette. ‘Up to now this Cerf frail has been blackmailed for thirty thousand bucks. That’s a lot of money, and all because she’s light-fingered. But

if we accept that, and maybe if a dame can't control her fingers she would be willing to pay that amount of dough to keep it quiet, why did the blackmailer kill Dana?'

'Maybe he was preparing for a big take. He started off asking for five thousand, then raised the ante to ten and then fifteen. Maybe he was going to shake Anita down for some real money when Dana happened along.'

'But why kill her?' Kerman repeated, frowning. 'Dana couldn't interfere with him unless she gave Anita away. There's no point in killing her. That's what foxes me.'

'Yeah,' I said, suddenly thoughtful. 'That's right. I think you've got something there, Jack.' I pushed back my chair, took one of Kerman's cigarettes and lit it.' Maybe there's another angle to it. Look, if Barclay and Anita were lovers and Dana found out about them while checking up on the blackmail setup, Barclay might have silenced her so she shouldn't give them away. That might make sense.'

'But it doesn't,' Kerman said. 'Why kill her? This guy Barclay has money, hasn't he? If they meant business all Anita had to do was to get Cerf to divorce her and marry Barclay. Barclay doesn't have to shoot Dana for that.'

'Yeah,' I said and stared at him, frowning.

'We're jumping to conclusions,' Kerman went on. 'Because Dana was watching Anita and is suddenly found murdered we assume she was shot because of something she found out in connection with Anita. The killing may have had nothing to do with the Cerfs at all.'

'For God's sake!' I exclaimed. 'I can't believe that. Why else should she be murdered? She hadn't an enemy in the world. Why was she out on those dunes unless she was watching Anita?'

'What makes you so sure Anita was out there?' Benny asked.

'I told you. She came to see me around ten-thirty. Dana was found a mile from my place. My idea is Anita went to that spot after seeing me to meet the blackmailer. I think Dana was watching her although Anita was confident she had given her the slip. You know how Dana worked. She wasn't easily shaken off. I think she followed Anita to her rendezvous and ran into the blackmailer who lost his head and shot her.'

'Has it occurred to you that Anita might have shot her?'

Kerman asked.

I nodded.

'Yeah, but I don't favour the idea. A woman doesn't like a gun as big as a .45. I don't think Anita could have handled it, and besides, she's not the killer type.'

Kerman blew out his cheeks, shook his head and shrugged.

‘Well, I haven’t seen her,’ he said. ‘All right, what else have we got? What was Dana doing with the necklace? We haven’t got around to that yet. Any ideas?’

‘Yes, but it’s only an idea. Suppose that necklace was planted in Dana’s room? Suppose someone wanted the police to know Anita had something to do with Dana’s death? Wouldn’t that be a way of doing it? The necklace could be easily traced. If Ed hadn’t found it the police would have, and they’d’ve been on to Anita fast enough as soon as they had traced it to her.’

‘That’s an idea. Natalie Cerf, huh?’

‘Maybe. It’s only an idea, but as soon as Benny told me he had found the necklace I thought of her. It smells of a plant, doesn’t it? Natalie hates Anita, and I can imagine it’d give her a bang to tie Anita to a murder rap.’

‘But she’s a cripple, isn’t she?’ Benny protested. ‘How could she get to Dana’s apartment? It’s on the fourth floor and there’s no elevator.’

‘I’m not saying she did it herself. Maybe she got someone to do it for her. It’s no more than an idea, but it’s worth thinking about. Find out, Ed, if anyone was seen entering Dana’s apartment between eleven and three last night. It can’t be before then because Anita was wearing the necklace when she called on me.’

‘If we can find that dame and persuade her to talk,’ Kerman said, ‘half our work’s done.’

I stood up.

‘I’ll have a crack at Cerf. In the meantime you see Leadbetter. He may have spotted Anita out there or even the killer. Ed, you know what to do. Get out to Dana’s apartment, but don’t start nosing around if the police are there. We’ll meet here for lunch and see how far we’ve got.’

We said so long to Finnegan, and then went across to the parking lot for our cars.

‘It’s early yet, Vic,’ Kerman said, consulting his wristwatch. ‘You’re not going to see Cerf now, are you?’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Paula had him out of bed at five this morning. He’ll be up and about. Besides, the less time I give him to get his second wind the easier he’ll be to handle. I’m going to sock into him this time. Paula hadn’t anything to hit him with. I have the necklace.’

‘Rather you than me,’ Benny said, getting into his vintage Ford. ‘Millionaires have a habit of hitting back. Give me a dame if I have to get tough with someone.’

‘Me too,’ Kerman said with feeling.

III

A guard lounged outside the main entrance of the Santa Rosa Estate. The big wrought-iron gates were closed, and it didn't look as if visitors would be welcomed this day.

The guard was a middle-sized youth, very dapper in his bottle green uniform and peak cap with a glossy black chinstrap which he held between his teeth and chewed at in a bored, meditative sort of way, like a cow ruminating on the cud.

He was very blond, and his eyes were almost colourless, either a grey or a blue, you could take your choice. There was a look of studied insolence and confidence on his pale, handsome face that I didn't like. He was around twenty-two, but experience that couldn't have been good for him had doubled his age. There was something about him that said he had kicked around a lot in his young life, touched bottom where the dirt was, and a lot of it still clung to him. He wasn't the kind of lad you'd expect to see playing ping-pong at the Y.M.C.A., or the type you'd introduce to your girlfriend unless you were there all the time with a shotgun within reach.

I stopped the car a couple of yards from him and let him look me over. His pale eyes missed nothing. By the way his top lip curled off his small teeth he didn't think much of what he saw.

I cut the engine and got out of the car.

'Can I drive in or do I have to walk?' I asked in a let's-get-together-and-be-friends tone of voice.

The sun glittered on his double row of chromium buttons.

His patent-leather gauntlets reflected patches of white cloud. His knee boots sparkled, and I could see part of my face in the neat, square toecaps: a very bright boy this; bright and as genuine as a five-dollar diamond.

'What's that again, Mac?' he said languidly. His voice sounded like a file biting on steel.

'I said do I drive in or do I walk,' I repeated.

He chewed his chinstrap thoughtfully, while his eyes ran over me.

'You don't do either,' he said, leaning up against the wall as if the night had been a long one and had kept him busy.

'You take it away, Mac: you and the heap.'

‘Not this morning,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘I have a little business to discuss with your boss. The name’s Malloy. Snap into it, sonny, and break the news to him. He’ll see me.’

He took off one of his gauntlets, undid the flap of his top right-hand pocket and pulled out a solid gold combined cigarette case and lighter. He selected a cigarette, lit it, stowed the case away and took a drag at the cigarette, letting the smoke roll down his thin, pinched nostrils. There was a faraway look in his pale eyes, and a dreamy kind of smile on his thin mouth.

‘There’s no one home,’ he said, eyeing the distant ocean as if he was surprised to find it still there. ‘Get in your heep, Mac, and fade.’

‘Important business,’ I said as if I hadn’t heard him. ‘Tell your boss it’s either me or the police: as important as that.’

That seemed to hold him for a moment. He flicked at his cigarette with a well-manicured thumbnail. Then as he didn’t seem to get any satisfaction from that, he tapped the ground thoughtfully with the toe of his elegant boot. But that didn’t get him anywhere either.

‘The old man left about an hour ago,’ he said at last.

‘Don’t ask me where he’s gone. I don’t know. Maybe he’s going on a trip. Now be a nice guy and fade. I like a little quiet in the morning.’

I had no reason not to believe him. Anyway I could tell that nothing short of a tank and machine-gun unit would persuade him to open the gate. I would be only wasting time to argue with him.

I got back into the car and trod on the starter. He watched me make a U-turn, then as I drove away he opened one of the gates, locked it behind ‘him and disappeared into the guardhouse.

I followed the long wall of the estate until I came to a corner, then I swung the wheel, drove a few yards down the lane that led along the side of the wall so the car would be out of sight from the main entrance, cut the engine and got out.

The wall was about eight feet high. You didn’t have to be an acrobat to scale it. I swung myself up and over all in one movement and landed on soft yielding soil of a flowerbed.

It was nearing nine o’clock by now, and I didn’t have a lot of hope of running into Natalie Cerf. She hadn’t struck me as the type who dabbled her toes in the dew, but I thought while I was here I might as well have a look around. There was always a chance that Anita might be still here; it was as good a hiding place as any.

It seemed a long walk to the house. I took my time, and every so often I looked back over my shoulder. I had no great yearnings to run into the bright boy at the gate. I had a feeling he might be a difficult proposition to stop once he got started.

I passed a swimming pool big enough to hold a regatta on.

It looked very wet and lonely, but that was something I couldn't do anything about and I went on towards the house.

The way was along a rubber-covered path, laid down, I suspected, for swimmers to reach the pool without bothering to put on shoes, up some steps to the esplanade that encircled the house.

Keeping out of sight behind a big rhododendron shrub I surveyed the front of the house for any signs of activity.

Row upon row of shiny glass windows stared back at me.

No one looked out. The house was as quiet and as lifeless as a chorus girl at getting-up time.

I moved out of the shrubbery and on to the esplanade. On its broad, naked vastness I felt as conspicuous as a man shouting 'Fire!' at a firemen's convention. There were no cars on the tarmac, no Filipino chauffeurs to sneer at me, no regal butlers to take my hat. I plucked up enough courage to walk on tiptoe the length of the esplanade to the loggia and look in.

She was sitting in her wheel chair, decked out in a blue kimono and quilted mules trimmed with ostrich feathers on her feet, a tray across her knees. She was munching buttered toast and staring blankly before her, and had that lonely, unhappy look people who are left on their own for long stretches of time get when they don't think anyone is around.

My shadow fell across her feet. She didn't look up immediately. A wary expression chased away her depression, her neatly made-up mouth tightened, and she put down the piece of toast. Then without moving her head, she lifted her eyelids and her eyes swivelled in my direction.

'Hello,' I said, taking off my hat. 'The name's Malloy. Remember me?'

'What are you doing here?' she demanded and sat up, taut as a violin string, her eyes angry.

'I looked in to see your father,' I said, leaning against the doorway where I had a view of the esplanade in case reinforcements should come galloping up. 'Would he be around?'

'Did Mills let you in?' she asked. It was extraordinary how hard her eyes were for a girl of her age.

'Is Mills the bright boy lounging at the main entrance? The one with the pretty buttons?'

Her mouth tightened and two little spots of red showed on her thin, pale cheeks.

'How did you get in here?' she demanded angrily.

'I climbed a wall,' I told her. 'And look, don't let's waste a nice morning getting cross with each other. I want to see your father.'

‘He’s not here. Will you please go away?’

‘Then perhaps I could have a word with Mrs. Cerf?’

‘She’s not here either.’

‘That’s too bad. I have a diamond necklace of hers.’

The spoon she was toying with clattered into the saucer. I saw her clench her fists.

‘Will you please go!’ she said, raising her voice and leaning forward in her chair.

‘But I want to return the necklace. It’s valuable. Can’t you tell me where I can find her?’

‘I don’t know nor do I care,’ she cried and pointed with a shaking finger towards the main entrance.

‘Now get out or I’ll have you thrown out!’

‘I don’t want to annoy you,’ I said, ‘but this is a lot more serious than you realize. Your father hired a woman operator of mine to watch Mrs. Cerf. While she was watching Mrs. Cerf she was murdered. Mrs. Cerf’s necklace was found in the girl’s room.’

She turned suddenly so I couldn’t see her face and reached for a holdall, dipped into it and produced a cigarette case and lighter. She lit a cigarette with a hand that was not too steady, keeping her face turned from me while she did so.

‘I’m not interested in Mrs. Cerf’s affairs,’ she said in a much quieter and subdued voice. ‘I told you to get out.’

‘I thought you might possibly be interested to know that the police didn’t find the necklace,’ I said casually. ‘If you’ll tell me where I can find Mrs. Cerf I’d like to put her mind at rest too.’

She looked up sharply, her face as expressionless and as white as a freshly laundered sheet. She started to say something then stopped and her eyes narrowed, and she looked like a cat that’s seen a movement and knows there’s a mouse around. I swung round on my heels.

The bright boy, Mills, was standing a few yards to the right and behind me, his black gauntlets, doubled into fists, rested lightly on his slim hips. He looked faintly amused, the way Joe Louis might have looked if a midget had socked him on the nose: full of confidence, too much confidence: the kind of confidence that made you wonder what was coming and wish you had a gun or a club instead of just your bare fists.

‘There you are, Mac,’ he said. ‘I thought I told you to fade.’

‘See him off the premises!’ Natalie snapped as imperious as a heroine in a Victorian novel. ‘And he’s never to come here again!’

Mills looked at me out of the corners of his eyes. There was a half-smirk on his thin mouth.

‘He won’t,’ he said languidly. ‘That’s one thing you can bet on. Come on, Mac. Let’s take a little walk to the gate.’

I glanced at Natalie, but she was buttering toast, no longer interested, the blank, lonely look back on her face. If they ever handed out an Oscar for a brush-off they’d give it to her without even a show of hands.

‘I don’t want to be a bore about this,’ I said to her, ‘but it would save time and trouble if you could tell me where Mrs. Cerf is to be found.’

I might just as well have addressed the Great Wall of China for all the attention she paid me.

The bright boy began to close in on me.

‘On your way, Mac,’ he said coaxingly. ‘You and me together.’

‘Now look . . . ‘ I began, but stopped short as his fist hit me in the mouth. It wasn’t what you call a heavy punch, but it was fast. I didn’t see it coming, and that should have warned me. It hurt as it was meant to hurt, but it didn’t even rock me.

‘Okay,’ I said, touching my bruised lips. ‘Let’s go down to the gate. If that’s how you feel maybe I can sublimate your repressions.’

I was so mad I didn’t even look at Natalie Cerf - I went down the steps fast. He followed me. I was sure I could take him. I was four inches taller and about twenty pounds heavier and was thirsting for his blood.

He kept his distance, and we arrived at the main entrance still two or three yards apart. At the gate I turned and waited for him. He still looked languid, and that irritated me, because guys don’t look languid when I’m going to sock them.

He moved in lightly, and I feinted with my left to bring his hands down and let go a right to his jaw that should have taken his head off his shoulders. It was a nice punch; one of my very best, and one that had never been known to fail before. It was well timed and it didn’t travel more than a foot. It wasn’t telegraphed and was a shade faster than a flash of lightning, but it missed him by a good three inches and the impetus brought me forward so all he had to do was to step in close and hit me. He slammed in five quick ones a little south of my belt with the force and speed of a rivet-gun.

I was out on my feet. My breath exploded at the back of my throat, my knees went and I stood there, trying to stand up. The right he tossed over was a languid affair. I could see it coming all the way, but I couldn’t do anything about it. It exploded on my jaw with the impact of a sledgehammer. I came out of a black wave of nausea to find myself lying flat on my back, staring up at the cottonwool clouds that floated serenely in the morning sky.

‘Don’t call again, Mac,’ a voice said a long way off. ‘We don’t like your kind around here, so spare us the visit.’

I vaguely made out the dapper figure standing over me, then something that could have been his boot smashed into my neck and I went out like a flame in the wind.

IV

There was a cop sitting astride a motor cycle when I pulled up outside my cabin. He had the resigned, bored look on his big, fleshy face of a man who expects a long wait, and is going to wait come snow, come sunshine.

When he saw me he gave a half-smirk, got off his machine, jacked it up on its rest and came over.

I had been cursing steadily all the way from the Santa Rosa Estate, and although now drained of expletives I was still mad. My neck felt as if it had been boffed by the fiat side of a battleaxe, and there was a ring of soreness around my middle that added fuel to my rage.

I was more mad at myself than I was at Mills. To have allowed a half-grown Dead End Kid to kick me around was something that hurt my pride, and when a Malloy’s pride gets hurt the Klu Klux Klan rides again.

‘And what do you want?’ I demanded, tough enough to chew a mouthful of nails. ‘I’ve got enough grief without a cop adding to it, so say your little piece and dust.’

The cop grinned sympathetically as he eyed the black and green bruise on the side of my neck. He whistled softly and shook his head.

‘What happened?’ he asked, folding his arms on the car door and leaning his weight on them. ‘Horse kick you?’

‘A horse?’ I said sarcastically. ‘Think a horse’d mark me up like this? You know that steam hammer working on the corner of Rossmore and Jefferson?’

He said he did, his eyes opening wide.

‘Well, I stuck my neck between that and the anvil and took a few whams to show me how tough I am.’

He digested this slowly. He was the kind who’d believe anything he was told, even if someone said he was handsome. But after a while, the nickel dropped, and he decided I was kidding.

‘Wise guy, huh?’ he said, grinning. ‘Well, okay. It’s your neck. The Captain wants you at Headquarters. He told me to bring you in.’

‘You go back and tell him I’ve better things to do than waste time with a buzzard like him,’ I said, preparing to get out of the car. ‘This is a snobby town, and I’ve got to be careful who I mix with.’

‘He said either to bring you in or carry you in: please yourself,’ the cop said amiably. ‘If the old man says carry you in he means I can sock you on the conk with my skull-bender. Pity to add to your bruises, Bud.’

‘He can’t talk that way to me!’ I said indignantly.

‘Funny, but he thinks he can,’ the cop returned, grinning.

He seemed a good-natured, friendly guy, so I grinned back at him. ‘He only wants to have a little talk about this killing last night. Better come, Bud.’

‘Right,’ I said, and trod on the starter. ‘But one of these days I’ll meet that jerk up a dark alley and I hope I have my spiked boots on when I do.’

‘Yeah,’ the cop said, starting his engine. ‘I hope so too.’

‘And listen, Jock,’ I shouted above the roar of his engine. ‘If I’m coming, I’m coming in style, so set your siren going.’

And we went in style. It was fun driving through the crowded streets at sixty miles an hour with the cop in front blasting the traffic out of the way with his siren. We crashed every red light, beat up a good dozen motorists, turned right when it said No Right Turn, and set everyone we met gaping at us.

When we pulled up outside Police Headquarters the cop grinned at me over his shoulder.

‘Okay?’ he asked, hoisting his machine up on its rest. ‘Was that stylish enough for you?’

‘Pretty good,’ I said, getting out of the car. ‘We’ll try it again some time. I needed something like that to get rid of my bile.’

I found Mifflin in the lobby, a worried frown on his flat, red face.

‘Hello, Mike,’ I said. ‘What’s cooking?’

‘The Captain wants you,’ Mifflin said. ‘Treat him nice and smooth. He reckons you know more than you’ve told us about this killing, and he’s in a mood to tame alligators. So watch yourself.’

I followed him up the stone stairs, along a corridor to a door marked: Edwin Brandon, Captain of Police.

Mifflin tapped on the door as if it were made of eggshells, opened it and waved me in.

The room was big and airy and well furnished. There was a nice Turkey rug to cover the floor, several easy chairs, one or two reproductions of Van Gogh's country scenes on the walls, and a big desk in the corner of the room between the two windows, one that overlooked the harbour and the other that gave on to a panorama of the business section of the city. Behind the desk sat Brandon, and just in case you didn't know who he was and what he did there was a gold and mahogany sign on his desk facing you that read Edwin Brandon. Captain of Police.

Brandon was a man around the wrong side of fifty, short, inclined to fat, with a lot of thick hair as white as a dove's back, and eyes that were as animated and as friendly as a couple of river-washed pebbles.

'Sit down,' he said, waving a fat white hand to an easy chair by the desk. 'I thought it was time we had a little talk.'

'Sure,' I said, and lowered myself carefully into the chair.

The muscles in my belly winced as I sat down and I winced with them.

This was the first time I had any dealings with Brandon.

I'd seen him on the streets, but had never talked to him, and I looked him over as curiously as he was looking me over.

Mifflin stood by the door and stared up at the ceiling, as quiet as a corpse in a grave. It was said that Brandon was a hard man, and the detectives under him were scared of him and the patrolmen had a horror of him. Judging by Mifflin's subdued stillness this seemed no exaggeration.

'What do you know about this murder last night?' Brandon began.

'Not a thing,' I said. 'I was there when Mifflin found her, but that's where it begins and ends.'

He opened his desk drawer and produced a box of cigars.

'What do you make of it?' he asked, peering at the cigars as if he suspected someone had been helping themselves.

'Looks like a sex killing to me.'

He looked up to stare at me thoughtfully, then turned his attention once more to the cigar-box.

'The medical evidence says not,' he said. 'No assault, no bruising, no sign of a struggle. She was stripped after she was shot.'

I watched him select a cigar, lay it on the desk and put the box away. I had an idea he wasn't going to

offer the cigar to me. I was right.

‘I understand Miss Lewis worked with you on any assignment you happened to be handling,’ he said, touching the cigar with tender fingertips. ‘Is that right?’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

‘So you would know a little more about her than most people?’ he went on, unpeeling the band from the cigar, frowning as if that was all he was interested in at the moment.

‘Well, I guess I know as much, but not necessarily more about her than most people.’

‘Would you say she had enemies?’

‘I guess not.’

‘A lover?’

‘Not as far as I know.’

He glanced up.

‘Would you know?’

‘Not unless she told me. She didn’t.’

‘Have you any idea why she should be out at East Beach at that time?’

‘What time would that be?’

‘As near twelve-thirty as makes no difference.’ He had removed the band now and was fumbling for a match.

‘No, I don’t know.’

‘She hadn’t been to see you, had she?’

I said she hadn’t, and by the odd look he gave me it occurred to me he was likely to groom me for the killer if I didn’t watch out.

‘But she had to pass your place to get to where she was killed, didn’t she? It seems funny she didn’t look in on you.’

‘We worked together, Captain,’ I said mildly. ‘We didn’t sleep together.’

‘Are you sure about that?’

‘Maybe there are some guys who don’t know who they sleep with, but I do. Yeah, I’m sure about it.’

He found a match, scraped it on his shoe and lit the cigar.

‘What were you doing between eleven-thirty and twelve-thirty last night?’

‘I was asleep.’

‘You didn’t hear the shot?’

‘When I sleep, I sleep.’

He looked suspiciously at the cigar, turned it between his white, fat fingers and eased himself farther down in the swivelled chair. I had an idea he was enjoying himself.

‘Did you have any visitors last night?’

‘Sure,’ I said.

‘Who?’

‘A dame. She had nothing to do with this murder, and she’s married. Sorry, Captain, but you don’t get her name.’

‘Was she a tall blonde in a flame-coloured evening dress?’ he asked abruptly and leaned over his desk to peer at me.

I was expecting him to jump something on me, otherwise he wouldn’t have questioned me personally, so I was ready for him, but for all that I was glad most of my spare evenings were spent in playing poker for stakes I couldn’t afford. I just managed to keep my face expressionless, but only just.

‘She was a redhead,’ I said. ‘Who’s the blonde?’

He studied me thoughtfully.

‘You told Mifflin Miss Lewis wasn’t working on any particular assignment,’ he said, shooting off at a tangent. ‘Is that right?’

‘If I told Mifflin that then it’s right.’

‘Not necessarily. You might be protecting a client.’

I looked past him to admire the harbour. It looked nice in the morning sun.

‘I’m not doing that,’ I said, because he seemed to expect me to say something.

‘If I find out you are protecting a client, Malloy,’ he said, a sudden snarl in his voice. ‘I’ll slam your itty-bitsy organization shut, and hang an accessory rap on you so fast you’d be doing time before you know you’d been tried.’

‘Well, you’ll have to find that out first, won’t you?’ I returned shortly. He leaned forward to scowl at me. Seeing him like that I could understand why his detectives were scared of him. He looked as pleasant and as sociable as a black mamba.

‘We’re not getting anywhere with this investigation, Malloy, because you are trying to play it the smart way. But you can’t fool me. Miss Lewis was working for a client of yours and got killed. You’re covering up a killer!’

‘I didn’t say so,’ I said calmly. ‘It’s your story, and you may be stuck with it.’

Mifflin made a slight movement like a man in agony, but when Brandon swung around and glared at him, he stiffened once more into his corpse-like trance.

‘Who’s this blonde?’ Brandon went on to me. ‘She was seen at Dana Lewis’s apartment last night. Who is she?’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

‘She was a rich woman, Malloy. She had on a valuable diamond necklace. I want to know who she is and what she was doing with this Lewis girl. You’d better talk.’

‘I still don’t know,’ I said, meeting his hard scrutiny.

‘Well, I think that woman is the client you’re covering up. That’s what I think.’

‘It’s a free country. You can think what you like.’

He bit on the cigar, then said in a quieter tone, ‘Now look, Malloy. Let’s put it this way. I don’t know what you make out of this racket, but it can’t be much. There are plenty of jobs a fella like you can do, and make better money. Why don’t you get wise? Tell me who this client is and put yourself in the clear. I know all about this secrecy guarantee of yours. That’s a bit of shop window dressing, and all right as far as it goes, but you didn’t intend it to cover murder. All right, if you withdraw the guarantee, maybe you’ll have to close down. So what? That would be better and safer than being caught with an accessory rap, wouldn’t it? Come on, tell me who she is and I’ll see you right.’

‘You can’t expect me to know every woman in town who wears a diamond necklace,’ I said. ‘I’ve no idea who she is. Sorry, Captain, you have the wrong angle about this.’

Brandon laid down his cigar. His face tightened and he stared at me with hot, angry eyes.

‘Is that your last word?’

‘I guess so,’ I said, easing myself out of the chair. ‘If I could help you I would, but I can’t. I have to run along now, unless there’s anything else I can do for you.’

‘You think you’re smart, don’t you?’ he said. ‘Well, we’ll see. From now on, watch your step. The next time you come in here you won’t get out so fast, and you’ll have a talk with my wrecking crew. We have lots of ways of softening up a punk like you.’

‘I guess that’s right,’ I said, drifting towards the door.

‘And there are lots of ways of getting a Captain of Police shifted out of office, Brandon. Don’t forget that.’

He looked suddenly as if he were going to rupture an artery. His face swelled up and turned a dusky crimson, and the pebbly eyes caught fire.

‘One step out of turn, Malloy, and in you come!’ he said in a strangled voice. ‘Just one step out of turn!’

‘Aw, go polish your badge!’ I said and went out, slamming the door behind me.

chapter three



I

Olaf's gymnasium was in the basement of a block of offices on Princes Street, the East Side district of Orchid City. To get to it you went down a flight of well-worn stone steps, along a narrow, dimly lit passage, at the far end of which was a large wooden sign that read: Boxing Academy. Prop: Olaf Kruger.

The smell of perspiration and resin, the rhythmic sound of leather-covered fists thudding on punch-bags, the shuffling of feet on the canvas floor, and the peculiar snorting boxers make when exercising greeted me as I pushed open the double swing doors.

Beyond the doors was a vast room equipped with every conceivable athletic apparatus, dozens of light and heavy punch-bags, two full-sized rings, lit by powerful overhead lights, and all the other paraphernalia needed by professional fighters.

A thick fog of tobacco-smoke hung in the hot, sweaty atmosphere, and a big crowd of men stood around one of the rings watching a negro pounding the regular sparring partner who had been with Olaf as long as I could remember. A number of other boxers were dotted around the outer edges of the room, either slamming away at a punch-bag or skipping or shadow boxing; getting themselves into shape for the end-of-the-week fights Olaf staged at the Athletic Club.

I made my way across the room towards Olaf's office.

‘Hello there, Vic.’

Hughson, the Herald sports writer, pushed his way out of the crowd around the ring and caught hold of my arm.

‘Hello there, yourself,’ I said.

Hughson was a tall, lean, cynical-looking bird, going bald, with liverish bags under his eyes and tobacco ash spread over his coat front. His sweat-stained hat rested on the back of his head, and a damp, dead cigar grew out of his big mouth.

‘You want to get a load of this, Vic,’ he said, waving towards the ring. ‘This nigger’s going to de-gut Hunter. You’d better get on to him before the odds shorten.’ His sharp little eyes dwelt on the bruise on my neck and he was sufficiently interested to remove his cigar and point with it.

‘Say, who’s been kicking you in the crop?’

‘Look, pal, go back to your nigger and leave me alone,’ I said. ‘Is Olaf around?’

‘In his office.’ He continued to eye the bruise wistfully.

‘Any new dope on the killing, Vic?’ he went on: ‘It’s my bet that crum Leadbetter did the job. He’s always crawling around those dunes like a goddamn snake, spying on couples.’ His yellowish face lengthened. ‘He once spied on me. Jay-sus! What a scare he gave me! I thought he was her husband.’

‘It could be anyone,’ I said, moving off. ‘Brandon’s handling it. You’d better ask him.’

‘Hey! Don’t run away,’ he said, catching hold of my arm again. ‘Talking about criminal assault reminds me: there’s a doll over there you want to take a look at. She has a chassis that’s got a lot of authority. I’ve been trying to find out who she is, but no one knows, or else they ain’t talking.’

I followed the jerk of his thumb. On the far side of the ring where there were several rows of wooden forms sat a girl. The first thing you noticed about her was her shock of flaming red hair, then her thin face with its high cheekbones and her large, heavily lashed eyes that slanted upwards and gave her an oriental look that made you think of intrigue and secret papers and the night train to Budapest. She wore a bottle green suede windbreaker with a zipper down the front, black, high-waisted slacks and Bata shoes. She was watching the negro with critical intentness as he slid about the ring, and every time he landed a rib bender her mouth tightened, and she edged a little closer as if she were scared of missing anything.

‘Yeah, some doll,’ I said, and she was. ‘Why not ask her?’

‘It’d be safer to open an artery,’ Hughson said. ‘Hank tried to make her, but she laid him among the sweet peas. That baby’s tough. I guess she must have plenty of protection to be alone in this joint.’

Someone shouted for Hughson, and winking at me he went back into the crowd. I took one more lingering look at the redhead, then continued on my way to Olaf’s quarters.

The office was a small, shabby room, the walls papered with the glossy prints of prizefighters and old billposters advertising the hundreds of fights Olaf had promoted since coming to Ocean City. Olaf

Kruger sat behind a big desk that was covered with papers and a dozen telephones that never rang singly. At another smaller desk a chemical blonde hammered a typewriter and chewed gum and filled the room with a perfume that would have come expensive at a dime a gallon.

‘Got a minute, or are you busy?’ I asked, kicking the door shut.

Olaf waved me to a chair. He was not much bigger than a jockey, bald as an egg and as smart as they come. He was in shirtsleeves, his thin gold watch-chain held his open vest together and his tie hung loose below his open collar.

‘How are you, Vic? I’m not busy. Nothing ever happens in this lousy joint. I’ve got all the time in the world.’

To prove him a liar three telephones started jangling and the door burst open and two guys came in and began yelling about dressing-gowns they wanted for their next fight - two guys as big and as ugly and as tough as a couple of bull rhinos, but Olaf brushed them off as if they’d been midgets.

He shouted, ‘Get the hell out of here, you bums!’

And they went.

Then he grabbed up two of the telephones, shouted into them he was busy, hung up, took the third, listened for a moment, said, ‘Tear up his contract and give him the gate!’ and hung that one up too.

‘Have a cigar, Vic?’ he went on, pushing the box across the desk. ‘What’s biting you? Heard about the murder. I don’t know the girl, but if you’re sorry I am too.’

‘She was a good kid, Olaf,’ I said, pushing the cigar-box back. ‘But never mind that. Know a guy named Mills?’

He ran a hand that lacked a thumb over his baldhead, looked at the chemical blonde and grimaced.

‘That’s a common name in our racket. What’s his other name?’

‘I don’t know. He’s handsome; around twenty-three or four. Useful with his fists. Moves like lightning and handles himself like a pro; but he’s not marked up any.’

Olaf sat up.

‘Sure, I know him. Caesar Mills. Yeah, that’s the guy. If he could have left women alone he’d have been the cruiserweight champ of the world. There wasn’t a fighter who could lay a glove on him at one time. He started here. I thought I’d picked a real winner, but the punk wouldn’t train. He won three fights in a row, then when I started matching him with boys who knew their business he couldn’t stay the course. He quit about six months ago.’

‘He and I had a little argument,’ I said, and turned so he could see the bruise on my neck. ‘He’s taken

to using his feet.'

Olaf's eyes opened.

'The louse!' he said. 'But leave him alone, Vic. He's poison. If you think you can flatten him you've another think coming. Even now I guess he'd be hard to stop. I wouldn't put anyone against him except a damn good heavy, and even then I wouldn't be sure of my money. How did you run into him?'

'He's acting as a guard to the Santa Rosa Estate. I went up there on business and we got into an argument.'

'A guard?' Olaf said, staring. 'Why, he's got bags of dough. It doesn't sound like the same guy.'

'Must be. What makes you think he has money?'

'Well, hell! By his style. He looks in here from time to time. Dresses like a million dollars, runs a blue-and-cream Rolls, has a house out at Fairview that makes my mouth water.'

I remembered the gold combined cigarette case and lighter Mills had produced from his pocket, but I didn't mention it.

'No one knows how he got his dough,' Olaf went on.

'When he first came to me he was out-at-elbows and glad to have a free meal. A guard, eh? Maybe he's hit bad times again. I haven't seen him for a month or so.'

'He's smooth with women, you said?'

Olaf threw up his hands.

'Smooth? You've never seen anything like it. He has only to tip his hat for them to fall over backwards.'

I thought for a moment, then pushed back my chair.

'Well, thanks, Olaf.' I touched my neck tenderly. 'That punch the Battler taught me was as useless on Mills as if I'd hit him with a handful of birdseed.'

'It would be,' Olaf said seriously. 'That guy's fast. But if you can land one on him he'll turn yellow. Just one good solid punch and he'd flip his lid. The trouble is to hang it on him.'

'And Olaf,' I said, pausing at the door, 'who's the redhead outside? The one with the chinky eyes and fancy pants?'

Olaf's face creased into a grin.

‘Gail? Gail Bolus? Is she out there? Now, that’s the damndest thing. Haven’t seen Gail for weeks. She’ll tell you about Caesar. Used to be his girl. She’s crazy about fighting, but when Caesar wouldn’t train she threw him up. She used to come here night after night about six months ago. Then she suddenly quit. I heard she left town. A tough baby, Vic. They don’t come tougher than she is.’

‘Come on out and break the ice for me,’ I said. ‘I want to meet her.’

II

Lunchtime at Finnegan’s was always a noisy, crowded free-for-all, with the centre part of the room packed with extra tables to cope with the rush. But on the outer ring of the room alcove tables offered sanctuary from the crush and were jealously reserved for Finnegan’s special customers.

From my secluded table near the bar, I spotted Kerman and Benny as they came in and waved to them. They waved back and moved towards me, threading their way through the packed-in crowd; Kerman pausing to apologize with old-world courtesy when he happened to jog an elbow or brush against a girl’s hat, while Benny followed on behind, readjusting the girls’ hats by tipping them over their noses and smiling blandly when they turned to remonstrate. Both seemed a little drunk, but that was a good sign. They did their best work after a bout with the bottle.

As they neared the alcove where I was sitting they spotted Miss Bolus. Both of them came to an abrupt halt and clutched at each other, then surged forward madly, struggling to get to the table before the other.

‘All right, all right,’ I said, pushing them back. ‘You don’t have to get so excited. Sit down and try to behave like you were house trained. There’s nothing in this for you.’

‘Isn’t this rat cute?’ Benny said, appealing to Kerman. ‘He sends us out all day walking our feet to the bone while all he does is to leech around with women. Then he has the crust to say there’s nothing in it for us.’

Kerman adjusted his necktie with a finicky little movement and eyed Miss Bolus with unconcealed admiration.

‘Madam,’ he said, with a formal bow, ‘I would be shirking my duty if I did not warn you against this man. His reputation is notorious. Ever since he gained access to Ebbing he’s been a menace to young and unprotected girls. All over the country hundreds of revengeful fathers are hunting for him with shotguns. Every time he passes the local orphanage toddlers stretch out their little arms and lisp “Daddy!” The beautiful girls you see lying in the gutters of this fair city have been thrown there by this fiend. Women are his playthings; here today, the gutter tomorrow. May I take you home to your

mother?’

‘And if she’s anything like you, baby,’ Benny said with a leer, ‘I’ll come along too.’

Miss Bolus looked at me inquiringly.

‘Are they always as drunk as this?’ she asked without a great show of interest.

‘It’s about their usual form,’ I said. ‘Perhaps I’d better introduce you. You’ll be seeing a lot of them I’m afraid. The dapper drunk is Jack Kerman. The other one who looks as if he’s slept in his clothes is Ed Benny. They’re harmless enough in straitjackets. Boys, meet Miss Bolus.’

Kerman and Benny sat down. They folded their arms on the table and studied Miss Bolus with an admiration that would have been embarrassing if she was the type to be embarrassed, but she wasn’t.

‘I like her eyes, Jack,’ Benny said, bunching his fingers to his lips and blowing a kiss to the ceiling, ‘and the delicate curve of her ears, and the line of her neck - particularly the line of her neck.’

Kerman declaimed with exaggerated gestures:

‘She was a phantom of delight

When first she gleamed upon my sight;

A lovely Apparition sent

To be a moment’s ornament.’

Benny and I stared at him goggle-eyed.

‘Where did you get that?’ I asked. ‘I didn’t know you could read.’

Benny hurriedly found a pencil and wrote down the quotation on his shirt cuff.

‘Would you mind if I used that, Jack?’ he asked anxiously.

‘It’s a very beautiful compliment, and I haven’t said anything nice to my girl for weeks.’

Kerman waved a deprecatory hand.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘That’s nothing. I got culture. That’s what a girl likes - culture.’

‘There are other things,’ Miss Bolus said suavely.

The waiter arrived at this moment with the special lunch, and for a few minutes while he set the plates and dishes before us there was a lull.

‘And bring a bottle of Irish,’ Kerman ordered. He leaned forward to ask Miss Bolus, ‘Can I press you to a little wine, madam?’

She laughed.

‘He’s crazy,’ she said to me. ‘Do they always act like this?’

‘Most of the time,’ I told her. ‘So long as you don’t take them seriously they’re all right. But if they want to guess your weight and ask you to let them run their hands over you, then’s the time to holla “Fire!” ‘

Kerman spotted my bruise.

‘Look!’ he said excitedly to Benny. ‘Someone hates him worse than we do.’

Benny gaped at my neck, got up, came around the table and peered at the bruise closely.

“Did she do that?” he asked, his voice hushed in awe.

‘No, you big dope,’ I said. ‘Sit down and I’ll tell you.’

While we were eating I told them about Mills.

‘And you mean to tell me you let some punk kick you in the neck and he’s still alive to tell the tale?’ Benny asked, shocked. ‘I don’t believe it!’

‘If you think you can do better I’ll fix it so you can meet him,’ I said a little heatedly. ‘You ask her. She knows him He’s way out of our class.’

Miss Bolus shrugged her elegant shoulders.

‘Oh, I don’t know. He’s good, but not all that good,’ she said indifferently. ‘He’s wide open to a left counter to the jaw. When he hits you with his right you want to move in with a left jab.’

‘Theories,’ I said and sneered. ‘When he hits you with his right you stay hit. The next time I talk to him I’ll take a gun along.’ I turned to the others. ‘Miss Bolus is going to help us solve the case. She’s interested in criminology.’

‘She must be if she’s chummed up with you,’ Benny said bitterly. He said to Miss Bolus with an ingratiating smile, ‘You and me can work the night shift. I’ll read your bumps.’

‘Mister Benny!’ Kerman exclaimed shocked.

‘I mean the bumps on her head, you dope!’ Benny said, annoyed. ‘Phrenology is an exact science.’

‘Can we cut out this frolicking and get down to business?’ I asked the waiter to put a bottle of Irish

whisky on the table.

I offered Miss Bolus a drink, but she said she didn't touch hard liquor until seven o'clock.

Kerman said he didn't either, that is if she meant seven in the morning.

'Now, Jack, how about Leadbetter?' I asked, pouring myself a drink and passing the bottle to Benny.

'Well, I've seen him,' Kerman said, wrinkling up his eyes and frowning. 'I didn't get much out of him. He's an odd customer. He has a little shack on the edge of the dunes, and there's a big telescope on the roof. He spends a lot of his time up there peeping at anything that happens along, and by the way he smacked his lips when he told me I guess it wouldn't be a bad way of spending an afternoon at that.'

'Never mind the asides,' I said. 'Did you get anything out of him?'

'It struck me he did know more than he says. His story is he was out looking for a fish hawk's nest - why he had to look for it at that time of night he didn't say - and he came upon Dana's handbag, saw the bloodstains and went straight off to the police. He said he didn't see anyone out there, but when I hinted I'd pay for information he said he wasn't sure he hadn't seen anyone, and his memory was bad, and he'd like a little time to think about it.'

'I bet he didn't say that to Mifflin,' I said.

Kerman shook his head.

'He's scared of the police. I have a feeling he knows something, but he's hoping to collect on his information.'

'Maybe he's thinking of tapping the killer,' I said thoughtfully. 'If he knows who he is he might try blackmail.'

'Yeah, I thought of that. He's the type.'

'I think I'll call on him, Jack. He might react to a little tough persuasion. I'd make him more scared of me than of the police.'

'Well, you try, but watch out. You know what Brandon's like. If he thinks you're interfering with his witness...'

'I'll watch out. Anything else, Jack?'

'I went along to that big service station near Santa Rosa Estate. I thought there might be a chance Anita had looked in there for gas before she skipped, but she hadn't. While I was talking to one of the mechanics, Cerf's Filipino chauffeur drove in. He had a loose tappet he was too lazy to fix himself, and while the mechanic was adjusting it I got talking to him. He's one of those guys who likes to hear

his own voice, and after I'd oiled him with a five-spot I got him on to Mrs. Cerf. I told him I was from the Herald and wanted to see Mrs. Cerf. He said she had gone away. This bit's interesting. He said she ordered the Packard to be left at the side entrance of the house at ten o'clock last night. He waited up for her, but at two o'clock when she hadn't shown up he decided she was staying out for the night and went to bed. She didn't come back, and the car's still missing.'

'She didn't come back?' I repeated, staring at him.

'That's right. He says he reported to Cerf the car hadn't been returned to the garage, and Cerf said it was all right and that he knew about it.'

'Well, that is something,' I said. 'It looks as if she came out to see me and then went off somewhere and spent the night there. She couldn't have been home when Cerf told Paula he was going to ship her out of town, although he made out to Paula she was home. It almost looks as if she knew about the murder and skipped quick.'

'Yeah, that's what I think,' Kerman said. 'Well, I nosed around the rest of the morning, but I didn't get anywhere. I have the Packard's registration number and I'll keep at it. But up to the moment no one has seen the car or her for that matter. Still a car that size is difficult to hide up for long.'

'Go after the car, Jack. That's your best bet. You should check every garage, hotel and road house within ten miles radius.'

Miss Bolus, who had been listening to all this with the same rapt interest as she had watched the negro boxer, said, 'And don't forget the night clubs.'

'She's right. Try L'Etoile, Jack.' I looked over at Benny. 'Did you get out there this morning?'

Benny nodded.

'Sure did, but there was no one around: no one I could talk to, that is. I saw Bannister, but he didn't see me. The night staff don't come on until six in the evening.'

'Right.' I turned to Kerman. 'You look after L'Etoile. I want to find out if Dana went there. Sniff around and see if you can spot the Packard. It wouldn't surprise me much if Anita was hiding there.'

'I've got something,' Benny said, pushing his plate away and pouring himself another slug of whisky. 'I've got something really hot.'

'Yeah, I know. Anita was out at Dana's place last night; right?' I said and grinned.

Benny threw up his hands in disgust.

'Ain't that something?' he said. 'I sweat my guts out all morning, dodge a frock of buttons, make myself amiable to an old whisky soak who lives opposite Dana's apartment, and this punk, who

hasn't been near the place, spoils my entrance!'

'Sorry, Ed,' I said, patting him on the arm. 'Brandon told me.'

'Brandon?'

'Yeah, Brandon. He thinks we're protecting a client and he's promised to turn his wrecking crew on me the next time we meet,' and I told them the details of my talk with Brandon.

'If he publishes a description of Anita someone's bound to give her away,' Kerman said, worried.

'I know,' I said and shrugged. 'That's something we'll have to take care of when it happens. What else did you find out, Ed?'

'Well, not much,' he returned. 'I thought I was going to create a sensation. The old dame - her name's Mrs. Selby - who lives across the passage, facing Dana's front door, spends most of her time watching her neighbours. She said she heard footsteps on the stairs about eleven-fifteen last night and peeped through her letterbox. I guess she was expecting to see Dana take a man into her rooms, and was ready to phone down to the janitor. She's that kind of crab. She said Dana and a woman in a flame-coloured evening dress went into the apartment. She only had a glimpse of the woman and she couldn't give me a description of her, except the dress and the diamond necklace she was wearing. They stayed in the apartment for about half an hour. Mrs. Selby wasn't particularly interested, but when she heard the front door open she had a quick peep and was in time to see the woman in the evening dress going down the passage alone.'

'She decided there was nothing more to see and went to bed. The telephone, ringing in Dana's apartment, woke her about one o'clock. About five minutes later she heard Dana's front door open and shut. She reckons the killer rang Dana and got her to come out to the dunes on some pretext and killed her. That's what she told the police.'

'That's odd,' I said thoughtfully. 'If Dana left her apartment at one o'clock, she couldn't get to the dunes before one forty-five, and the police say she was murdered around twelve-thirty.'

'That's what Brandon told you,' Benny said. 'He's such a liar he probably told you the wrong time to keep himself in practice.'

'I doubt it,' I said, 'but I'll check with Mifflin. He'll tell me.'

'Well, at least we're breaking new ground,' Kerman said.

'Yes, but I don't know if it's getting us anywhere,' I said, frowning. 'One thing does seem almost certain now. Anita succeeded in bribing Dana to tell her why she was watching her.'

Benny sat forward.

‘Now wait a minute!’ he exclaimed heatedly. ‘That’s a pretty lousy thing to say, isn’t it?’

‘I know, but we must face facts, Ed. Anita offered me a thousand dollars to give her the information. I wouldn’t play. Half an hour later she and Dana are seen together at Dana’s apartment, and the next morning a necklace worth twenty thousand is found under Dana’s mattress. Maybe I have a suspicious mind, but to me that points to a bribe.’

‘It looks like it,’ Kerman said reluctantly. ‘She’d have to be pretty strong-minded if Anita offered her a necklace like that.’

To hell with that for an idea,’ Benny broke in. ‘Not so long ago you said Natalie Cerf might have planted the necklace on Dana. Don’t you ever stick to a theory?’

‘But I didn’t know then that Anita had been to Dana’s apartment. This Mrs. Selby didn’t see or hear anyone visit Dana after Anita had gone, did she?’

‘No, but she was asleep, remember. She mightn’t have heard if someone sneaked up there.’

‘I know how you feel about this, Ed. We were all fond of Dana, but after all she was only a kid. That necklace would be a big temptation.’

Benny grimaced.

‘Well, maybe, but I don’t like to think...’

‘Nor do I, but there it is. It’s an idea worth thinking about. We’ve got to find Anita. The two most likely places where she may be hiding are L’Etoile or Barclay’s house. Unless, of course, she’s left town. I’ll go out and see Barclay this afternoon. You, Ed, go back to Dana’s apartment and try and find out from Mrs. Selby if she noticed whether Anita was wearing the necklace when she left. Then from there go to the spot where Dana was found and check every yard of the way. Someone may have seen her. It’s a slight hope as not many people would be around at that time, but that cuts both ways. If anyone did see her they’ll remember her.’

‘Okay,’ Benny said.

‘And, Jack, you hunt for the Packard, and when you’ve got that going, have a crack at L’Etoile.’

Miss Bolus said, ‘I could do that. I’m a member.’

‘Do you want to?’ I asked, surprised.

‘Well, I’m going out there anyway for a swim. It won’t hurt me to look around.’

‘I bet you look cute in a swimsuit,’ Benny said admiringly.

‘I looked cuter without one,’ she said, giving him a calculating stare that made him gulp. She pushed

back her chair. ‘Give me a description of the car and I’ll see what can be done.’

Kerman wrote down the registration number and description of the Packard on the back of his card.

‘If you are ever lonely,’ he said, ‘you’ll find my telephone number on the reverse side.’

‘Do I look as if I’m ever lonely?’ she asked, turned her chinky eyes on me and said, ‘Where do I get in touch with you?’

I told her where I lived.

She gave me an indifferent little nod, looked the other two over without apparently seeing them, and went away, moving with a long flowing stride that took her along as effortlessly as if she were being drawn forward on wheels.

She went through the swing doors as remote and un-touchable as the Everest Peak.

‘My! My!’ Benny said, rubbing his hands enthusiastically.

‘My dreams will be in Technicolor tonight. Where did you find her, Vic?’

‘And what’s the big idea?’ Kerman asked.

‘I don’t know yet,’ I said. ‘It was her idea, not mine. She used to go round with Caesar Mills. Kruger introduced us. I wanted to find out how Mills got the money to buy himself a house at Fairview. She didn’t know, but thought she could find out. You know how it is: one thing led to another. She has a way with her. She could get information out of a deaf mute. The point is she wants to get even with Mills. That makes two of us. I have a feeling she’ll be useful.’

Benny and Kerman exchanged glances.

‘The one outstanding point you have made in that little speech,’ Benny said, ‘is the gag line that one thing leads to another, and boy going around with a Popsie like that you can bet your sweet life one thing will lead to another!’

III

As I walked over to the parking lot to collect my car it occurred to me that I was thinking far too much about Caesar Mills and far too little about Dana’s killer. I reminded myself that my outraged feelings towards Mills were personal and private, and I had no business even to think of him until I had found Dana’s killer. But I couldn’t help thinking how nice it would be if in some way I could

involve Mills in the murder so I could concentrate on him with an easy conscience.

Although I was aware that my immediate job was to go out to Wiltshire Avenue and take a look at George Barclay, there was another little job concerning Caesar Mills that also needed my care and attention, and after wrestling with my conscience I decided it mightn't be such a waste of time if I looked into the Mills affair first.

I got into my car, drove over to the nearest drug store, parked, went inside, and consulted a telephone book. A little wave of satisfaction flowed over me when my finger, running down a column, stopped at a line that read: Mills, Caesar, 235 Beechwood Avenue. Fairview 34257.

I put the telephone book back on the rack, lit a cigarette and gently massaged the back of my neck. I stood like that for a moment or so, then hurried out, climbed into the car and drove over to the County Buildings at the corner of Feldman and Centre Avenue.

The Land Record Office was on the second floor, and in charge of a sad-looking old clerk in a black alpaca coat and a querulous frame of mind. After a little persuasion he got me the record I wanted. 235 Beechwood Avenue had been bought by Natalie Cerf a year ago. There was no mention of Comrade Mills having any part in the transaction.

I pushed the record book across the counter, passed a remark about the weather to show the clerk what nice manners I had, and went slowly down the stone steps into the afternoon sunshine.

I sat in my car for a while exercising my brain. The more I thought about my discovery the happier I became. It looked as if the drag-hook I had thrown out into the unknown depths had caught something big. The cream-and-blue Rolls belonged to the Cerfs. 235 Beechwood Avenue belonged to Natalie Cerf, and both were being used by a guard, employed by Cerf to lounge at the main entrance and kick callers in the neck. And in his spare time this guard went around looking like a million dollars, and kept his cigarettes in a gold combined case and lighter that must have set him back at least a couple of months' salary.

Maybe all this hadn't anything to do with Dana's killing, but the setup interested me. Kruger had told me that Mills had been broke when he first came to Orchid City. Well, since those days he had certainly got on. Blackmail is one of the short cuts to wealth and seemed to offer the most satisfactory explanation of his sudden opulence. Maybe he was blackmailing the whole Cerf Family. He had every opportunity of finding out if Anita was a kleptomaniac. Why was he using Natalie's house unless he had something on her?

Keep at it, Malloy, I said to myself, you're doing fine.

Take it one step farther. You've made up your mind to drag Mills into this mess, so go ahead and drag him in.

So I began to reason like this: if Mills is a blackmailer, couldn't he be the guy who shot Dana? It was guesswork, but the kind of guesswork that suited my present mood.

Nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to watch that bright boy take a walk to the gas chamber.

I then decided I had spent enough time on Comrade Mills, anyway for the immediate present, and conscious that my visit to George Barclay's place would now be something of an anti-climax, I drove over to Wiltshire Avenue, a nice, quiet, snobby road, screened on either side by high box hedges that concealed the houses lurking behind them. Barclay's house stood at the far end of the circular cul-de-sac, facing me as I drove down the long, shady avenue.

I pulled up outside the iron-studded oak tree gate, got out of the car and looked to right and left to see if anyone was watching me. No one was. The road was as quiet and as lonely as a pauper's grave, but a lot more decorative.

The latch of the oak gate yielded to pressure and the gate swung open. I peered around into a large, well-kept garden.

About fifty yards ahead of me, facing a lawn that looked like a billiard table to end all billiard tables, was the house. It was a two-storey, chalet-style, brick-and-wood building, nice if you like phoney imitations of Swiss architecture. A flight of wooden steps ran up the side of the house to a verandah, and on the roof four fat, white doves balanced on the overhang and regarded me with their heads on one side as if they were hoping to hear me yodel.

The afternoon sun was hot, and no breeze penetrated the thicket of Tung blossom trees that surrounded the garden. I sweated a little. Nothing moved: even the doves looked as if they were holding their breath.

Mounting the steps to the front door, I dug my thumb into the bellpush and waited. Nothing happened, and I rang again. But, this afternoon, no one was at home.

The house wasn't particularly difficult to break into, and I wondered how much time I had before Barclay returned. I decided a quick look around might pay dividends, but not with my car at the gate to advertise that Prowler Malloy was inside and up to no good.

Reluctantly I went down the steps, along the garden path and out through the gateway to my car. I drove rapidly to the end of the Avenue, parked under a beech tree, removed the registration card from the steering post, and walked back to Barclay's house.

The doves were still there to watch me mount the steps to the front door. I rang the bell again, but there was still no one at home, and I found a window that wasn't bolted. It took me half a minute to lever it open with the blade of my knife, take one more look around, wink at the doves who didn't wink back, and slide over the sill into a nice quiet atmosphere of green sunblinds and shadows.

There appeared to be only the one room downstairs. At the far end of this room was a broad stairway leading to a balcony and the upper rooms.

I moved around, using my eyes, making no noise and listening intently. No one screamed, no bodies fell out of the cupboards, no one shot me in the back. After a moment or so I became a lot less tense and much more interested in my surroundings.

The room was overpoweringly masculine. Old swords, battleaxes and other ancient weapons cluttered up the walls.

A pair of fencing foils and mask decorated the overmantel.

There were at least half a dozen pipe racks full of well-used pipes, a barrel for tobacco stood on an occasional table alongside a bottle of Black and White whisky, White Rock soda and glasses.

To judge by the weapons, the golf clubs, the pipes, the stuffed birds, the sporting prints and the other undergraduate atmospheric novelties that littered the place, I didn't have to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce that Barclay belonged to the rugged, hairy-chested, outdoor school of manly men.

I didn't think I would find anything of interest in this room. It was too open and above board; nothing-in-my-hand, nothing-up-my-sleeve kind of room, so I went up the stairs on tiptoe and paused on the balcony to listen.

It crossed my mind there was a possibility that Barclay might be sleeping off his lunch in one of the upstairs rooms: a thought that disturbed me. My nerves hadn't entirely recovered from my encounter with Mills, and I had no wish to walk into a guy who collected battleaxes as a hobby and who might take a pot shot at me with a crossbow or pat me on the dome with an iron-studded mace. So I listened, but no sounds of heavy breathing reached me, and I plucked up enough courage to open the door nearest to me and glance in.

A very male bathroom greeted my eyes; a bath, a shower, a mechanical rowing machine and a Turkish bath cabinet, but no bath salts, no powder, no perfume bottles, and the towels hanging on the hot rail as if they were made from sharp wire thread.

I went to the next room, peeped around the door and decided this was where Barclay spent his nights.

There was a big double bed, a dressing-table and mirror, a fitted wardrobe, a trousers press, and over the bed hung a sporting print of an old guy with whiskers, holding an ancient fowling piece and looking as if he had a cold in his nose.

I left the door ajar, sneaked over to the dressing-table and opened one of the drawers. A large glossy photograph in a morocco-leather frame lay face up to greet me. It was an intimate photograph that struck a false note in this atmosphere of wide open spaces and clean manly fun. It was a picture of Anita Cerf, a full-length shot, with a spotlight full on her and the background blacked out. She had nothing on but a pair of dark, fur-backed gloves, which she used the way a fan dancer uses her fans but with much more effect. It was a novelty picture and would have sold in gross lots to the members of the Athletic Club at five dollars a throw. Across the foot of the picture was scrawled in white ink: For darling George, with love from Anita.

I should have liked very much to have taken the picture along with me, but it was too big to go into my pocket. I lifted it from the drawer, slid it out of the frame and turned it over. On the back was a rubber-stamped address:

Louis,

Theatrical Photographer,

San Francisco.

I studied the photograph. It could have been taken some years ago. She looked younger than when I had last seen her, and the don't-give-a-damn expression was not in evidence. I thought regretfully of my lost opportunity. There were times, I told myself, when being too honest with women was a mug's game. If I'd seen this photograph before she had called on me I wouldn't have needed a second invitation to neck with her on my casting couch.

I slipped the photograph into its frame and returned it to the drawer. The other drawers yielded nothing of interest, and I turned my attention to the wardrobe.

Dana had said that Barclay dressed like a movie star. To judge by the contents of the wardrobe the description was about right. I stared at the rows and rows of suits, the long shelf of hats and the dozens of pairs of shoes at the bottom of the cupboard. I decided that was nothing in there for me, but just to make sure I pushed some of the suits to one side so I could see the back of the wardrobe.

I stood looking at the blue coat and skirt that was hanging neatly on a hanger. I remained without moving for several seconds, then I felt a little chill run up my spine and reached forward and lifted the two garments off the hook and carried them to the window. I had seen them often enough. They belonged to Dana. I remembered that Benny had said the suit was missing from her wardrobe and that he guessed she must have worn it on the night she was killed.

Well, here it was, hidden at the back of Barclay's cupboard, and instead of the finger pointing to Mills it was now pointing to Barclay.

I had no time to think or to make up my mind what I was going to do with my find for suddenly I heard an un-mistakable sound of a footfall in the room below that brought me round on my heels, my nerves jerking and crawling up my spine.

I hurriedly rolled the coat and skirt up into a bundle, and stepped quickly to the door. Someone was moving about in the room below. I heard a board creak, then the sound of a drawer being opened and a rustle of papers. I crept out on to the balcony and looked over the banisters, keeping out of sight.

Caesar Mills stood before the writing desk in the distant corner of the room, a cigarette hanging from his thin lips, a bored, nonchalant expression on his face. He was wearing a blue Kuppenheimer lightweight suit and a wide-brimmed panama hat with a gaudy hatband. As Kruger had said he looked like a million dollars.

I faded quietly back into the bedroom, opened the dressing-table drawer, snapped up the photograph, rolled it hurriedly in the middle of Dana's coat and skirt, opened the bedroom window and slid out on to the verandah.

I had a hunch that bright boy was looking for Anita's picture, and I was going to take a great deal of care that he shouldn't have it.

IV

As I drove along the beach road that runs at right angles to Wiltshire Avenue, I spotted Benny's orange-and-red Ford convertible in a parking lot opposite a row of stalls that sold everything from soda pop to sea food, and did a roaring trade at night when the playboys and girls stoked up before having a neck on the sands.

I drove into the lot, took a parking ticket off an old ruin whose hands were so palsied I had to tell him to keep the change, and walked over to the stalls where I had a pretty good idea I should find Benny.

I found him all right.

He was having an engrossing conversation with a slim brunette with large, wicked eyes and a laugh like the slamming of a rusty gate. She was on one side of the milk-bar counter and Benny was on the other, but that didn't make her safe.

She had on a white overall that was wrapped around her figure like a second skin, and she leaned over the counter so that Benny could look down the V opening and as he seemed to be enjoying himself I had a look too.

The brunette gave me a long hard stare, straightened up, tossed her head and moved off with her nose in the air, while Benny turned on me with a look of outraged surprise.

'I might have known it,' he said bitterly. 'Always at the wrong moment. Brother, didn't anyone tell you not to come trampling up to a man and a maid when they're sighing over each other?'

'Was that what you were doing?' I asked. 'It didn't look that way to me. I thought you'd dropped a dollar down the front of her dress and were going in after it.'

'That's because you've had a gross upbringing,' Benny said warmly. 'I was telling her what a lovely mind she had.'

'Well, she keeps it in the funniest places,' I returned. 'And may I remind you you're supposed to be working?'

‘For Pete’s sake!’ he exclaimed, reddening. ‘What else do you think I’m doing? You said check every yard of the way from Dana’s place to the spot where she was killed. That’s what I’m at.’

‘Did Dana walk over that floozie’s chest?’

‘Leave it, will you?’ he begged. ‘Don’t drive it into the ground.’

‘Well, did you get anywhere?’

He looked over his shoulder, winked at the brunette who winked back.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Come over to the car where we can talk.’

As I got ready to move he went on, ‘Just a second, pally, I gotta fix up a date with glamour puss. She wants me to read her bumps. Join you in a second.’

I went over to the car, lit a cigarette and waited for him.

He came over, rubbing his hands and climbed in beside me.

‘Some doll!’ he said enthusiastically. ‘One little puff of air will blow her over.’

‘Concentrate, you pocket Casanova,’ I said irritably.

‘What have you got?’

‘I haven’t run across one solitary soul who saw Dana last night,’ he said, and leaned over to tap me on the chest. ‘But I’ve found two guys who saw Anita.’

‘Anita?’

‘Yeah. One is the taxi driver who took her to the edge of the dunes. He’ll swear to the flame-coloured evening dress, lie pulled up under a street light and had a good look at her. She interested him because she obviously didn’t want him to recognize her again. He thought it was queer she wanted to be dropped at such a lonely spot and not for him to wait.’

‘What time was this, Ed?’

‘Just after midnight.’

‘And who was the other guy?’

‘A fisherman. He’d just come back from setting lobster pots and saw a woman on her own walking across the dunes. She was too far away for him to see details, but the moon was up and he did notice she was wearing evening dress.’

I flicked my cigarette through the car window.

‘Looks as if Anita was right there when Dana was shot, doesn’t it?’ I said, running my fingers through my hair. ‘No wonder she’s hidden herself away.’

‘It’s a damn funny thing I haven’t been able to pick up Dana’s trail anywhere, isn’t it?’ Benny said, worried.

‘I’ve tried every taxi rank near her place, but no one’s seen her.’

I leaned over the back seat, hoisted up Dana’s coat and skirt and dropped the garments into Benny’s lap.

‘Get a load of this,’ I said. His red, rubbery face went the colour of weak tea, and he turned to stare at me, clutching at the garments, his eyes complete circles.

‘Jeepers, Vic!’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Hanging in George Barclay’s cupboard.’ I went on to tell him what I had found out about Mills and the house on Beechwood Avenue and showed him Anita’s photograph. He was so shocked by the discovery of Dana’s clothes in Barclay’s cupboard that he didn’t even crackwise over the photograph.

‘Looks as if Barclay did it,’ he said. ‘Maybe that’s the reason why I haven’t picked up her trail. Do you think he shot her at his place, stripped her and took her over to the dunes in his car? Do you think that’s how it was done?’

‘I don’t know, Ed I’m through with jumping to conclusions. Every time I think I’ve got something, something else turns up and kicks the first something to hell. The only way to solve this murder is to collect every scrap of information we can lay our hands on, keep an open mind, and when there’s nothing else to collect, then, and only then, see what we’ve got. I’m going over now to throw a scare into Leadbetter. You’d better come along.’

As I steered the car through the narrow parking lot exit I said, ‘After we have talked to Leadbetter, we’d better go back to the office. We’re collecting a lot of stuff, and if we’re not careful we won’t know how to use it.’

‘Have you any idea why Mills was nosing around in Barclay’s place?’ Benny asked.

‘Not a clue, but I’m glad I got there first. I bet he wouldn’t have missed that photograph. And Ed, I think I’ll get you to take a trip to San Francisco and check up on Anita’s background. It looks to me she was more a showgirl than a mannequin to judge from that picture. You might dig up something interesting.’

Benny reached over the back of the seat and picked the picture off the floor. He studied it as I drove

the car along Orchid Boulevard.

‘Well, a doll doesn’t get herself photographed like this for the fun of it,’ he said. ‘These theatrical photographers don’t have such a dull life, do they? Imagine focusing a camera on a honey like this.’

I grunted.

‘Yeah, I think a trip to Frisco might be an idea at that,’ he went on. He held the photograph at arm’s length and squinted at it. ‘I wish she’d wave at me.’

‘Put it away,’ I said shortly. ‘The trouble with you—’

‘It’s not a trouble, pally, it’s a pleasure. It’d be a nice idea to gum this picture to the end of Leadbetter’s telescope. I bet it’d get his mind off bird’s eggs.’

We had reached the end of the Boulevard and were now bumping over the beach road that led to the sand dunes. I had an idea where Leadbetter’s place was. If it was the place. I was thinking of I had seen it from time to time when I had gone out with a party of friends for a day’s bathing. It was a lonely, two-storey cabin of redwood, bleached white by the sun. It stood on a little ridge of high ground, boxed in by a half-circle of blue palmettoes, but with wide, uninterrupted views of the coast, seashore and dunes.

The road petered out about a quarter of a mile from the cabin, and after locking the photograph and Dana’s clothes in the car boot, we set off across the hot, loose sand at an easy pace.

‘The moon was like a searchlight last night,’ I said as we tramped along. ‘If this guy was at his telescope there’s no knowing what he did see.’

‘Are you going to offer him any dough?’ Benny asked.

‘I don’t know. I think the thing to do is to be very tough. If we can get him going he might spill his guts without it costing anything.’

‘If he wasn’t holding out for dough I think Jack would have got him going.’

‘We’ll see.’

We cut through a thicket of red-and-black mangroves, picked our way over the sprawling, elephant-tusk-shaped roots and came out on to the vast stretch of open sand dunes.

Fifty yards ahead of us, almost invisible against the row of palmettoes was Leadbetter’s cabin.

On the flat roof, half-concealed by a solid wooden screen, the six-inch lens of the telescope glittered like a ball of fire in the sunshine. There was no sign of life nor movement in or around the cabin. It looked as forsaken and as quiet as a cross-eyed girl at a beauty parade.

We sloshed through the sand up to the cracked and weather beaten door. It was full of old, plush-covered furniture, and on the table was the remains of a meal. A greasy looking newspaper served as a tablecloth, and amongst the debris was an interesting-looking earthenware jar that might contain applejack.

Benny rapped on the door which hung open at his touch.

We both peered into the dirty, sordid little room while we waited. Nothing happened; no one came to answer our knock.

‘Probably looking for a quail’s nest or watching some doll take a sunbath,’ Benny said.

‘Maybe he’s up on the roof.’

We stepped back and looked up, but all we could see was the glittering eye of the telescope pointing out to sea. Benny unleashed a whistle that sent a Pock of ibis flapping out of the mangroves, but it didn’t produce Leadbetter.

‘Let’s go up on the roof,’ I said. ‘We might be able to spot him through the telescope.’

‘That’s a hot idea,’ Benny said. ‘We might be able to spot something else besides old Snoopy.’

We entered the cabin, climbed the rickety stairs to the second floor. On the landing was a ladder that led to a trapdoor and the roof.

I mounted the three rungs of the ladder, heaved on the trapdoor and it went up with a crash. Hot sunlight poured down on me as I swung myself up the rest of the ladder to the roof. Benny followed me.

We stood motionless, looking at the big telescope on its brass-wheeled stand. There was a wooden box for a seat set behind the apparatus, and a crate of beer and a lot of empty bottles close by. It was hot up there, and a great swarm of flies buzzed angrily away from us, swarmed above us and then went back to their gruesome meal.

Leadbetter lay flat on his back. There was a hole in the middle of his forehead like the hole you make in a sheet of asbestos if you hit it hard with a hammer. He had bled a lot, and the blood was only just beginning to clot. One thing was certain, he wouldn’t peep at any more courting couples through his telescope: not ever again.

‘Gawd!’ Benny said and clutched hold of my arm.

chapter four



I

The clock on my desk showed ten past five. Sunblinds making the office dim and airless were drawn against the sun that sizzled the sidewalks in an unexpected and premature taste of the coming summer.

While I wandered about the room, my jacket off, my collar undone and my tie hanging loose, Paula sat at her desk and looked as cool as a block of ice.

‘There was no sign of him,’ I said, moving to the climax of my story, ‘so we went up on the roof. He was there all right.’

I paused to mop the back of my neck, pausing by the window to look into the hot street below. ‘He had been shot through the head with a .45 as he was looking through his telescope. The slug made a hole about an inch wide in his skull and I’d say he’d been dead about twenty minutes - not more.’

Paula didn’t get excited. She held her lower lip between finger and thumb and pulled gently: a sure sign she didn’t like what I was telling her.

‘There’s a big clump of mangroves near the house’ I went on. ‘I reckon the killer hid there, waiting for Leadbetter to show himself and then shot him. It was nice shooting. The slug’s still in his head. It’s my bet they’ll find it’s the same gun that killed Dana.’ I stubbed out my cigarette, yawned and rubbed my eyes. ‘Well that’s about all. We came away quick. There was no one to see us. I’m sure of that.’

Paula gave me a long worried stare, reached for a cigarette, lit it and flicked the match into the ashtray.

‘I don’t like it, Vic,’ she said. ‘Maybe we could have prevented this killing if we’d opened up to

Brandon about the Cerfs.’

‘Maybe, but I doubt it,’ I said. ‘Anyway, Leadbetter had it coming to him. He could have told the cops what he knew; he could have told Jack, but he didn’t. He preferred to deal with the killer. I bet he thought he would make himself a little money, only he stopped a slug instead.’

Paula nodded.

‘That could be it.’ She twisted around in her chair and looked through the slots in the sunblinds, thinking. ‘Brandon will turn on the heat when the news breaks. We’re going to be right in the middle of the squeeze.’ She brooded for a long minute, then shrugged, turned to face me. ‘What now, Vic?’

‘I’ve sent Benny to Frisco to see if he can dig up anything about Anita. It certainly looks as if she was on the scene of the murder. My next move is to have a talk with Barclay.’

‘You have a tricky job there,’ she pointed out. That suit of Dana’s was evidence only so long as it was in the cupboard. Taking it puts Barclay in the clear. He can always deny knowing anything about it.’

‘Sure, but it was a risk I had to take. I was hoping we might find something from the suit. Clegg’s working on it now. Besides, Mills might have been looking for it for all I know. When I have Clegg’s report I thought I’d sneak it back and then confront Barclay with it.’

‘Risky, but I suppose it’s the only thing you can do. What happened to her underclothes, shoes and stockings?’

‘I don’t know. They may be hidden in Barclay’s place somewhere. I hadn’t much time before Mills arrived. That’s something I can look for when I go back.’

‘Are you going to Mills’s place?’

I grimaced.

‘I guess so. I’m not over anxious to run into him again, but I’ll have to go out there. He may have nothing to do with the killing. I’m beginning to think he hasn’t, but we’ll have to be sure before we drop him.’

‘It’s all a question of time, isn’t it? We’ve got to get this business straightened out before the police do.’

‘Just as soon as Clegg is through with that coat and skirt I’ll go back to Barclay. Right now it looks as if he’s the killer. If I can crack him it’s in the bag. Give Clegg a ring, will you, and see what happening?’

While she was phoning I went over to the window again.

There were a lot of things that puzzled me. Why was Dana stripped? Why had Anita given her the necklace? To part with twenty grand worth of diamonds seemed cockeyed to me for the return she got. On the other hand she may not have given the necklace to Dana. She may have asked her to look after it for her. She may have been meeting the blackmailer and was scared he might take it from her. Somehow I couldn't see Dana taking the necklace as a bribe. It looked that way, but the more I thought about it the less likely it seemed. It didn't fit in with her character.

Paula said, 'Clegg's on the line. He wants to speak to you.'

I reached for the receiver. Clegg said he could find no bloodstains, no sand, nothing to give me a lead at all. I thanked him, said I would collect the suit on my way down town and hung up.

'Nothing,' I said in answer to Paula's inquiring look.

'Then she couldn't have been wearing it when she was shot. The front of her skull was smashed in. Whatever she was wearing had to get stained.'

'Maybe he made her strip before he shot her,' Paula said.

'If he did, surely there would have been some trace of sand in her clothes.'

'She might have undressed in the car.'

'Yeah,' I ran my fingers through my hair. 'I better see Barclay. I'll take Kerman with me. We may have to push that guy around a little, and I have an idea he might be difficult to push.'

As I was moving towards the door the telephone buzzer sounded.

Paula cradled the receiver in her slim white hand and looked at me.

'Tip from the porter's office. Brandon's on his way up.'

I grabbed hold of my coat and hat.

'Stall him, Paula,' I said, making for the door. 'Tell him you don't know where I am, but I'll be in some time tomorrow morning. I'll use the rear exit.'

I jerked open the door and shot into the corridor. I had just reached the bend in the corridor when I heard the elevator doors swing back. I nipped out of sight as Brandon went stamping over to my door and rapped with impatient knuckles.

I parked under the same beech tree at the entrance to Wiltshire Avenue, removed the registration card from the steering post and climbed out of the car into the solid heat of the sun. 'We walk from here,' I said. 'It's just at the top of the road.'

Kerman reluctantly got out of the car, adjusted the blue-and-red silk handkerchief that peeped out of his top left-hand pocket, ran his thumb along the edge of his dapper moustache and stifled a groan.

'As far as that?' he said, staring. 'Jeepers! My feet feel as if they've been scuffling in a bed of red-hot embers. Think he'll give us a drink?'

'He's more likely to bend a two-handed sword over our skulls,' I returned, tucking under my arm Dana's coat and skirt I had made into a brown-paper parcel. 'He's a collector of medieval weapons.'

'Well, that's nice,' Kerman said. 'A two-handed sword, huh? That's something I've never been hit with.'

We walked side by side up to the long avenue, keeping in the shadow of the trees.

'The idea is to get to his bedroom and plant Dana's things in his wardrobe without being seen,' I said, as we paused outside the iron-studded gate. 'If he's in the garden hold him in conversation until I join you. If he's in the house I'll have to take a chance that he doesn't hear me. With any luck he won't be home.'

'You'll look a little flatfooted if he catches you and calls the cops,' Kerman said, grinning. 'I can just imagine Brandon's face when you're marched in on a charge of breaking and entering.'

'We have to keep him away from the telephone,' I explained. 'That's why I've brought you along. Don't let's have any misunderstanding about that. We're going to act very tough indeed.'

'That's fine, so long as he doesn't act very tough with us.'

I pushed open the gate and glanced around. The doves were still on the roof, and there was no one in the garden.

'I wonder if he's skipped,' I said, looking towards the house.

'Do I go first?' Kerman asked.

'Sure. Ring the bell, and if he's there keep him amused until I've had time to get into his bedroom. I shouldn't be two or three minutes.'

'I hope you're not,' Kerman said, and went off briskly towards the house.

I watched his progress up the wooden steps to the front door and heard the bell ring sharply somewhere in the house. We waited, but nothing happened, and Kerman looked my way, lifted his

hands and shook his head. I made motions, telling him to ring again. He rang again. Then without any warning a voice said, 'What exactly do you think you're up to?'

Maybe I didn't jump more than a foot, but it felt like a yard. I swung around.

A tall hunk of male beef was standing just behind me; the kind of lad women would fall for in a big way. He had a lot of black curly hair, and his eyes seemed bluer than they were because of the rich golden tan of his skin. He had a complacent, smug air about him of a guy who's been told so often he is handsome that he has at last come to believe it, and it hasn't been such hard work at that.

I didn't have to be Philo Vance to guess he was Barclay.

Dana had said he dressed and looked like a movie star and that description about fitted him. He wore an apricot-coloured rugger shirt, white linen slacks with a crease sharp enough to slice bread with, and white buckskin shoes with brown explosions. Around his thick hairy wrist was a heavy gold-chain bracelet, and around his thick hairy neck was a green silk scarf with his initials neatly monogrammed just where I could read them.

'Mr. Barclay?' I asked, not perhaps as nonchalantly as I would have liked but near enough to make no difference.

'What if I am?' He had a Lawrence Tibbett baritone, very manly and rich; the kind of voice that would send shudders up the spines of bobby-soxers, but did nothing at all to mine.

I handed him my card: the one with the Universal Services' crest in the corner, and stood back while he examined it as enthusiastically as if I'd handed him the business end of a skunk. He took his time about reading it, turned it and stared at the blank side for a moment or so, then returned it as if it soiled his fingers.

'Sorry and all that,' he said, and sneered thoughtfully at a Charlotte Collins dahlia that happened to be in his line of vision. 'I have all the service I want. Thank you for calling: some other time perhaps.'

Kerman joined us. Barclay studiously ignored him.

'We're not offering service,' I said. 'We're acting for a client whose wife happens to be a friend of yours. You may be able to help us.'

Although he managed to hold his bored, contemptuous attitude a wary expression now came into his eyes.

'Still sorry,' he said, waving his hand to the gate. 'I'm a little pressed for time right now, and besides I don't like snoopers.'

'We can get our information from the police,' I said. 'But then you know what the police are; they haven't any respect for the individual. We have.'

He took one hand from one trousers pocket, rubbed his square jaw thoughtfully and still managed to appear as unruffled and as calm as a mountain capped with snow.

‘What do you want?’ he asked. ‘Let’s be quick about it.’

‘Sorry, but our business is a little too serious to discuss in a hurry. Shall we go and talk it over?’

He looked from me to Kerman and back to me again, and his eyes hardened.

‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ he exclaimed, losing his poise, and pushing past me, walked with long quick strides towards the house.

We went after him.

‘Do you still plant exhibit A?’ Kerman asked out of the corner of his mouth.

‘Not a hope. We’ll either have to trap a confession out of him or beat it out of him. I don’t know what else we can do.’

‘It should be fun beating it out of him,’ Kerman said gloomily.

Barclay opened the front door and entered the living room without bothering to see if we were following. He crossed over to a big cocktail cabinet, opened the double doors to reveal an interesting collection of bottles on the inside of the doors were racks that held cut-glass tumblers, and set in the middle of the cabinet was a tiny refrigerator.

It was the most efficient drinking apparatus I had seen, and by the way Kerman reacted, rubbing his hands briskly and teetering up and down on his toes, he thought so too.

‘Well, say your piece and be quick about it,’ Barclay said, selecting a glass and half filling it with whisky. He added a splash of soda and an ice cube from the refrigerator, closed the cabinet doors with a sharp click that told me he wasn’t going to open them again until we had gone, and moved over to the settee where he stretched out his manly bulk I waited in silence until he had settled himself, then stripped the brown paper off the rolled-up coat and skirt and tossed them into his lap.

‘How did this suit get into your cupboard?’ I asked.

He put the whisky down on the occasional table at his side, poked at the coat doubtfully, a look of blank surprise on his face.

‘What was that again?’ he asked, and his head came round and he stared at me.

‘That suit was in your cupboard. I want to know how it got there.’

He brushed the suit from his lap on to the floor, picked up his whisky, took a long drink and set the glass down again.

‘Are you drunk or just crazy?’ he asked.

‘Look, don’t let’s have any of that,’ I said. ‘I called here about a couple of hours back. There was no one home so I had a look round, and I found that suit in the cupboard in your bedroom.’

‘Did you?’ He was getting over his surprise now. ‘So you took it away and brought it back again. Very clever,’ and he allowed himself a small sneer.

‘I took it away because I wanted to have it examined for bloodstains.’

He lifted his head sharply at that. There was a sudden bright glitter in his eyes.

‘What do you mean - bloodstains?’

‘That suit belonged to Dana Lewis, the girl who was shot near East Beach last night.’

He swung his legs off the settee and sat up.

‘What the hell is all this?’

‘I’m asking you how it is that this suit, belonging to a girl who was murdered and stripped last night, happened to be in your cupboard.’

‘I don’t know what you are talking about, and I don’t care. I’ve had enough of this. Take your old clothes and beat it!’

‘I have very definite evidence to connect you with Dana Lewis,’ I said quietly. ‘She was one of my operators and was watching Mrs. Cerf at the time she was murdered.’

That stopped him. He pulled up like an angry bull confronted by a barbed-wire fence.

‘What’s this - blackmail?’

‘Nothing as simple as that. The murdered girl was a friend of mine. I’m checking up on her death. I want to know how her clothes got into your cupboard.’

‘Well, well, well,’ he said and got slowly to his feet; very big, dangerously quiet and controlled. ‘But all the same it smells of blackmail to me. Before we go any further with this, let’s call the police. I’d like them to hear what you’ve just said, then you can produce your proof, and if you can’t they’ll know how to take care of you.’ His hand reached for the telephone, but Kerman was a shade too fast for him. He grabbed the telephone, yanked the cable loose from its moorings and threw the instrument across the room.

‘No phone, pal,’ he said.

Barclay’s reaction was immediate. Moving fast for a big man he socked Kerman on the side of the

head. It was a nice punch, and Kerman went down, taking the table with him.

By the time Barclay turned to let fly at me I was already moving in on him. I got my face out of the way of a left swing, touched him lightly on the chest with my left, straightened him a trifle, then uncorked the right-hand wallop that Comrade Mills had treated so flippantly, only Barclay wasn't in Mills's class and he took the punch on the side of his jaw. His eyes rolled back, the whites showed and he fell forward on his face with a crash that shook the room.

'Nice work,' Kerman said, getting slowly to his feet. He held the side of his face tenderly. 'He packs quite a punch.'

'Think we could help ourselves to a little of his whisky?'

'Let's help ourselves to a lot,' I said, stirring Barclay's thick body with my foot.

Kerman went over to the cocktail cabinet, still rubbing his face. He made two drinks, handed me one and swallowed the other at a gulp. I drank half mine and set the glass on the table. I was worried about Barclay. He hadn't acted like a guilty man, and I had an uneasy feeling he had been genuine when he said he didn't know what I was talking about.

'We'll have to handle this a little smarter than we're doing now,' I said, 'if we don't want a showdown with the cops.'

Kerman poured himself another drink. Now he had got his hands on the whisky he was thoroughly happy.

'We're doing all right,' he said. 'He started the fight anyway. Let's get him talking,' and he picked up the soda syphon and squirted a jet of soda into Barclay's face.

Barclay grunted, rolled over, shielding his face with his hands, then slowly lifted his head and blinked up at us.

'Come on, sissy, don't loll around all night,' Kerman said, putting down the syphon. 'We have a lot to talk over,' and he reached for an Indian club that was hanging on the wall and balanced it lightly in his hand. 'And don't go showing off your strength again or I'll give you a tap with this.'

Barclay got to his feet, stripped off his sodden scarf and dropped it on the floor. His eyes were dark explosions, but without a word he walked slowly over to the settee, sank down on it and fingered his jaw where a lump was forming.

'Now, suppose we start all over again?' I said, lighting a cigarette. 'How did this suit get into your cupboard?'

After a long pause he said with a snarl in his voice, 'I tell you I don't know what you're talking about.'

And the trouble was I didn't believe he did.

'All right,' I said. 'So you don't know what I'm talking about. Well, I'll tell you. Three days ago Franklin Cerf hired us to watch his wife. Never mind why. He had his reasons, but we needn't go into that. Dana Lewis was the operator detailed to shadow Mrs. Cerf. She reported that Mrs. Cerf and you were on friendly terms and were meeting secretly. This information was not passed on to Cerf by the way. Last night she received a telephone call about one o'clock, and she left her apartment. She was found later on the sand dunes near East Beach, shot through the head.

'Her murder puts us on a spot We guarantee our clients absolute secrecy, and if we help the police we can't avoid breaking our guarantee and giving Mrs. Cerf away. That's bad for our business, and we've decided to carry out our own investigation.

'We are looking for Mrs. Cerf. You may or may not know she's disappeared. We thought this place would be a likely hide-out for her, and late this afternoon I came here to see if she was around. No one was home so I searched the place. I didn't find Mrs. Cerf, but I did find Dana Lewis's clothes in your bedroom cupboard. I'm giving you a chance to explain how they got there. If you can't give me an explanation then I'm going to assume you killed her and take the necessary action. You have a pretty sound motive for getting rid of her. She knew you and Mrs. Cerf were fooling around together. You're not the type who'd welcome an outraged husband on your heels, and you might have been tempted to shut her mouth with a gun. Now do you understand what I'm talking about?'

He stared at me for a long minute.

'Why, you're crazy!' he exclaimed. 'I've never set eyes on the girl, and besides, I was out of town last night. I've just got back.'

'Kerman and I exchanged glances.

'Where were you?'

'Los Angeles. I left here at five o'clock yesterday evening by car and I'm just back. You'll find a bag in my car if you like to look.' He had lost a lot of his smug complacency now, and anger had given place to uneasiness.

'Where did you spend the night?'

'I was with a girl.'

Kerman shot his cuff and produced a pencil 'Let's have her name and address, pally,' he said.

Barclay gave him a cold stare.

'That's likely, isn't it?'

‘Well, there’s no harm asking,’ Kerman said, disappointed.

‘Look, Barclay,’ I put in. ‘Please yourself, but if you give us the name and address so we can check your story you’ll be putting yourself in the clear. That is if the girlfriend doesn’t mind.’

Barclay gave a sour smile.

‘What the hell!’ he said. ‘She won’t mind. Kitty Hitchens - Apartment 4834 Astoria Court.’

That seemed to be that. I intended to send Kerman to check, but I hadn’t a doubt he was speaking the truth. The address came out too pat for a lie.

‘She could always say you were with her even if you weren’t,’ I pointed out just for something to say.

‘The doorman saw me. I had a drink at the bar and the barman knows me. The elevator boy will remember me too. I often go over there. They’ll remember I didn’t leave until three o’clock this afternoon.’

‘Is she as good as all that?’ Kerman asked, interested.

Barclay glared at him.

‘But it still doesn’t explain how these clothes got into your cupboard, does it?’ I said.

‘I guess not, and I don’t believe they were there. I think you two punks were going to stick me for blackmail only you fluffed it.’

‘Mind if we go upstairs and have a look around? Her underwear and shoes are missing. I hadn’t time to look for them on my first visit.’

He stared at me, his thick fingers drumming on the table.

‘How do I know you didn’t plant them up there when you came a while ago?’

‘You don’t. You just have to be the trusting type. Let’s go up and see.’

We went up. None of us had much heart for the search, and it was pure accident that Kerman found the shoes. They were concealed at the back of the airing cupboard in the bathroom, under a pile of blankets.

‘Pretty smart,’ Barclay said, sneering. ‘Going to make anything of it?’

‘You wouldn’t be so damned cocky if we were the police,’ I said. ‘Now we’ll really take the joint to bits.’

We did, but we didn’t find Dana’s underclothes. There were another woman’s garments in one of the

bedrooms: a couple of pairs of pyjamas, some stockings and an evening dress. Barclay said they belonged to a girl he once knew, but who hadn't been around for some time. Kerman gaped at him in sheer amazement.

We trooped back to the living-room, and I put the shoes with Dana's coat and skirt. There was a short pause while Barclay poured drinks. He handed us each a whisky and went to sit on the settee.

Although he was acting tough I could see he had been shaken by the discovery of the shoes, and his controlled uneasiness convinced me still further that he didn't know anything about Dana's death.

'Where do we go from here?' he asked, after he had swallowed half his drink.

'I guess this lets you out,' I said. 'It looks as if the clothes and shoes were planted on you.'

'I swear they were,' he said, seriously. 'But who did it I can't imagine.'

'I can make a guess. Why not the killer? If the police had found what we've just found you'd be behind bars by now.'

'I guess that's right.'

'The one person who can help us is Mrs. Cerf. We've got to find her. Any idea where she is?'

He shook his head.

'The last time I saw her was three days ago. We had dinner together.'

'How did you come to meet her in the first place?'

'On the beach. She was lonely, and I happened to be around. She doesn't have a lot of fun with Cerf.'

I eyed him stonily.

'How long have you known her?'

'About ten days.' He gave a leering little grin. 'Can I help it if they chuck themselves at me, and that's what she did.'

'Did you ever have trouble with her?'

'What do you mean - trouble?'

'Have a scene in a shop with her? Did you ever miss anything?'

He was more alert than he looked.

‘You mean she was one of those - light-fingered?’

I nodded.

‘So that’s why Cerf was having her watched! I thought he was trying to get evidence for a divorce. She did too.’

‘You still haven’t answered my question.’

‘Nothing like that. I haven’t missed a thing.’

I ran my fingers through my hair.

‘She knew she was being watched? She told you so?’

‘Sure. She told me some girl was following her. That’s why I dropped her. I keep clear of divorce courts.’

‘So you dropped her?’

‘You bet I did.’

‘We have reason to believe she was being blackmailed. Did she ever say anything to you about that?’

The blank look of surprise on his face spoke for itself.

‘No. That’s a new one on me.’ He flicked the edge of his glass with his finger-nail, making it ring. ‘She did try to borrow money off me the last time we met.’

‘How much?’

He gave a sneering laugh.

‘It didn’t get as far as that. I don’t believe in lending money to married women.’

‘Did she ever mention Ralph Bannister in her conversations with you?’

‘No. Is he in this too?’

‘You know him?’

‘Well, I’ve met him. He runs L’Etoile. I go out there sometimes.’

I was getting nowhere fast.

‘Has she ever been here?’

A watchful look came into his eyes.

‘That’s none of your damned business.’

Kerman tapped him on the arm with the Indian club.

‘Don’t get shirty, pally,’ he said warningly.

‘Ever run into a guy named Caesar Mills?’ I asked.

‘You mean her chauffeur? I’ve seen him once or twice. Why bring him in?’

‘I thought he was a guard at the house.’

‘Maybe. He drives her around sometimes. I don’t know anything about him.’

‘I found a photograph of Mrs. Cerf in one of your drawers. I take it she gave it to you?’

‘Pretty picture, isn’t it?’ he said and laughed. ‘She gave it to me all right.’

‘Know when it was taken?’

‘A few years ago. She used to be in some show in Frisco. That’s before she turned mannequin. What happened to the photograph? Did you take it?’

‘Yeah; don’t expect to get it back.’

He lifted his massive shoulders.

‘I should worry. I’ve got a trunk full of pictures like that. Women are funny that way. Once you’ve seen them without their clothes . . .’

‘Well, I guess we’ll be running along,’ I broke in. I was tired of him now. Handsome homewreckers always give me a pain in the gut. I stood up. ‘If I think of anything else I want to know I’ll call in and see you again.’

‘Aren’t you going to make anything of those shoes?’ he asked, his voice casual but his eyes shifty.

‘I guess not. Consider yourself lucky.’ I picked up Dana’s clothes and shoes, jerked my head at Kerman, and we went to the front door, opened it and walked down the wooden steps. Neither of us looked back. The doves cooed at us from the gable but we didn’t look at them either. We went down the garden path, out through the gateway and down the avenue to the car.

‘I’m glad you hit him,’ Kerman said suddenly. ‘He’s the kind of heel who needs hitting hard and often.’

‘We’re no better off, Jack. Except I think we can write him off the suspect list. It brings us back to Mills again, but if Mills planted the clothes to throw suspicion on Barclay why did he come back this afternoon?’ I climbed into the car, jabbed down on the starter. ‘We’ll have to check Barclay’s alibi. We can’t afford to take his word. Will you go over and see this dame? Make the check as complete as you can.’

‘I’ll drive over tonight,’ Kerman said, suddenly enthusiastic. ‘Kitty Hitchens, eh? I once knew a redhead called Kitty. She was double jointed. Talk about acrobatics . . . ‘ He gave a deep sigh, then went on, suddenly excited, ‘Say! If this Hitchens doll fell for a sissy like Barclay how’s she going to react to me?’

‘She’ll probably call a cop,’ I said irritably. ‘For the love of God, get your mind off women, can’t you? We have a job of work to do, and so far we’re doing it damned badly.’

I pulled away from the kerb and headed downtown fast.

III

There was a light showing through the windows of my cabin as I pulled up outside the gate. Whoever was in there wasn’t making a secret of it, so I decided it couldn’t be a burglar, but just to be on the safe side I crept up the verandah steps and peered cautiously into the room. A faint but subtle perfume wafted through the open french windows to greet me.

Miss Bolus lay on the casting couch, a magazine in one hand and glass half-full of neat Scotch in the other. A cigarette drooped from her full red lips and an irritable little frown wrinkled her brows. She wore a white taffeta evening dress with a low-cut, strapless bodice that set off her golden-tanned shoulders and swept in a full skirt to her brocaded satin shoes.

Not quite sure if what I saw was an illusion, I stood in the doorway and gaped at her. She looked up, dropped the magazine on to the floor and gave me a brief, disinterested nod of her head.

‘I thought you were never coming,’ she said petulantly. ‘I’ve been waiting hours.’

‘If I had known you were here I would have hurried,’ I said, coming into the room. ‘What goes on?’

‘You’d better hurry,’ she said. ‘We’re going out.’

‘We are? Where?’

‘Where do you think? I have found the Packard.’

‘At L’Etoile?’

‘That’s where you told me to look for it, isn’t it? It was with a lot of other cars in the rear garage.’

‘And you found it - just like that?’ I reached for the whisky bottle, poured a drink and sat down on the edge of the couch. ‘Any trouble?’

‘Don’t sit on my dress you oaf,’ she said crossly. ‘Of course I didn’t have any trouble. I just talked to one of the mechanics.’ She looked at me out of the corners of her chinky eyes. ‘Men find it easy to talk to me.’

‘I can believe that. You didn’t give anything away?’

‘No.’ She drained her glass, set it on the floor and lay back against the cushions. She was easily the most ravishing-looking girl I had ever seen.

‘Well, that’s fine,’ I said. ‘And you’ll take me out there now?’

‘Yes. I may have seen all there is to see, but you never know. You’d better change.’ She sat up and lowered her feet to the floor. ‘Did you see Barclay?’

‘I saw him, but there’s nothing there. He has an alibi for the time of the shooting. My only hope now is Anita Cerf.’

‘Well, you may find her tonight. Go and get changed.’

I went and changed. While I was adjusting my tie, Miss Bolus pushed open my bedroom door and leaned against the door frame.

‘Have you a gun?’ she asked.

I looked over my shoulder and stared at her, then shook my head.

‘Do you think I’ll need one?’

‘You might. There were some tough boys about that place. I expect they’re still there. It depends if you’re looking for trouble or not. If you are you’ll need a gun.’

‘I never look for trouble; besides I don’t own a gun. What sort of joint is this? I’ve always heard it’s a luxury night club.’

‘So it is, but there’s a lot of heavy gambling going on there, and every member has to vouch for his or her guest. Bannister is hard boiled. He has a couple of muscle men to take care of snoopers. I’m just warning you. You won’t be able to do what you like there.’

‘Well, I can always try,’ I said, and touched the sides of my hair with brushes. I counted my money,

slid the small change into my pockets and decided I was ready. 'Let's go. Did I tell you you look good enough to eat?'

'Is that the best you can do?' she asked, and looked at me from under her eyelashes.

'Why, no. I wasn't trying.' I moved closer. 'Do you want me to try?'

She lifted her elegant shoulders and drifted out of reach.

'Save it for a rainy afternoon.'

I watched her wander across the sitting room to the verandah doors. I don't know when the room had looked more glamorous. I turned off the lights and followed her down the path to the car.

As she settled beside me in the bucket seat, I said, 'Caesar Mills was out at Barclay's place this afternoon, having a look round.'

She tilted her chin and I felt her stiffen.

'I'm not interested in Caesar Mills,' she said in a cold, flat voice.

'Maybe not, but I have a feeling you know a lot more about him than you've told me. How about opening up?'

She took a cigarette-case from her evening bag, lit a cigarette and kept her tilted chin pointing to the pool of light made by the headlamps of the car.

'I'm not talking about Mills,' she said emphatically. 'I told you - he doesn't interest me.'

'I was under the impression you and I had an account to square with him. Isn't that why you've joined up with me?'

'No, it isn't. I wouldn't need your help or anyone else's to get even with Mills. I can take that little rat any time I want.'

'Well, okay, if we don't talk about Mills, let's talk about you.' I swung the car on to Orchid Boulevard and trod on the gas. 'What lies behind the sultry look in your eyes?'

She made an impatient movement, sank further down in the seat and said nothing.

'Don't be so hard to get,' I said, glancing at the shadowy outline of her tilted chin. 'What's your story? I'm burning up with curiosity. You appear out of nowhere, cotton on to me as if you've known me all your life and mix yourself up in something you say has nothing to do with you. What lies behind it all? Who are you?'

'That's easy,' she said, and gave a hard, short laugh. 'I'm nobody. The only thing about me that's

glamorous is the way I look. The rest of me comes right out of an ashcan. I was brought up the hard way, and when I say hard I mean hard. My dad did a strong-man act at the pit doors of the Gaiety Theatre in New York. He made about ten dollars a week. When I was old enough to quit school, and I was twelve when I did quit, I took the collection bag along the queue, and that's a swell place to get your leg pinched or for a guy when he's giving you a dime to run his paws over you. My mother went off with a bond salesman when I was three. I don't blame her. It couldn't be a lot of fun to be married to a sap as dumb as my dad. But he was kind, and I wouldn't let anyone but me say a word against him. He killed himself trying to earn a living to keep me. The joke was I could have kept him and myself, and would have thought nothing of it only he wouldn't stand for it. Maybe he thought I picked up the bruises on my legs from a woodpecker. Maybe he didn't know about the bruises.'

I said, 'Light me a cigarette. I'm not altogether sure I want to hear any more of this.'

She laughed again.

They never do, but you asked for it and you'll get it. My dad died when I was fifteen. From then on I got along all right. I'm not saying it wasn't a hard racket, nor has it been much fun, but I've got along.' She lit the cigarette and pushed it into my mouth. 'And I'll tell you something. If you don't want me to hate you, don't ever offer me money, because I'll take it, and do I hate a man who gives me money.'

'Then why take it?'

'I'm superstitious that way. If I ever refuse a dime I'd expect to lose a dollar.'

'Well, I haven't enough to make it worth your while,' I said frowning into the night. About a couple of miles at the top of the hill I could see the lights of Fairview. I urged the car forward. 'If you're planning to get anything out of me, honey, you're on the wrong horse.'

'Don't act dumb,' she said acidly. 'I'm not expecting anything from you. I can always pick up a little money when I need it. I'm a poker player, and can make enough to live on any night at L'Etoile. That's more than my dad could do, the poor dumb sap. And another thing, don't ever play cards with me. I can't help cheating and I'd skin your bankroll.'

'You're certainly giving yourself a swell build-up. What's the idea?'

'You said you wanted to know what lies behind the sultry look in my eyes. I'm telling you.'

'You certainly are.'

She glanced at me. The light from the dashboard lit up the lower part of her face. Her lips glistened red in the faint light.

'I'll make you a proposition,' she said suddenly. How about giving me a bed in that lousy little cabin of yours?'

‘What was that again?’

‘I’m suggesting I live with you. The rent I’m now paying for a two-room apartment a pig would sneer at makes my flesh creep.’

‘I have only one bed,’ I pointed out.

‘Well you don’t have to be coy about that. I wouldn’t be,’ she said, and laughed. ‘You mean you don’t want me?’

‘That’s more or less the idea. It’s just that I’m used to being on my own and like it that way; nothing personal in it.’

‘That’s a new one!’ she exclaimed, and for the first time since I had met her she sounded cheerful. ‘My mistake. I’m always trying to save money. It’s a failing of mine. Forget it.’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘I’ll forget it. I’m beginning to wonder if you are as tough as you sound.’

‘Try me and see,’ she said.

I took her at her word and shoved on the brakes, bringing the car to a standstill by the edge of the grass verge. I twisted around in my seat and looked at her.

‘No time like the present,’ I said. ‘The last dame I passed up has been haunting my dreams. I’ll take good care you don’t.’

I slid my arm round the back of her neck and pulled her to me. She came easily enough and there was a mocking little smile in her eyes.

‘You don’t want me to live with you,’ she said gently, ‘but you don’t mind stopping the car.’

‘Let’s not go into that now,’ I said, and began to browse lightly over her upturned face. It was a lovely face, and when my mouth touched hers she gave a little sigh and relaxed into my arms. We stayed that way for a while. Kissing her was like stopping the hands of a clock. Time ceased to exist.

It wasn’t until another car went past and nearly blasted us off the road with its horn that the spell was broken. I straightened, touched my lips with a handkerchief, put my foot tenderly on the starter.

‘Remind me to take up an option on that when that rainy afternoon comes along,’ I said, and headed once more for Fairview.’

L'Etoile night club stood in its own grounds. The entrance was by way of a carriage drive, guarded by a set of iron gates and a couple of hard-faced bouncers who passed us through as soon as Miss Bolus showed herself at the car window. By the way they saluted her they were old friends. They didn't bother to look at me.

The building when we reached it was three storeyed, compact and overlit. On the roof, shining like a beacon, was a star-shaped sign of electric lights. There was the usual green-and-white awning over the front entrance and the usual red carpet down the steps to the drive. The doorman who opened the car door wore a uniform that would have made the late Marshal Goering gnash his teeth with envy.

A hat-check girl in a skirt that would have done better service as a cutlet frill and a bodice that should have been downright ashamed of itself, took my hat and gave me a check and a leer.

Miss Bolus said she was going to the Ladies' Room and would I wait?

I hadn't time to say either yes or no before she vanished through a door marked Madames, and left me high and dry in an atmosphere so lush that it threatened to suffocate me. But not for long.

Out of the crowd that drifted in a steady stream through the open doorway, a lean guy with a face like a weasel and eyes like sloes picked his way towards me. I could tell he was going to talk to me by the way his eyes fastened on me the moment he saw me. As soon as he came to rest before me I decided by the cut of his tuxedo he was some kind of bouncer. I was right.

'Looking for someone?' he asked in a voice you could have grated a nut on.

'No,' I said. 'Should I be?'

He licked his lips with a pale tongue, eyed me slowly from head to foot and tried again.

'Waiting for someone?'

'Check,' I said, and jerked my thumb towards the Ladies' Room. 'She'll be out in a moment -I hope.'

He relaxed, but not much.

'Gotta checkup,' he explained in a slightly less aggressive tone. 'We don't encourage guests to roam around without their escorts. Members only, mister, and their friends. We get a lot of guys drifting in who shouldn't be here. Thought I didn't recognize your face.'

'I don't always recognize it myself, especially in the early morning,' I said.

He scratched the side of his jaw and ran his eyes over me again. I could see he wasn't too sure of me.

'What would be the name of the lady?' he asked. 'Just to keep the record straight.'

‘Miss Bolus.’

Immediately he looked as if he had bitten into a quince.

‘Oh, her,’ he said, the nut-grater back in his voice. ‘Then you’re in swell company.’ There was no mistaking the sarcasm in Iris voice. He stalked away to third degree another guy who had just handed in his hat and was looking helplessly around.

Miss Bolus drifted out of the Ladies’ Room and joined me.

‘Who’s the fella with the face like a weasel?’ I asked, and indicated with my thumb.

‘That’s Gates,’ she told me. ‘He’s one of Bannister’s musclemen. He’s all right if you leave him strictly alone.’

‘He doesn’t seem to like you a lot. When I told him I was with you he looked like he had swallowed a bee.’

‘Did he? Remind me to cry when I have a spare moment,’ Miss Bolus said indifferently. ‘But never mind Gates. What shall we do?’

‘Let’s drink,’ I said. ‘My nerves need bolstering up.’

She took me through the lobby, along a wide corridor, past double glass doors over which was a lighted sign that read Grillroom, into a big room, furnished with dozens of tub-shaped chairs, a carpet that made you think you were walking on a lawn, and a horseshoe-shaped bar behind which four barmen, immaculate in white coats, officiated with speed and efficiency that was something to see.

We had several drinks. They were no more poisonous than any of the other drinks in town, but much more expensive.

After the third whisky I said I thought Miss Bolus had better go away and play poker.

‘And what do you think you’re going to do?’ she asked, making motions to the barman to fix another round.

‘I’m going to snoop,’ I said. ‘Just give me the layout of the joint. Any idea where she might be?’

‘The most likely place is the top floor. Bannister has an apartment up there, and I think there are other rooms on the same floor. If she’s anywhere she’ll be there.’

‘Then that’s where I’ll be.’

She lifted her shoulders.

‘You’ll never get as far. I told you if you’re looking for trouble you’ll find it here, but please

yourself.’

‘If that dame’s here I’m going to find her. If someone spots me I can always pretend I’ve lost my way.’

The barman placed two more whiskies before us and I parted with more money.

‘Go ahead,’ she said without enthusiasm. ‘You won’t get far so I don’t see it matters. But don’t get any bright ideas. One or two wise guys have tried to be funny with Bannister and they’ve run into an awful beating.’

‘If there’s one thing I like about you more than another it’s your goodwill and encouragement,’ I said testily. ‘Finish up your drink and run away. If I do meet with trouble leave me to find my own way out. Don’t send for the cops. Brandon is only waiting his chance to get his hooks into me.’

‘I won’t,’ she said, finished her drink and slid off the stool.

‘It’s you who are sticking your neck out, and it’s your neck. I’m going up to the first floor. We can go that far together.’

The final whisky gave me a feeling of tremendous confidence. I told Miss Bolus so.

‘Just wait until you sober up,’ she said unfeelingly.

We went from the bar, down the corridor to a flight of stairs.

A short, thickset man who looked as if he had slept in his tuxedo, stood at the bottom of the stairs, his hands deep in his coat pockets, a bored expression on his face. He looked like an ex-pug, and there was scar tissue on the flesh over his cheekbones. He glanced at Miss Bolus and gave her a curt nod, shot out a hand and gripped my arm.

‘Where’s he going?’ he asked in a throaty growl.

‘He’s coming with me,’ Miss Bolus said. ‘Don’t work so hard. Bannister won’t pay you anymore.’

He took his hand away, grunted and waved us on. We went up the stairs, and when we were out of earshot I said, ‘Is that another of Bannister’s playmates?’

‘That’s Shannon. He used to be a fighter, but he was never any good. If I had to pick a quarrel with either Gates or him, I’d pick one with him. Gates carries a gun.’

‘I think we’d better say goodbye before you have me too scared to do what I want to do. I shouldn’t be long.’

‘That’s one thing I’d bet my girdle on,’ she said.

We were by now in a long corridor, and at the far end was another flight of stairs. Near where we were standing was the entrance to the poker room, and by the look of the crowd business was brisk.

‘There’s another bar farther down the corridor,’ she told me. ‘You can see the stairs from there. Don’t get into too much trouble,’ and with no show of further interest in me she went into the poker room and was swallowed up in the crowd.

I walked down the corridor like a guy who is planning to have fun but is in no hurry to get started. As she had said, another bar, a lot smaller than the one downstairs, was near the foot of the stairs. I glanced in. It was packed solid, and no one looked in my direction. I looked back over my shoulder. A blonde and a tall, beefy man who lurched as he walked, were coming towards me. The blonde had a bleak look in her eyes as she steered the beefy man into the bar.

Neither of them paid any attention to me. As they began to fight their way through the crowd I jumped for the stairs. I went up them three at a time, and making no noise. I arrived at the top without anyone shouting ‘Hey!’ or shooting me in the back.

Facing me was another long corridor and a number of doors giving off it that had nothing to tell me what lay behind them.

I was standing looking down the corridor, trying to make up my mind what was the best and safest thing to do, when a door about ten feet from me jerked open and a blonde woman in a white silk blouse and brick red slacks stepped into the corridor

It was Anita Cerf.

chapter five



I

She stared at me blankly for perhaps half a second, then recognition jumped into her eyes and she caught her breath sharply, the way you catch your breath when a ghost appears at the bottom of your bed. But she didn't lose her presence of mind. She took two quick steps back and tried to slam the door, but I shot out my foot, blocked the door open and gave it a hard shove with my shoulder. She went staggering back as I swept into the room, spun on her heel and made a dive for another door at the far end of the room. I caught up with her before she reached the door, grabbed her wrist and swung her around to face me.

'Take it easy,' I said. 'I want to talk to you.'

She wrenched free and backed away. Her breasts rose and fell under the white silk of her blouse, her eyes glittered and her face was the colour of old ivory. She looked nothing like the seductive charmer who had tried so hard to get me to talk the previous night. Now she looked older and harder and a little shop soiled: an ex-follies girl who had kicked around and had been kicked around, who had grown tired of shoving men off, and because she didn't shove anymore had lost the freshness and the charm that made her type of beauty mean something; and on top of all that she looked scared. Her wide grey eyes were full of terror.

'Get out!' she said in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

The room we were in was a bedroom: a nice room; not the kind of room you'd expect to find on the top floor of a night club. The carpet was thick and easy to the feet The bed looked comfortable. The drapes matched the carpet, and the carpet matched the quilted walls. The dressing table was loaded with bottles and powders and perfumes and atomizers. There were a number of lamps with parchment shades scattered about the room to give a restful even illumination.

A girl - even a millionaire's wife - could be happy in such a room, but Anita Cerf didn't look happy. She looked like the victim of a railroad accident coming out of a smashed-up coach.

'I've been looking all over for you,' I said. 'I have some questions to ask you, Mrs. Cerf.'

'Get out!' She pointed to the door with a finger that shook like the finger of an old woman with palsy. 'I'm not going to answer questions! I'm not going to listen to you!'

'What about the necklace? Don't you want it?'

She reeled back on her heels as if I had hit her, and her hand flew to her mouth.

'I don't know what you are talking about.'

'Yes, you do. The necklace you gave Dana Lewis. Why did you give it to her?'

She darted across the room and wrenched open a drawer of the dressing-table. I had seen enough movies to guess what she was after, and arrived at her side as she snatched a .25 automatic from the drawer. My hand clamped down on hers as she was bringing up the gun. I could feel her fingers undermine striving to pull back the safety catch, and I exerted pressure, crushing her fingers against the sides of the gun.

'Drop it!' I said. 'Stop acting like a fool!'

She rammed her elbow into my chest and fell against me, making me stagger. I caught hold of her round her waist and held her to me. It was like trying to hold a wild cat, and she fought with the desperation of terror. I had all I could do to hold her. We went staggering and wrestling across the room.

'Cut it out or you'll get hurt!' I exclaimed as she tried to butt me under the chin.

She hit me in the face, using her fist like a hammer, and hacked at my shin with the heel of her shoe. She was panting, and I could feel the muscles in her body twitching. As she tried to hit me again, I twisted her arm, forcing her to turn her back on me, and pushed up her hand towards her shoulder blades. She bent over, gasping. I put on more pressure, and her fingers relaxed hold of the gun. It dropped to the carpet and I kicked it under the bed.

'You're breaking my arm,' she moaned, and flopped down on her knees.

I let go of her wrist, caught her by her elbows and lifted her to her feet, steadying her. Then I stepped away from her.

'I'm sorry, Mrs. Cerf,' I said, knowing I didn't sound sorry at all. 'Let's cut out the fighting and talk. Why did you give Dana Lewis your necklace?'

'I didn't give it to her,' she said, holding her wrist and glaring at me. 'You've nearly broken my arm.'

‘You went with her to her apartment. You were wearing the necklace when you went in. You weren’t wearing it when you came out. It was found in the room. You gave it to her? Why?’

‘I tell you I didn’t!’

‘You were seen,’ I told her. ‘You can either tell me or the police. Please yourself — but make up your mind.’

She made up her mind by a sudden dive for the bed. She dropped on hands and knees and began scrabbling wildly for the gun; but it was well out of reach.

I went over to her and pulled her to her feet. She started fighting again, but I was tired of her by now and slung her on the bed hard enough to drive the breath out of her. She lay flat, her chest arched, her arms stretched wide on the green coverlet.

‘Why did you give it to her?’ I repeated, standing over her.

‘I didn’t!’ she panted. ‘The necklace was stolen! I didn’t give it to her.’

‘Why did you take a taxi and go out to East Beach when you left her?’

She struggled up. Her face was stiff with fear.

‘I don’t know what you are talking about. I didn’t go to East Beach.’

You were there when she was shot. Did you shoot her?’

‘I wasn’t. I was never there! Get out! I won’t listen to you Get out!’

The odd thing was all the time she was scared she might be overheard And her terror worried me. She wasn’t frightened of me. But she was frightened of what I might say.

Every time I got set to speak I saw her stiffen the way you stiffen when the dentist begins to drill close to a nerve.

‘You don’t know anything, do you?’ I said. ‘Then why are you hiding? Why don’t you go home? Does Cerf know you are here? Come on: it’s time you tallied!’

She half-lay, half-sat on the bed, flinching away from me.

She began to say something, but the mumble died suddenly and she stiffened, and her eyes opened very wide and a resigned look of terror came into her face that wasn’t pleasant to see.

I didn’t hear the door open: the door at the far end of the room. I didn’t hear anyone come in. But I caught a movement reflected in the big mirror in the wardrobe and I turned slowly.

Ralph Bannister stood in the doorway, his hand holding the doorknob: a man of middle height, square, broad shoulders, in a well-fitting tuxedo. He had a lot of grey-black hair taken straight back off a wide, high forehead. His eyes were small and deep set, and there were heavy dark bags under them which gave him a permanently tired look; as if he got very little sleep. His mouth was pale and thin, and his skin was without colour. I had seen him a few times in the better restaurants downtown, but I had never spoken to him, and I didn't think he had ever noticed me. He wasn't the kind of man to notice people, nor could you imagine him to be the owner of a gaudy nighterie like L'Etoile. He looked more like a successful criminal lawyer or maybe a specialist in some obscure disease.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Anita's head turn slowly until she was looking at Bannister, and I saw her fists clench and her knuckles turn white.

He paid her no attention. His small, expressionless eyes ran over me, and his stillness managed to create a sharp atmosphere of menace.

'What do you know about the necklace?' he asked. His voice subdued and quiet, like a churchwarden apologizing for giving you a draughty pew.

'You want to keep out of this,' I said. 'Unless you're interested in murder.'

'Where is the necklace?' he asked.

'Under lock and key. Did she tell you she's mixed up in murder? Keeping her here makes you an accessory. But maybe a little thing like that doesn't bother you.'

He turned his expressionless eyes to Anita.

'Is this the man you were telling me about?'

She nodded, rigid with terror. The veins in her neck stood out like knotted cords.

He turned back to me.

'How did you get in here?'

I wasn't going to get Gail Bolus into trouble if I could help it, so I said, 'I walked in - what's to stop me?'

His small dark eyes examined my face, shifted away. His pale mouth tightened as he moved across the room. All his movements were leisurely, like the movements of a man with a bad heart. He touched the bellpush in the wall, then moved away to take up a position in the middle of the room.

I thought of the .25 under the bed. I felt a sudden need for it, but unless I went down on hands and knees and crawled half under the bed there was no way of getting it. I didn't think Bannister, for all his languid airs, would stand by passively while I was crawling under the bed. I decided regretfully

to wait and see what happened. I didn't have to wait long. The door jerked open and Gates came in. He took one look at me and a gun jumped into his hand.

Bannister said, 'How did he get in here?'

Gates moved into the room. There was a ferocious look of rage on his thin, bony face.

'Gail Bolus brought him.' Rage made his voice unsteady.

Flat feet came thumping along the corridor and Shannon appeared in the doorway. His eyes jumped from Bannister to me and back to Bannister again. I could see the great lumpy muscles in his shoulders suddenly form into knots under his ill-fitting tuxedo.

'Get her,' Bannister said.

Shannon went quickly away down the corridor, making a thudding noise like a man walking on stilts.

Bannister waved a hand at Anita.

'Go into the other room.'

She got off the bed.

'I don't know what he's talking about,' she said in a cold, tight voice. 'lie's lying. He's trying to get me into trouble.'

Bannister looked at her the way you might look at a dead cat you've found lying in the gutter.

'Go into the other room,' he said in his churchwarden voice.

She went.

As the door clicked shut Bannister went on to Gates. 'I said no one was to come up here. One more slip like this and you're through. You and Shannon.'

Gates didn't say anything. He didn't even look at Bannister. His beady, black eyes were fixed on me, and he looked as if he could eat me.

'Why don't you use your head and keep out of this?' I said to Bannister. 'Turn Mrs. Cerf over to me and you'll hear no more about it.'

He eyed me over and sat down in the only armchair in the room. His movements were like those of an old man who is stiff in the joints and very tired.

'It's not going to be as easy as that,' he said.

Shannon's flat feet came thumping along the corridor.

The door swung open and Miss Bolus came in. Shannon followed her in, pushed the door shut and set his back against it.

Miss Bolus looked calm and indifferent. Her chinky eyes took in the scene. They shifted from Gates and his gun to me, to Bannister and to me again.

'Hello,' she said, brightly. 'How did you get up here, and what's the idea of the gun?'

Bannister pointed a long white finger at me.

'Did you bring him here?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said, and her eyebrows went up. 'Don't you want custom?'

'Not his, nor yours. I always thought you'd turn out to be a trouble maker.'

'How nice!' She laughed. 'I'm so glad you're not disappointed. But do stop acting like Adolphe Menjou and tell your cheap bouncer to put away his gun.' She looked over at me. 'Come on. Let's get out of here. They can't stop us.'

It was a brave little speech, but it didn't inspire me with a lot of confidence. Up to now I hadn't moved a fraction of an inch. I didn't like the hungry, ferocious expression in Gates's eyes. I had a feeling that if I gave him the slightest opportunity he would start spraying lead.

'Shoot if he moves,' Bannister said to Gates, and made a sign to Shannon: a flicking movement with his wrist.

Shannon sidled up to Miss Bolus, tapped her on her bare shoulder. As she jerked away and turned angrily, he hit her on the side of the jaw. It was a punch that would have put Joe Louis on his back. Miss Bolus went across the room as if she had been caught up by the blast of an exploding bomb.

She smashed into the dressing table. One limp arm scattered the bottles and powders with a crash of glass to the floor. The dressing table rocked and shot away from her, leaving her lying amid broken bottles; a trickle of blood ran down her face from a cut above her eye. She lay still, her eyes half-open, motionless.

All this happened in a second or so. Gates, who hadn't seen Bannister's signal, was startled and shifted his eyes from me to Miss Bolus.

I sprang at him, my right hand smashing down on his wrist. The gun jumped out of his hand and went sliding across the carpet to land up at Bannister's feet.

Gates let out a startled oath, clutched at his wrist and staggered forward. I socked him in the face and sent him reeling across the room as Shannon closed in on me. He hit me in the body with his left. It

was like being hit with the buffer of a train. I ducked under the right cross that came whistling through the air and slammed a couple of quick ones into a body that felt like a sack of concrete. Shannon grunted and gave ground. I jumped out of range as Gates came staggering across the room at me. I tapped him on the bridge of his nose and then sank a hard one into his midriff—he went down on hands and knees. Shannon came charging in and I spun round a fraction late. I managed to duck under his left, but walked into a right hook that came up from the floor. A blinding flash of light exploded before my eyes and I went down into a pit that had no bottom.

II

A single, naked electric-light bulb hung from a ceiling that had big patches of damp on it. It's hard, bright light cast sharp etched shadows on the brick wall opposite me: the shadows of two men playing cards on an upturned packing case.

I closed my eyes against the light and tried to remember what had happened. The scene in the bedroom came back bit by bit. I wondered where Miss Bolus was. I opened my eyes and without turning my head looked around the room.

As far as I could see the room was big: some kind of cellar, and full of packing cases. There were no windows, and by the damp ceiling and the sweating walls I guessed it was well underground. I turned my attention to the two shadows on the opposite wall: Shannon and Gates. The smoke from their cigarettes moved up the wall in spirals. Gates was shuffling the cards, and as I watched, he began to deal, his hand flicking the cards across the packing case so quickly that the shadows of his hand and the cards falling on the packing case were moving blurs on the wall.

I was lying on the bare springs of a creaky iron bedstead.

They hadn't bothered to tie me, and by now the effects of Shannon's punch were wearing off. But I didn't want them to have any warning I was ready to start trouble until my head cleared, so I lay quiet. I thought of Gates and his gun.

That was something that had to be risked. If I could put Shannon out of action I felt confident I could handle Gates, but Shannon presented a problem. I would have to hit him not hard enough to put him out. From the scar tissue on his face he had taken plenty of punches in his time, and I didn't kid myself I could hit him any harder than he had been hit before.

Then suddenly, as if he had picked up my thought waves, Gates said, 'It's about time this punk came to. The boss wants to talk to him.'

'When I hit them, they stay hit,' Shannon said in a complacent growl. 'What's the matter with you?' A

sneer crept into his voice. 'I thought you liked losing your dough.'

I turned my head slowly. They were sitting about three yards from me to the rear of the head of the bed. I didn't expect them to be that close: the shadows were deceptive.

My movement attracted Gates's attention. He swung round as I put my one hand on the springs to give me a lever for my spring and his gun swung up and on me.

'Don't try anything funny,' he said in his grating voice. 'Or it'll be too bad for you.'

I looked at him and then at Shannon, who had put down his cards and was easing the great ropey muscles in his shoulders.

'Better tell the boss,' Gates said, without taking his eyes off me. 'I'll watch him.'

Shannon got up, gave me a hard scowl and went pounding across the concrete floor to a door at the far end of the cellar.

'What's happened to Gail Bolus?' I asked and touched the lump on my jaw with tender fingers.

'You don't want to worry about her,' Gates said. 'It's you you want to worry about.'

I decided it wouldn't be safe to jump him. There was a bleak look in his eyes that told me he'd shoot if he had to, and by the way he held the gun I hadn't a hope that he'd miss.

'All the same I worry about her,' I said. 'I have that kind of a mind. Just where is she?'

'She's being taken care of,' he returned, and a thin smile twisted his lips. 'You pipe down and take it easy unless you want a smack in the puss with this rod.'

I glanced at my wristwatch. It was twenty minutes to eleven. That meant I had been in the club a little over an hour and a half. I had no idea what was coming, but I didn't have to be clairvoyant to know whatever it was wouldn't be pleasant.

Except for an occasional drip of water from a leaky tap in the distant corner of a cellar there was no more sound for several minutes. Gates held the gun on me and smoked.

During those minutes he didn't once look away or give me the slightest hope of surprising him.

The cellar door swung open and Bannister came in, followed by Shannon. Bannister moved across the floor slowly, his hands in his pockets, his eyes distant and cold. He stood at the foot of the bed and looked at me. Shannon moved to the head of the bed. He was close enough for me to smell the odour of stale tobacco and sweat that clung to his clothes.

Bannister's first words came as a complete surprise to me.

He said, 'I owe you an apology, Mr. Malloy. Why didn't you tell me who you were? I'm sorry. I mistook you for someone else.'

I swung my legs off the bed and ran my fingers over the side of my face.

'You didn't give me much time to introduce myself, did you?'

'You had no business to be on the third floor. I was misled by Mrs. Cerf. I'm sorry you were manhandled. You're free to go just as soon as you are ready.'

'Then how would it be if Weasel-face put away his rod?' I asked.

Gates snarled at me, but at a sign from Bannister he shoved his gun into its holster and moved away to glower at me from the shadows.

'That's fine,' I said. 'Now, where's Mrs. Cerf?'

'She's gone. I've thrown her out.'

'Where's she gone to?'

'I don't know. I told her to pack and take her car and get out. She left about ten minutes ago.' He offered me a cigarette from a leather case. 'I'm interested in the necklace,' he said. 'You seem to know something about it.'

I took the cigarette, lit it and blew the smoke at him.

'Why?' I asked. 'What's the necklace to you?'

'She promised it to me,' he said, and pulled thoughtfully at his long, thin nose. 'That's why I had her here.'

'You mean - Mrs. Cerf?'

'Yes. A couple of nights ago she came to see me. She said she needed protection and was willing to pay for it. She wanted a room in the club for a week. She offered five hundred dollars.' A bleak little smile came to his grey face. 'It wasn't enough. She was obviously in trouble, and besides she's married to a millionaire. I finally agreed to give her a room and protection, and in return she promised me the necklace. I'm being quite frank with you, you see. But when she arrived last night she said the necklace had been stolen. I thought she was lying, but I wasn't sure. She was in a bad way: hysterical and frightened. She wouldn't say why. I let her stay the night. We were negotiating terms when you interrupted us. The necklace belongs to me. At least I have the first claim. Where is it?'

'You wouldn't want it,' I said. 'It was found in the room of a girl who was murdered last night. Dana Lewis. You've read about her in the papers. The police don't know we have it, but they'll come

around to it sooner or later. I should forget about it quick. I should forget about Mrs. Cerf too.'

He drummed on his knee with white fingers, thinking, then he lifted his shoulders in a tired shrug.

'Who is Dana Lewis?' he asked. 'What has she to do with Mrs. Cerf?'

'Dana was one of my operators. Cerf hired her to watch h's wife. That's all I can tell you, and you can keep that to yourself too.'

You think she killed this girl?'

'I don't know. I don't think so, but I don't know.'

'Maybe I'd better forget the necklace,' he said, half to himself.

'What was frightening her?' I asked. 'You saw the way she acted. She was scared of something. What was it?'

'I don't know. She was like that all the time she was here Every time she heard someone in the corridor she would start out of her chair. When I told her to get out, there was a look of death in her face. I was glad to see her go.'

'When she came to you she asked for protection - is that right?'

'She said a man she knew was pestering her, and she wanted to get out of his way for a while. She said he was dangerous. She wanted to be sure if he came to the club looking for her I'd take care of him That's why you were pushed around. I thought you were the fella she was scared of. When we went through your pockets and found who you were I guessed she had been lying.' He stood up. 'That's all. I have work to do. Keep clear of this place from now on. I don't want any more of this kind of trouble.'

I got off the bed.

'How about Gail Bolus?' I asked.

'She's in your car, waiting for you.'

'Doesn't she collect anything for that punch in the jaw? She could sue for assault.'

Bannister gave a tired smile.

'She could but she won't. We know her. She's been cheating the house for weeks. A punch on the jaw will do her good. I hope so anyway.'

'If that's how you feel about it,' I said and shrugged.

‘Which way do I go?’

‘Show him,’ Bannister said to Shannon. ‘And neither the girl nor Malloy is to come here again. Understand?’

I went across to the door, opened it and found myself in a dimly lit passage. Shannon came pounding after me.

‘Straight ahead,’ he said. ‘The door at the far end takes you to the car park. Now scam out of here, and don’t show your mug here unless you want it flattened.’

I turned and grinned at him.

‘I won’t,’ I said, ‘and don’t you punch any more girls in the jaw. One of them might get annoyed.’

He was beginning a slow, leering smile when I hit him. I didn’t give him a chance to duck. The punch travelled about four inches, and it had all my weight behind it. My fist bounced against the side of his jaw with a crack like the snapping of dry wood. As he began to fall I slammed in another punch to the same spot and stood back to watch him fold up on the floor. Then I grabbed his arm and rolled him over on his back. I had to work fast. Gates might come out to see what the row was about. When I had him on his back, I placed the heel of my shoe squarely on his nose and mouth and put my weight on it.

If there’s one thing that makes me madder than another it’s the louse who hits women.

III

I pulled up outside the gates of the Santa Rosa Estate, and tapped my horn button. It was now a little after one o’clock in the morning, and I wasn’t sure whether there’d be a guard on duty at that hour. There was, and he wasn’t Comrade Mills. The guardhouse door opened and a tall, thickset man in a peaked cap and knee boots, opened one of the gates and came out.

‘Is Mr. Cerf back yet?’ I asked as he threw the beam of a powerful flashlight on me.

‘Well, he’s back, but I don’t know if he’s seeing anyone. It’s kind of late, mister. Who are you?’

I told him.

‘Stick around,’ he said. ‘I’ll find out,’ and he went back into the guard house.

I got out of the car and fidgeted around like an expectant father waiting for news. Since leaving L’Etoile I had taken Miss Bolus to her two-room apartment on Jefferson Avenue, and had driven right

over to the Santa Rosa Estate in the hope that Anita Cerf had come home, or at next best Cerf would know where she was.

The guard returned.

‘Yeah, he’s in and will see you,’ he said. ‘I’ll open the gates and you can drive up.’

I drove up.

The house was in darkness, but the regal looking butler was waiting on the doorstep as I ran up the steps. He took my hat without a word. His back was stiff with disapproval.

Maybe he didn’t like me keeping him out of bed, or maybe he just didn’t like me.

We tramped through the big hall, along the passage lined on either side with suits of armour, into the elevator that took us up to the second floor, along another mile of corridor to Cerf’s study.

The butler opened the study door and said in a low, dismal voice, ‘Mr. Malloy, sir,’ ushered me in and shut the door behind me.

Cerf was sitting in a big armchair, a cigar between his fingers, a book open on his knee. As I crossed the room towards him, he closed the book and placed it on the table beside him.

‘Well? What do you want?’ he demanded, as aggressive as a pneumatic drill.

‘I want Mrs. Cerf, and I want her quick,’ I snapped back, matching his tone.

He stiffened and the mauve in his face deepened.

‘We’re not going over that again. I told that girl what would happen if you tried to drag Mrs. Cerf into this. If that’s all you want you can get out!’

I said, ‘That was this morning. A lot of things have happened since then. I’ve dug up something that connects your wife with the murder. It’s just a matter of time before the police get on to it too.’

‘What have you dug up?’

‘It’s a long story. Where’s Mrs. Cerf?’

‘She’s out of town. I’m keeping her out of this, Malloy. You can forget Mrs. Cerf. You’ll have no opportunity to talk to her. I’ll see to that.’

‘I’ve already talked to her.’

The cigar slipped out of his fingers and dropped to the floor. Muttering under his breath he bent to pick it up and remained bent, his face hidden for much longer than it takes to pick up a cigar. When he

finally straightened, his nice mauve sun-tanned complexion was a shade paler, and there was a worried look in his eyes.

‘You’ve . . . what?’

“That’s right,” I said, pulled up a chair and sat down. ‘You told Miss Bensinger this morning you were sending Mrs. Cerf out of town. The truth was, Mr. Cerf, you didn’t see your wife after she had gone out last night, and I don’t think you have an idea where she spent the night. You think she’s connected with Dana Lewis’s death. You may even think she shot Dana, and you’re trying to cover her up. It won’t work. And I’ll tell you why. Mrs. Cerf came to see me last night a little after ten o’clock. She wanted to know why she was being watched. I didn’t tell her. She offered a bribe, but I referred her to you. She left my place and contacted Dana Lewis. The two of them went to Dana’s apartment. They arrived there about eleven-thirty. They were seen together. About twenty minutes later, Mrs. Cerf left. She took a taxi to East Beach. Nearly an hour later Dana had a phone call, and she left her apartment. She was later discovered by a guy named Owen Leadbetter, shot to death in some shrubs out at East Beach. One of my operators went to her apartment to make certain there was nothing in the apartment that would connect you with her murder. He found Mrs. Cerf’s necklace under Dana’s mattress.’

He had been listening to all this in motionless silence. His face had been as expressionless as the wall behind his head, but the reference to the diamond necklace was a little too much for him. The muscles in his face went suddenly slack and he nearly dropped his cigar again.

‘That’s a lie,’ he said, and sounded as if he were speaking through clenched teeth.

‘I have the necklace, Mr. Cerf. The situation is tricky because we had no business to take it from the apartment. But I’m trying to keep you clear of police inquiries. I have accepted you as a client, and I’ll maintain our guarantee of secrecy as long as I can, but how long that will be depends on how fast I can find Mrs. Cerf.’

He sat staring at me, his fists clenched and an ugly glitter in his eyes, but he didn’t say anything.

‘To make matters worse there’s another murder,’ I went on. ‘Leadbetter, who was responsible for finding Dana’s body, was shot this afternoon. He either saw the murder committed or else the murderer. I think he was trying to blackmail the murderer and the murderer silenced him. Anyway he was shot this afternoon.’

Cerf made a sudden furious gesture with his hand, spilling ash over his trousers.

‘I must have been crazy to have employed you!’ he exploded, his face turning a deep purple. ‘I won’t be dragged into this! Do you understand? I’ll sue you! Just because this blasted woman gets shot...’

‘Dana Lewis was shot because you employed her to watch your wife,’ I broke in curtly. ‘And you know it! If it wasn’t for your wife, the girl would be alive now. It’s your responsibility as much as mine.’

He glared at me, muttering something under his breath, and drummed on the arm of his chair with angry fingers.

‘I don’t intend to accept the responsibility,’ he said.

‘If I decide to tell the police all I know, you’ll have to accept it.’

He touched his lips with the tip of his tongue, scowled down at his immaculate shoes and said in a more subdued voice, ‘Now look, Malloy, you’ve got to keep me out of this. I have my daughter to think of.’

‘Let’s think of Mrs. Cerf. Where is she?’

‘You said just now you have talked to her,’ Cerf said, looking up sharply. ‘Why ask me?’

‘Our talk was interrupted. I traced her to L’Etoile night club. She was hiding there. Has she come here?’

He shook his head.

‘Have you heard from her?’

‘No.’

‘Have you any idea where she could have gone?’

‘No.’

He was beginning to calm down now and the worried expression had come back.

He said, ‘She was at this night club all last night?’

‘Yes. Her story to Bannister - he owns the place - was that some man was pestering her and she wanted to keep out of his way. She offered her necklace to Bannister in return for protection, but Bannister didn’t get the necklace so he threw her out.’

‘This is fantastic,’ he muttered, getting to his feet. ‘Who’s the man who is pestering her?’

‘That’s something I have to find out. Maybe the guy who’s blackmailing her.’

He began to pace up and down, paused suddenly and looked at me.

‘You don’t think she shot this girl?’

I gave him a sour smile.

‘I don’t. Both Dana and Leadbetter were shot with a .45. Leadbetter was shot at about twenty yards range. I doubt whether any woman could hit a haystack at that range with a .45, let alone a target as small as a man’s head. But I’m not saying the police wouldn’t try to make a case against her. The way she’s behaving makes her suspect number one.’

‘I was a fool to have married her,’ he said, grinding his clenched fist into his palm. He went on, ‘Keep me out of this, Malloy. I’ve got to think of my daughter. I know I’ve been unreasonable, but surely you can understand my position? If I can do anything to help I’ll do it. But keep this away from the police and the newspapers.’

‘I’ll do what I can,’ I said. ‘But I must find Mrs. Cerf. Is there any way of stopping her money? If you can cut off her money so she’ll come to you . . .’

‘I can do that, and I will,’ he said. ‘I’ll see the bank tomorrow.’

I got to my feet.

‘It’s getting late. I won’t keep you any longer, Mr. Cerf. One more thing. I’d like my cheque.’

He hesitated, then went over to his desk, sat down and wrote out a cheque.

‘Here,’ he said, handing it to me. ‘Get me out of this mess, Malloy, and I’ll pay again.’

I slid the cheque into my pocket.

‘If I can’t get you out of it I’ll return the money,’ I said, and made for the door, pausing to ask, ‘How long have you had Mills in your employment?’

He looked startled.

‘Mills? Why? Has he anything to do with this business?’

‘I don’t know. I hear he lives in a very fancy style. I’m wondering if he is the fella who’s blackmailing Mrs. Cerf.’

‘Mills?’ He rubbed his fleshy chin, staring at me. ‘I don’t know anything about him. He’s been with me about a month or so. Franklin, my butler, engages the staff. Do you want me to talk to him?’

‘Not yet. I’ll dig up some more dirt on Mills first. Leave him to me. And if you hear anything of Mrs. Cerf will you get in touch with my office?’

He said he would, and as I moved to the door, he went on, ‘I’m sorry for the way I have acted, Malloy, and I appreciate all you’ve done up to now to keep me clear of this bus ness.’

I said I’d keep on with the job, and for him not to worry.

This new attitude of his made a nice change from being bawled out, but I knew he was piping down because he had to and not because he wanted to. I left him standing with his back to the fireplace, his dead cigar clenched tightly between finger and thumb and a sick look on his solid well-fed face.

The butler, Franklin, was hovering at the far end of the corridor. As soon as he saw me come out of the room he came silently towards me.

‘Miss Natalie is asking for you, sir,’ he said, disapproving as a bishop at a bubble dance. ‘If you will come this way.’

That was something I hadn’t expected, but I followed his ramrod back down the corridor to a door opposite the elevator. He tapped on the door, opened it and said, ‘Mr.

Malloy, madam,’ in a voice covered with frost and stood aside as I walked into a big, high-ceilinged room, lit by a bedside lamp that threw a soft light on the divan bed and wrapped the rest of the room in shadows.

Natalie Cerf lay in the bed. She had on black pyjamas, and her hands lay folded on the lilac-coloured sheet. Her dark, glossy hair was arranged on the lilac pillow to frame her thin, pinched face. Her dark eyes looked at me with the same searching scrutiny as when we had first met, giving me the same feeling that she could read the letters in my wallet and count the small change in my pockets.

I moved to the foot of the bed and waited. She remained motionless, staring at me until the bedroom door closed softly, and the faint sound of Franklin’s footsteps faded away down the corridor. Then she said in her hard, tight little voice, ‘Have you found her?’

I shook my head.

‘Not yet.’

‘Have you tried L’Etoile night club?’

‘Do you think she’s there?’

She gave a quick nod of her head.

‘Either there or with George Barclay. There’s, nowhere else for her to go.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

A little sneer lifted the corners of her drooping lips.

‘I know her. She’s in trouble, isn’t she?’ Satisfaction gleamed in the dark eyes. ‘She has no one to go to except Barclay or that man at L’Etoile.’

‘What makes you think she’s in trouble, Miss Cerf?’

‘She murdered that woman operator of yours. Perhaps you don’t call that trouble?’

‘We don’t know she did. Do you?’

‘She’s been practising with a gun.’

‘What kind of a gun?’

She made an irritable little shrug.

‘A revolver. What does it matter? For the past week she’s been shooting at a target out at East Beach.’

‘How do you know that?’

The dark eyes shifted away from my face.

‘I’ve had her watched — ever since she came here.’

I wondered if Mills had done the watching.

I said, ‘Because a woman shoots at a target it doesn’t follow she’s a murderess.’

‘Then why is she hiding? Why doesn’t she come back here? It would take a lot to keep her away from all the things Father has given her, and that’s what she is doing.’

‘There may be another reason. What do you know about Barclay?’

Again the little sneer came to her mouth.

‘He’s her lover. She was always going to his place.’

‘She was being blackmailed; did you know?’

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘Your father thinks so.’

‘He’s trying to find an excuse for her. She’s been giving her money to her lovers.’

‘All right. I’ll have another talk to Barclay.’

‘You’ve seen him?’ Her eyebrows came down in a sharp frown.

‘I get around, Miss Cerf. Does your father know about Barclay?’

She shook her head.

‘Did he tell you he found a suitcase in her cupboard full of knick-knacks taken from his friends?’ I said.

‘He didn’t have to tell me. She stole some of my things. She is a thief.’

‘You hate her, don’t you?’

The thin hands, like the claws of a bird, clenched into fists.

‘I don’t like her,’ she said in a carefully controlled voice.

‘The suitcase could have been planted in her cupboard. It’s been done before.’

‘You are a fool if you believe that. She’s a thief. Even Franklin has missed things from his room. We all know she’s a thief.’

‘Has Mills missed anything?’

Her mouth tightened and a flash of anger showed in her eyes.

‘He may have.’

‘But he would have told you, wouldn’t he?’

‘He would have told Franklin.’

‘Mills acted as Mrs. Cerf’s chauffeur, didn’t he?’

A faint spot of colour came into the pinched cheeks.

‘What if he did?’

‘Well, she’s attractive. He seems to have plenty of spare cash. I was wondering if they got together at any time.’

‘Got together for what?’ she asked, a little hiss in her voice.

‘I should have thought you would have been told about the facts of life by now, Miss Cerf.’

She took a handkerchief from under her pillow and began to nibble at it. Her lipstick made little red smears on the white cambric.

‘I don’t like your manner,’ she said.

‘Few people do, but they get used to it,’ I returned, wondering if I had imagined a slight movement of the long drapes that covered the window near the bed. I was careful not to look in that direction but I

began to listen intently.

She said, 'When you find her, are you going to hand her over to the police?'

'Is that what you want me to do?'

'That's not the point. Are you or aren't you?'

'If I'm sure she shot Dana Lewis, I shall. But I'll have to be sure first.'

'Aren't you sure?' She sounded surprised.

'I haven't discovered the motive. Why should she shoot her? Tell me that and I might be convinced.'

'My father's settled money on her. In two years' time, if she is still with him, she is to come in to a great deal of money.' She lifted her head to look at me, and her long, dark tresses fell back from her face. 'Isn't that good enough for a motive?'

'You mean Barclay would be evidence for a divorce, and she would lose the money, and that's why Dana was shot?'

'It's plain enough, isn't it?'

'But Barclay has money.'

'Not enough. You don't know her like I do. She wouldn't want to be dependent on Barclay: not if she could help it.'

'It still doesn't make sense.' I was sure now I could hear someone breathing behind the curtained recess. I felt a creepy sensation run up my spine. 'If she was so determined to have the money she would have come back here after the shooting. By going to Bannister she's gypped herself out of it.'

'She wouldn't have gone to Bannister unless something had gone wrong: unless she had been seen.'

'For someone who can't get around, Miss Cerf, you seem to keep very well informed.'

'Yes.' She met my eyes calmly. 'As I can't get about I take precautions. I hope you will think over what I have told you. I want to go to sleep now. I'm tired.' She switched on the tired, lonely look. 'You should thank me. I've told you who murdered your friend. You should be able to do the rest.' She waved her hand to the door. 'Franklin will show you the way out. I don't want to talk anymore.'

'If you get any other ideas about Mrs. Cerf you might let me know. So far, you're doing fine,' I said.

'I don't want to talk anymore,' she repeated firmly and closed her eyes, withdrawing her hands from above the sheet and hiding them from sight.

By now I had enough experience of her ways not to waste any more time on her. Anyway I was tired too. It had been a long day and a longer night. I crossed the room to the door.

As I opened it I took a quick look at the window recess.

I couldn't see much because of the shadows, but I did catch a glimpse of something that glittered: something that could have been a shiny toe-cap of a knee-boot: the kind of boot Comrade Mills liked to wear. I wondered if Natalie knew he was there, and decided she probably did.

IV

In the distance a car backfired, making me jump. The sound reminded me of gunfire, and I told myself irritably that if I was going to start jumping out of my skin every time a car backfired I'd better give up my job and become a dancing master at an academy for young ladies. And as soon as the idea dropped into my mind, I wondered if I wouldn't be a lot better off.

I sat in the car, bumping over the uneven beach road that led to my cabin. I was in no hurry and drove slowly. There was a moon like a grapefruit hanging in the sky, no stars and no clouds. The heat from the sun still clung to the sandy road, but there was a faint breeze coming off the sea that kept the temperature pleasant. The headlights of my car made a big white glare that bounced on the sand and came back at me.

I had been doing a lot of heavy thinking while I drove from the Santa Rosa Estate, and I was beginning to get a few ideas: the first tangible ideas I had had since the murder. I thought it would be nice to get home, mix myself a long drink with plenty of ice in it and sit out on the verandah and sort these ideas over. I wasn't tired anymore. I decided to see the dawn come up over the hills, think over my ideas and then go to bed. On the face of it it seemed a pretty good programme, and I speeded up the car and went jolting over the sandy road, past the other beach cabins that were in darkness, along the half-mile of vacant building plots that separated my cabin from the rest of them, up the sharp little hill where I had a clear view of my cabin in the moonlight.

A light streamed out from my open verandah doors.

When I had left the place with Miss Bolus I had turned off the lights and locked the doors. Now the lights were on and the doors open. It occurred to me as I pulled up outside the gate that if this sort of thing was going to continue I might just as well have a hotel sign hoisted on the roof. I thought maybe Jack Kerman had got back from Los Angeles or Paula was waiting to talk to me or even Benny had come back from Frisco with news. I didn't think anything was wrong until I reached the steps to the verandah, then I came to an abrupt halt.

Grey smoke hung in the air, drifted out through the open doorway: smoke that smelt of gunpowder. I

remembered the car that had backfired, and felt suddenly spooked.

I climbed the steps to the verandah like an old man with gout: tiptoed to the open door.

The smell of gunpowder was strong in the room. On the carpet by the open window was a .45 Colt automatic. That was the first thing I saw. I looked from the Colt to the casting couch at the far end of the room and the hairs at the back of my neck bristled. Lying on the couch was a blonde woman in a white silk blouse and brick-red slacks. Blood flowed from a hole in her forehead and soaked into the big yellow cushion that had supported a number of female heads in its time. By the looks of it now the cushion wasn't likely to support any more heads.

I went slowly across the room and stood over her. She was dead of course. A .45 does a job of work. It is a little crude, a little too heavy and needs a strong wrist, but in the right hands it does do a job of work. Terror still lurked in her eyes.

A face framed in blood isn't pretty: not even Anita Cerf's beauty could ride above the smashed forehead and the blood.

I was staring down at her when the shadow of a man appeared on the opposite wall: the shadow of a man in a slouch hat, his arm raised and a blunt something in his fist. It all happened very quickly. I saw the shadow and heard the swish of the descending sap simultaneously and I ducked; but much, much too late. Then the top of my head seemed to fly off, and I felt myself falling.

chapter six



I

The sun crept around the edges of the blind and lay across the floor in two long, bright bands. In the hot, airless room there was a smell of whisky strong enough to get tight on, and it seemed to come from me: an overpowering smell as if I had fallen into a vat of the stuff and had taken a swim in it.

I didn't like it. I didn't like myself. My head felt like hell.

The bed on which I was lying was too soft and too hot. I kept thinking of a woman's face framed in blood with a hole in her forehead through which you could stick your finger, and I didn't like that either.

I looked at the two bright bands of sunlight on the floor. I wasn't focusing well, but the carpet seemed familiar. There were holes in it burned by the cigarettes I had dropped on it.

There was a ragged tear in it near the window where Benny's spaniel pup had chewed it. It wasn't much of a carpet, but it was a relief to see it, for it meant I was in my room and on my bed and the woman's face framed in blood was probably a nightmare. Probably...

A man's voice said, 'He stinks like a distillery, and he's as soused as a mackerel.' A voice that sent a chill down my spine. Brandon's voice. 'Who's the woman out there?' the voice went on. 'Ever seen her before?'

Mifflin said, 'She's a new one on me.'

I looked through my eyelashes. They were there all right.

Brandon was sitting on a chair and Mifflin stood at the foot of the bed.

I kept still and sweated. The back of my head felt as if the bone had been removed. It felt pulpy and soft as if there was a hole there: a hole that let in the draught that suddenly played about my pillow.

Mifflin had opened a window by my bed. He had pulled the blind aside to get at the window and a lot of hot, bright sunshine fell on my face, sending shooting pains into my skull.

I thought of Anita Cerf lying out there on the casting couch and the bloodstained yellow cushion and the Colt automatic. A beautiful setup for Brandon to walk into. A red-handed, no alibi, God's gift to a lazy cop setup. Even Brandon wouldn't look far for the killer. I thought of the way he had looked at me when he was questioning me about Dana's death.

'But she had to pass your place to get to where she was killed, didn't she? It seems funny to me she didn't look in on you.'

If a little thing like that seemed funny to him, imagine the bang he was getting out of a setup like this.

The same gun. Dana, Leadbetter and now Anita. All shot through the head. The same method; the same killer.

Motive? I didn't kid myself that a little thing like a motive would stop Brandon. Ever since he had been in office the police administration had been sagging like a bed with worn-out springs. If he wanted to stop awkward questions, muzzle the Press, quiet the flutterings of the men who had put him in the job he had to solve these murders quick. He'd cook up some motive. He wouldn't miss out on a chance like this.

'Hey! Malloy! Wake up!' Mifflin bawled. His heavy hand fell on my shoulder and shook me. Bright lights burst before my eyes, and the pain in my head went shooting down to my heels and back to my head like a runaway roller-coaster.

I threw off his hand and sat up, only to clap my hands to my head and bend over, groaning.

'Snap out of it!' Mifflin urged. 'We want to talk to you. Hey! Malloy! Pull yourself together!'

'What do you think I'm doing - a fan dance?' I snarled, and swung my feet to the floor.

'What have you been up to?' Brandon demanded, leaning forward to peer at me. 'What kind of drunk-up is this?'

I squeezed my aching head between fingertips and peered back at him. He looked fat, well fed and well shaven. His linen was immaculate; his shoes gleamed in the sunshine, and he looked every inch the corrupt policeman. In comparison I must have looked like hell. My fingers rasped my unshaven jaw, the awful stink of whisky fumes made me feel sick and my evening dress shirt stuck to my chest.

'What do you want?' I asked, as if I didn't know. 'Who let you in?'

‘Never mind who let us in,’ he barked and brandished his half-smoked cigar at me. It smelt as if he had picked it out of an ashcan on his way over. ‘What’s going on here? Who’s that woman out there?’

Not quite the right note, I thought, puzzled. Maybe these two birds were hard-boiled, but not so hard-boiled that they could be calm about a killing like the killing in the other room. And they were calm: disapproving, censorious and smug, like neither of them had ever touched a drop in their lives, but calm.

‘Is there a woman out there?’ I asked.

Not very bright, but the best I could manage under the circumstances. At least it was non-committal.

‘What’s the matter with this guy?’ Brandon demanded, and looked over at Mifflin.

‘He’s drunk,’ Mifflin said stolidly. ‘There’s nothing else the matter with him.’

‘I’m beginning to wonder,’ Brandon said. ‘Get that woman in here.’

It came out of me before I could stop it.

‘No! I don’t want to see her! I don’t...’

The kind of voice you hear gangsters use on the movies when they’ve been cornered and are about to get the works. I snapped it off short, but it must have been pretty good because it brought Brandon to his feet and turned Mifflin as still as the Graven Image.

Then a voice said from the doorway. ‘What are you doing with him? Can’t you see he has the shakes?’

And there was Miss Bolus in a fawn linen frock, her red hair caught up with a green ribbon, and her chink eyes moving from Brandon to Mifflin and to me and back again.

‘I told you not to barge in on him,’ she went on, leaning her hips against the door frame, one hand touching her hair, pushing it into place. ‘Why can’t you leave him alone?’ She turned her head slightly to look at me. ‘Would you like a drink, honey? Or has the dog bitten you too hard?’

‘He doesn’t want a drink,’ Brandon said. ‘What did he mean, saying he didn’t want to see you? What goes on around here?’

I thought maybe my mind had given way. Right behind Miss Bolus, in the other room, was the casting couch. From where she stood, if she looked over her shoulder, she could see it. She must have seen what was on it as she came to my bedroom door. Brandon must have seen it. Mifflin must have seen it. And yet here they were as calm as three oysters on the ocean bed, making no attempt to put on the hand-cuffs, telling me I was drunk, and even offering me more drink.

Brandon was saying something as I pushed myself off the bed. But I didn’t listen. I had to see what

was going on in the other room. I hoisted myself to my feet. I felt like a diver trying to walk on the floor of the sea without the sea being there.

Brandon suddenly stopped talking. None of them moved.

Maybe they sensed something of what was going on in my mind. Maybe they didn't like the way I looked. If I looked anything like the way I felt I must have been something to see. They watched me crawl across the room. Captain Webb on the last lap of his Channel swim had nothing on me; but I got to the door.

Miss Bolus put her hand on my arm. Her fingers dug into my muscles, but I wasn't in the mood for warnings and I shoved her aside. All I wanted to do was to look into the other room; to look at Anita Cerf lying on my casting couch with her face framed in blood and a hole in her head big enough for me to poke my finger in.

I looked into the other room and I looked at the casting couch and I felt the breath whistle through my locked teeth, and sweat start out on my face the way a boxer sweats when he has been hit far south of the line.

There was no Colt automatic lying on the carpet and no blonde woman on the casting couch. I here was no yellow cushion soaked in blood. No nothing — nothing at all.

II

I was back on the bed again. I didn't remember how I got there, but I was there and Miss Bolus was standing over me, a glass of whisky in her hand. As I half-struggled up, she bent over me, holding the whisky to my lips, and as I drank I found myself looking down the front of her dress. I must have been pretty bad, because she hadn't a brassiere on, and as soon as I saw she hadn't a brassiere on, I closed my eyes.

That's how bad I was.

I drank the whisky. There seemed a lot of it, but there was no bite to it, so it was easy to keep drinking until there was nothing more to drink. It must have been all right because as soon as Miss Bolus moved away I felt its effect. I felt it rushing around in my system like a sheep dog chasing up sheep, only it wasn't sheep the whisky was chasing, it was my nerves, and I could feel it pulling them this way and that, tightening them, disciplining them, bringing them back to their tough everyday standard. And after a minute or so although my head hurt still, I was suddenly and miraculously well again.

Cool fingers took the glass from my hand. Miss Bolus smiled at me.

‘I’ve seen the shakes a good many times in my young life,’ she said, ‘but nothing to compare to yours.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, and sat up slowly. ‘Let it be a lesson to you. It’s cured me. From now on—’ I broke off to stare at Brandon who sat on the straight-backed chair at the foot of the bed; his snake’s eyes missing nothing. ‘Hey!’ I exclaimed. ‘But I am seeing things. I’m seeing coppers. Look!’ I pointed.

‘Can you see coppers?’

‘I can see one,’ Miss Bolus said. ‘And the Police Captain. I wouldn’t call him a copper. He mightn’t like it.’

‘Cut out the funny stuff, Malloy,’ Brandon said bleakly.

‘We want to talk to you.’

‘Give me another drink,’ I said to Miss Bolus, and as she went across the room for the bottle, I said, ‘Who asked you in here, Brandon?’

‘All right, you can cut that out too,’ he said, glaring. ‘What’s going on here? Who’s this woman? What’s she doing here?’

I discovered suddenly that the front of my dress shirt was soaked with whisky and that explained where the awful stink came from. I got unsteadily to my feet, ripped off my collar and dropped it on the floor with a grimace of disgust.

‘And get me some coffee,’ I said as Miss Bolus came over with the whisky. ‘Strong enough to lie on and plenty of it.’

‘Did you hear what I said?’ Brandon snarled, starting out of his chair.

‘Sure, but that doesn’t mean you’ll get an answer,’ I said, sending Miss Bolus away with a wave of my hand. ‘You have no right here. What’s it to you who she is? What’s it to you what’s going on?’ While I was talking I stripped off my tuxedo and shirt. ‘I’m getting myself a shower. Stick around if you have to. I shan’t be long.’

It was only when I was opening the bathroom door that I wondered if the body was in there. I kept right on, shut the door and shot the bolt. No body. I reached out and pulled the shower curtain aside. Still no body. There was nowhere else to look, so I stripped off the rest of my clothes and got under the shower. Two minutes of hissing cold water cleared my head the way nothing else could have cleared it. I was beginning to get things under control. The electric clock on the wall told me it was twenty minutes past eleven. Anita Cerf had been shot at three forty-five a.m. I had been unconscious for nine hours. My fingers explored the back of my head. It was tender and felt a little soft, but so far as I could judge it was still all in one piece, and that was something to be thankful for.

The body was gone. That seemed pretty obvious. If it had been hidden anywhere in the cabin Brandon would have found it. Who had taken it, and why? I flicked the electric razor into life and began to shave. Why take the body away?

Why? Was the killer crazy? If he had left the body and the gun he could have been practically certain that Brandon would have nailed me for the murder. But maybe the gun could be traced. Was that it? Or maybe the killer hadn't taken the body. Maybe someone else had. Miss Bolus? I couldn't see Miss Bolus carrying away a body across her square young shoulders. She might have done. She had enough nerve, but I couldn't quite see her doing it. Who then? And who was the guy in the slouch hat who had sapped me? The killer?

That was as far as I got: not very far, but then I wasn't in the condition for brilliant deductions. Brandon hammered on the door.

'Come out of there, Malloy!' he shouted.

I put down the razor, felt my chin and decided it was smooth enough, slipped on a bath robe and opened the door.

Brandon was standing just outside. He looked as amiable as a tiger and a lot more ferocious.

'I've had enough of this,' he said violently. 'You either talk here or you'll come down to the station.'

'I'll talk here,' I said, moving over to the table where Miss Bolus had put the coffee. 'What is it?'

I could hear her humming in the kitchen. She wouldn't hum like that, I thought, pouring coffee, if she had seen Anita Cerf, let alone handled her. It couldn't have been her.

Who then?

Brandon said, 'Where's Benny?'

I wasn't expecting that one. I wasn't aware that he even knew Benny. I picked up the cup of coffee, held it a few inches below my nose and stared at him through the steam.

It was good strong coffee. The smell of it made my mouth water.

'You mean Ed Benny?'

'Yes. Where is he?'

'He's in San Francisco.'

'What's he doing there?'

'What's it to you?' I asked, sitting on the bed.

‘The San Francisco Police Department are asking.’

‘They are? Well, why don’t they ask him? What’s the idea?’

For no reason at all I felt a cold chill run up my spine. I put the cup of coffee down on the bedside table.

‘It’s no use asking him,’ Brandon said harshly. ‘He’s dead.’

The cold chill spread right across my back.

‘Benny? Dead?’ The voice didn’t sound like mine.

‘Yeah. The harbour police fished him out of Indian Basin,’

Brandon said, his eyes glued to my face. ‘His hands and feet were tied with piano wire. They reckoned he died around nine o’clock last night.’

III

I stood at the window and watched them go.

Brandon stamped down the path to the gate, the dead and chewed cigar pinched between clenched teeth and tight lips, an angry, frustrated look on his smooth, fat face. The uniformed cop who opened the car door for him, saluted, but even that didn’t seem to please him. He bundled himself into the car and glared back at the cabin as if he would like to set fire to it and kick the ashes into the sea.

Mifflin followed him into the car. Mifflin didn’t look angry, but he looked very thoughtful, and he was still apparently thinking when the car drove away.

I remained at the window, looking at the ocean without seeing it. Dana, Leadbetter, Anita and now Benny. The thing had suddenly gone mad: it wasn’t a murder case anymore. It was a massacre case.

I felt rather than heard Miss Bolus as she came to the door, and I could feel her watching me.

‘How did you get here?’ I asked without turning.

‘I called you around nine o’clock this morning,’ she said.

‘The operator said your receiver was off and no one was answering.’ She joined me at the window. ‘I hadn’t anything better to do so I came over. You were lying on the floor. The lights were on; the

doors open. I got you on to the bed and was trying to bring you round when I heard them drive up. I poured whisky over you and told them you had been celebrating. I kept them away from you as long as I could. I didn't want them to know you had been sapped. I didn't think you would want them to know either. I don't think they did, do you?'

'No.' I took a package of Camels from my pocket, shook out two, gave her one and lit up. 'The whisky was a good idea. You didn't see anyone else here when you came in?'

'There wasn't anyone else here. What happened?'

'Someone was waiting for me. I walked in, and, Bingo! That's all there was to it.'

She went over and began straightening the bed.

'You make it sound pretty simple,' she said.

'Being hit on the head with a sock full of sand is simple. There's nothing to it. You should try it some time.'

'Don't you have anyone to look after you?'

I had forgotten Tony, my Filipino boy, then I remembered it was Sunday. He didn't come in on Sundays. That was a break. I wouldn't have liked him to have walked in here and found me lying on the floor. He was a respectable boy. He would probably have quit.

'Not on Sundays. On Sundays I have a beautiful redhead who comes in and does for me,' I said, and went into the sitting room. I stood over the casting couch and stared at it.

If the yellow cushion had been there I should have been convinced that I had had a nightmare, but the yellow cushion wasn't there.

It was a pity about the casting couch. I had grown fond of it, but I would have to get rid of it. It was lucky there were no bloodstains on it, but it did smell of death. At least it smelt of death to me. You don't make love to a girl on a couch that smells of death. Even a Malloy has his finer feelings at times, and this was one of the times.

I wandered around the room. Nothing out of place. There was no sign that Anita Cerf had been here: no sign whatsoever. I examined the carpet where the Colt automatic had lain. There were no oil stains. I got down on hands and knees and put my nose on the carpet and sniffed. There seemed to be a faint smell of gunpowder, but I couldn't be sure if I was imagining it.

Miss Bolus stood in the bedroom doorway and watched me. A troubled little frown wrinkled her brow.

'What's on your mind?' she asked. 'Or do you always act like this?'

I stood up and ran fingers down the back of my head.

‘Sure,’ I said absently. ‘You want to see the way I act when I’m not hit on the head.’

‘I don’t think you’re well. Hadn’t you better go back to bed?’

‘Didn’t you hear what Brandon said? I have to go to Frisco to identify Benny.’

‘Bosh,’ she said sharply. ‘You’re not fit to go. I can go or someone from the office.’

I went over to the cupboard where I kept the aspirin.

‘Yes,’ I said, not paying a great deal of attention to what she was saying. I took four aspirins from the bottle and flicked them one after the other into my mouth. I washed them down with lukewarm coffee, ‘But I’m going all the same. Benny was a friend of mine.’

‘You had better get a doctor to look at your head,’ Miss Bolus said. I could see she was worried. ‘You may have concussion.’

‘The Malloys are famous for their rock-like skulls,’ I said, wondering if I had taken enough aspirins. My head still ached. ‘Nothing short of a sledgehammer would give me concussion.’ I shot two more aspirins into my mouth to be on the safe side. I was wondering why Anita Cerf had come to my place, and how the murderer knew she was there. Then an unpleasant thought dropped into my mind. Perhaps he didn’t know, and was waiting for me. That seemed much more likely. Maybe he thought I was getting too inquisitive and had come out here to silence me the way he had silenced Dana, and had knocked Anita off for practice. Well, not exactly practice . . . This needed a little thought. This needed one of those brain sessions for which I’m not particularly famous. I decided to put the problem in lavender until my head stopped aching.

‘I wish I knew what was going on in your mind,’ Miss Eolus said uneasily. ‘Has something happened? I mean apart from Benny?’

‘I’m glad to hear you call it a mind,’ I said. ‘You should hear what some people call it. No, nothing’s happened apart from Benny. Nothing at all.’ The two additional aspirins were on the job now. The pain in my head began to recede.

‘Why don’t you run along?’ I went on. ‘You must have things to do.’

She smoothed down her dress over her hips. She had nice hips: just the right shape and just the right weight. This wasn’t a new discovery. I had noticed them before.

‘Well, isn’t that fine?’ she said bitterly. ‘After all I’ve done for you. A brush-off. I don’t know why I bother with you. Can you tell me why I bother with you?’

‘Not right now,’ I said, not wishing to hurt her feelings, but wanting her to go very badly. ‘We’ll talk

about that some other time. I'll call you in a day or so. I must hurry up and change. You won't mind if I say goodbye now, will you?' and I went into the bedroom and closed the door.

After a couple of minutes I heard her car start up. I didn't wave out of the window and I forgot her as soon as the sound of the car engine died away.

IV

The air taxi touched down on the long runway of the Portola airport, San Francisco, at twenty minutes past three. We came in on the tail of an air-liner full of movie stars, and when we reached the main gates of the airport there was a big crowd waiting to see the stars. A couple of excited bobby-soxers waved the-r handkerchiefs and screamed at us as we drove past, but we didn't wave back. We weren't in that kind of mood.

Kerman said, 'You know it's a funny thing, Vic, but a guy has to die before you get to know anything about him. I had no idea Ed had a wife and a couple of kids. He never mentioned them. He never told me his mother was living either. He never acted like a man with a wife and a couple of kids, did he? The way he used to horse around.'

'Oh, shut up!' I said. 'What do we want to talk about his wife and kids for?'

Kerman took out his handkerchief and mopped his face.

'I guess that's right.' And after a while he said, 'I'll be glad when it gets a bit cooler. March and a heat wave. It's all wrong. Now, last night...'

'And shut up about the weather too,' I said.

'Sure.' Kerman said.

During the silence that followed, and while we drove along Market Street, I reconstructed the happenings of the morning. Paula had come over. Brandon had already been to see her about Benny. She had told the same tale as I had: that Benny had gone to San Francisco for the weekend. He hadn't gone on business. He had gone up there on a sight-seeing trip. He did that sort of thing, Paula had said. I had said much the same thing. Brandon hadn't believed us, but there was nothing he could do about it because Benny's murder was out of his district.

While we talked Jack Kerman had arrived. Barclay's alibi, he told us, after we had talked about Benny, was as water-tight as a submarine. He had been with Kitty Hitchens as he had said and hadn't left her apartment until three-thirty of the afternoon following Dana's murder. That put Barclay out of the running.

I then told them about Anita Cerf. By the way Paula and Kerman went over my rooms I could see they didn't believe me. It was hard to believe, because there just wasn't a trace of her ever having been in the cabin. But they both remembered the yellow cushion. The fact it wasn't in the cabin finally convinced them I hadn't imagined it: the cushion and the pulpy softness at the back of my head.

Paula didn't want to go to San Francisco, but I said I was going. Around one o'clock I phoned through to the Orchid City airport and ordered an air taxi to take us out.

The trip in the aircraft didn't do my head any good, and I kept thinking of Benny. I had known him for about four years. We had worked and played together. He was an irresponsible, crazy kind of guy, but I liked him. It gave me a sick feeling to think he was dead.

Kerman had said there was no proof to connect Ed's death with the murder of Dana, Leadbetter and Anna. There wasn't, but I was convinced that in some way or other there was a connection. Kerman's theory was that Ed had got into a gambling game and had struck lucky and someone had taken his winnings and had thrown him into the harbour.

Kerman wasn't sold on the theory, but he said Ed was a wild character and he could have got into that kind of trouble.

I said no. Ed was working. Maybe he was wild, but not when he had a job on, and he had a job on. He had arrived in San Francisco around four-thirty yesterday afternoon. At one o'clock in the morning the police had fished his body out of Indian Basin. The medical report showed he had been dead about four hours. If that was anything to go by he had been killed around nine o'clock: four and a half hours after arriving in San Francisco. Time enough to begin his inquiries into Anita Cerf's private life, but not time enough to get into a gambling game: work first, play after. We all followed that rule, and Ed was no exception.

Had he been followed to Frisco? If he had been killed at nine o'clock there would have been time for the killer to hop a plane and get back to Orchid City and shoot Anita.

Kerman asked me if I wasn't getting fancy ideas, and where was my proof. Maybe I was getting fancy ideas, but I didn't think so. I had no proof that was the way it happened, but I had a hunch I was right, and I'd rather play a good hunch against proof when proof was as non-existent as it was now.

By this time the taxi had reached Third Street and pulled up outside Police Headquarters.

'Leave the talking to me,' I said to Kerman.

We climbed the worn stone steps, pushed open the double swing doors and asked a patrolman going off duty where we could find the Desk Lieutenant.

He was a nice civil cop, and although he was going off duty, he retraced his steps down the passage to show us the way.

As soon as I told the Desk Lieutenant who I was and what I had come about, he told the patrolman to take us to the Homicide Department. The patrolman led the way up a flight of stone stairs, along another passage to a small room furnished with four chairs, two desks, a window with bars and yellow walls and ceiling. There was a smell of stale bodies, dirt and vomit in the room: the smell of most police stations.

We sat around, not saying anything and waited. About five minutes crawled by, and then the door opened and a couple of plain-clothes dicks came in.

One of them, a big, square-faced man with the usual hard eyes, set mouth, big feet' that are more or less the standard uniform of a copper, waved us to a couple of straight-backed chairs, and waved the other dick to one of the desks.

'I'm Dunnigan,' he said, as if he wasn't particularly proud of the fact. 'Detective district commander. Are you relations of the deceased?'

It seemed odd to talk of Ed Benny as the deceased, and it gave me a cold, spooked feeling. I said we weren't relations, but friends, and when I told him our names I saw his mouth tighten, and guessed Brandon had been telling him about us.

'We'll want you to identify him,' he said. 'Give this officer your names and addresses, and then I'll take you along to the morgue.'

We helped the plain-clothes dick fill up a couple of forms, then followed Dunnigan from the room, down the corridor, down the stairs into a yard, across to a squat brick building.

There were three bodies under the sheets on the long marble slab facing us as we entered the morgue. The attendant in a long white overall rolled back the sheet covering the body in the middle.

Dunnigan said curtly, 'Is that him?'

It was Benny all right.

'Yeah,' I said.

He looked over at Kerman, whose face had gone the colour of a fish's belly.

'You, too?'

Kerman nodded.

The attendant dropped the sheet back over Benny's face.

'Take it easy,' Dunnigan said. 'You don't have to be sorry for him. It comes to us all, and it was quick. He was socked at the back of his head with a sandbag. He didn't know anything about the water. Come on; let's get out of here.'

As we went across the yard my head began to ache again.

V

The bellhop was lean and grey-faced and about thirty-three, and his uniform was too tight for him. He took us up the stairs and along a dim corridor. He had a kind of dancing walk, and his behind stuck out either because his trousers were so tight or because that was the way he was made. I couldn't make up my mind about this; not that it mattered.

The rattled a key in the lock, opened the door and sneered at the room beyond. Kerman and I sneered at it too. There were two beds, a bamboo table, an armchair that looked as if an elephant had once sat in it, a carpet that once had some pile, but had long since lost its self-respect. In places it showed its canvas backing: by the bed, by the window and by the armchair; the three places where people used their feet the most. Over one of the beds there was a coloured print of a pretty girl on a ladder. There was a dog at the foot of the ladder and it was looking up at the girl and it had a leer in its eyes. The girl was pretending to look embarrassed, but she wasn't making much of a job of it. Over the other bed there was another print of the same girl. This time she was standing on a chair, holding her dress up round her neck, and it was a mouse and not a dog that was leering at her.

'Shower cabinet in there,' the bellhop said, jerking his thumb. He crossed to the window, pulled down the blind and let it snap up with a bang. 'Everything works if you handle it right,' he said. 'Careful how you use the shower. The system's a mite old, and it's got to be handled right.'

He ran his rat's eyes along the ceiling, down the wall on to our feet and up to our faces.

'Got all you want?' he went on, hopefully expectant.

'What else have you got?' Kerman asked, edging his way into the room.

'Liquor or women or dope,' the bellhop said, eyeing us speculatively. 'So long as you can pay for it I can fix it. I know a blonde who can be over here in three minutes.'

We settled for liquor.

When he had gone, Kerman said, 'Do we have to get fixed up in a joint like this? Couldn't our expense sheet run to something a little less murky?'

I went over to the window and beckoned. When he joined me I pointed to a building across the street, exactly opposite the hotel. The first floors were dingy-looking dwelling apartments. The ground floor was a photographer's shop. The word LOUIS was spelt out across the fascia in black letters against a yellow background.

‘See that,’ I said. ‘That’s where Ed started his investigation. Wait a minute. Let me show you.’ I opened my suitcase, produced from the bottom of it the photograph of Anita Cerf I had found in Barclay’s bedroom. ‘You haven’t caught up with this yet,’ I said, and told him how I had got it. ‘The first thing Ed said he would do when he got here was to check on the photo. I had a copy made for him before he caught the plane.’ I turned the photograph over and showed Kerman the rubber-stamped name and address on the back. ‘That’s why we’re here.’ I jerked my head to the shop across the way. ‘That’s it.’

‘Not much of a joint,’ Kerman said, studying it.

I put the photograph back in the suitcase and sat on the bed. My head was aching badly now, and I wanted a drink. I hoped the bellhop wouldn’t take all night.

D.D.C. Dunnigan had asked a lot of questions, but our story was that Ed had come up here for a weekend of sight-seeing and we had no idea why he should have landed up in Indian Basin, and we stuck to it.

I felt sorry for Dunnigan. He obviously wanted to find the killer. But we couldn’t help him without giving Cerf away, so we had to sit around in the yellow-walled room and lie ourselves black in the face. He told us he was checking all the hotels, and that worried me. Sooner or later he would find out Ed stayed in this joint, and that might lead him to the photographer’s shop across the way. It might, but I doubted it, although some coppers get a break, and he might be one of them.

‘What are we going to do?’ Kerman asked. He lowered himself carefully into the armchair. It held him, but only just.

‘There’s nothing we can do tonight,’ I said. ‘The shops shut; everything’s shut, but first thing tomorrow we’ll get going. We have no more to work on than Ed had. Somewhere along the line he stepped out of turn and tipped his hand. That’s something we have to watch. The quickest way to work this, Jack, is for me to go to work exactly the way Ed did, and for you to lurk in the background. Tomorrow morning I’ll go over to that shop and show this guy Louis the photo. I don’t know what will happen, but you can bet something will happen. Your job is to stick to me like glue without being seen. If I run into trouble, you’ll be on the spot to get me out of it. I’m going straight ahead as if Ed had never been here. Maybe I’ll end up in the Basin too, only this time you’ll be around to fish me out. Do you get it?’

Kerman stroked his dapper moustache and said he did.

He said, ‘I’d just as soon do the job and you did the body-guard business, but if that’s the way you want to play it, okay.’

A tap sounded on the door at this moment, and the bellhop slid into the room. He brought with him two bottles of whisky, some ginger-ale and glasses. These he set down on the bamboo table.

Kerman looked the assignment over and asked, ‘What’s the third glass for?’

The bellhop leered at him.

‘You might bust one or you might want to give a guy a drink. A third glass is always useful, mister. The drinks I’ve missed because there ain’t been a third glass.’

‘We’ll all have a drink,’ I said. ‘Make them big ones, Jack.’”

I said to the bellhop, ‘What’s your name?’

‘Carter,’ he told me, and fetched out a crumpled cigarette from inside his pillbox hat, wrapped his lips around it and set fire to it.

‘Been here long?’ I asked, leaning back on my elbows and looking beyond him at the girl on the ladder. I wondered what the dog could see that I couldn’t that made him leer.

‘Ten years,’ the bellhop said. ‘When I first came the joint wasn’t bad. But the war knocked it. The war knocked everything.’

Kerman gave him a drink you could have floated a duck on. He sniffed at it, poured a little of it into his mouth, and rinsed his teeth with it.

‘See what I mean about the third glass?’ he said when he finally got it down.

I shook four aspirins into my hand, washed them down with whisky. He watched me without interest.

‘How would you like to earn a little money?’ I asked.

‘Doing what?’

‘Exercising your memory?’

He took another pull at his glass, went through his rinsing movements and swallowed.

‘What’s my memory got to do with it?’

I took out my wallet, produced a photograph of Ed Benny and handed it to him.

‘Ever seen this guy?’

He didn’t take the photograph, but leaned forward and peered at it. The seams of his trousers creaked but held.

Then he straightened, poured the rest of the whisky down his throat, put the glass on the bamboo table and slid to the door.

‘All right, guys,’ he said, his hand on the doorknob. ‘It was a beautiful act while it lasted, and you

certainly fooled me. Coppers buying a guy a drink! Ain't that something? For crying out loud! Who would believe it? But you don't get anything from me. I don't talk to coppers.'

Kerman hauled himself out of his chair, grabbed the bellhop by the scruff of the neck and sat him on the bed by my side.

'Do we look like coppers?' he demanded furiously. 'I've a mind to shove that ugly snout of yours through the back of your neck!'

'Well ain't you coppers?'

I took a twenty-dollar bill out of my wallet and laid it on the bed between us.

'Do we act like coppers?'

He eyed the bill avidly.

'Can't say you do,' he said, and licked his lips. 'They were here this afternoon asking questions. He's dead, isn't he? They showed me a photo of him: a morgue photo.'

'So he did stay here?'

His hand strayed towards the bill.

'Yeah, he stayed here all right. The manager didn't want the cops tramping over the joint. He told them he didn't know the guy.'

I picked up the bill and gave it to him.

'Give him another drink,' I said to Kerman. 'Can't you see he's thirsty?'

'You'll keep this to yourselves?' the bellhop said, a little anxiously. 'I wouldn't like to get the sack.'

'You surprise me,' Kerman said. 'By the way you talk I should have thought it was the one thing you prayed for.' He thrust another man's-sized drink into the bellhop's hand.

'Look,' I said, as he started to go through his rinsing movements again, 'this guy was a friend of ours. Someone sapped him and threw him into the Basin. We're trying to find out why. Have you any ideas?'

The bellhop shook his head.

'I guess not. He booked in at five o'clock yesterday afternoon. He took the room next to this one. He went out almost immediately after, and that's the last we saw of him.'

'Did he leave a bag?'

The bellhop's eyes shifted.

'Yeah, but the manager's got that. He's entitled to it. The guy didn't pay for his room.'

'Go and get it,' I said.

The bellhop stared at me.

'I can't do that,' he said. 'If the managers saw me with it...'

'Go and get it or I'll talk to the manager myself.'

'You mean - now?'

'Yes; now.'

He put the half-finished whisky down on the overmantel and after giving me a long, thoughtful stare, eased himself towards the door.

'Do I make anything out of it? Or does that twenty cover it?'

'You make another ten.'

When he had gone Kerman said, 'That was a lucky break. How did you guess Ed came here?'

'Why did we come here? Give me another drink. Talking to that rat makes my headache.'

While he was fixing me a drink, I opened the suitcase again and took out Anita's photograph. I put it face down on the bed.

Kerman said, 'Do you think he'll know her?'

'It's worth trying. He's been here ten years.'

The pain in my head was a little better, but still not right.

I washed down two more aspirins.

'You're taking too much of that stuff,' Kerman said, frowning. 'And you'd better lay off whisky. You should have seen a doctor.'

The bellhop came in with the suitcase and put it on the bed.

'I've gotta take it back,' he said, a worried look on his rat face. 'I don't want to get into trouble.'

I went through the suitcase. I didn't expect to find anything and I wasn't disappointed. It was just an ordinary suitcase a guy would pack who is going away for the weekend.

The only thing in it that was missing was Anita's photograph. I put the things back, closed the case and shoved it on to the floor.

'Okay,' I said. 'Take it back.' I took a ten-dollar bill out of my wallet and dropped it on the bed. 'Take that too, and keep your mouth shut. Okay?'

He picked up the note and the bag.

'Is that all I can do for you?' he asked, suddenly reluctant to leave us.

I turned Anita's photograph over and flicked it towards him.

'Ever seen this dame before?'

He put the bill in his pocket, set the bag on the floor and picked up the photograph. He held it at arm's length, squinting at it.

'Looks like Anita Gay to me,' he said, and shot me an inquiring look. 'It's her, ain't it? Jeepers! The times I've seen her. Sure, it's Anita Gay.'

Don't act coy,' I said. 'Who's Anita Gay? What does she do? Where can I find her?'

'I don't know where you'll find her,' he said regretfully, and laid the photograph on the bed. 'I haven't seen her for months. She used to do a turn at the Brass Rail. And, boy, was she a sensation! That fur glove routine of hers certainly packed them in.'

'What's the Brass Rail?'

'You don't know the Brass Rail?' He looked astonished.

'Why, it's a big beer-dill-pickle hippodrome on Bayshore Boulevard. It hasn't had my custom since Anita quit. She wouldn't be coming back, would she?'

I thought of the face framed in blood with the hole in the forehead big enough to poke my finger in.

'No,' I said. 'She won't be coming back.'

chapter seven



I

I left the hotel the next morning around eleven o'clock. It has been a hot night, and I hadn't slept well, and when I finally bludgeoned myself to sleep with aspirin and whisky I didn't wake until it was nearly ten.

Kerman let me sleep. He said there was nothing like rest after a sock on the head. But as my head still ached and I still felt lousy when I woke I didn't believe him. After a lot of strong black coffee and a couple more aspirins and a tepid shower I did manage to feel well enough to start the day's work.

I decided against calling on the photographer's shop right away. I thought it would be better, if I could, to get a little information about Anita from the Brass Rail before I tackled Comrade Louis, so I decided to go there first.

Kerman asked me if I was windy about calling on Louis. I said no. I just wanted to get as much information as I could before someone tossed me into the Indian Basin, and I felt the danger zone was the photographer's shop, I said I was working on a hunch. Kerman had a great respect for my hunches, especially when I played the horses, so he agreed we should go to the Brass Rail first.

He left the hotel before I did. I wasn't worried that he would lose me. He was very good at shadowing people, and I wasn't going to make it hard for him.

When I got on to the street I asked a patrolman where I could find the Brass Rail. He said it was on the corner of Bayshore and Third, about ten minutes' walk from the hotel.

While he was explaining how to get there I glanced across the street at the photographer's shop. There was a light showing in the fanlight, but there was nothing else to see except hundreds of glossy prints mounted on boards set flush against the shop window and the door.

I thanked the patrolman, thinking the San Francisco police had much better manners than the Orchid City police. If you asked an Orchid City cop the way he was likely to run you in for insulting behaviour, or at best send you in the wrong direction to teach you not to bother him in the future.

The Brass Rail was a typical down-at-the-heel dump you're likely to come upon in any big town that has a large population, not too choosy about their entertainment. It could have done with a coat of paint and a lot of elbow grease on the brass work. There were three double swing doors, an island ticket office out front, and a lot of glossy photographs in frames that covered every spare inch of wall space.

Along the outside edge of the usual projection that over-hung the ticket office were four-foot letters made of tarnished chromium that spelt out: THE BRASS RAIL.

At night there would be lights behind the lettering, and the setup would look a lot smarter than it did now because the darkness would hide the tarnish. Another sign in lights, below the four-foot letters read: 50 TALL TANNED TERRIFIC GALS.

I went and browsed over the photographs, and came to the conclusion that there would be nothing original about the show; nor would it ever set this town nor any other town on fire. There were the usual hard-faced, bright-eyed comics in loud suits. You knew by looking at them the kind of joke they'd crack. The girls didn't look much either. They didn't attempt to hide what charms they had. Most of them wore a G-string and a vacant smile. One of them did wear a hat, but she looked overdressed. The fifty tall tanned, terrific gals were tall and tanned, but tarnished would have been more truthful than terrific.

While I was browsing, one of the swing doors opened and a little guy with a face like a ferret came out into the sunshine. He wore a grubby camel-hair coat, a slouch hat that rested over his right eye and imitation shark-skin shoes that hadn't been cleaned since he had bought them: a long time, ago to judge by the cracks in them.

'Who's in control here?' I asked him. 'Who runs the joint?'

He eyed me over, cleared his throat and spat accurately into the street.

'Stranger around here?' he asked in a voice made hoarse by trying to put over ancient jokes.

I said I was a stranger around here, and repeated my question.

His sharp-featured face darkened.

'Nick Nedick,' he said, and then followed a stream of obscenities that ran out of his mouth like sludge from a drain.

He didn't seem to think much of Nedick for some reason or other. 'Up the stairs,' he went on after he had exhausted his vocabulary. 'Second door on right past the circle entrance. Spit up his cuff if you

see him,' and he went away down the street, flat footed, his head bent forward as if he wanted you to think the weight of his brain was a little too much for him.

I looked after him, wondering what was burning him up.

In the middle distance I saw Kerman leaning against a lamp post reading a newspaper. He melted into the scene very well. When he had to look like a loafer he looked like one. It is not easy to stand about on the sidewalk and not look conspicuous, but Kerman could do it by the hour.

I pushed open the double swing doors and crossed the lobby to the stairs. An elderly negro in shirtsleeves and a sack round his middle was rubbing the brass banister rail. He was rubbing as if he had very tender hands, and his large, bloodshot eyes stared vacantly into space. I might have been the invisible man for all the attention he paid me.

At the top of the stairs were more double swing doors that led to another lobby. As Ferret-face had said, there was a door marked "Office" to the right of the circle entrance.

I rapped on it, pushed it open and entered. The office was small, stuffy and hot. There was a desk, two metal filing cabinets, a lot of glossy photographs on the walls similar to those decorating the front of the house. A man in shirtsleeves sat at the desk, pounding a typewriter. He typed with two fingers, but very fast. He had a lot of black crinkly hair, a five o'clock shadow and a complexion like a toad's under-belly.

There was a girl in the corner of the room nearest the window. Her dress lay on top of one of the filing cabinets.

Her underwear was not over clean, and her stockings had long runs in them. She had got herself tied into such a fantastic knot that she scarcely looked human. Her body bent backwards as if her back was broken and her legs hung over her shoulders and she was standing on her hands. As I stared at her she turned a slow somersault so she landed on her feet, still tied up in the same knot, and then fell forward once more on her hands to start the somersault all over again.

'Why don't you look at me?' she said to the man with the crinkly hair. 'How can you tell how good I am if you don't look at me?'

The man with the crinkly hair went on pounding on the typewriter as if his life depended on it. He didn't look up, even to see who had come in. The girl went on doing her slow somersaults, and kept asking why he didn't look at her. But he didn't take any notice.

I stood around staring at her, because although the act wasn't very refined, it was sensational in its way. It would have been a lot more sensational if she had had a better figure, and if her things had been cleaner, but for all that as something free, it was worth seeing. I wished Jack Kerman could have seen her. Kerman was very keen on double-jointed women. He would have taken a great interest in her; more interest than I was taking. I felt he was missing something.

But like all things which are repeated too often the novelty wore off after a while. It didn't wear off as far as the girl was concerned. She seemed set for the day, and never stopped asking the crinkly haired man to look at her. And the crinkly haired man seemed set for the day too. He never stopped typing.

So after I had gaped all I wanted to, I tapped him on the shoulder, but even at that he didn't stop typing nor did he look up, but he did, say, 'Wadjerwant?'

I said, 'I'd like a word with Nick Nedick.'

He looked up then, but the typing went on as before.

'Far door,' he said, and his eyes shifted back to the typewriter again.

The girl said plaintively as she began another somersault: 'The pain your mother went through to give you your eyes, you heel. Why don't you use them? Why don't you look at me?'

Because I was sorry for her, I said, 'You're doing fine, baby. You're sensational! I've never seen anything like it.'

Her tight, hard little face swivelled between her crossed legs to look at me. Her mouth opened and she cursed me.

Some of the words I had never heard before. They all sounded very bad. The man with the crinkly hair gave a sudden, sharp giggle, but he didn't look up, nor did he stop typing.

I didn't blame her for cursing me. It couldn't have been much fun to do what she was doing, and the man who could give her a job not even to look at her. Maybe she had been years getting her body to tie itself up the way she was tying it up now. Maybe she was hungry. Maybe she couldn't pay her rent. I guessed she was afraid to curse the man with the crinkly hair. He might have kicked her in the teeth. There was something about him that made me think he would kick her in the teeth if he had half a chance. I waited until she had run through all the words she knew, smiled at her to show her I hadn't taken offence, and went over to the far door the man which the crinkly hair had indicated and knocked.

II

The inner office was very much like the outer office, only it was a little larger, and there were two desks instead of one and four metal filing cabinets instead of two and a lot more glossy photographs on the walls.

At the desk near the door sat an elderly woman with sad, dark-ringed eyes and a thin, yellowish face that might have been beautiful years ago, but was no more than plain in a nice way now. She was doing things with a book of theatre tickets. I wasn't interested enough to see just what.

At the far end of the room was the other desk. A man sat behind it, but I couldn't see anything of him except his thick fingers. He was hiding behind a newspaper he held before him. He had a big diamond ring on his little finger. The diamond was as yellow as a banana. I guessed someone had given it to him as a settlement of a debt, or maybe he had found it. It wasn't the kind of diamond you would buy: not if you were in your right senses.

The woman looked at me with a timid smile. Her dentures were as phoney as a chorus girl's eyelashes, and not half so attractive, but I didn't take any interest in them either. She had to eat with them; I didn't.

'Mr. Nedick,' I said, and tipped my hat. 'The name's Malloy. I'd like a word with him.'

'Well, I don't know.' She looked timidly across the room at the spread of newspaper. 'Mr. Nedick is busy right now. I don't know really.'

'Then don't worry about it,' I said. 'Mr. Nedick and I will get along fine without you worrying. Won't we, Mr. Nedick?' and I went over to his desk and sat on the edge of it.

A round ball of a face appeared from over the top of the newspaper. Small, humorous eyes looked me over. The newspaper was cast to the floor.

'We might, young man, we might at that,' Nedick said.

'Just so long as you don't want to sell me anything.'

I could see at a glance that the trouble with him was that someone, sometime, had told him he looked like Sydney Greenstreet. All right, he did look like Sydney Greenstreet; but not only did he look like him, he now dressed and talked like him too, and that was a shade too much.

'The guy outside with the typewriter said for me to come in,' I explained. 'I hope that's all right.'

The fat man chuckled the way Sydney Greenstreet chuckles. He seemed pleased with the effect.

'That's all right. And what can I do for you, Mr. Malloy?'

I gave him my card: the one with the Universal Services crest in the corner.

'Orchid City, huh?' He tapped the desk with the edge of the card and smiled at the elderly woman who was hanging on his every word. 'Millionaire's country, Mr. Malloy. You live there?'

'I work there,' I said. 'I'm trying to get some information about a young woman. I believe you know her: Anita Gay.'

Nedick closed his eyes and his round face registered thought.

‘What sort of information, Mr. Malloy?’ he asked after an appreciable silence.

‘Anything,’ I said, took out my cigarette-case and offered it. ‘I’m not fussy. I’m trying to reconstruct a picture of her background. I’d like to listen to you talk about her. Anything you say may be useful.’

He took the cigarette doubtfully. I lit it for him and lit my own.

‘Well, I don’t know,’ he said slowly. ‘I’m a little busy right now. I don’t think I could spare the time.’

‘I would pay for it,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t expect you to give me your time for nothing.’

He let loose another chuckle: it wasn’t so convincing as the first.

‘Well, that’s business, Mr. Malloy. I appreciate a businessman when he’s as straightforward as you.’ He looked at the thin woman. ‘I think you could go to the bank now, Miss Fenducker. Tell Julius I’m tied up for the next half-hour as you go out.’

There was a short silence while Miss Fenducker hastily grabbed up her hat and coat and left the room. She was the type who never could do anything without getting into a panic about it. By the way she rushed out of the office you would have thought the place was on fire.

As she opened the door I caught a glimpse of the girl contortionist. She was still turning somersaults. Julius had stopped typing and was reading what he had written, his feet on the desk. Then the door closed, shutting out the scene and I was alone with Nedick.

‘What sort of fee had you in mind. Mr. Malloy?’ Nedick asked, his small eyes still.

‘Well, I don’t know,’ I said. ‘How about fifty bucks? It depends on what you can tell me.’

‘I could tell you a lot for fifty bucks. I don’t want to appear inquisitive, but is she in trouble?’

‘Not exactly in trouble,’ I said, thinking of the way she had looked the last time I saw her. ‘Anyway, not now. She has been in trouble. My client wants an accurate picture of her background if I can get it without causing too much commotion.’

He pushed back his chair, crossed one fat leg over the other and hooked a thick thumb in the buttonhole of his vest.

‘And the fifty bucks?’

I took out my wallet and laid five tens on the desk. He reached out a fat hand, scooped them up and stowed them away in his trousers pocket.

‘I’m always telling Julius you never know what’s coming into this office,’ he said, and chuckled

again. 'Always see everyone, I tell him. You never know what you've missed if you turn people away. Time and again I've proved myself right.'

'Yeah,' I said, flicking ash on the floor. 'When was Anita Gay with you?'

'She was with us for two years. I can give you the exact date if it interests you.' He raked around in a drawer full of papers and odd junk, and finally produced a leather-bound memo book. He flicked through the pages until he came to the entry he was looking for and laid the book on the desk.

'That's another thing I'm always telling Julius. Always make a note of everything that happens in the office. Make it so you can find it again quickly. You never know when you may need it. Now here,' his hand slapped the open page of the book. 'It's all here. She came to the office on 3rd June, two years ago. She said her name was Anita Broda. She wanted a job. She had been a stripper, working the nightclubs in Hollywood, but she'd got herself in bad with the Vice Squad, and her agent had turned sour on her. Roy Fletcher had advised her to come to see me. Fletcher handles legitimate stars. He hadn't anything for her, and didn't want her anyway. So he sent her to me.' He looked at me and grinned. 'You've seen her, Mr. Malloy'

I said, yes, I had seen her.

'Very nice,' he said. 'She stood over there,' he pointed to the window, 'and did her act. Even Julius was impressed, and he's a very hard man to impress: the hardest man in this racket. After the first week she moved from the middle to the top of the bill. After the second week we had her name in lights across the front of the house.'

'Why isn't she here now?'

His face darkened.

'She got married. It's always the same, Mr. Malloy. Get a good girl who draws in the money, and she gets married. Marriage is the biggest menace there is to this racket.'

I was beginning to wonder if I hadn't squandered my fifty bucks a little recklessly.

'You haven't seen her since her marriage?'

He shook his head.

'I heard she and Thayler didn't get on, and she left him. Anyway, she got a job with Simeon, the swank dress designer on 19th Avenue. I sent Julius down to see her, to try to persuade her to come back, but she wouldn't. I guess being a mannequin sort of raised her social status. She was a girl to get on. Anyway, nothing I could offer her interested her. She left Simeon's about a couple of months ago. I don't know where she is now.'

I let him run on, but I was stiff with attention.

‘She and Thayler,’ I said. ‘Who’s Thayler?’

‘Her husband.’

‘You wouldn’t know when she married him?’

‘Sure,’ he said complacently, and patted the book again. ‘I’m not likely to forget. Marrying him lost me a lot of money. They were married on 8th November last year.’

‘What happened to him? Did he die?’

‘Die?’ Nedick blinked. ‘No, he didn’t die. He’s right here in town. He and a guy named Louis run a photographer’s shop on Army Street.’

My head began to ache suddenly. Maybe I was thinking too hard. I pressed my fingertips to my temples and scowled at him.

‘Let’s talk about Thayler,’ I said. ‘Tell me about him. Tell me all about him.’

Nedick opened a cupboard in his desk and hoisted up a black bottle without a label and two glasses.

‘Would a drink be any good to you?’ he asked. ‘You look sort of pinched.’

‘That’s the right word,’ I said. ‘Set them up and tell me about Thayler.’

He poured two shots of whisky into the glasses. We nodded to each other and drank.

While I was getting out the aspirin bottle, he said, ‘Lee Thayler was here when Anita came. He did a Buffalo Bill act. It wasn’t bad, and he kept changing his routine so we kept him on. The trouble with most of the hams we get here is they can’t vary their routine. After a week they’re through. But Thayler was different. He was smart, and kept working out new tricks.’

I swallowed a couple of aspirins and chased them down with whisky.

‘What kind of tricks?’ I asked.

‘Anything with a rifle. You know the kind of thing: shooting at pennies tossed in the air; firing at targets by sighting in a mirror; trick stuff. He had a very good trick with a Colt .45. He would throw the gun in the air, catch it and fire at the same time. He had a girl to help him in this trick. He shot cigarettes out of her mouth. It was a dangerous act, but he had plenty of confidence.’

‘And he married Anita?’

‘He did.’ Nedick scowled. ‘Both of them quit when they married. Thayler bought himself a piece in this photographer’s shop. He reckoned he was ready to settle down to a steady job when he married. It was hard to believe because Thayler wasn’t the type to settle down. But as far as I know he did

settle down. Anyway, he seems to be doing all right. He knew a lot of people in the show business, and they all went to him to be photographed. Louis does the actual work. Thayler's job is to drum up new business.'

'And Anita left him?'

'So I heard. I don't know the details. Perhaps she got sick of sitting around doing nothing. Thayler was a mean sort of guy. I guess when the first bloom wore off they started fighting. He'd fight with anyone.'

'Were they divorced?'

'I never heard they were.'

He poured two more whiskies. We touched glasses before we drank. The whisky was good. It was only when it was down you realized what a kick it had.

'Would you have a photograph of this guy?'

'Sure.' He pointed to one of the filing cabinets. 'You're younger than me. Open the top drawer of that file. Yeah, that one. There should be a folder of photographs . . . you got it? Bring it over here.'

I laid the folder on the desk and he began to paw over a collection of glossy prints. Finally he found one he was looking for and handed it to me.

'That's him.'

I looked at the tall lean cowboy who stood against a painted backcloth of cactus and open prairie land. He had on sheepskin chaps, a ten-gallon hat and a check shirt. His face was long and narrow, his lips were thin, and his eyes steady and dangerous. He looked as if he seldom smiled, and when he did the smile wouldn't reach his eyes. It was the face of a man who would take risks; a gambler's face; a man who would hold life cheap.

I said, 'Can I keep this?'

Nedick nodded.

'If you want it. I have a photograph of Anita somewhere. That fur glove routine of hers was a natural. It had the boys sitting on the edge of their chairs.' His big hands pawed over more photographs and he found one similar to the one I had taken from George Barclay's drawer. 'That's her. If you ever run into her tell her I'd like to do business with her again. I can't let you have it; it's the only one I have left.' He fished out another photograph, tossed it over. 'That's Thayler doing his cigarette trick act. I didn't like it. I was scared there'd be an accident. It was too dangerous. But the girl didn't mind. She had nerves like steel.'

But I wasn't listening. I was staring at the photograph. It showed Thayler in his cowboy dress shooting at a girl who faced the camera, her profile turned to Thayler. It was a good photograph. You could see the cigarette flying out of the girl's mouth, and the smoke and flash of the gun. The girl was wearing a kind of bodice made out of pony skin, a G-string and a ten-gallon hat.

'It wasn't that he aimed at the cigarette,' Nedick said. 'He didn't. He threw up the gun caught it and fired in one continuous movement. It made me sweat to watch him.'

It made me sweat to look at the photograph, for the girl in the G-string was Miss Bolus.

The door jerked open, and the man with the crinkly hair came in. He put some papers on the desk.

'That's Gardener's contract,' he said to Nedick. 'You'd better sign it before the lug changes his mind.'

As Nedick reached for a pen, he asked. 'What's that girl like out there? We're not missing anything, are we?'

'She stinks,' the man with the crinkly hair said contemptuously.

'Then send her away. I can hear her bones creaking in here. It worries me.'

'Everything worries you,' the man with the crinkly hair said. 'Do her good to get some exercise,' and he gathered up the papers and went out.

Through the open door I could see the girl. She was sitting on a chair, her dress across her knees and she was crying.

The man with the crinkly hair said to her, 'I'm going to give you some advice. The best thing you can do is to take the elevator to the top floor, pick a nice high window and jump out of it. Your act stinks and you stink. Now, beat it.'

He closed the door as the girl got slowly to her feet.

Nedick said, 'Sometimes I think Julius is a little rude to people.'

I thought it would be nice to go into the outer office, pick up the typewriter and to try and smash it to bits on the top of Julius's black, crinkly head. But it wasn't my business how he treated people, so I said, 'Tell me something about this girl: the one in this photograph. What's her name?'

Nedick took the photograph, studied it, laid it down.

'That's Gail Bolus.' He shot an inquisitive look at me. 'Does she interest you?'

'Any girl who dresses like that interests me,' I said. 'Is she still around?'

‘No. We never did know much about her. Thayler brought her with him: she was part of his act. He paid her out of his own pocket. Apart from her name, there’s not much I know about her. Except she had very strong nerves.’

‘She quit when Thayler quit?’

‘Oh, no. She quit before that: when Thayler started to make passes at Anita Gay. That put the skids on his act. He couldn’t find another girl with, the right kind of nerve. He wanted Anita to take Gail’s place, but she wouldn’t touch it; I didn’t blame her either.’

‘Were Gail Bolus and Thayler anything to each other?’

‘I guess so. A mixed act usually gets around to sleeping together sooner or later. They were no exception. But she wouldn’t stand for him and Anita getting together, and she told him so. They quarrelled and she walked out on him.’

‘She quit about six months ago?’

Nedick said, yes, it would be about six months ago.

‘What happened to her?’

‘We lost sight of her. She didn’t register with any agent. She hadn’t any particular talent except to stand still and let Thayler shoot at her. I guess she quit show business.’

‘You never ran into a guy named Caesar Mills?’

He explored his memory, finally shook his head.

‘It’s not a name I recall.’

‘Would you know anything about Louis?’

He stroked his moustache and let out a half-hearted chuckle.

‘You certifiably believe in getting value for your money, don’t you, young man? I can’t sit around all day talking to you. I have a business to look after.’

‘You leave it to Julius,’ I said, and reached for my wallet again. ‘Suppose we say another twenty-five?’

He filled up the glasses as a sign of assent. The money exchanged hands, and he settled back in his chair again.

‘You’re a man after my own heart, Mr. Malloy,’ he said, beaming. ‘Now what do you want to know about Louis?’

‘What kind of man is he?’

Nedick spread out his big fat hands and hunched his shoulders.

‘An arty guy. He can take pictures, and he’s cheap. He gets all our trade.’

‘Concentrate on what he looks like.’

‘Tall, weedy, effeminate, chin beard and has two convictions for criminal assault,’ Nedick said rapidly.

That gave me a picture. I liked this guy, Nedick. He was saving me an awful lot of leg work.

‘How does he stand with the cops?’

‘Not good. The assault raps hang over him, although they happened five and ten years ago. I guess he’s got used to taking girls in the flesh by now. But there are rumours...’

I waited, but as he said nothing, I said, ‘Don’t dry up on me. I’ll have the rumours as well as the facts.’

‘If you can handle a camera well, Mr. Malloy,’ Nedick said, pulling at his lower lip, ‘and you haven’t any moral scruples, you can always earn a living: even if it’s a smelly one.’

‘Don’t go vague on me,’ I pleaded. ‘I’ll treat it in confidence.’

‘The cops think he’s running a blackmail racket. I wouldn’t know if they’re right or not. He takes his camera out nights in Buena Vista Park. It’s a nice spot for couples to get to know each other. Some of the couples don’t always want their photographs taken. You know how it is. Some of the negatives might be worth quite a bit of money. It’s just a rumour. Nothing you can pin on him.’

I said I knew how it was.

I said, ‘From what you know of Thayler, could you see him mixed up in blackmail?’

Nedick laughed.

‘Thayler was the kind of guy who would be mixed up in anything. He was ambitious. He had no nerves. He wanted money. Believe me, Mr. Malloy, no one or nothing would stop him once he had made up his mind. I told Julius over and over again Thayler was dangerous. I said sooner or later he would get us into trouble, but Julius wouldn’t listen. Well, he didn’t get us into trouble because he quit before he had time to get into trouble. It wouldn’t surprise me if he turned out to be a killer. Blackmail? Sure. Thayler wouldn’t worry about blackmail. He’s ruthless. I was glad to see him go. If he hadn’t taken Anita with him I would have hung out a flag when he did go. I didn’t like him, and I didn’t like his act; but Julius kept him on because he brought in business. Only a man without a conscience would have put on an act as dangerous as that cigarette routine. It worried me. I was glad

when he went.'

I couldn't think of any more questions to ask him so I slid off the desk.

'Well, I guess that's all then,' I said, and shook hands with him. 'If I think of anything else I'll call in and see you. And thanks for your help.'

'That's all right,' Nedick said. 'Just so long as you have what you want. Take my tip and don't monkey with Thayler. One of these days he'll shoot someone. I wouldn't like it to be you.'

I said I wouldn't like it to be me either.

III

After leaving the Brass Rail, I went straight back to the hotel. The bellhop was hanging around the lobby, and I told him to have some sandwiches and four bottles of beer sent up to our room.

I hadn't been in the room more than five minutes before Kerman came in with the bellhop close on his heels.

'What's the idea of sandwiches?' Kerman asked in disgust.

'Can't we afford to go to a restaurant?'

The bellhop put the beer and sandwiches on the bamboo table and stood around, waiting to see if there was anything in it for him. I gave him half a buck and told him to scram.

'If you guys are looking for a little recreation,' he said hopefully, 'I have that blonde lined up, waiting.'

Kerman opened the door.

'Beat it!' he said.

When the bellhop had gone I opened a couple of bottles of beer and started pouring.

'I thought we'd better talk up here where we wouldn't be overheard,' I explained.

'Well, all right,' Kerman said, and sat in the armchair.

'You were long enough in that dump. I was getting ready to organize a rescue.'

I gave him a beer and went over to sit on the bed.

‘I’ve picked up a lot of stuff,’ I said, and told him what I had learned. I told him everything except about the girl contortionist. I thought if I told him about her he wouldn’t be able to keep his mind on business.

He listened without saying anything, but he didn’t touch his beer, and that’s a sure sign I had his attention. When I was through, he let out a long, low whistle.

‘For crying out loud!’ he exclaimed. ‘What does it all mean?’

‘All these facts are pieces in the jigsaw puzzle,’ I said.

‘They need fitting together. I had no idea Gail Bolus was hooked up in this business. All right, you don’t have to grin.’

‘Think she’s working hand-in-glove with Thayler?’

‘She might be. I don’t know. It may be a coincidence she turned up in Orchid City. She may have cut Thayler right out of her life. I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. The big discovery is that Anita was married when she married Cerf. If she married Cerf secretly - that is if Thayler had no idea what she was up to, and then found out - we shan’t have to look far for the blackmailer. And another thing that’s interesting. Thayler is an expert with a .45. He may be the boy who has done the killings.’

Kerman grunted and drank some beer.

‘Do you think Thayler knocked off Benny?’

‘Thayler or Louis or both.’

‘And how about Mills? Is he out of it?’

‘I don’t know. I think there’s something going on between Natalie Cerf and him, but whether it has anything to do with this setup or not I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know much, do you?’ Kerman said. ‘You’ll have to do a lot better than this if you’re going to make a name for yourself.’

‘I know enough to tackle Louis now,’ I said. ‘And that’s what we’re going to do.’

I opened my suitcase and took out a writing-pad. I wrote in big block letters the words: THIS BUSINESS IS CLOSED FOR THE DAY.

Kerman said blankly, ‘You mean we don’t do any more work?’

‘Not us, you dope. We’re going across the way and we’re seeing Louis. We’ll stick this on the shop

door as we go in.'

Kerman hurriedly finished his beer.

'This is the moment I've been waiting for,' he said, and reached for his hat.

IV

As I pushed open the shop door a concealed bell went ping! Harsh electric lights lit up the outer room of the shop: a room smothered in glossy prints more or less on the same pattern as those decorating the outside of the Brass Rail. A short counter divided the outer from the inner room. The inner room, from what I could see of it between the gap in the two shabby curtains that had only been half-drawn, consisted of a number of chairs, a couple of partitions with curtains hanging before them and two big mirrors. Beyond the inner room was a narrow passage that led, I assumed, to the studio.

We had decided that if anyone happened to be in the shop they would have to be taken care of, and Kerman had brought along his gun. He was a little self-conscious of it as he had never shot with it nor did he have any cartridges for it. I said it didn't matter so long as Louis didn't produce a gun of his own. Kerman's gun looked all right: it looked vicious. No one, unless they were out of their minds, would argue with it.

Kerman said bitterly that we would look a couple of suckers if Thayler turned up and started some trick shooting.

I guess he was right, but I didn't tell him so.

As soon as we were in the shop, Kerman stuck the notice on the door, and as he shot the two bolts a girl in a slinky black dress and with a figure like an hour-glass came down the passage, through the changing-room into the outer room. She was hard and blonde and brassy, and switched on a mechanical smile when she saw us, although her eyes looked bored.

'Was there something?' she asked, resting her hands on the counter. She had bright scarlet nails, and her fingers were grubby. When you looked closer the rest of her was grubby too.

'Why, sure,' I said, tipping my hat. 'We thought it would be nice to be photographed. Can you fix it?'

Kerman said, 'I'll let you have a copy of mine to keep you warm nights if it's a good likeness.'

The blonde's bored eye blinked and she looked questioningly from Kerman to me.

'I'm afraid Mr. Louis is engaged right now. I can make an appointment,' she said, and languidly

patted her back curls.

‘We’re in a hurry,’ I said, looked at Kerman and nodded.

Kerman produced his gun with a flourish and pointed it at the blonde.

‘Don’t squawk, sister,’ he said in a voice that sounded like someone ripping calico. ‘This is a stick-up!’

The blonde recoiled, her eyes popping and her mouth opened to scream. I poked her hard with my index finger in her midriff and the breath came out of her with a hiss like a punctured tyre. She doubled up over the counter.

It took us about a minute and a half to tie her hands and feet and gag her with the cords and gag we had brought with us. Then we put her under the counter, found a pillow for her head and told her to take it easy. Her eyes weren’t bored any more: they were black explosions of fury.

‘Come on,’ I said to Kerman. ‘You’re doing fine.’

‘What really excites me,’ he said, as he moved after me, ‘is the thought a copper might crash in here and mistake me for a gunman. I guess a little thing like that hadn’t crossed your mind?’

I motioned him to silence, crept down the passage to a door at the far end, opened it and looked in.

The studio was fair sized and workmanlike. The usual portrait camera stood on its wooden tripod facing a backcloth of grey-painted canvas. Two big arc lamps on wheels stood on either side of the camera. There was a table with a raised drawing-board against the wall and a man in a white smock and a blue beret sat at the table, working on a collection of glossy prints. He was tall, weedy, effeminate, and had a black chin beard. His complexion was the colour of old parchment, and his lips were thick and red against the black-ness of his beard and moustache: not a pleasant specimen.

When he saw us he dropped the paint brush he was working with and his hand shot into a drawer of the table.

‘Hold it!’ Kerman snarled, threatening him with his gun.

The hand hovered above the drawer. The bearded face turned a greenish tinge. I went over and took a small automatic from the drawer and shoved it into my hip pocket.

‘Hello,’ I said, and brought my fist down as hard as I could into the hollow between his neck and right shoulder. The blow drove him off his chair on to the floor. I bent over him, gathered him up and stood him on his feet, then I hauled off and hit him on the bridge of his nose. He went shooting across the studio, collided with the camera and landed up on the floor with the camera on top of him.

Kerman sat on the edge of the table.

‘Be careful you don’t hurt him,’ he said.

‘Not a chance,’ I said. ‘He hasn’t got any feelings. Have you, you heel?’

Louis made no effort to get up so I went over to him, picked the camera up, and holding it by its tripod, slammed it down on his chest. He gave a gurgling scream as the camera flew off the head of the tripod and went whizzing across the room. One of the tripod’s legs came off. I threw the other bits away, took the leg in both hands and hit him with it as he tried to get up.

Kerman slid off the table

‘Do you think he wants his camera?’ he asked.

‘He won’t want anything when I’m through with him,’ I said breathlessly, and bashed Louis again.

Kerman went over and stamped on the camera until it was in small pieces.

‘I don’t see why you should have all the fun,’ he said.

We drew off to recover our breath.

Louis cowered on the floor, his hands covering his face, scarcely breathing. He looked like a man waiting for a bomb to drop on him.

While I was getting my second wind I examined the prints he had been working on. They weren’t nice pictures. They confirmed Nedick’s theory that Louis was a blackmailer.

As nothing more happened to him, Louis began to crawl to his feet, but when I turned, he flopped back on to the floor again. He had as much spine as a plate of porridge.

‘Why’d you kill Benny?’ I asked, standing over to him.

The small eyes twitched. Breath made a rattling sound in the long scraggy throat.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ The voice came in a whisper: like an echo in a tunnel.

‘I kicked the white smock. It was a good kick. It moved the weedy figure about three yards.

‘Why did you kill Benny?’ I repeated.

He didn’t say anything. He groaned instead.

I kicked him again.

‘Maybe he thinks we’re fooling,’ Kerman said, coming over to watch. ‘Some guys need an awful lot of persuasion before they talk.’

‘This one won’t,’ I said, reached down and pulled Louis to his feet. His legs were rubbery and he started to fall, but I managed to keep him upright long enough for Kerman to take a sock at him. He went flying across the room and smashed through the grey painted backcloth.

Kerman said, ‘Hey! Do you see what I see?’

He reached under the table and produced a blow-lamp.

‘Now that is something,’ I said. ‘Get it going.’

I ripped the rest of the backcloth out of its frame, collected Louis and dragged him back to the middle of the studio by his ankles.

There was a property couch at the back of the studio. I pushed that alongside Louis.

‘Let’s get him on here,’ I said.

Kerman gave the blow-lamp a few quick pumps until the flame began to roar out of the spout, then he came over and caught hold of Louis. We got him on the couch and I sat on his chest.

Fever sweat had broken out on his face. He glared up at me, his eyes wild with panic.

‘I’m not going to waste a lot of time on you,’ I said. ‘We’re here to find out what happened to Benny, and we’re going to find out. I know you, Thayler and Anita Gay are all hooked up together, and I know Benny came here yesterday. If you don’t talk you’re in for a bad time. Benny was a pal of mine. I don’t care two hoots what happens to you. You’ll talk or you’ll get hurt. Now, why did you kill Benny?’

‘I don’t know Benny. I swear it!’ Louis gasped.

‘He doesn’t even know Benny,’ I said to Kerman.

‘This is just the thing to help his memory,’ Kerman said, picking up the blow-lamp.

‘Do you want to get burned?’ I asked Louis.

‘I don’t know him!’ Louis squealed, and began to struggle. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about!’

‘You’ll change your ideas in a second, you louse,’ Kerman said, and played the flame on Louis’s shoes.

After a few moments of this Louis suddenly stiffened, arching his chest, his eyes bulging and sweat jumping out of his face like a squeezed sponge. I had trouble in keeping him down, and the noise he made started my head aching again.

‘Why did you kill Benny?’ I asked, signalling Kerman to lay off. The studio stank of burned leather.

‘I didn’t . . . I swear I know nothing about it,’ Louis groaned. The muscles of his legs were twitching and his head rolled on the padded back of the couch.

‘Give him a good dose this time,’ I said savagely.

Kerman gave him a good dose. Louis screamed so loud I had to cram his beret in his mouth.

‘Does it matter if I lame him for life?’ Kerman asked.

‘Not to me, but hold it until I see if he’s changed his mind. The smell’s bothering me.’

‘We ought to have brought a bottle of Scotch with us,’ Kerman said. ‘I’ve got a weak stomach.’

I took the beret out of Louis’s mouth.

“Why did you kill Benny?” I asked.

‘It was Thayler,’ he said so faintly I could scarcely hear him.

‘I think he’s going to talk,’ I said. ‘But keep the lamp handy in case his memory goes.’ I stood up.

‘What happened?’ I asked Louis.

It took a little time to get it out of him, and Kerman had to burn him once or twice when he seemed reluctant to go into details, but we finally got it out of him.

Benny had called at the shop a little after five o’clock the previous evening. Obviously from what Louis said, Benny had no idea he was walking into trouble. He had shown Louis Anita’s photograph and had asked him what he knew about her.

‘Thayler was there,’ Louis said, sweat running down his face. ‘He was listening behind the curtain. He came out with a gun. I searched Benny and found out where he was from. Anita had told Thayler about Universal Services. Thayler sapped Benny and took him away in his car. I don’t know what happened to him. I swear that’s all I know.’

That was when Kerman gave him the lamp again.

‘Where’s Thayler now?’ I asked.

Louis said something but I couldn’t hear.

‘I think this punk could do with a drink,’ I said.

‘I know I could,’ Kerman grumbled and began to look around the studio. After a while he discovered a bottle of Scotch and some glasses in a cupboard. He poured three drinks, gave me one, set one on the table for himself and threw the third in Louis’s face.

‘Where’s Thayler now?’ I asked, after I had taken a drink.

It wasn’t bad whisky: not good, but drinkable.

‘He’s gone to see Anita,’ Louis managed to get out.

‘When did he go?’

‘He caught the ten o’clock plane last night.’

‘You’ll have to speak up,’ I said. ‘You asked for this, and you’ve got it. Did you know he tied Benny’s hand and feet and threw him in the Indian Basin?’

The thin, pain-ridden face blanched.

‘No.’

I was inclined to believe him.

I said, ‘Thayler and Anita were married, weren’t they?’

He nodded.

‘Did you know she married a guy called Cerf about two months ago?’

His eyes shifted, but as soon as he said he didn’t know Cerf, Kerman reached for the lamp, and he howled out, ‘Yes, I knew. It was Thayler’s idea. Thayler said she could make a lot of money out of Cerf.’

‘Was she scared of Thayler?’

He looked blank.

‘She hadn’t any need to be.’

‘They quarrelled and parted, didn’t they?’

‘That was nothing. They were always quarrelling. When she met Cerf she came here and asked Thayler what she was to do. He told her to marry the guy and get as much out of him as she could. He said he’d keep his mouth shut if she paid him a cut.’

‘What do you know about Gail Bolus?’

He licked his dry lip, shaking his head.

‘Only she worked with Thayler before he met Anita. I never met her.’

‘Is she in this racket?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘This isn’t Thayler’s first trip to Orchid City, is it?’

He hesitated, but as soon as Kerman made a move he said hurriedly, ‘No. He went out there two nights ago. He got worried when Anita called him on long distance and told him she was being watched. He went to see her, but he didn’t contact her.’

‘He came back here?’

‘Yes. He was nervous. He said the girl who had been watching Anita had been shot. He thought he was better out of the way. He was worried he didn’t find Anita.’

‘Didn’t he tell her he was coming?’

‘No. He had this call from her and she asked him to come, but he had a job to do. Then when she hung up he changed his mind, and decided to go and find out what was happening.’

‘Is he coming back here?’

‘Yes’

‘When?’

‘He didn’t say.’

‘Anita was shot last night.’

He flinched, and his small eyes receded in their sockets.

‘Shot? Is she dead?’

‘Yeah. There was a Colt .45 found near her. What gun did Thayler use?’

‘I don’t know. A big gun. I don’t know anything about guns.’

I shrugged and moved away from him.

‘I can’t think of anything else, can you?’ I asked Kerman.

Kerman shook his head.

‘What shall we do with the rat?’

‘I’ll fix him. Give me those photographs on the desk.’

Kerman picked up the prints, glanced at them, grimaced, and handed them to me.

‘Here, write your name on the back of these,’ I said to Louis.

As Kerman reached for the blow-lamp, Louis hurriedly scrawled his name on the back of each print. I took them from him, slipped them into an envelope I found on the table, scribbled D.D.C. Dunnigan’s name on the envelope and put it in my pocket.

‘I’m handing these to Police Headquarters,’ I told Louis. ‘They’ve been waiting to get their hooks into you.’ I turned to Kerman. ‘Come on, let’s get out of here.’

Kerman stood over Louis.

‘Benny was a pal of mine,’ he said, in a low, flat voice.

‘Here’s something to remember him by,’ and he shoved the flame of the blow-lamp in Louis’s face.

chapter eight



I

I arrived back at Orchid City as dusk was falling and went straight to the office. Paula was still there, and as I pushed open the office door she glanced up from a paper-strewn desk with an expression of relief and expectancy on her face.

‘What news?’ she asked. ‘And how’s the head?’

‘The head could do with a drop of Scotch,’ I told her, dropping into an armchair near her desk. ‘Be a nice girl and fix me a drink. Things are popping, but there’s some way to go yet. At least I know who killed Benny. A guy named Lee Thayler. He’s either here in Orchid City or he’s returned to Frisco. I’ve left Kerman to watch that end.’

‘Thayler?’ Paula repeated, as she opened the desk cupboard and hoisted into view a bottle of Haig, a glass and a carafe of water. ‘Who’s he and where does he fit in?’

‘He’s Anita’s husband,’ I said, reaching for the bottle. ‘I haven’t found him yet, but I’m going after him. I may run into a little trouble with him. He’s kind of cute with a rod. Maybe it’d be an idea for you to make a few notes just in case. If I step into anything too big to handle it will help Mifflin to clear up the mess to know some of the facts. But don’t tell him anything unless things do happen.’

Paula stared at me; her dark eyes opening wide.

‘Now don’t get excited,’ I said, pouring myself a drink.

‘This is just a precaution. Got your notebook?’

‘But, Vic . . . ‘ she began, but I waved her to silence.

‘I want this down fast. I haven’t a lot of time to waste.’

She pulled her notebook towards her and picked up her pencil.

‘Go ahead,’ she said, a resigned expression on her face. ‘I’m ready when you are.’

‘The scene is San Francisco,’ I began; ‘the time two years ago in early June.’ I watched her pencil fly over the page, making sure I wasn’t going too fast for her. ‘A strip-tease artist, calling herself Anita Broda, blows into town from Hollywood. Her act has been a little raw for Hollywood’s night clubs, and the Vice Squad has sent her packing. She goes the rounds in Frisco, trying to get an engagement, but the night clubs are scared of her. Finally, she gets an introduction to Nick Nedick who runs a third-rate vaudeville show on the corner of Bayshore and Third. He takes a chance on her, and gives her a week’s tryout. She clicks in a big way, and after her third week has her name in lights across the front of the house.

‘Most of the acts Nedick engages fade away after the first or second week, but the customers rave about Anita so she becomes a permanent feature, heading the top of the bill for a record run of eighteen months.

‘There’s another act, not so successful as Anita, but good enough to remain as a second permanent feature, put on by a guy named Lee Thayler, a trick sharpshooter, and his partner, a girl called Gail Bolus.’

Paula looked up sharply, blinked, and asked, ‘Isn’t that the girl ...?’

‘Yeah, the same one,’ I said. ‘Let’s get straight on. This stuff’s loaded with dynamite. You’ll get another surprise in a moment.’

‘Go ahead,’ she said.

‘Thayler and Anita fall for each other, and Thayler decides to quit show business and buys himself a piece in a photographer’s shop, specializing in theatrical work.

‘The owner of the shop is a guy named Louis, who makes money on the side as a blackmailer. Thayler is probably mixed up in the racket. The shop isn’t much, and two wouldn’t make much of a living out of it unless there was more to it than the photographer’s business.’

I paused for a moment to give Paula time to catch up, then went on, Thayler marries Anita on 8th November of last year. Gail Bolus quits show business. A month later Anita leaves Thayler. Maybe they didn’t hit it off. I don’t know. Anyway, she gets a job as a mannequin at Simeon’s swank dress shop on 19th Avenue. It’s here she meets Cerf.

‘Cerf, as you know, lost his wife a couple of years back in a car accident. He has a sick daughter on

his hands, and life isn't much fun. Anita spreads her net, and he walks into it. He offers marriage.

'Anita talks it over with Thayler, who's quick to see the advantage of her being hooked up with a millionaire. He tells Anita to go ahead and marry Cerf. He promises to keep out of the way providing he gets a take on whatever Anita gets out of Cerf, and she intends to get plenty. Anita marries Cerf: a bigamous marriage, of course, and goes to live with him at Santa Rosa Estate.

'I've made inquiries about Anita, and can't find anyone who'll support Cerf's suspicions that she was a kleptomaniac I spent a couple of hours before leaving Frisco, talking to people who knew and worked with her, and none of them ever suspected that Anita had this tendency. I am now pretty sure that the suitcase of stolen articles was planted in her cupboard to discredit her with Cerf. The only person who had reason to discredit her is Natalie, Cerf's daughter, who would have lost half the estate if Anita had lived.

'But we'll leave that because I haven't had time to tackle Natalie yet. I'm satisfied that Anita's association with Barclay has nothing to do with the case. She found Cerf dull, and probably an unsatisfactory lover, and turned to Barclay for a little spare-time fun. She was the type. I'm pretty sure Barclay doesn't figure in this, although there's still the problem why Dana's clothes were hidden in his house. It's my guess they were planted there by the killer to divert suspicion, but that's guesswork.'

Paula paused long enough to ask, 'What happened to Benny, Vic?'

'Yeah, Benny. Get this down. Benny had no idea Louis was hooked up with Anita. He went to the shop and into trouble. Thayler happened to be there. As soon as he heard Benny ask questions about Anita, he came out with a gun. Anita had already told Thayler she was being watched by Universal Services. Thayler was jittery. He had been to Orchard City hoping to see Anita on the night Dana was murdered, but hadn't contacted her. On his return to Frisco he was in a state of nerves, and when Benny turned up he lost his head and knocked Benny off. Then he caught the ten o'clock plane to Orchard City. Maybe he decided the safest thing would be to silence Anita. I don't know. The point is he was on the spot when Anita was killed. Whether he killed her or not is something I have still to find out. I'm sure he was the guy who sapped me when I found Anita. He may have taken her body. I don't know. These are the first pieces of the jigsaw that mean anything, but they don't make a complete picture. There's a lot of work to do before we do get a complete picture.'

I finished my drink, got up and began to pace the floor.

'If I can find out why Dana was murdered,' I went on, 'and why Anita Cerf left the diamond necklace in Dana's apartment I think we'll have the answer. I think those two points are the framework of our jigsaw. If we can only find the answers to them the rest of the bits will fall into place. I want to find out too why Anita was scared when I found her at L'Etoile, and why she was hiding there. And why she was murdered and what's become of her body. There are a hell of a lot of things I want to find out.'

‘How about Gail Bolus?’ Paula asked, laying down her pencil. ‘Where does she fit in in this?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, sitting on the edge of her desk. ‘On the face of it I think she’s still hooked up with Thayler. The way she turned up after I had been sapped was too much of a coincidence to be an accident. It’s something I’m going to find out.’ I reached for a cigarette and lit it. ‘Another thing: I have an idea Caesar Mills is mixed up somewhere in this business. It’s a hunch, but it’s a strong one. It’s time I went out to his place at Fairview and looked the joint over. Maybe it’s a waste of time, but it’ll set my mind at rest.’

‘We haven’t a lot of time to waste, Paula said. Brandon is raising hell over Leadbetter’s killing. He wants to see you. They’ve matched the bullet that killed Leadbetter with the one that killed Dana. You’ll have to watch out, Vic. Brandon’s in a dangerous mood.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, and scowled. ‘Right now I’ll have to see what I can do about Thayler, but I’ll take care of Mills at the same time. The point is I can’t go chasing all over town looking for Thayler. He may be here or he may have gone back to Frisco. It might take me weeks to run him down.’ I sat thinking for a moment, then reached for the telephone.

‘Finnegan’s an old friend of Dana’s. He offered to help. I believe he could find Thayler. He has contacts among the mobs in town.’ I dialled Finnegan’s number, waited, and when Finnegan’s growling voice came over the line, I said, ‘Pat, there’s something you can do. I want to contact a guy named Lee Thayler. He may or may not be in town. He’s a trick sharpshooter, blackmailer and possibly a murderer. It’ll be worth a couple of hundred bucks to anyone who let’s me know where he is to be found.’

‘Well, all right, Mr. Malloy,’ Finnegan said. ‘I’ll pass the word round. If he’s in town, I’ll find him. How about a description?’

‘I’ll do better than that. On my way out I’ll leave a photo of him for you. It’s urgent, Pat. He has something to do with Dana’s killing.’

‘Let me have the photo,’ Finnegan said, his voice hard, ‘I’ll find him for you if he’s to be found.’

I thanked him and hung up.

‘That takes care of Thayler,’ I said, and slid off the desk.

‘Now, while I’m waiting, I think I’ll take a look at Mills. Get these notes typed, Paula, and put them in the safe. And another thing, take that diamond necklace over to Cerf and get a receipt for it. We should have done that before. If Brandon heard about it and found it here we wouldn’t have a leg to stand on. In Cerf’s hands it doesn’t become evidence anymore.’

Paula said she would do that right away.

‘Well, so long,’ I said, making for the door. ‘If I run into trouble turn the whole works over to

Mifflin,' and before she could fuss, I left the office and went pelting down the stairs.

II

Beechwood Avenue, a three-mile long, two-way street, separated by a parkway planted with magnolia trees, climbed snakelike up the hill at the back of Fairview and down into the valley to the San Francisco and Los Angeles Highway. It was a quiet, backwater street, lined on either side by stately houses, white columned with balconies and lofty porticos.

No. 235, Caesar Mills's residence, hid behind white stucco walls. The moonlight was bright enough for me to read the chromium numbers on the seven-foot gate as I drove past.

All I could see of the house was its green-tiled roof.

About two hundred yards farther on I saw a cul-de-sac, leading to one of the bigger estates, and I drove into it, pulled up close to the kerb, turned out all but the parking lights and got out.

It was a hot, still night and quiet, and the air was heavy with the scent of flowers growing in the hidden gardens and from the magnolia trees in the parkway: a nice secluded spot for courting couples or burglars.

I walked casually towards No. 235, without hurrying, like a man taking a little exercise before going to bed. It was twenty minutes past ten. I was feeling flatfooted and tired, and the heat bothered me. I had a feeling, too, that I was wasting time; that I had no business to be out here. I should be concentrating on Lee Thayler, or better still in bed, getting some sleep to be ready for whatever happened in the morning.

I paused outside the seven-foot gate to look up and down the street. There was no one around, and I lifted the latch, pushed open the gate and peered at a small, well-kept garden, flood-lit by the moon. Facing me was a one-and-a-half-storey frame house with the chimney at each end, six wooden columns supporting a verandah roof, broken by three dormers that extended across the front of the building.

Four casement windows opened on to the verandah, and lights spilled through the windows. It looked as if Caesar Mills was at home.

I decided, now I was here, to take a peep at him, and I crept along the garden path to the verandah and looked in through the nearest window.

One glance showed me that Mills lived in style. The room was designed for comfort, and money had been lavished on it. Chinese rugs lay on the parquet floor. Two big chesterfields, four lounging chairs

and a divan were arranged about the room. A walnut table, loaded with bottles and glasses stood against one of the walls. Lamps with parchment shades made pools of subdued light on the polished floor and the rugs. It was a nice room: a room furnished with taste. The kind of room anyone could be happy in.

Caesar Mills sat in one of the armchairs, a cigarette between his lips, a tall, frost-filmed glass of whisky in his hand.

He was wearing a navy blue, silk dressing-gown, white silk pyjamas and his bare feet were thrust into heelless slippers. He was reading a magazine, and by the bored frown on his face, he didn't seem to think much of it.

I wondered if it would be worthwhile to wait. I wanted badly to get into the house and look it over, but I didn't feel like taking risks, nor did I feel like getting into a rough house with Mills. But there was a chance he would go to bed before long so I decided I'd give him half an hour and see what happened.

I picked a spot in the shadows and sat down on the edge of a big stone tub full of petunias and waited. From where I sat I could see into the room and I could see Mills, sure he couldn't see me.

Twenty minutes dragged by. I knew it was twenty minutes because I kept looking at my watch, and thinking how nice it would be to go home and get some sleep. It wasn't much fun watching Mills taking it easy in an armchair while I sat on the edge of a stone tub with an ache in my head and a pain in my back. But I was playing a hunch, and I was obstinate, so I waited, and after a while he tossed aside the magazine and stood up.

I was hoping he was going to lock up for the night, but instead he went over to the bottles on the walnut table and freshened his drink. Watching the whisky run out of the bottle made my throat twitch with envy. I was hot and tired, and I could have done with that drink.

Then as he returned to his chair, I saw him pause and cock his head on one side and listen. I listened too.

The sound of a car coming fast disturbed the quiet of the night. Mills put down his glass, went over to the big mirror above the fireplace and took a look at himself, then he stood, waiting.

The car drew up outside the garden gate, a car door slammed and the latch of the gate clicked up.

By now I was on my feet. I stepped back into the darkness made by the shadow of the house. I heard the gate swing to, and footsteps come along the path: quick, light steps of a woman.

I waited, squeezed against the wall, looking from the darkness into the brilliantly lit garden. A woman came round the corner of the house: a woman in fawn linen slacks and an apple-green sports shirt, worn outside the slacks. She was bare headed and carried a handbag made of fawn linen to match her slacks.

She passed close to me, and I caught the fragrance of her perfume. The moonlight was harsh on her white, pinched face. There was an unhappy little sneer on her lips.

She walked briskly across the verandah and into the room.

As soon as she was out of sight, I took out my handkerchief and mopped my face and hands. I wasn't tired anymore. My head no longer ached. I felt pretty pleased with myself. It's always good to play a hunch and prove yourself right.

The woman in the fawn linen slacks and the apple-green sports shirt was, of course, Natalie Cerf.

III

It was very quiet out there in the shadows and the heat. Somewhere in the far distance I could hear the sound of the ocean breaking on the reef out at East Beach: a whisper of sound that seemed loud in the silence around me.

And while I stood in the darkness waiting for something to happen, I tried to remember what Paula had said about Natalie Cerf. Two years ago there had been a motor accident. Natalie's mother had been killed and Natalie crippled.

She had been treated, X-rayed and examined by every doctor worth a damn in the country. But none of them had done anything for her. Cerf had paid out hundreds of thousands of dollars: none of them could make her walk.

It looked as if medical science had missed a miracle healer in Caesar Mills. What the brains of the best medical men in the country had failed to do, apparently he had done, for Natalie couldn't have walked more briskly into the room where he was, not if she'd been a competitor in the Olympic Games.

I heard Mills say in his lizard, grating voice, 'You didn't say you were coming out. I wasn't expecting you. Why didn't you phone?'

Under cover of his voice I moved forward so I could look into the room.

Mills was standing in the doorway; as if he had just come into the room. There was a sulky frown on his face and his pale eyes were hard.

'Am I disturbing you?' Natalie asked politely.

She was sitting bolt upright on the arm of the chesterfield, her thin hands folded on her handbag, an

alert look on her face.

‘I was going to bed.’

‘Were you? It’s not very late. Is that the reason why you look so sulky?’

He came into the room and closed the door.

‘It’s not that. I don’t like you busting in like this. I might have had a guy here or someone.’

He picked up the drink he had left on the table. She watched him, her face suddenly as expressionless as the face of a shop-window dummy.

‘I didn’t think I had to ask permission to come to my own house,’ she said quietly. Although the words were hostile, her tone, if anything, was conciliatory. ‘I’ll know next time.’

Mills didn’t like this, but he didn’t say anything. He returned to his armchair and sat down. There was a long - overlong - pause.

She said lightly, ‘Aren’t you going to offer me a drink?’

He didn’t look at her.

‘This is your house. They’re your drinks. Help yourself.’

She slid off the arm of the chair and walked over to the table. I watched her pour three inches of whisky into a glass, drop a chunk of ice into it. Her narrow, thin back was straight and her hands were steady, but her lips were trembling.

‘What’s the matter, Caesar?’ she asked, without turning.

She still tried to keep the light, bantering tone, but it wasn’t convincing.

‘How long do you think this is going on?’ he asked.

She turned swiftly to face him.

‘How long is what going on?’

‘You know: this—’ He waved his hand at the room. ‘How long do you think I’m going to fool outside those gates, saluting like a lackey? How long do you think I’m creeping into your bedroom, side-stepping Franklin who knows what’s going on, and pretends he doesn’t?’

‘But what else can we do?’ she asked, frowning.

‘We can get married, can’t we? How many more times do I have to say it? We can live here, can’t

we? You have your own money. Cerf can't do anything about it.' He drained his glass and set it down angrily on the edge of the fire-kerb. 'We can get married,' he repeated. 'That's what we can do.'

'No, we can't.'

'We can get married,' he said again. 'You can tell Cerf the truth. You don't think he cares, do you? Maybe he cared when it happened, but not now. A guy can't live with that kind of thing for two years without getting used to the idea. You're kidding yourself if you think he cares anymore. He doesn't.'

'Yes, he does,' she said, her eyes big in her white, pinched face.

He got up and stood with his hands thrust into his dressing-gown pockets, his head a little on one side, a faint, sneering smile on his pale lips.

'I tell you he doesn't,' he said.

They both spoke quietly, but there was a tenseness about them that told me they were holding themselves in as if they knew that so long as they kept their tempers the situation was under control. And it was easy to see that because they both had something to lose, they didn't want the situation to get out of control.

'And I'll tell you why,' Mills went on. 'Look at the way he treats you. How often does he come to see you? Twice a day.' He broke off as she made an impatient little movement, said, 'I know what you're thinking.'

'What am I thinking?'

'You think because he only sees you twice a day it's because he can't bear to come more often. You have a cockeyed idea that his conscience troubles him. You think every time he comes into the room and sees you sitting in your chair or lying in bed with that hurt, lonely look on your bitchy little face he gets a stab in the heart. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?'

'There's no need to be coarse,' she said, and behind her back her hands clenched into fists.

'Isn't it?' he repeated.

'Yes! I know he does,' she cried, her voice suddenly loud and harsh. 'I know he can't bear to see me, and I'm glad. Do you hear? I'm glad!'

'It's time you stopped kidding yourself,' he said, keeping his voice down, watching her, very confident as he swayed backwards and forwards on the balls of his feet. 'It's time you faced up to it, baby. Your racket was washed up when he married that blonde.'

'I'm not going to talk about it!' she cried. 'I've had enough of this, Caesar. And don't call me baby. It's vulgar and hateful.'

‘If we don’t talk about it now, it’s the last time we talk about anything,’ he said, crossed the room to take a cigarette from a silver box on a distant table. ‘But please yourself.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s plain enough, isn’t it? I’m handing in my nice knee boots and peak cap tomorrow. I’m through with standing outside your gate, I’m through with creeping up the back stairs to your room. That’s what it means.’

She gave a sudden harsh laugh. It wasn’t a pleasant sound.

‘And I suppose you’ll give up all this?’

‘If you mean this house and all its junk, then you’re right for once, baby.’ He lit a cigarette, released a stream of smoke down his thin nostrils. ‘I quit unless we marry.’

‘I can’t marry you, Caesar,’ she said. ‘Not so long as he lives. I can’t do it.’

‘Do you think anyone will want to marry you by the time he’s dead?’

‘Why can’t we go on as we are? You have everything you want, haven’t you? You have your freedom. I don’t interfere with you.’

He walked up to her, caught hold of her wrist and jerked her to him.

‘I’m sick of being your bedroom lackey,’ he told her.

She slapped his face. The sound of her palm against his tight, brown cheek was as loud as a pistol shot.

They stood looking at each other, then he released her wrist and, with a sneering little grin, moved away from her.

She sat down abruptly as if the strength had gone out of her limbs.

‘I didn’t mean to do that,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘You don’t think I care, do you?’ he said, and laughed. ‘I had you on the raw that time, baby. It gives me a bang to see you squirm. Sooner or later this had to come to an end. Well, I guess this is the payoff. I’m through.’

‘Don’t talk like that. You don’t mean it. You’re angry. I’ll go now. We can talk about it tomorrow.’

‘You talk about it tomorrow. I shan’t be here.’

He pitched his cigarette into the fireplace. Her eyes went from him to the smouldering cigarette, and

her lips tightened. When he was sure she was looking at the cigarette he put his foot on it and smeared it on the tiles.

‘Like that,’ he said softly.

‘Caesar, please...’

‘Like that,’ he replayed. ‘You and me - like that.’

There was a long, tight silence.

She said after minutes, ‘You’ll miss this house and the money. You’ll miss everything I do for you.’

‘Baby, how you love to kid yourself. Miss this house and your money? This isn’t the only house and you aren’t the only girl with money. You don’t really think that, do you?’

‘Let’s not go on with this anymore, Caesar,’ she said, clenching her fists and sitting bolt upright.

‘We’re going on with it. I can find another girl as good as you and as rich as you tomorrow. It’s easy. This town is crammed with girls like you. Girls who like a guy with a little muscle to fool around with; who like to buy him suits and lend him a house and snap their fingers at him when they want him: and you know why they want him, don’t you? I don’t have to go into that side of it, do I?’ He laughed. ‘Rich, pampered girls with nothing better to do than buy a man because he’s got muscles. Well, you’re not the first, baby, and you won’t be the last. If you want to keep me, marry me. Marry me so I can get my hooks into your money, and that’s the only reason why I’d marry you.’

‘Did you say I wasn’t the first?’ she asked, her eyes closed and an exhausted look on her face. She had dropped back into the chair while he was speaking, and there was a grey, sick look on her face.

‘Certainly I said you weren’t the first, and you won’t be the last either.’

‘Yes,’ she said softly. ‘I may be the last.’

‘Don’t count on it, baby. Don’t count on it.’

He finished his drink, yawned, ran his fingers through his hair.

‘Well, I guess I’ll go to bed. I’m sick of this. You’d better run off home.’

Her eyes opened.

‘And tomorrow?’ she asked in a cold, brittle voice.

‘I shall be the hell out of here tomorrow.’

She got slowly to her feet.

‘You really are going away?’

‘What’s the matter with you?’ he asked roughly. ‘Don’t I talk plain enough for you? I’m through. I’m quitting. I’m taking a powder. I’m leaving you flat. I’m giving you the brush-off. Now do you get it? I’m shaking the dust of this love nest off my feet. I’m going to forget the way you look, the way you act, the things you say, and baby, it’s going to be a long and beautiful vacation.’

She stood motionless, a feverish look in her eyes.

‘Did you say that to Anita?’ she said.

Mills gave her a quick, searching look, then laughed.

‘You’re no fool, are you? So you knew about her? Well, she didn’t last long, and she wasn’t much anyway. She hadn’t your youthful enthusiasm.’ He turned away to pour another drink. ‘Why don’t you give Franklin a chance?’ he asked, and laughed again. ‘Franklin’s old but I bet he’s keen.’

She had turned slightly, her back to him, her hand unfastening the clip on her bag. She dipped into the bag and lifted out a .25 automatic. The heavy nickel plate on the gun reflected in the lamplight, sending bright flashes across the ceiling.

Mills heard the snick of the safety catch as she thumbed it back, and swung round as she pointed the gun at him.

‘You’re not going away, Caesar,’ she said softly.

She had her back to me now. I couldn’t see the expression on her face, but I could see Mills’s expression. The confident smile slid off his face the way a fish slides off the fishmonger’s slab. He stood very still, scarcely breathing, his eyes opening wide.

‘You’d better put that gun away,’ he said, stiff-lipped and whispering. ‘There might be an accident.’

‘There’s going to be one,’ she said, and began to back slowly towards the casement window. ‘Oh, yes, Caesar, there’s going to be an accident all right. Don’t move. I know how to use this thing. A millionaire’s daughter has so many opportunities to do things: shooting with this toy is one of them. I’m a pretty good shot, Caesar.’

‘Now, look, baby . .

‘I told you not to call me that. Keep quiet and don’t move. It’s my turn to talk now.’ She was by the window, within three feet of me. I could smell the perfume in her hair, see the feverish glitter in her eyes. I kept as still as a corpse and as quiet. I didn’t know how quick she could be. The slightest movement from me might bring her swinging round and shooting at the same time. I was too close for her to miss. The thought made me sweat a little.

‘I knew, sooner or later, this would happen,’ she said. ‘I knew, sooner or later, I should have to do this. You’re not the type, Caesar, to keep a bargain. But you’re handsome and strong and you’re fun sometimes: but not always. You’re not always fun. Every once in a while your mean, hateful, dirty little ego gets the better of you. And don’t think you ever fooled me. You didn’t. I knew about Anita. I watched you two together. What a swine you are, Caesar, What a fine, handsome swine you are.’

‘Oh, yes. I wanted this thing of ours to go on, but I knew sooner or later you would get tired of it, and you would find someone else. And I knew it wouldn’t be difficult for you to find someone else. And I knew, too, you would talk about me to the slut you found. You can’t resist ta king, can you, Caesar? You’ve talked to me. Do you think I liked to lie by your side and listen to all the details about the other girls, knowing that one day you would be telling some other girl about me? But you’re not going to do that, Caesar, nor are you going to tell any girl about any other girl, not ever again.’

‘You’re crazy,’ Mills said, his voice off-key.

‘No, I’m not. I should be crazy if I let you walk out of here, but you’re not going to do that. They’ll find you in the morning, and they’ll reconstruct the shooting, and they’ll know it’s a woman, but they won’t know which woman. There have been so many, haven’t there, Caesar? Regiments of women: all who would have wanted sometime or other to have shot you. I don’t think they’ll even suspect me. Everyone in this pick-nosed town knows I can’t walk. How could I come out here and shoot you? They may think I did because this house belongs to me, but they’ll only have to talk to Dr. McKinley and he’ll tell them I can’t walk. He couldn’t afford to admit I’ve been fooling him for months. And then there’s faithful Franklin. He knows I’ve come here to see you. The news of the shooting will please him, Caesar. He doesn’t like you, and he won’t give me away.’

Mills said through white, stiff lips, ‘Put it down, you little fool! Don’t point it at me! Put it down!’

‘Goodbye, Caesar,’ she said, and the short, glittering barrel moved to aim at his head. ‘You’re going to be lonely. That’s something you don’t know the meaning of yet. But you will. You’ll be lonely when you’re dead, Caesar.’

‘Don’t do it!’ he shouted, and threw up his hands, half-turning, seeing she was going to shoot and knowing there was nothing he could do about it.

I swung my fist and hit her elbow as the gun went off. The blow paralysed her arm and she dropped the gun, swung round and struck at me. I felt her nails scrape down the side of my face and I grabbed at her, but she dodged out of reach, and ran past me into the garden.

I let her go, watching her run down the moonlit path to the gate and to the car.

‘Hello, Mac,’ Mills said. ‘So there are times when you come in on cue.’ He sat down abruptly as if his legs couldn’t support him. Sweat beaded his tallow-white face. ‘Have a drink? If you need it the way I need it, brother, you need it!’

I moved into the room, dabbing at the scratches on my neck with my handkerchief. One of the scratches was bleeding; the others felt raw.

‘Sort of shook you up, didn’t it?’ I said, and sat on the arm of the chesterfield where Natalie had sat but a few minutes before. ‘You won’t be closer to a coffin than you were just now.’

‘I know it,’ Mills said. He tried to pour whisky into a glass but his hand shook so much most of the whisky went on to the carpet.

‘Better let me do it,’ I said, and took the bottle from him.

He lay back in the armchair, the sweat was now pouring down his face. Olaf Kruger had said once you got him going he’d turn yellow. Natalie had got him going all right.

I made a couple of drinks big enough to float a yacht on, handed him one and poured the other down my parched throat. It was the nicest drink I’d had for forty-eight hours.

Mills put his down in three long swallows. It might have been water. And when he had drained the glass, he shoved it at me again.

‘I could use another like that,’ he said. ‘Sweet Pete! That bitch scared me. If you hadn’t barged in like that...’

‘You had it coming,’ I said, fixing another drink for him. ‘It’s a wonder to me more of you heels don’t get wiped out. If I hadn’t wanted to talk to you I’d have let her shoot you.’

He gave a thin, smiling grimace.

‘You’re my pal, Mac,’ he said. ‘I owe you something. What a spot I was in! She’s crazy. You know that? She’s as crazy as a rattlesnake you kick accidentally, and as dangerous. I thought I was a goner. Did you hear what she said? That stuff about being lonely when you’re dead. That’s a nice crack to make when you’re shooting at a guy, isn’t it? That’ll tell you how crazy she is.’

I handed him a drink to match the first.

‘Don’t toss that lot down all at once. I want you sober for the next ten minutes.’

‘Gimme a cigarette,’ he said. ‘My nerves are creeping up and down my spine like spider’s legs. I’m going to get the hell out of here. I know her. Know what, Mac? I wouldn’t put it past her to go home, get another gun and come out here again. Well, I’m not staying. I’m not taking any more chances with a crazy twist like her.’

I gave him a cigarette and lit it for him. Although he kept talking I could see he was in a bad way. The reaction had hit him all ends up, and I shouldn't have been surprised to have seen him slide out of his chair in a faint.

'Take it easy,' I said. 'She isn't coming back. Get hold of yourself.'

He took another drink and sat staring blankly at the carpet. I could see it was no use hurrying him. He had had a shock, and he hadn't the guts to shake it off quickly.

It was nearly five minutes before he spoke again, and then his voice sounded a little more normal.

'What are you doing out here, Mac?' he asked. 'Don't tell me if you don't want to. I'm glad you came. I'd be growing cold by now if you hadn't bust in the way you did.'

'I'm here to talk to you,' I said. 'You can help me straighten out a little problem I'm working on if you want to.'

He looked at me and gave a pinched grin.

'After what you did for me, Mac,' he said seriously, 'Anything I can do is for the asking. And I'm sorry I pushed you around that day. I guess you feel sore about that. Well, I'm sorry.'

'I was sore all right, but forget it. I thought that dame couldn't walk. What's behind it all?'

'She's trying to get back on Cerf,' Mills said. 'I tell you she's crazy. And I mean crazy.'

'What's Cerf done to her?'

'Do you want to hear it?' Mills asked, huddling farther down in his chair. 'I'll make it short if you really want to hear it.'

'Go ahead,' I said.

'Well, it's this way,' Mills said. 'She was nuts about her mother, but she hadn't much time for Cerf. To complicate things Cerf was crazy about her. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her and was jealous the way she used to hang around her mother. The three of them took a trip in a car. Cerf drove. They stopped some place for lunch and Cerf livened himself up with a load of booze. He was all right in the hotel but when he got into the air he was stinko - just like that!' And Mills snapped his fingers. 'Instead of turning the wheel over to one of the women, he got obstinate and insisted on driving. He hit a truck head on. It was a hell of a smash. The trucker was killed, Nat was knocked out and her mother thrown through the windscreen, cutting her throat on the glass. Cerf wasn't even scratched. When Nat came to she found herself covered with her mother's blood and her mother laid out beside her with her head hanging on a strip of skin. Know what I think?' He leaned forward to stare at me. 'I think that sent Nat crazy. It didn't show, but it's there. Cerf nearly went crazy himself when he found Nat was hurt, and she was quick enough to see the way he reacted. Up to then, she told me, he'd never

shown any feelings. He was responsible for her mother's death, and she hated him from then on with a hatred that has been growing ever since. To punish him she pretended she couldn't walk. Maybe for the first couple of months she did punish him; from what she told me, he was genuinely fond of her, but after a while I guess he got used to the setup. She wouldn't have it he didn't care, but that's my bet. Can you imagine? She kept to a wheel chair or in bed for two solid years, going out only when Cerf was away or at night when she knew he wouldn't come to see her. That shows you what a nut she is.'

'And how did you happen along?' I asked.

'They wanted another guard on the gate. I was short of dough at the time and got the job. You know how these things happen. About a couple of days later she began to make passes. I guess she was bored with herself and thought it'd be fun to have a guy to fool with.'

'Do you know anything about a suitcase of stolen articles which was found in Anita's cupboard?'

'That was Nat's idea. I collected the stuff for her, and she planted the suitcase. She reckoned it'd take the guilt off Cerf's honeymoon, and it certainly did. She was full of sweet ideas like that.'

'What can you tell me about Gail Bolus?'

He stared at me, surprised.

'You get around, don't you, Mac? What do you know about her?'

'I'm asking you. You know her, don't you?'

He nodded

'Yeah. She blew into town about four months ago. She was crazy about the fight racket. We met at Kruger's. At that time I did a bit of boxing. We hooked up together. She liked to see me fight. When I quit fighting, she lost interest in me. You know how it is, Mac. She was a tough dame, and knew all the answers. You have to work too hard with a dame like that. I gave up trying. As far as I know she used to earn a living playing poker. She could shuffle all the aces to the bottom of the deck as easily as she could light a cigarette. I don't know what became of her.'

'Did she ever mention Lee Thayler?'

He shook his head.

'Who's he?'

'Never mind. What were you doing in Barclay's house a couple of days back?'

He gave me a quick, startled look.

‘You’re a busy guy, aren’t you? What were you doing there?’

‘I was there. What were you looking for?’

‘That was Nat again. She sent me out there to see if I could find anything that’d convince Cerf Anita was two-timing him. But I didn’t find anything.’

I finished my drink and stood up.

‘You wouldn’t have any ideas about the murder? Why Dana Lewis was shot?’

He shook his head.

‘Not a thing. Nat thinks Anita did it, but I don’t. Anita isn’t the type.’ He pushed himself out of the chair. Fear and whisky made him unsteady on his feet. ‘If that’s all you want, Mac, I guess I’ll be going. I’ll pack a bag and get out of town. I shan’t be easy until I’ve put some miles between myself and that twist.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘That’s all I want.’

V

On the way back to Orchid City I chewed over what I had heard and what Mills had told me. On the face of it none of the facts I’d learned had any bearing on Dana’s death, although they did clear up some points that needed clearing up. But I was still as far away as ever from finding Dana’s killer.

I was still sure that the key to the whole business was the reasons why Dana was shot and why the diamond necklace had been left in her apartment. But I couldn’t see any way of finding the explanations of those two reasons. As far as I could see the hunt was narrowed down to Thayler or maybe Bannister. Thayler was the most likely suspect. I couldn’t see why Bannister should have shot Dana unless he had been bribed to do so by the promise of the necklace, and when he didn’t get it he had squared accounts by shooting Anita. I didn’t like this theory much, but decided it might be worthwhile to give it a little more thought. I didn’t think it was possible for Natalie to have shot Dana. She had no motive for one thing, and she wouldn’t be able to handle a .45 for another.

I went on like this, turning the facts over in my mind, trying to make them fit into the jigsaw, and getting nowhere until I pulled up outside my cabin.

It was quite a change to find the place in darkness. I turned on the light after unlocking the front door and walked heavily into the sitting room. The clock on the mantel showed one-fifteen. I was tired enough to go to bed with my clothes on.

As I walked into my bedroom the telephone began to ring.

In the quiet of the night the bell sounded loud and hysterical. Cursing softly I sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the receiver.

It was Pat Finnegan, and he sounded excited.

‘I’ve found him, Mr. Malloy,’ he said. ‘He’s holed up with Joe Betillo, and he’s there right now.’

I stiffened to attention.

‘You mean Thayler?’

‘Yeah. Do you want me to come over?’

‘You go to bed,’ I said, and patted my pillow regretfully.

‘This is something I can handle on my own. Thanks for the tip, Pat.’

‘Now wait a minute, Mr. Malloy. You can’t go out there alone,’ Finnegan said excitedly. ‘Betillo’s a mean guy to monkey with. You want to be careful of him.’

‘Forget it, Pat,’ I said. ‘Do me a favour, will you? Call Frisco and tell Kerman to come back by the first plane. Tell him where Thayler is.’ I gave Mike the telephone number of Kerman’s hotel. ‘You leave Joe and Thayler to me.’

‘But, look, Joe’s a mean guy . . . ‘ Finnegan began, but I cut him short.

‘So am I. Go to bed and so long,’ and I dropped the receiver back on its cradle, gave my pillow one more regretful pat and went out to the car again.

chapter nine



I

I knew Joe Betillo well by sight and reputation. He was a mortician and embalmer, coffin maker, abortionist and fixer of knife and bullet wounds with no questions asked, and owned a double-fronted shop in Coral Gables, the Dead-End district of Orchid City. The shop was at the far end of a cul-de-sac alley alongside Delmonico's bar, which dominated the waterfront and faced the harbour.

Coral Gables, the farthest extension west of Orchid City, was a shack town that had grown up around the natural deep-water harbour where an industry of sponge and fish docks, turtle crawls and markets provided a living for the tough boys of the district. It was a tough spot where cops patrolled in twos, and a night seldom passed without someone getting a knife in his hide or his head broken by a beer bottle.

As I parked the car in the shadows, a few yards from the brightly lit entrance of Delmonico's bar, the clock on the dashboard showed one-forty-five. A mechanical piano was going: thumping out tinny jazz. The waterfront was deserted. Even for Coral Gables, one-forty-five a.m. was bedtime.

I got out of the car and walked to the mouth of the alley leading to Betillo's place. I could see through the bar windows a few stragglers lounging up at the bar, and a couple of girls in halters and shorts sitting at a table by the door, looking with exhausted eyes at the lights shining on the oily water in the harbour.

Keeping in the shadows I moved quietly down the alley that was as dark as a homburg hat and smelt of stale whisky, cats and rotting fish. I turned a sharp corner in the alley and came upon Betillo's shop: a two-storeyed job made from salvaged lumber, bleached white by the sun and the wind, shabby and uncared for, and in total darkness. There was a five-foot fence adjoining the building, and

after a quick look around to make sure no one was watching, I caught hold of the top of the fence and swung myself over.

I landed in a big yard full of timber, sawdust and wood shavings. Splashes of moonlight, broken by neighbouring roofs, provided light and shadows, and I hadn't much fear I would be seen if anyone looked out of the windows.

I sneaked across the yard, keeping in the shadows, on the lookout for a window. I found one at the rear of the building within easy reach and fastened only by an inside slip catch. I levered the catch back, forced the blade of my knife between the sill and the frame and raised the window. It went up without noise. I took my time, pushing it up inch by inch until I had space enough to crawl through. I flicked on my flashlight to see where I was going. The round, bright beam lit up an unfurnished room, its floor covered with wood shavings and sawdust. I swung my leg over the sill and climbed quietly into the room.

A door by the window gave on to a passage, and at the end of the passage was a flight of stairs, and facing the stairs was another door. I took all this in with one brief glance and a flash or two of my light.

Before I moved out of the shelter of the room I was in I turned off my flashlight and stood listening. The shop and the apartment above was as quiet and as dark as a coal mine on a Sunday. I crept down the passage; using the light only when I had to, pushed open the door facing the stairs and peered into what seemed a big room, the far side of it stacked high with coffins. The first thing I noticed was the sweet sharp smell of formaldehyde, the stuff you pickle corpses in.

I slid into the room, closed the door and swung the beam of my light around the walls. There were about three dozen coffins stacked against the wall facing me: cheap, pinewood jobs that looked as if they had been knocked together in a hurry. Along the wall on my right were three better class ones: one a real humdinger in black ebony with silver handles. In the centre of the room was another even more gaudy effort in walnut with gold handles. In another corner of the room was a long marble slab with a deep sink close by where I guessed Betillo tidied up his corpses.

I poked around, lifting coffin lids, peering here and there, and feeling spooked, not knowing what I was looking for, but hoping I'd strike something. Eventually I did.

I had got around to the stack of coffins against the far wall: the cheap, pine jobs. The second of the three I looked into contained Anita Cerf.

I was half expecting to find her somewhere in the room, and had tensed my nerves for the shock of seeing that blood-framed face again. But in the hard, bright light of the torch she looked even more horrible than I had imagined. Betillo had embalmed her just as she was: he hadn't attempted to tidy her up or fill in the hole in her forehead or even wash the blood from her face. The sight gave me a turn, and before I could control my jumping nerves, I dropped the coffin lid with a crash that sounded like a thunderclap in my ears.

I stood listening, my heart hammering and my mouth dry.

Nothing happened. I was suddenly aware that I hadn't a gun, and if I were caught here it would be easy enough for Betillo to stick a knife into me and sling me into the harbour, or if he didn't want my body to be found, he could embalm me and keep me in one of his boxes for the next twenty years.

The thought made me sweat, and I decided to get out quick and watch the joint from the alley until Kerman arrived with his gun.

As soon as I made this decision I couldn't get out of the place fast enough. I tiptoed to the door. As I put my hand on the doorknob I felt it turn in my grasp. That sent my blood pressure up and my heart into my mouth. Someone out in the passage was coming in!

I snapped off my light, took three quick, silent steps back, away from the door, and waited. The room was now pitch dark, and the close, suffocating smell of the formaldehyde bothered me. I listened, holding my breath, peering into the darkness, waiting for something to happen.

There was a long, ghastly silence. The only sound I could hear was the dull thumping of my heart and the faint whisper of my controlled breathing. Then a board creaked close to me. Whoever it was who had come into the room must have had eyes like a cat. He was coming straight at me as if he could see me. The first warning I had of his nearness was a sudden increase of darkness as his form loomed up, and then before I could dodge, a pair of cold, hard hands shot out of the darkness and grabbed at my throat.

For a second or so I stood motionless, unable to do anything; fear, panic, cold feet, whatever you like to call it, paralysing me. Fingers dug into my neck, two thumbs sank into my windpipe. It was a savage, murderous grip that cut the air from my lungs and the blood from my head.

I controlled the instinctive urge to grab at my assailant's wrists. From his grip he had wrists like steel, and I should be wasting precious time trying to break his hold, and I hadn't a lot of time to waste. Already my head was feeling woozy and my lungs were yelling for air. I reached out and touched his chest gently, measuring the distance, then slammed in a right with everything I had. My fist sank into the arch of his ribs; his breath came out with a gurgling rush. The grip loosened on my throat, but before he could back away I uncorked another right to his body that sent him reeling into the darkness.

I touched the button on my flashlight. The beam hit Betillo as he came in a staggering rush towards me. His broad, flattish face was vicious with pain and animal fury. I ducked under a right swing that would have taken my head off if it had landed, dropped the flashlight and hit him on the side of his neck with a thump that sounded like a meat axe cutting into a side of beef. He lost balance and fell. I didn't give him a chance to recover, and jumped him, landing with both feet on his chest, driving the wind out of him and crushing him flat. I sprawled on the floor beside him but he was fixed all right. I shoved away from him and got to my feet, snatching up the flashlight to look at him. He lay flat on his back, his body and legs squirming and thrashing as he tried to drag air into his flattened chest.

Leaning over him I grabbed hold of his long, oily hair and slammed his head on the floor. The thump shook the room.

His eyes rolled back and he went limp.

The whole affair had taken about a half a minute of anima, furious fighting. Panting, I bent over him, making sure he was out. From the look of him he wouldn't come round for hours, if he ever came round at all. I pulled open his coat, hoping to find a gun on him, but he wasn't carrying one. I straightened, picked up my flashlight, wondering why Thayler hadn't appeared on the scene. We had made enough noise to awaken the dead.

I went to the door, opened it and looked out into darkness.

As I stepped into the passage the silence was suddenly broken by the choked bang of a gun. I ducked down, thinking someone was firing at me. Then three more shots went off, crashing through the house, deafening me. Whoever it was shooting wasn't firing at me. There was no gunflash although the noise sounded close.

I crouched close to the wall, sweating and listening. I heard a door slam. Footsteps ran along a passage upstairs and another door slammed. Then silence.

II

I wasn't anxious to go up the stairs. I had no idea what I was going to run into, and without a gun, I felt as defenceless as a snail without its shell. But it did occur to me that someone up there was getting killed, and maybe I should see if I could do anything about it; making a mental note to get my head examined when and if I got out of this jam.

I went up the stairs on hands and knees. Halfway up a cloud of gunsmoke drifted down to meet me. I kept on, making no noise, being as quick as I could without being reckless.

At the head of the stairs I took a chance and turned on my flashlight. I faced a short passage. Near where I crouched a door stood open, and in the light of the flash, gunsmoke drifted lazily into the passage.

No one took a pot shot at me, and I began to hope the guy who had done the shooting had vamoosed. But I still wasn't taking any chances, and I listened, remaining on hands and knees, and after a moment or so I got used, to the sound of my heartbeats and the blood pounding in my ears and picked up another sound: the sound of breathing coming from the room where the shooting had been. At least I thought it was breathing, although it sounded more like a pair of bellows with a hole in them trying to

operate, and then another sound came to me that sent a cold chill up my spine: the steady drip-drip-drip of water or something falling on the floor.

I stood up, braced myself and went to the door. The smell of cordite hit me as I entered the room. The breathing sound I had heard turned to a gasp and a rattle that made my hair stand on end. I flicked on the flashlight. The beam hit a scene I dream “about even now. One quick look brought my hand groping for the light switch; a moment later the room was flooded with harsh, white light.

The room was small, and the bed faced me. On the bed was a man wearing only pyjama trousers. From the waist up he was naked. Two big, .45 slug wounds decorated the middle of his white, hairy chest, and blood ran down his ribs in a shiny, maroon-coloured stream. A third slug had ripped open his jugular, and blood spurted from the wound in a terrifying scarlet jet, hitting the near wall and dripping on to the floor.

It took me a second or so to recognize the man on the bed.

The blood-smeared, ghastly coloured face looked like something someone had cooked up for a horror show in a wax-work exhibition. But it was Thayler all right It couldn't be anyone else but Thayler.

There was nothing I could do for him. It was a miracle he was still alive. Even if I could have sealed the artery I couldn't do anything about the holes in his chest.

He lay very still and stared at me; his slate-grey eyes unafraid; life going out of him, splashing on the wall and dripping on to the floor.

‘Who did it?’ I asked, leaning over the bedrail. ‘Come on, you can still talk. Who did it?’

Even though he was going fast and his lungs were drowning in blood he tried to speak. His mouth moved, his jaw twitched, but that was as far as he got. But he did manage to convey something to me. Slowly, and with an effort that mingled sweat with his blood, he lifted his hand and pointed.

I followed the direction of the pointing finger and found myself looking at a cupboard.

‘Something in there?’ I said, stepped round the bed and jerked open the cupboard. There wasn't much in it: a suit of clothes, a hat and a small suitcase. I looked over my shoulder at him. The grey eyes held mine, willing me to understand what he was trying to say.

‘In the suit?’ I asked, pulling out the suit from the cupboard.

The finger continued to point. I tossed out the hat and the suitcase and looked at him again. Still the finger continued to point at the cupboard which was, as far as I could see, now empty.

‘Hidden in there?’ I asked.

The eyes said yes, the hand dropped. The breathing was very slow and laboured. Red-tinged air-

bubbles came through the two holes in his chest.

I turned back to the cupboard, shone the beam of my flash at the flooring and back panel, but could see nothing except dust and bits of fluff.

I took out my knife, opened the heaviest blade and began prising up the floorboards in the cupboard. As I worked I became aware that the laboured, wheezing breathing had stopped. I glanced over my shoulder. The face on the blood-soaked pillow had turned the colour of clay, the lean, heavy jaw sagged. The finger still pointed to the cupboard and the dead, blank eyes looked directly at me.

I levered up one of the floorboards and flashed the torch beam into the cavity. There was nothing but dirt, a spider or two and the signs that a rat had once lived there. I straightened up, scowled at the cupboard, knowing I should get out, but certain Thayler had meant me to find something in there; something that might be the key to the whole of this mad, murderous business.

There was a cane-bottomed chair close by and I jerked it before the cupboard and stood on it so the upper shelf of the cupboard was level with my face. A panel of wood formed the back of the shelf, and I got my knife-blade under it and began to lever it out. It resisted my efforts, but I kept at it, feeling the blade bend under the leverage, careful not to put too much pressure on it, but making the pressure even and continuous. I had the panel on the move when I heard a faint noise that could have been the scraping of a boot on bare boards. Stepping down from the chair I sneaked to the door and listened. Hearing nothing I snapped off the overhead light, opened the door, and peeled into the dark passage. My heart was banging against my ribs, and I felt it miss a beat when I saw a flash of light on the wall by the foot of the stairs.

I crept out of the room and peered over the banisters.

Someone was moving about in the passage below. Then another torch flashed on, and I caught a glimpse of a cop standing at the foot of the stairs looking up into the darkness.

‘Must be upstairs, Jack,’ a voice murmured. ‘No one around here.’

I didn’t wait to see or hear more, but went quickly and silently back into the room of death, shut the door softly and turned on the light again. There was a good strong bolt on the door and I pushed it home. I had about two minutes to find what I was looking for, and I returned to the cupboard, got my fingers in the gap I had made in the panel and heaved at it with all my strength. It moved, the nails coming away with a sharp, creaking sound. I heaved again, and the panel came away in my hand. I shone the torch into the cavity. Two things met my eyes: a Colt .45 automatic pistol equipped with what appeared to be a miniature telescopic sight and a leather-bound notebook I grabbed them up as a rap came on the door.

‘Open up!’ a voice called. ‘We know you’re in there. It’s the city police. Come on; open up!’

I shoved the gun in my hip pocket and the notebook in my coat pocket, slipped silently off the chair and went over to the window. I was scared stiff and had difficulty with my breathing, but I kept my

head. If they caught me in here I would be in a hell of a jam.

As I pushed open the window one of the cops drove his shoulder against the door, but the bolt held.

‘Get down and around to the back,’ I heard him say. ‘He may try to get out of the window.’

The other cop went clattering down the stairs.

I was out on the windowsill by now. There was a sheer drop of about thirty feet into the yard. I couldn’t go that way, and besides the cop would be in the yard any second now. The roof guttering was just above my head. I caught hold of it, tested its strength. It seemed strong enough, and sweating in every pore I started hauling myself up on to the roof. For about four seconds I hung in space, then I got my heel in the gutter and heaved myself up. I felt the gutter bend under the strain, then a voice yelled from below. With a tremendous heave I rolled myself on to the gently sloping roof, crawled desperately for cover behind a chimneystack.

A gun went off and bits of brick stung the back of my neck. I gave a convulsive wriggle and put the stack behind me and the gun, and lay for a moment or so, trying to get my breath.

I knew I hadn’t long before they’d be up here looking for me.

The moonlight turned night into day. About twelve feet away I could see the flat roof of Delmonico’s bar, separated from Bertillo’s place by the alley.

‘He’s up on the roof, Jack,’ the cop yelled from below, ‘I’m coming up!’

I crawled to the far edge of the roof, stood up and measured the distance between the two roofs. I hadn’t any run back. It had to be a cold-blooded leap with the alley thirty feet below me.

There wasn’t any time to waste. If I was going to get out of this mess I had to jump, so I balanced myself on the edge of the roof and jumped. It flashed through my mind as I was in mid-air that I wasn’t going to make it, and I flung myself forward, hitting the opposite guttering with my chest and sliding back. My hands grabbing and searching for a hold gripped a concealed drain pipe running along the flat roof. I heaved myself up, and, gasping for breath, rolled on to the roof.

There were no chimneystacks to hide behind on this roof, and the light of the moon picked me out as if a searchlight was playing on me. But not far away was a sky light, and I nipped over to it, heaved it up and without looking where I was going, lowered myself into darkness

For about half a minute I sat on the floor, drawing in great, heaving breaths, my legs feeling like rubber, and not caring where I was or what was going to happen next. Then, just as I decided to get up, a door opened right by me and a panel of light from a shaded lamp in the room beyond fell on me.

I twisted around, ready to start fighting and looked up at a girl in a crumpled black nightie that was as transparent as a plate-glass window.

She was a tall, tired faced blonde, and she regarded me with sleepy curiosity.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘Are you in trouble, honey?’

I dug up a grin.

‘Perhaps that’s a slight understatement. Sister, I’m full of trouble.’

She poked a knuckle in her eye and yawned.

‘Cops?’

‘Yeah, cops,’ I said, getting to my feet.

She stood aside.

‘You’d better come in. They’ll search the joint.’

I went past her into the room. It was a typical love nest.

Delmonico’s catered for all tastes and vices The room was small and stuffy and skimpily furnished. A bed, a chest of drawers, a toilet basin and threadbare mat were the only luxuries the room could boast of.

‘What have you done, honey?’ the girl asked, sitting on the bed and yawning. She had very big white teeth and her mouth was a smear of lipstick. ‘I heard shooting. Was it you?’

‘I walked into it,’ I said. ‘The cops moved in just behind me. I had to get out quick.’

‘Was Betillo shot?’

‘Not him; some other guy.’ Seeing the disappointment on her face, I added, ‘Betillo run into a cracked head. He won’t be much use for some time.’

‘That’s fine,’ she said. ‘I hate that heel.’

Outside in the passage there was a sudden soft thud.

‘Cops,’ I said softly. ‘Right out there, now.’

‘They’re crazy to stick their snouts in here,’ she said, moved across the room and swiftly and silently, bolted the door and then dug her thumb into a bellpush on the wall.

‘That’ll bring the bouncers up,’ she went on with a tight little smile. ‘Keep your shirt on, honey. You’ll soon be out of this.’

The door suddenly rattled.

A voice said, ‘Open up or I’ll shoot the lock in!’

I pulled the girl away from the door.

Heavy footsteps came pounding up the stairs. A voice yelled, ‘It’s cops! Hey, Joe! Buttons!’

One of the cops shouted, ‘Lay off! This ain’t anything to do with you! Keep back or you’ll get hurt.’

A gun went off and there was a yell. More feet pounded up the stairs. I yanked the sheets off the girl’s bed, knotted them together, ran over to the window. More gunfire. If I didn’t get a move on the riot squad would be out there to welcome me. I pulled out all that was left of my money and pushed the notes into the girl’s hands.

‘So long, sister,’ I said. ‘And thanks.’

One of the cops fired through the door. Someone along the passage opened up with what sounded like a Sten gun.

I had the window open by now.

‘Boy!’ the blonde exclaimed, excited. She was wide awake now. ‘I’m loving this! Mind how you break your neck.’

I knotted one end of the sheet, dropped the sheet out of the window, got out on the sill.

‘Shut the window on the knot,’ I said, ‘and make it snappy. I’ll buy you a drink one of these days.’

She closed the window as more gunfire rattled through the building, and waved to me through the pane.

I grabbed the sheet and went down fast. As I dropped to the ground a voice shouted, ‘Hey! You!’ And a shadow moved towards me.

I swung round as a hand grabbed at my shoulder. I wasn’t in a playful mood, and I brought my right fist up in an uppercut that caught the guy on the side of his jaw. He gave a choked grunt and slid forward, his hands clutching at my coat. I kicked him off and he dropped down on his hands and knees. He remained like that, groaning.

I ran down the alley to where I left my car.

It was getting on for three o'clock a.m. when I pulled up outside an apartment block on Hawthorne Avenue. The building was set back from the road, and in the forecourt a big bowl and fountain gave the place its only sign of distinction. It was a rabbit warren of apartments; all small, all squeezed together; and all expensive. I had been there before. Its only advantage was that it was soundproof, but even at that, I'd rather have lived in a tent.

Miss Bolus rented a two-room apartment on the ground floor, facing east. I decided I wouldn't embarrass her by using the front entrance. The hall porter wouldn't take too kindly to a call on an unattended young lady at this hour, so I walked across the lush lawn, past the bowl and fountain and along the cement path to the casement window that I knew led into her sitting room.

Her apartment was in darkness. The window, next to the casement, would be her bedroom, and I tapped gently on the windowpane. She couldn't have been a heavy sleeper for I had only tapped about three times when I saw through a chink in the curtains a light flash up. I stepped back, pushed my hat off my forehead and groped for a cigarette. I was feeling tired and hot, and hoped there would be a drink in there for me. As I lit the cigarette, the curtains parted and Miss Bolus looked out at me. I could only see the outline of her head, but she could see my face in the light of the match.

I grinned at her.

She waved me to the casement window and moved away.

The curtain swung back into place.

As I stepped to the casement, I felt a drop of rain on my face. For the past ten minutes, heavy clouds had been piling up in the sky. It looked as if it were coming on for a wet spell. I wasn't sorry. The close, brittle heat didn't suit me. The casement window swung open as it began to rain in earnest.

'Hello,' I said. 'It's raining.'

'Did you wake me up to tell me that?' she asked, holding the casement door against her side, and looking at me in the light that flowed over her shoulder from the standard lamp in the sitting room.

'That and other things. Can I come in? I could do with a drink.'

She stood aside.

'When I heard you tapping I thought it was burglars,' she said. 'I think I was dreaming about burglars.'

I went into the small room that was comfortable enough, but the furniture was too modern for my taste. I sat down in a chair shaped like the letter S, pitched my hat on the nearby divan, yawned and looked at her approvingly.

She was wearing an oyster-coloured silk wrap over a pale blue, crepe-de-Chine nightdress. Her small feet were thrust into fur-lined moccasins, and her flame-coloured hair was tied back with a piece of blue ribbon. She looked very wide awake, her make-up was surprisingly fresh, and there was a look of restrained surprise and perhaps angled in her chinky, green eyes.

‘Never mind the burglars,’ I said. ‘How about a drink?’

‘What have you got?’

She moved past me to the sideboard.

‘I think I’m going to be very angry with you,’ she said. ‘You’ve never seen me angry, have you?’

‘I don’t think I have. Why be angry?’

She poured out a big whisky, added Whiterock and handed me the glass.

‘I don’t like being woken up suddenly like this. I think you’re taking too much for granted.’

I sampled the Scotch. It was very good.

‘Yeah, maybe I am,’ I said and set the glass on the table with a little sigh. ‘But this isn’t a social call. I’m here on business: business that can’t wait until tomorrow.’

She sat on the arm of the settee, crossed one slim leg over the other and looked at me inquiringly.

‘What business?’

I took a drag on my cigarette, blew a cloud of smoke to the ceiling.

‘Lee Thayler was shot about an hour ago’ I said ‘Two bullets in the middle of his chest, and the third cut open an artery.’

There was a long, long pause. The silence was broken only by the occasional whirring grunt of the refrigerator in the kitchenette next door.

I looked at her. She was still; her arms folded across her breasts, her eyes expressionless, her mouth set. She wasn’t a good card-player for nothing. She didn’t give anything away.

‘Who shot him?’ she asked, after the silence had gone on a little too long.

‘The same killer who wiped out Dana, Leadbetter and Anita,’ I said. ‘You’ve been a little secretive, haven’t you? I didn’t know you and Anita were old pals, nor that you and Thayler were bedfellows.’

‘That’s ancient history,’ she said with a casual shrug. ‘How did you find out?’

‘I ran into a character named Nick Nedick. He showed me a picture of Thayler. You were in it.’

You know, I think I’ll make some coffee,’ she said, and got off the arm of the settee. ‘I supposed you’re going to ask a lot of questions now?’

‘Go ahead and make it’ I leaned forward and flicked on the electric fire. ‘We may as well talk now as later’. You don’t seem to care much that Thayler’s dead.’

‘Why should I? We were washed up, and I’ve forgotten he ever existed.’

I heard her go into the kitchenette and I leaned back in the chair. The .45 dug into my hip so I pulled it out and looked at it the telescopic sight intrigued me. I aimed the gun at a blue vase on the overmantel and peered through the sight. I couldn’t see anything. I examined the sight more closely, wondering what it was. Although it looked like a telescopic sight it didn’t function as one. It was something I had never seen before on a gun. But right now I was a little tired, and I had other things on my mind, so I laid the gun on the table beside me and put my hat on it. I’d get Clegg to look at it: G egg knew all about guns and poisons and bloodstains. He was a pretty good man to know.

I heard a sudden, stifled sound that brought my head around and I stared towards the kitchenette door: the stifled sound of a woman crying.

I slid out of the chair and crossed the room without making any noise and peered around the half-open door.

Miss Bolus was standing by the electric percolator; her face in her hands.

‘You go and sit by the fire,’ I said. ‘I’ll make the coffee.’

She started, dashed the tears away with the back of her hand and turned away from me.

‘I’ll make it,’ she said in a muffled voice. ‘For God’s sake leave me alone.’

I took hold of her arm and pushed her into the sitting room.

‘Sit by the fire.’

It took me about a couple of minutes to make the coffee, and when I re-entered the room, she had lit a cigarette and was standing before the fire, her face half-turned from me. I set down the tray.

‘Will you have it black?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

I poured a cup, laced it with whisky and put it on the overmantel near her. Then I sat down and poured myself a cup.

‘Let’s put the cards on the table,’ I said. ‘It’ll mean nothing, but it’ll be a satisfactory way of clearing the mess up. You know a lot about this business - far more than I do. You’ve been working hand-in-glove with Thayler, haven’t you?’

‘What do you mean - it’ll mean nothing?’ she asked, her voice sharp.

‘Well, how can it? Whatever happens I have to keep Cerf covered. I’ve explained that to you. If I put my hand on the killer I’ll have to call Brandon in, and he’ll chop me for not calling him in before. It’s stalemate. Thayler killed Benny. All right, Thayler’s dead. Well, that’s something. But Thayler didn’t kill Dana. Even if I can’t touch the killer I still want to know who did it, and I think you can tell me who it is.’

‘Can’t you guess?’ she said a little scornfully.

I shook my head.

‘I could, but guessing is not the same as knowing. Thayler knew who the killer was - that’s why he was knocked off. Leadbetter also knew who the killer was - he was knocked off too. I think you know who the killer is. Suppose you tell me before you get knocked off too?’

She sat down, her coffee cup in her hand, opposite me, the table between us.

‘What makes you think I know?’ she asked.

‘A hunch. I think you and Thayler teamed up again after Anita was shot. I think he told you what I’m certain Anita told him.’

‘Well, all right. Now he’s dead, it doesn’t matter,’ she said, and dropped back against the chair. ‘I lied just now when I said he and I were washed up and I’d forgotten he ever existed. I loved him. I was crazy about him, and we were happy until that bitch came into our lives. No other girl except me would have had the nerve to go through that act of ours, and if I hadn’t loved him, and wanted him to get on and make a name for himself, I wouldn’t have done it. But I did it, and he got on, and he got talked about, and people came to see him. And then she had to come on the scene and spoiled it.’ She reached for a cigarette and lit it with an unsteady hand. ‘But as soon as she got him away from me she left him and married Cerf. I happened to be in Orchid City when Cerf brought her to live at his estate. I saw her one day. I made inquiries. I found out she had married him, and hadn’t divorced Lee. She bitched up my happiness, so I bitched up hers. I wrote an anonymous letter to Cerf and told him she was already married.’

I poured out more coffee, stirred whisky into it, lit another cigarette.

‘It’s a funny thing,’ I said, ‘but I wouldn’t have thought you were the type to write anonymous letters.’

‘Wouldn’t you?’ she said, a little breathlessly. ‘After what she had done to me? Well, I did, and I told Lee too, and he came to see Anita. By that time she had got tired of Cerf, and was playing around with

Barclay. She was scared when she heard Lee was coming to see her, and she persuaded Bannister to hide her in the night club. Lee told me what had happened. He heard it from Anita before she died. The shooting of your girl, Dana Lewis, was a mistake.

‘Cerf confronted Anita with my letter. She tried to lie her way out of it, but he didn’t believe her. She thought he was going to kill her there and then, and she bolted out of the room and out of the house. That night she came to you, to find out if Cerf knew about Barclay. When she left you, she saw Cerf following her. She got scared and appealed to Dana for protection. Dana took her to her apartment. Cerf followed them and waited outside. Anita offered Dana her necklace if she would change clothes with her and draw Cerf away from the house so Anita could reach L’Etoile in safety. Dana agreed to do this. The two women changed clothes. Before leaving the apartment Dana hid the necklace under her mattress in case Anita changed her mind and took it when she left. Cerf shot Dana out on the dunes, thinking she was Anita. You’ve guessed that by now, haven’t you? It was Cerf who shot Leadbetter, who saw him taking Anita’s clothes off Dana’s body, and later tried to blackmail him.’

‘How the hell do you know all this?’ I said, sitting forward to stare at her.

‘Anita wrote Lee a letter when she was at the L’Etoile and told him; he told me. It was her idea for Lee to blackmail Cerf. She said the two of them could get all Cerf’s money if they played it right.’

‘And what did Thayler do?’

‘Lee always wanted money. He agreed.’ There was a bitter expression in the green eyes now. ‘You wondered why Dana’s coat and skirt were hidden in Barclay’s cupboard. Anita was wearing the suit. She went to Barclay’s because she always kept some clothes there. Barclay was away. She changed into her own clothes, leaving Dana’s suit in Barclay’s cupboard, and went on to L’Etoile. You found her there. Then Bannister flung her out. She had nowhere to go. Cerf was still looking for her, so she went to you. You were with Cerf. Maybe Cerf thought you knew too much and came to your place intending to shoot you, only he found Anita there. He shot her. Lee had been hunting for Anita, and had decided to see you and find out if you knew where she was. He arrived too late to stop Cerf killing Anita, but in the struggle, Cerf dropped his gun, but he escaped. While Lee was out at the back looking for him, you turned up. By then Lee thought up a plan to screw every dollar out of Cerf. He could do so now with ease because he had Cerf’s gun. It had Cerf’s initials on it, and it had killed Dana, Leadbetter and Anita. He knocked you out, took Anita in his car to Betillo’s and then phoned me to go over to your place and report on your movements.’ She broke off to stub out her cigarette, her mouth twisted into a jeering little smile.

‘There’s not much more to it. You can more or less guess the rest. Lee got into touch with Cerf and told him to start paying unless he wanted Anita’s body and the gun turned over to the police. Lee asked half a million to begin with, and the money was to be paid at once.’

‘And you’re going to tell me Cerf had, by now, the answer to blackmail,’ I said. ‘He went along tonight to Betillo’s and wiped Thayler out, is that it?’

She nodded and looked away.

‘I warned him Cerf was dangerous,’ she said, her voice suddenly stifled. She put her hand to her eyes. ‘But he was so sure of himself. He laughed at me.’

I got up suddenly, and without a word, walked quickly into her bedroom. I was in there less than ten seconds before she came to the bedroom door to stare at me.

‘What do you want in here?’ she asked sharply.

I looked around the room, ran my fingers through my hair, shook my head.

‘You know, baby, my nerves must be bad. I could have sworn I heard someone in here. Didn’t you hear a footfall? A sound as if someone was creeping across the floor?’

Her eyes opened a trifle, and she looked a little nervously round the room. I jerked the window curtains aside. No one lurked behind them. I glanced out into the darkness. Rain splashed on the windows.

‘You’re trying to frighten me,’ she said, her voice shooting up two tones.

‘Only you and I know Cerf’s the killer,’ I said, going to her and looking down into her big green eyes. ‘And neither of us believe it do we?’

Her slim white hand rested on my sleeve.

‘It’s hard to believe,’ she said. ‘If Lee hadn’t told me I wouldn’t have believed it.’

‘Lee telling you doesn’t make me believe it,’ I said, and smiled at her. ‘I don’t kid myself I’m much of a detective, but take a look around. Look at the bed. You haven’t slept in it tonight. Why, the coverlet isn’t even off. Look over there where you’ve thrown the clothes you stripped off just before I tapped on the window.’ I lifted a shoe, held it out to her.

‘You hit him in the neck artery and he bled like hell. I guessed you’d have a little blood on you somewhere. Well, here it is on the side of your shoe.’

She touched her lips with the tip of her tongue.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she said crossly, and walked into the sitting room.

I followed her, swinging the shoe in my hand.

‘Don’t you?’ I said. ‘It’s plain enough to me. Substitute in your clever little story Gail Bolus for Jay Franklin Cerf and we shall be getting somewhere. It was you who shot Dana, thinking she was Anita. You who shot Leadbetter, who saw you strip Dana and threatened to expose you. You who shot Anita because you hated her and were determined to square accounts because she stole Thayler from you,

and it was you who went round to Betillo's tonight and shot Thayler because—' I paused, then asked, 'You tell me: why did you kill Thayler?'

IV

From the kitchenette there came the whirring grunt of the refrigerator. From the overmantel came the steady tick-tick-tick of the squat, oak-framed clock.

Miss Bolus breathed steadily; her breasts rose and fell under the thin silk wrap lightly and evenly and without emotion. Her hand was steady as she poured more coffee into her cup. She added sugar, stirred the coffee with the spoon. There was a vague, faraway expression on her face.

She said, 'Are you serious?'

'Up to now it's been a beautiful act,' I said, and sat opposite her, my hand near my hat. "Don't let it turn corny, baby. The tears, the spontaneous story about Cerf, the calm way you followed me into the bedroom, knowing I'd see your bed hadn't been slept in were all admirably done: so don't let's spoil it. Why did you kill Thayler?'

She looked at me then; her eyes very thoughtful.

'I didn't kill him,' she said steadily. 'I loved him. It was Cerf. I told you.'

'I know what you told me, but unfortunately for you your old friend Thayler kept a diary. He made me a present of it before he died. I've read it, and what's in it doesn't hook up with what you've told me. He said Anita was scared of you, and she knew you were gunning for her. That's why I came here. That's why I looked your room over. I knew you had only just got back from Coral Gables. I wanted to check up to see if you had been in bed, and with all that blood around I knew you would have taken some of it away with you if you had been there.' I touched the shoe that stood on the table. 'Why did you kill him?'

She looked at me for a long moment of time, then laughed. It was a tinny, humourless sound.

'So the bastard kept a diary,' she said. 'That's funny.'

'Yeah, diaries have an unpleasant habit of coming home to roost,' I said.

She sipped her coffee, made a little grimace and set the cup on the table.

'It's cold,' she said.

‘Look, let’s not beat about the bush or whatever it is one beats,’ I said a little tersely. ‘Tell me about Thayler.’

‘Well, the heel had it coming, and the opportunity was too good to miss. I was getting away with the other shootings, why not one more?’ she said carelessly. ‘I’m sorry about Dana,’ she went on. ‘If you had seen her out there in die shadows and the moonlight, dressed in Anita’s evening gown, you would have made the same mistake.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘It’s too bad about Dana. I think I would fold my tent and silently steal away if it wasn’t for Dana. The others you plugged were a worthless lot. Dana wasn’t. I can’t let you get away with Dana’s killing.’

She shrugged.

‘There’s not much you can do about it,’ she said.

‘Well, there is,’ I told her. ‘There are two things I can do, I can take the law into my own hands or I can go to the police. I don’t feel like wringing your nice white neck. It’s a pity because it would save a lot of complications, but I have to live with my conscience, and my conscience wouldn’t like me to do that sort of thing. So it’ll have to be the police. It’ll mean I’ll probably get a few years as an accessory, but that can’t be helped.’

‘Cerf won’t like it,’ she reminded me, frowning.

‘That’s right, but he’s had it all his own way up to now. He’ll have to put up with it. Would you care to slip on some clothes before I phone Brandon? He’d probably haul you off to the station as you are, so you’d better dress.’

‘You wouldn’t be kidding?’ she asked, raising her eyebrows.

‘Not this time, baby. I’m past kidding You haven’t a lot to worry about. With your looks you’ll probably only get fifteen years.’

‘If that’s the way you feel about it,’ she said, and lifted her elegant shoulders. ‘Then I’d better change.’ She picked up her coffee-cup. ‘Could I have a little whisky in this? You may not believe it but I feel a little sick.’

I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

‘Help yourself,’ I said.

She threw the cup at me. I was half-expecting it, but she moved a shade faster than I thought it possible for anyone to move. By the time I had dashed the coffee out of my eyes she had the .45.

‘I asked for that,’ I said as calmly as I could. ‘I should have remembered you once did this kind of

thing for a living.'

'Yes,' she said, and her eyes lit up so they looked like emeralds. 'Get in there, and don't try anything funny. I'm as good a shot as ever Lee was, and I couldn't miss you if I tried.'

I backed into her bedroom.

'Over there by the wall and face the wall,' she ordered.

'One move out of you and you'll get it. I'm going to change.'

She had picked the wrong spot for there was a dressing table close by and I could see her in the mirror. But that didn't help me much. I was about six yards from her and the bed was between us. She had wiped out four people already; one more couldn't make much difference to her dreams; if she had dreams, and I was beginning to doubt she had.

'This scene has gone a little sour,' I said, for something to say. 'The detective always gets his girl. If you shoot me the story will have an immoral ending.'

She laughed.

'I like immoral stories. Did you leave your car outside?'

'Sure. Shall I give you the ignition key?'

She sat on a chair and pulled on stockings. The gun lay on the window ledge within easy reach. If it hadn't been for the bed I would have taken a chance, but the bed made it very difficult.

'I'll get it later,' she said. 'Don't move.'

She got up and began hunting through the drawers of her wardrobe. She held the gun in one hand now.

'Where do you think you're going?' I asked her.

'New York. Thanks to you the police will never even suspect me. I hope to make a new start in New York. A girl with my looks doesn't have to worry a great deal. I think I told you that before.'

'So you did.' I was aware that I was beginning to sweat.

Maybe it was turning warmer or I was turning yellow. It was not the kind of thing I cared to analyse in a situation like this.

She found a green silk vest, stepped into it and pulled it up over her hips under her nightdress. The time for act on would be when she pulled the nightdress over her head. I screwed up my nerves and tensed my muscles. She didn't pull the nightdress over her head, but let it slip off her shoulders and stepped out of it. It was suicide, but better than being shot down in cold blood.

As she was on one leg, stepping out of the nightdress, I swung round, flung myself across the bed towards her, my heart in my mouth, and scared as stiff as a board.

She never blinked an eyelid, and stood still, a lovely little half-naked figure, her neatly made-up lips curved in a smile.

The barrel of the .45, looking as big as the top of a beer tankard, shifted to cover me. I saw her finger turn white on the trigger. I scrambled madly towards her, throwing out my hands, but I was miles and miles away from her and hours and hours too late. The automatic burst into one continuous roar: the gunflash scorched my face. The first slug missed me, so did the second and third. By that time I had reached her and smashed the gun out of her hand. Then I came to an abrupt stop. She was down on the floor, a look of terror fixed on her face, her eyes open and blank, her mouth twisted out of shape and the front of her chest smashed in. Blood welled out of the hole in the centre of her chest, big enough to hold a baseball. I stood staring stupidly, not understanding, seeing her eyes roll back and set, and her hand flop heavily on the carpet.

Slowly I turned to look at the gun lying by her side.

Smoke curled out of the telescopic sight. It took me a few moments to understand what that meant: it was a trick gun: a gun that killed the killer; a gun that fired backwards.

Thayler's last little joke. His gift to me, and the joke had turned sour.

I drew away from the stream of blood that filtered through the complicated pattern of the rug. The place was sound proof, and it was unlikely anyone had heard the shots, but I couldn't afford to take any chances. I stepped into the sitting room, picked up my coffee-cup and saucer and the empty whisky glass and my hat. There were a couple of my cigarette-stubs to collect too. I looked around the room, trying to remember if I had touched anything. I wiped the surface of the table over with my handkerchief just to be on the safe side. Then I turned out the light, opened the casement door and looked into the half-light of the dawn. There was no one in sight. Rain fell steadily.

I went towards my car at a steady run.