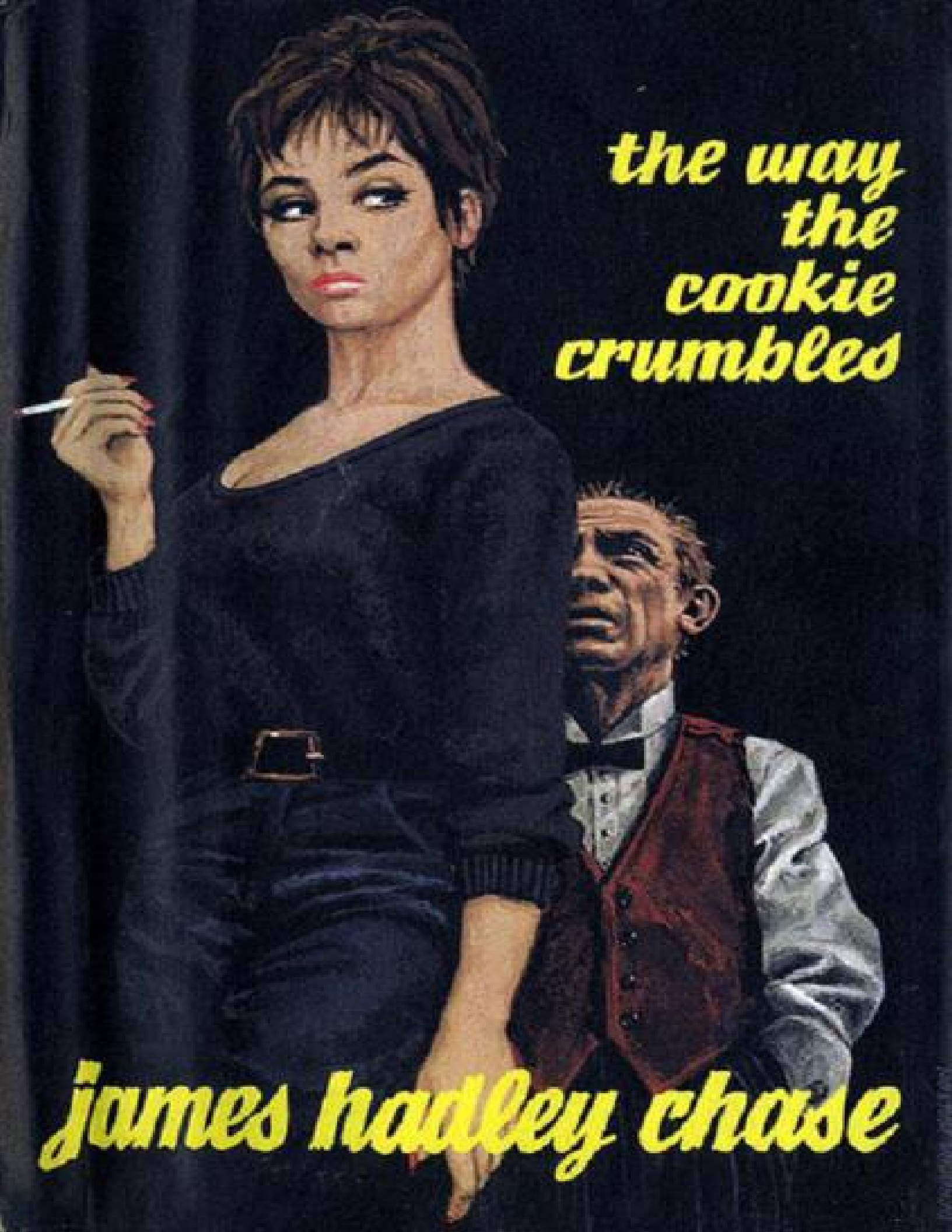


A woman with short dark hair and bangs, wearing a black off-the-shoulder dress with a belt, holds a cigarette in her right hand. She has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left. Behind her, a man in a tuxedo with a red vest and white shirt is visible, looking up at her. The background is dark.

*the way
the
cookie
crumbled*

james hadley chase

Table of Contents

[CHAPTER ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWO](#)
[CHAPTER THREE](#)
[CHAPTER FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER SIX](#)
[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER NINE](#)
[CHAPTER TEN](#)

The Way the Cookie Crumbles
James Hadley Chase
1965

The wall clock showed 03.50 hours as the bell of the telephone on Sergeant Beigler's desk rang briefly. Beigler, a powerfully built, freckle-faced man in his late thirties, scowled at the telephone, glanced at the wall clock, then dropped a large, hairy hand on the receiver, scooped it up and snapped, 'Beigler. Yeah?'

'I've got Harry Browning on the line,' the Desk Sergeant told him. 'He wants you. Sounds like he's ready to flip his wig.'

Beigler's scowl deepened. Harry Browning was the owner of La Coquille Restaurant, one of the three top ranking restaurants in Paradise City. He was a personal friend of the Mayor and the Chief of Police, Captain Terrell. That put him in the Velvet Glove category so far as Beigler was concerned.

'Let's have him, Charley,' Beigler said and reached for a cigarette. He looked regretfully at the empty carton on his desk. He had drunk the last of the coffee half an hour ago. Beigler had two vices: coffee drinking and cigarette smoking. 'And send someone for coffee, Charley. I'm all dried out.'

'Okay.' The Desk Sergeant, Charley Tanner, sounded smugly resigned. He was always sending someone out for coffee for Beigler. 'Here's Browning.'

There was a click on the line, then a deep voice barked, 'That you, Beigler?'

'That's right, Mr. Browning. Anything I can do?'

'This is a hell of a thing! I have a dead woman in the restaurant. I want you to come out here fast and get rid of her. Now listen, Beigler, this may be just police routine to you, but to me, it's goddamn serious. I don't want any publicity. And when I say I don't want any publicity that's just what I mean. You understand? If the Press get onto this I'll have someone's skin and when I say I'll have someone's skin, I don't give a goddamn who he is, I'll have his skin. Do I make myself clear?'

Beigler was sitting bolt upright now, the heat in the big, dimly lit room forgotten.

'That's all right, Mr. Browning. You've got nothing to worry about. I'll be right over.'

'The only thing I'm worrying about is to get this thing handled right! You handle it right, Beigler and I won't worry . . . nor will you!' and Browning hung up.

Beigler grimaced, then jiggled the cross piece of the telephone. When the Desk Sergeant answered, Beigler said, 'Any reporters downstairs, Charley?'

'Hamilton of the Sun. He's asleep, half drunk. Why? What's cooking?'

'I don't know yet, but something. Listen Charley, I've got to go out. If Hamilton wants to know where I've gone tell him I've gone home with the toothache. Who's on duty?'

'You got the toothache?' Tanner asked, his voice concerned. 'I'm sorry, Joe. I . . .'

'Never mind being sorry,' Beigler snapped. 'Who's on duty?'

'Mandrake's gone out for your coffee,' Tanner said, disapproval in his voice. 'There's Jackson here, growing corns on his arse.'

'Send him up to relieve me. Hess still around?'

'He's just leaving.'

'Stop him! Tell him to wait for me. I'm coming down right now.'

Beigler struggled into his jacket, patted his hip pocket to assure himself he was wearing his gun, then snatching up a pack of cigarettes, he left the Detectives' room and ran down to the Muster room.

Fred Hess, in charge of Homicide, was leaning against the wall, a resigned expression on his fat,

round face.

‘Two minutes and I would have been out of this chicken coop,’ he said bitterly as Beigler joined him.

‘What’s cooking?’

Beigler strode down the steps to the parked police car.

He got in and started the engine. Hess scrambled in beside him.

‘Dead woman at La Coquille. Browning is laying an egg.’ Beigler sent the car roaring down the deserted Main Street.

Hess grunted.

‘Murder?’

‘He didn’t say. I didn’t ask. We’ll start it moving when we get there. He didn’t sound in the mood to answer questions.’

‘I bet.’ Hess gave a loud guffaw. ‘From what I’ve heard of that joint, the last thing they would want is a stiff. You ever been inside, Joe?’

‘On my pay?’ Beigler was driving along the Promenade now. Only a few cars were parked by the beach. There was no traffic. ‘We’ll have to watch it, Fred. Browning draws a lot of water in this City.’

‘If it’s murder, it doesn’t matter a damn how much water he draws. It’s news.’

‘Yeah but we don’t know if it’s murder yet. Let me handle it. Browning has lots of influential friends.’

‘It’s all yours, pal. I know when to keep my chin tucked in.’

La Coquille Restaurant stood at the far end of the Promenade, surrounded by lawns, flowerbeds and illuminated palm trees. Three marble steps led up to the imposing entrance. The restaurant closed at 02.30 hours and now the lighting consisted of a solitary chandelier in the lobby and a few concealed wall lights that cast long dark shadows across the heavy pile of the claret-coloured carpet.

Beigler and Hess got out of the car and walked up the steps, pushed their way through the revolving door and into the elegant lobby where Louis, the tall aristocratic maître d’hôtel, was waiting for them. Louis, haughty and dignified, was seldom shaken, but Beigler could see he was certainly shaken now.

‘This way,’ Louis said, and moving with long, stiff strides, he led the two detectives into a second lobby and then up the stairs into a big bar.

Here, Harry Browning waited. He sat on the stool by the bar, a glass of brandy in his hand, a cigar clenched between his teeth.

Browning was fifty-five, heavily built and balding. His clean-shaven face was tanned dark by the sun. He wore a tartan tuxedo and a white carnation in his buttonhole. He looked what he was: smart, rich, powerful and arrogant.

‘She’s there,’ he said and waved to the end of the room.

Along one side of the room was a number of banquettes in dark, heavily carved oak. Each banquette was screened by a red velvet curtain. ‘The end box.’

Beigler and Hess walked to the end of the room and peered into the banquette.

In the dim light, they could make out the figure of a blonde woman sprawled across the table. She was wearing a white, backless evening dress. Her blonde hair made a puddle of gold against the dark oak of the table.

Beigler looked back at Browning.

‘Could we have a little more light down here, Mr. Browning?’

Louis went behind the bar and snapped down some switches. The end of the bar where the two detectives were standing suddenly became illuminated by strong overhead lights that made them blink.

Beigler nodded his thanks and then moved into the banquette. He touched the woman’s shoulder. The chilling flesh confirmed Browning’s statement that she was dead, but to make absolutely sure, he pressed his fingers against the side of her neck, but there was no pulse beat.

‘Better not touch her until we get some photos,’ Hess said.

Browning came down the room, savagely chewing on his cigar.

‘I want her out of here right away, boys! Get moving! You can have all your fun and games at the morgue. If the press get hold of this, it’ll kill business for the season. Get her out of here!’

‘Can’t move her until we’ve photographed her,’ Hess said shortly. ‘This could be murder.’

Browning glared at him.

‘Who are you?’

Beigler silently cursed Hess for opening his mouth. He said hurriedly, ‘He’s in charge of Homicide, Mr. Browning. He’s right of course. This could be murder. I . . .’

‘This is suicide!’ Browning said, his face like granite. ‘There’s a hypo on the floor and her face is blue. I don’t have to be a goddamn dick to know she died of an overdose of heroin. Now, get her out of here!’

Beigler peered under the table. He saw an empty hypodermic syringe lying on the carpet. Straightening, he put his hands either side of the woman’s head and gently lifted her head to peer at her dead face. The blue colour of her skin and her pupilless wide eyes made him grunt. He lowered the head back on to the table.

‘Could still be murder, Mr. Browning,’ he said quietly. ‘She could have been given a shot.’

‘No one’s been near her since she came here,’ Browning said impatiently. ‘Now, get her out of here!’

‘All cases of suicide have to be treated as homicide until we prove it suicide. I’m sorry, Mr. Browning, but this can’t be an exception.’

Browning’s eyes gleamed angrily.

‘I don’t like uncooperative cops, Beigler. I have a long memory.’ He turned to Louis. ‘Get me Captain Terrell.’

As Louis hurried back to the bar, Beigler said, ‘I’m sorry, Mr. Browning, but that’s the way it is unless the Chief says otherwise. Is there another phone here I can use?’

‘You don’t use any goddamn phone until you’ve talked to Terrell!’ Browning snapped and walked back to the bar.

Beigler and Hess exchanged glances. Hess grinned. He knew if a chopper was to fall it wouldn’t be on his neck. He moved around Beigler and into the banquette. By the dead woman was a white and gold brocaded evening bag. He picked it up, opened it and glanced inside. He fished out an envelope, looked at it, then offered it to Beigler.

‘You’d better look at this, Joe. It’s for us.’

Beigler took the envelope. He could hear Browning talking in a low voice on the telephone. He glanced at the sprawling writing on the envelope which read: Police Department. He carefully slit open the envelope, using his penknife and drew out a folded sheet of paper. He spread it flat, and

with Hess breathing down the back of his neck, read the note written in the same sprawling hand: *You'd better go to 247, Seaview Boulevard. He had it coming. I did it. To save trouble, I'm taking the quick way out. Muriel Marsh Devon. P.S. The key is under the mat.*

'Hey, Beigler,' Browning called. 'Terrell wants you.'

Holding the note, Beigler moved to the bar and took the telephone receiver from Browning who walked away a few paces.

'That you, Chief?' Beigler asked.

'Yes,' Terrell said. 'What's going on, Joe?'

'Mr. Browning reported a dead woman in the restaurant. I've just arrived. Looks like suicide: overdose of heroin. There's an empty hypo and the woman's face is blue. I found a suicide note in her bag. I'll read it to you.' Beigler flicked open the note and read it, keeping his voice low so Browning couldn't hear what he was saying. 'Sounds as if she's knocked a guy off. Mr. Browning wants us to shift the body. I don't see we can do that, do you, Chief? We should get the Squad down here.'

There was a pause, then Terrell said, 'Who's with you, Joe?'

'Hess.'

'Leave him with the body. You go to Seaview Boulevard and check. I'll call Lepski to join you there. I'll be at the restaurant in twenty minutes. Tell Hess to call the squad.'

'Browning isn't going to like this,' Beigler said, glancing at Browning who was pacing up and down.

'I'll talk to him. You get off, Joe.'

'I'm on my way', Beigler said. He laid down the receiver and crossed to Browning who stopped pacing and swung around. 'The Chief wants to talk to you, Mr. Browning.'

As Browning hurried to the telephone, Beigler went over to Hess.

'Get the squad down here, Fred. This is the full treatment. The Chief's on his way.' He grinned. 'I'm going over to Seaview Boulevard. So long, and watch your step with Browning.'

'Maybe he won't watch his step with me,' Hess said uneasily.

As Beigler ran down the stairs, he heard Browning say in a loud, choking voice, 'You can't do this to me, Frank. You . . .'

His voice faded as Beigler hurried out into the hot night air. As he crossed to his car, a tall lanky figure came out of the darkness. It was Bert Hamilton of the Paradise Sun.

'How's the toothache, Joe?' he asked, planting himself in front of Beigler. 'I didn't think you had any teeth left to ache.'

Beigler stepped around him.

'Take my advice, Bert, and keep out of there,' he said. 'You're likely to get your nuts chewed off.'

'What makes you think I've got nuts?' Hamilton asked.

As he walked up the steps to the restaurant's entrance, Beigler sent his car racing down the driveway and headed for Seaview Boulevard.

* * *

Ticky Edris had a large globular shaped head, stumpy legs and arms and stood about three and a half feet high. He was what is known to the medical profession as an achondroplastic dwarf. Edris had worked as a waiter and stillroom assistant at La Coquille restaurant for the past eight years.

Browning's swank customers were contemptuously amused by the little man's apparent good nature, his sad eyes and his quick, bustling walk. They found an offbeat pleasure in being waited on by the dwarf, and over the years, Edris had become a kind of court jester, greeting the customers with a familiarity that even Browning would have hesitated to use.

Wearing a chef's apron, cut down to size, Edris was finishing polishing the last of the glasses when Louis, the maître d'hôtel, came in.

'They want to talk to you, Ticky,' he said. 'Just answer their questions. The less everyone says about this the better for Mr. Browning.'

Edris hung up the glass cloth and took off his apron.

His odd shaped face was a little drawn and there were shadows under his eyes. He had been working non-stop since six o'clock and he felt pretty pooped.

'Okay, Mr. Louis,' he said, slipping into his white drill jacket. 'You leave it to me.'

He trotted out of the room and into the bar. At the far end of the bar a photographer was taking pictures of the dead woman. Chief of Police Terrell, a big man with sandy hair, flecked with white, and a jutting, square jaw, was talking to Browning. Apart from a slight stubble of beard, Terrell showed no sign that he had just rolled out of bed and into his clothes at Beigler's telephone call.

Dr. Lewis, the Medical officer, a short, fat man was waiting impatiently for the photographer to finish. Two fingerprint men who sat at the bar, looking longingly at the rows of bottles, also waited.

Fred Hess and Detective 3rd Grade Max Jacoby, a notebook in hand, sat in one of the banquettes. Looking up and seeing Edris, Hess beckoned.

Edris trotted over.

'You the waiter who served the dead woman?' Hess demanded.

'Yes.'

Hess studied the dwarf. His expression said plainly he didn't think much of what he saw. Edris stared back at him, his face expressionless, his stubby hands clasped before him.

'What's your name?'

'Ticky Edward Edris.'

'Address?'

'24, East Street, Seacombe.'

Seacombe was an extension of Paradise City where most workers of a low-income group lived.

While Hess was questioning Edris, Jacoby, a young bright looking Jew, recorded the answers.

'What time did she arrive here?' Hess asked, lighting a cigarette.

'A little after eleven: eight minutes past to be exact.'

Hess looked sharply at the dwarf.

'How can you be as sure as that?'

'I own a watch. I use it.'

'Was she alone?'

'Yes.'

'Had she reserved the banquette she's in now?'

'No. It was late. Nearly everyone had left the bar and had gone to the restaurant. There was plenty of room.'

'She seem all right?'

Hess was aware that Browning and Terrell had come up and were listening. Glancing over his

shoulder, Edris saw Browning frowning at him and he said, a little hurriedly, 'She was all right.'

'When she came in, what did she do?'

'She went to the banquette and sat down. I asked her if she was waiting for anyone and she said no. She ordered a whisky sour. I served it and beat it.'

'Then what happened?'

'I had to go down to the restaurant with drinks. When I came back the curtain was drawn. I asked the barman if anyone had joined her, but he said she was still on her own. I reckoned she wanted privacy so I didn't go near her.'

'You're damned right she wanted privacy. Then what happened?'

'We close around two-thirty. When most of the people had gone and the curtain still remained drawn, I went along to collect. I rapped on the stall, but got no answer. I looked in and there she was.'

'You didn't go near for three and a half hours?'

'That's right. I was busy. I work in the stillroom. We had a heavy night. There was plenty to clear up.'

Browning suddenly grunted and turning to Terrell, said, 'I'm going home. Louis will lock up. This is a hell of a thing for me. Could ruin my business. Get your men out of here as quickly as you can, Frank. I want Louis to get some sleep.'

'We won't be long now, Harry,' Terrell said, shook hands and then watched Browning walk down the stairs and out of sight. He went down the bar to where Dr. Lowis was now examining the dead woman.

Edris said, 'When you asked just now if she seemed all right, I didn't tell you the truth. I'd like to answer that question again.'

Hess glared at him.

'Look, your mother might have thought you were cute, but I don't. You mean you were lying?'

'I didn't want to lose my job.' Edris took out his handkerchief and wiped his sweating face. 'I like this job. The boss was listening. If I had told the truth and he had heard me, he would have booted me out.'

'What makes you think he won't boot you out if you tell the truth now?'

'If you don't tell him, he won't know, will he?'

Hess eyed the dwarf thoughtfully, then shrugged.

'Okay. So she didn't seem all right?'

'No. As soon as I saw her, I knew she was in trouble. She was white and shaking. I knew when she got that way, she's likely to make a scene. Scream, get hysterical. So when I saw she was ready to flip her lid, I got her into the banquette and got her a drink. I pulled the curtain. I didn't want her to make a scene. The boss doesn't like scenes.'

Hess and Jacoby looked at each other, then Hess said, 'You mean you know this woman?'

Edris glanced over his shoulder to where Louis was standing talking to Bert Hamilton, then lowering his voice, he said, 'Yes, I know her. She lives in the apartment opposite mine.'

'Why the hell didn't you say so before?' Hess snarled.

'You didn't ask me, and besides, I told you, Mr. Browning was listening. If he finds out I knew her and I put her in the banquette, he'll boot me out.'

'What do you know about her?'

‘She’s a junkie and a whore. I’ve known her off and on for eight years.’

Hess leaned forward.

‘You mean she’s your girl, Ticky?’

Edris looked at him for a moment, his eyes sad, then he said, ‘You think any girl would be my girl?’

‘You steered some of the rich playboys her way and she gave you a rake off? That’s it, isn’t it, Ticky?’

‘She happened to live in the apartment opposite mine,’ Edris said with quiet dignity. ‘From time to time, she used to talk to me. I guess she looked on me the way you and the rest of them do: like a freak. Just because she talked to me doesn’t make me a pimp, does it?’

They stared at each other. Hess was the first to look away.

‘What did she talk about?’

‘Lots of things. Her husband, her daughter, her life, her lovers.’

‘She married?’

‘That’s right.’

Louis came over.

‘You Mr. Hess?’

‘What of it?’ Hess snapped. ‘I’m busy.’

‘You’re wanted on the telephone,’ Louis said, his aristocratic nose tilting.

Hess got to his feet.

‘Stick around, pint size,’ he said to Edris. ‘I’m not through with you yet.’

He went to the bar and picked up the receiver.

‘Yeah?’

‘This is Joe,’ Beigler said. ‘We’ve got a murder in our laps. The Chief with you?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Tell him I’ve found this guy she mentions in her note. He’s got five holes shot in him. I want you over here.’

‘Okay. I’ll tell him. Nice, ain’t it? Doesn’t look as if we’re going to get any sleep, does it?’

‘That’s a goddamn fact. Hurry it up, Fred,’ and Beigler broke the connection.

As Hess replaced the receiver, two white-coated interns came up the stairs, carrying a folded stretcher.

‘The stiff ready yet?’ one of them asked.

‘Pretty near. Hang on. I’ll see.’ Hess started down the bar. As he passed Edris, he said, ‘Okay, Ticky, you can beat it. We’ll talk to you tomorrow. Get down to headquarters at eleven and ask for me. Hess is the name.’

He continued on to Terrell and Dr. Lowis.

‘Yes, you can take her away,’ Lowis said as he finished packing his bag. ‘I’ll have a report on your desk by tomorrow at ten. I’m going back to bed.’

Hess grinned at him.

‘That’s what you think, Doc,’ he said cheerfully. ‘We’ve got another stiff for you. Beigler’s just phoned. He’s waiting for you at 247, Seaview Boulevard.’

Dr. Lowis’ fat face was a study.

‘That means I won’t get any sleep tonight,’ he protested.

‘What do guys like us want with sleep?’ Hess said, his grin widening. ‘We’re supermen.’

As Lowis hurried away, Terrell said sharply, ‘What’s this, Fred?’

‘Joe just called, Chief. Reports a shooting murder. He wants us over there, sir.’

Terrell looked down at the woman who had been laid out on the floor. She was about forty; a thin, good-looking woman with a good figure.

‘A junkie, Fred. Her thighs are riddled with needle scars.’

‘The dwarf has been shooting the breeze. He knows her. Says she’s not only a junkie, but a whore too. Browning will love this when it comes out.’

Like a vulture smelling decay, Hamilton of the Sun was moving down the bar towards them.

‘We’ll leave Max to take care of this end,’ Terrell said. ‘Let’s get over to Joe.’

‘What’s happening now?’ Hamilton asked. He was a tall, grey-haired man in his early forties. Someone had told him once he looked like James Stewart and he had cultivated a plum-in-the-mouth drawl that made him even more like the famous actor.

Terrell started down the long bar.

‘Tag along and you’ll see,’ he said, over his shoulder.

‘What’s cooking?’ Hamilton asked as he fell into step with Hess.

‘Another stiff. She knocked him off and then knocked herself off,’ Hess said. ‘The kind of crap that’s right up your alley.’

As the two men passed him, Edris stepped back and looked after them. Then he watched the two interns lift the dead woman on to the stretcher and hurry away with her. It wasn’t until he had trotted into the stillroom and closed the door that his face lit up with an evil little grin.

With sheer exuberance, he began to dance round and round the room, waving his stumpy arms in time with his dancing.

* * *

Seaview Boulevard connected Paradise City with the town of Seacombe. At the Paradise City end of the long boulevard the villas were large, lush and costly. Each of them had an acre or so of ornate garden, a swimming pool, triple garages and electronically controlled carriage gates.

At the Seacombe end of the boulevard, the villas were small, shabby and cheap. They stood in tiny gardens and the sidewalk was chalked out for kids’ games. Seaview Boulevard represented as nothing else could the upper and the lower stratas of American life, the haves and the havenots, the rich and the poor.

The first pale fingers of dawn were lighting the night sky as Sergeant Beigler pulled up outside No. 247: a bungalow type of villa, screened by a high overgrown hedge.

He took a flashlight from the glove compartment of his car, then crossed the sidewalk, pushing open the wooden gate and using the beam of the flashlight to light his way up the short path to the front door. He lifted the well-worn mat and picked up the key the dead woman had written would be there.

He paused for a moment to look at the bungalow low opposite which was in darkness, then loosening his gun in its holster, he put his thumb on the bell push and kept it there. He didn’t expect anyone to answer the door, but he was a careful cop. He wasn’t using the key until he was sure that no one but the dead was in the bungalow.

A two-minute wait satisfied him, and slipping the key into the lock, he opened the door. He stepped

into a small hall, shut the door and swung the beam of his flashlight around until he located the light switch. He snapped down the switch and the ceiling light came on, showing him a passage ahead of him with closed doors either side.

He was a little surprised to find, apart from grubby white nylon drapes, the two front rooms were unfurnished. The third door further down the passage gave onto a bathroom. From the towels on the hot rail and the pink sponge in the bath rack, he concluded someone used the bathroom. The door opposite led into the kitchenette. The empty, dusty cupboards and drawers told him no one living in this bungalow ever ate there.

He moved on to the two rooms at the end of the passage. He opened the left door, switched on the light and entered a bedroom. He saw at a glance this was no ordinary bedroom.

In the centre of the room was a king-size bed. The sheets and the pillowcases were immaculate and hadn't been used. There was a big mirror fitted to the wall opposite the bed and another mirror covered the ceiling.

The carpet was thick and the colour of old claret. The bottle green coloured walls were decorated with framed photographs of smiling, naked showgirls. There was a big closet on one side of the room and Beigler walked over to it and opened the doors. A brief look showed him that here was all the perverted paraphernalia of a call girl from albums of erotica to whips and canes. He closed the cupboard, then walked out of the room and paused as he faced the closed door of the remaining room. He reached forward, turned the handle of the door and pushed it open.

The door swung slowly back. There was a light on in the room. Facing him was a single bed. A man was slumped down in the bed, a newspaper spread across the sheet.

Death had caught him in the harmless occupation of reading the evening news. He wore blue and white pyjamas; the front of the jacket was stained with blood. There was blood on his clenched hands and a smear of blood across his suntanned cheek.

Beigler stared at him for a long moment, then moved into the room.

The dead man was powerfully built with the shoulders of a boxer. His crew-cut hair was the colour of Indian ink. A pencil line moustache gave him a swaggering, sexy look. He belonged to the regiment of playboys you see on the beaches of Paradise City; flaunting their muscles, their maleness and their virility; their only assets, for the dollar never comes easy to men like them.

Beigler saw a telephone on the bedside table. He dialled La Coquille's number. He had just finished speaking with Hess when the front door bell rang. He went to the front door to find Detective 2nd Grade Tom Lepski standing on the doormat.

'The Chief said there was trouble out here,' Lepski said as he stepped into the hall. He was a wiry, tall man, tough, with a lined, suntanned face and clear ice-blue eyes.

'Yeah a stiff. Come and see him.'

Beigler led the way back to the bedroom. Lepski stared at the dead man then pushed his hat to the back of his head.

'That's Johnnie Williams,' he said. 'Well, well, so he's got his at last.'

'You know him?'

'Oh, sure. I've seen him around. One of the big money gigolos at the Palace hotel. What's he doing in a dump like this?'

Beigler had been looking through the drawers of a chest that stood against one of the walls. He found a pigskin wallet. In it he found a Diner Club card, a driving licence and a chequebook. They

were all in the name of Johnnie Williams. From the chequebook, Beigler learned that Williams had a cash balance at the bank of 3,756 dollars.

‘I guess he lives here,’ he said. ‘Take a squint at the room opposite.’

While Lepski was in the other room, Beigler continued to search the smaller bedroom. He found a closet full of Williams’ clothes.

Lepski came back.

‘A knocking shop,’ he said. ‘Who’s the woman?’

‘Calls herself Muriel Marsh Devon. She killed herself by an overdose of heroin at La Coquille restaurant tonight. She left a suicide note, admitting she knocked off our handsome lump of beef.’

Lepski wandered over to the dead man and peered at his chest. He grunted and moved back.

‘She certainly made sure of him. Cut his heart to pieces from the look of it.’

Beigler suddenly stooped and reached under the bed. He carefully drew into sight a .38 automatic. Taking out his handkerchief, he dropped it over the gun and picked it up.

‘Nice open and shut case,’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if I don’t get an hour or two of sleep even now.’

A car pulled up outside the bungalow and Lepski went to the door. He returned with Dr. Lowis.

‘He’s all yours,’ Beigler said and waved to the dead man.

‘Thanks for nothing!’ Lowis snapped. ‘Now I have two reports to make.’

Beigler winked at Lepski and pushed him towards the door.

‘Never mind, doc,’ he said. ‘You’re not the only one.’ To Lepski, he said, ‘Let’s get some fresh air.’

The two men went down the passage and opened the front door. They moved into the garden and both lit cigarettes.

‘Funny no one reported the shooting,’ Lepski said, nodding to the bungalow opposite.

‘Could be they are on vacation,’ Beigler returned. ‘Besides, this end of Seacombe keeps to itself. Know something? I’ve been on the force ten years now, never had a squeal out of Seacombe yet.’

‘I wonder why she gave it to Johnnie. I wonder why he bothered with a two-dollar whore.’

‘She was a lot better than that. I’ve seen her. Well dressed; took care of herself. Most men who chase prostitutes like to perform in shabby surroundings. Don’t ask me why.’

‘I won’t then.’ Lepski stilled a yawn. ‘I wish the Chief hadn’t yanked me out of bed.’

‘Here they come now,’ Beigler said as two cars came racing down the broad boulevard, their headlights lighting up the row of bungalows as the cars swept past.

Half an hour later Dr. Lowis came out of the bungalow and joined Chief of Police Terrell who was sitting in his car, smoking a pipe, patiently waiting for his men’s reports.

‘I’d say he was shot around ten o’clock,’ Lowis said. ‘Five slugs in the heart. Good shooting, but she really couldn’t have missed. She fired from the foot of the bed. I’ll have a report for you by eleven. That all right?’

Terrell nodded.

‘It’ll have to be, doc. Okay, you get off and catch up with some sleep.’

When Lowis had driven away, Bert Hamilton came out of the bungalow. He had been busy on the telephone, filing his story.

‘Plenty of meat in this one,’ he said to Terrell. ‘Got any ideas why she shot him?’

‘That’s something I’ll have to find out,’ Terrell said getting out of the car. ‘See you some time,

Bert,' and moving past the reporter, he entered the bungalow.

Beigler and Hess were talking in the hall.

'All clear here, sir,' Hess said. 'A nice, tidy job.'

'It looks like it,' Terrell returned, 'but we won't let it go as easy as that. You two boys go over to East Street and look at her home. Check her handwriting is the same as the suicide note. I think this case is straightforward, but let's be sure. Have a talk with that dwarf. He seemed full of information. Maybe he can tell us why she shot Williams. I want a report on my desk by ten, so get moving, boys.'

Hess suppressed a groan.

'Okay, Chief.'

Terrell went into the dead man's room where Lepski was propping up the wall, talking to the finger print men who were packing their kit.

'Tom,' Terrell said, 'I want you to find out if anyone heard the shots. Check up and down the boulevard and I want some background on Williams.'

'You don't want me to start checking now, do you, Chief?' Lepski said. 'It's only just after six o'clock. You don't want me to get people out of bed, do you?'

Terrell grinned.

'Give them half an hour. They rise early this end of the boulevard.' At the sound of an approaching car, he went on. 'Here's the ambulance now. I'll leave you to handle this.' He turned to the finger print men. 'You got anything?'

'Lots of prints,' one of them said. 'This room hasn't been dusted in months. Mostly his prints, but there are others. We'll run a check on them all.'

Terrell nodded, then went to the front door as the ambulance pulled up. He told the two interns where to find the body, then he got into his car and headed for Police headquarters.

A few minutes after Terrell and his men had left La Coquille restaurant, heading for Seaview Boulevard, Ticky Edris took off his drill jacket and slipped on a light grey alpaca coat. He then trotted to the stillroom door, opened it and glanced into the bar.

Louis and Jacoby were talking at the head of the stairs.

‘Going home now, Mr. Louis,’ Edris said in his piping voice. ‘That okay with you?’

Louis waved his hand, not pausing in his talk with Jacoby. Edris returned to the stillroom, his movements quick and bustling. He let himself out through the Staff exit, bounced down a flight of steps and into the parking lot reserved for the Staff’s car. He half ran, half bounced to where two cars were parked. One of them a Cooper Mini; the other a Buick Roadmaster convertible with the top up.

A broad shouldered man sat at the wheel of the Buick, smoking a cigarette. He wore a brown straw hat and a well cut fawn-coloured suit. His shirt was white and immaculate; his tie expensive and conservative. The thick wings of his gold blond hair went well with his heavy suntan. He was handsome: a young looking thirty-eight, and the deep cleft in his chin gave him the little extra personality that appeals to most women.

He could have been mistaken for a successful law officer, a bank official or even an up and coming politician, but he was neither a law officer, a bank official nor a politician. Phil Algir used his impressive appearance, his wealth of general knowledge and his charm to fool the greedy out of their money. Algir was a con man who had spent fourteen years of his life in prison and who had left New York in a hurry for Florida at the very moment a warrant was being sworn out for his arrest. He had remained quietly in Paradise City, short of funds, afraid to set up another of his smooth swindles, knowing the next time he was caught, he would go away for another fourteen years.

Behind his handsome, charming facade, there was a streak of vicious ruthlessness in Algir. Up to this night, he had managed to get the money he needed without resorting to violence, but now the facade was down. If this job he and the dwarf had planned didn’t work out, it wouldn’t be fourteen years in a cell this time. A seat in the gas chamber would be waiting for him. But he had every confidence in Edris and himself. This job was going to work out - it had to.

‘Going like a dream,’ Edris said, resting his stumpy fingers on the door of the car. ‘No fuss - no trouble. All right your end?’

‘Yeah.’

‘They’ve gone to the bungalow. They’ll then come on to East Street. You’d better get moving, Phil. You know what to do.’

‘Yeah.’ Algir started the car engine. ‘Think they’re satisfied she knocked herself off?’

‘Looks like it. I’ll watch Terrell. He’s smart. Don’t get to the school before half-past seven.’

‘I know. I know. We’ve gone over it enough times, haven’t we? You handle your end. I’ll handle mine.’

Edris stepped back, and with a brief nod, Algir sent the Buick moving out of the parking lot. Edris watched the tail lights disappear, then turned and got into the Mini. The clutch, brake and gas pedals had been built up with thick lumps of cork so his stumpy legs could reach down to them. He was a fast, expert driver. He hadn’t had an accident in his seventeen years of driving.

He drove fast out of Paradise City, pushing the Mini up to eighty miles an hour once on the highway. But as he approached No. 247, Seaview Boulevard, he slowed and drove past at a much slower speed, glancing at the parked police cars in front of the bungalow. It took him another ten minutes to reach East Street. Leaving his car before the apartment block, he took the elevator to the top floor and entered the two room apartment he had lived in now for the past eight years.

There was a big living room, a small bedroom, a kitchenette and a shower room. He had lavished considerable care on the living room and by careful buying and selection, he had made it into a comfortable, tastefully furnished home. He used a coffee table for his dining table and he had had a special miniature chair and a lounging chair made for his own comfort: the rest of the furniture was of normal size as Edris liked to entertain his friends from time to time and he had chosen the settee and the armchairs with consideration for the comfort of others.

He bounced into the bedroom, stripped off his clothes and then ran into the shower room. He danced around in his grotesque nakedness under the shower of tepid water, slapping his hands together in time with his humming. He then dried himself and put on a pair of gold and blue pyjamas and a blue dressing gown. He went into the sitting room, crossing over to the miniature cocktail cabinet. He poured himself a slug of whisky, added charge water, then carrying the drink to his armchair, he sat down, putting his feet up on a tiny footstool. He took a drink, set down the glass, then lit a cigarette. He sat for some minutes, relaxing, drawing the cigarette smoke deep into his lungs and then expelling it through his wide nostrils.

He glanced at the tiny lady's wristwatch on his wrist. The time was 06.30 hours. It would take Phil a little under the hour to reach Greater Miami. If all went well, Phil would be on his way back to Paradise City by half-past eight. He couldn't expect to hear from Phil before half-past nine or even ten.

Edris finished his whisky, stifled a yawn and stubbed out his cigarette. He would have liked to have gone to bed, but he knew if he went to bed, he would fall asleep and that would never do. He mustn't be sleepy or dull minded when the cops arrived.

He struggled out of his chair and carrying his empty glass over to the cocktail cabinet, he made himself another drink. Edris was a heavy drinker, but seemed able to absorb a considerable quantity of alcohol without it affecting him. But tonight he had been under a strain and he was tired. He told himself to go slow with the whisky. It wouldn't do for him to get overconfident.

He was finishing his drink, sipping it slowly, when he heard a car pull up in the street below. He restrained the urge to look out of the window. The cops mustn't catch him peeping at them. He carried the glass into the kitchenette and rinsed it out. Then he went into the hall and standing by the front door, he listened.

Beigler had got the key to the dead woman's apartment from the janitor who had shrugged indifferently when Beigler had told him the woman was dead. To Beigler's questions, he had said he knew little about the woman except her name was Marsh, that she paid her rent

regularly, never appeared in the mornings, went out in the afternoons and returned very late each night. She didn't have much mail and seldom visitors.

Yawning prodigiously, Hess got into the elevator with Beigler and they shot up to the top floor. Entering the woman's two-room apartment, they looked around. The living room was comfortably furnished with a big TV set in one corner. There was a double bed in the bedroom and fitted clothes closets. On the dressing table were two silver framed photographs: one of a handsome, dark-haired

man in his early thirties; the other of a girl around sixteen or seventeen years of age, her blonde hair in an urchin cut. Her thin, sharp features, pert little nose and large mouth, made her elfin-like and attractive.

A careful search of the various drawers in the apartment revealed very little except a collection of unpaid bills and a number of letters that began: Dear Mummy and ended: all my love, Norena. The address at the head of each letter was Graham Co-Ed College, Greater Miami.

Hess found several specimens of the dead woman's handwriting which he compared with the suicide note. They seemed to have been written by the same hand.

Beigler, who had been reading some of the letters from the girl, Norena, looked up at Hess.

'I guess she must be the daughter,' he said and nodded to the photograph on the dressing table. 'Nice looking kid. I wonder who the father is.'

'Maybe the midget knows. Let's go talk to him. He's just across the way.'

Leaving the apartment, the two men crossed the landing and Hess rang on the front door bell of Edris' apartment.

After a brief delay, the door opened and Edris looked inquiringly up at them.

'Oh,' he said and moved back. 'Come in, gentlemen. I'm just making coffee. Will you have some?'

'Sure,' Beigler said and the two detectives entered the living room.

Hess said, 'Why aren't you in bed, Ticky?'

'Can't sleep without coffee. I won't be a second,' Edris said and with a hop and a skip, he bounced into the kitchenette.

'Sort of cute, ain't he?' Hess said. He looked around the room. 'For Pete's sake! He's got himself his own goddamn armchair!'

'Why shouldn't he?' Beigler said, lowering himself onto the settee. 'Would you like to be a dwarf?'

Hess thought about it, shrugged and sat down.

'Why should I care? I'm not a dwarf.'

Edris returned carrying a tray with coffee things. He poured three cups and handed them around, then he sat in his armchair and put his feet up on the footstool.

The three men drank a little of their coffee. Beigler, who considered himself a connoisseur, nodded with approval.

'Fine coffee,' he said. 'You've got it just right.'

Edris smiled.

'Not much I don't know about coffee.'

'Never mind the coffee,' Hess broke in. 'Let's hear what you know about this woman. That her husband's photo in her bedroom?'

Edris was far too smart to fall into that obvious trap.

'I wouldn't know. I've never been in her bedroom.'

Hess stared at him, then got to his feet, crossed the landing and collected the two photographs. He came back and offered them to Edris.

'Who's he?'

'That's not her husband. That's the fella she ran away with years ago. His name was Henry Lewis. He got killed in a car crash some fifteen years ago.'

'This her daughter?'

‘That’s right.’

‘Where’s she?’

‘The Graham Co-Ed College, Greater Miami.’

‘Her husband alive?’

‘He’s alive.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘Melville Devon.’

‘Know where he lives?’

‘Somewhere in Paradise City. I don’t know where.’

‘You said she ran off with this guy Lewis? She leave her husband for him?’

‘Yes. From what she told me, she couldn’t get along with Devon. He was a serious sort of fella, always working. After they had been married less than two years, she met Lewis. He had money. So she ran off with him. That was fifteen years ago. She took the baby with her. Lewis liked kids. They had a pretty good time together for a year, then he got killed.’

Hess stared thoughtfully at Edris.

‘She tell you all this?’

‘Yes. Not all at once. When she got blue she would come in here and sit, saying nothing for hours. Then she’d start talking and then she would shut up. She had no money when Lewis died. They were planning to marry as soon as Muriel could get a divorce. She put the baby with foster parents and got a job as a hotel receptionist.’ Edris paused to finish his coffee. He poured more into his cup and pushed the jug over to Beigler. ‘She got into bad company. After a while she started on the needle. She got tossed out of the hotel. She hadn’t the money for a fix so she went on the streets. Some old guy set her up in an apartment. She lived pretty well for the next five years until he died. She sent Norena, that’s her daughter to boarding school. They only got together during the vacations. The drug habit really got her, and she quit New York and came here. Then Johnnie Williams showed up.’

Edris again paused and looked at Hess. ‘Maybe you’d better talk to him. He knows more about Muriel than I do.’

Hess poured himself another cup of coffee.

‘Williams is dead. She killed him. Why didn’t she tell you, Ticky? She told you everything, didn’t she? Why didn’t she tell you she put five slugs into him before she came to La Coquille?’

Edris sat very still. His big eyes clouded. They looked like the eyes of a spaniel.

‘She didn’t tell me. I knew something pretty bad had happened, but she was drunk. I couldn’t get any sense out of her. So she killed him! Well, he had it coming. The dirty, double-crossing son of a bitch!’

‘Just why did he have it coming?’ Beigler asked.

‘She did everything for that slob. She kept him, bought him his clothes, let him have a room rent-free. She was crazy about him. He bled her white. During the last six months or so, he’s been going after the old women at the Palace Hotel. He found one with money. By now, Muriel was broke. She was so far gone on the needle, she couldn’t even get customers. She had the school bills and her regular fixes to pay for. Johnnie was really in the money. When she tried to borrow off him, he laughed at her. I guess he laughed once too often.’

‘How about the daughter? Does she have any idea what was going on?’

‘No. Muriel and she went away on sea trips during the vacations. She didn’t want Norena to come

to her apartment too often. She was hoping to take her to the West Indies this vacation, but she had no money and Johnnie wouldn't stake her.'

'You being her best friend, you didn't stake her, Ticky?'

'She wouldn't take it from me. I offered, but she couldn't bring herself to take money from me.'

'Why not? You were her best friend, weren't you the guy she always confided in.'

Edris looked thoughtfully at Hess, his eyes stony.

'I guess she thought I was more to be pitied than her. She never looked on me as a human being. I was just someone, something, to talk to.'

Hess sneered.

'Did she say she pitied you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, you saved your money, didn't you, Ticky?'

'I don't have all that money to save,' Edris said.

'Oh, come on: with your cute tricks, I bet you pick up plenty of tips.'

Beigler said impatiently, 'Let's skip it, Fred. This isn't getting us anywhere.'

'Oh, I don't know. I think this freak is a shade too cute,' Hess said, scowling at Edris. 'Didn't Muriel say one little thing that hinted she had killed Williams?'

'No.'

Hess began to unwrap a packet of gum.

'Did she own a gun, Ticky?'

'I don't think so. She might have done. I wouldn't know.'

'Who was the pusher who gave her her fix?'

'I don't know.'

'It wouldn't be you?'

'No.'

Hess fed the gum into his mouth, stared at his fleshy hands for a long moment, then shrugged. He got to his feet.

'I guess that's all. You got anything that's worrying you, Joe?'

Beigler also got to his feet.

'No.'

'Well, let's get out of here.'

The two detectives walked to the door. Edris remained in the armchair, his feet on the foot stool, his eyes watching them.

'Thanks for the coffee,' Beigler said at the door.

'Keep your nose clean, pint-size,' Hess said.

The two detectives went out, shutting the door behind them.

Edris remained still for several minutes, his face mottled with hot, rising blood. His eyes gleamed. His stumpy fingers scratched on the arms of the chair as he wrestled with his rage.

Later, when the hands of his watch moved to 07.15 hours, he got to his feet and crossed to the telephone. He dialled a number. As he waited for the connection, he lit a cigarette.

A woman's voice said, 'This is the Graham Co-Educational School.'

'I want to speak to Dr. Graham,' Edris said. 'This is very urgent.'

'Who is this?'

‘My name is Edward Edris. This is a matter that concerns Norena Devon one of your pupils. It’s an emergency.’

‘Will you hold it please?’

Edris sucked in smoke and released it down his nostrils.

There was a little delay, then a man’s voice said, ‘This is Dr. Graham.’

‘Doctor, this is Edward Edris. I am a friend of the Devon family. Norena knows me well. There has been an accident. Her mother is very seriously hurt.’

‘I am sorry to hear that. What would you like me to do, Mr. Edris?’

‘Would you break the news to Norena? Don’t tell her how serious it is. Just say there’s been an accident. Dr. Graham, it so happens that Mr. Stanley Tebbel, Mrs. Devon’s attorney, is in Greater Miami right now. I have already spoken to him. As he is returning to Paradise City immediately, he would drive Norena back with him. This would save time. Her mother is asking for her.’

Edris waited, aware of his mounting tension. This was the crux of the conversation. Would

Graham play or was he going to be difficult?

‘Mr . . . who did you say?’ Graham asked, after a pause.

‘Stanley Tebbel.’

‘Does Norena know this gentleman.’

‘She must know of him. I doubt if they have met. Dr. Graham, I can understand what you are thinking. One doesn’t let a girl of seventeen go off with a strange man. I appreciate your cautiousness. But this is extremely urgent. To put it bluntly, Norena’s mother is dying. Look, I suggest, you break the news to Norena, tell her I telephoned, she knows me well. Ask her to call me and I will explain to her about Mr. Tebbel. My telephone number is Seacombe 556.’

Again there was a pause, then Dr. Graham said ‘That won’t be necessary, Mr. Edris. I’ll see Norena goes with Mr. Tebbel as soon as he arrives. I am very sorry about this.’

‘Thank you, Doctor.’

‘Norena will be ready to travel in half an hour. Good day to you, Mr. Edris,’ and the connection was cut.

Edris hung up. His face was bright with a sly, wicked grin. Suddenly, he began to jump up and down, throwing his stumpy legs out like a Cossack dancer and clapping his stumpy hands together.

He went dancing round and round the room, a sinister little figure of evil.

* * *

Dr. Wilbur Graham, a tall, balding, harassed-looking man, paced up and down his big study, his bony hands clasped behind his back. It was three days to end of term and he had still a lot to do, but he found he couldn’t settle to work until this sad business to do with Norena Devon, one of his favourite pupils, had been settled.

He had already seen the girl and had broken the news to her. He had also told her that her mother’s attorney would be arriving any moment to take her home to her mother.

Norena wasn’t a particularly attractive looking girl. She wore blue plastic framed spectacles and her complexion was sallow, but she was well built and her blonde hair was glossy and cared for.

‘Is - is she going to die?’ she had asked.

‘She is badly hurt, Norena. You must be brave about this. I think Mr. Edris would have said if she

was in danger, but she is bad,' Graham had said, shrinking from the truth.

He was still pacing up and down when the maid announced Mr. Stanley Tebbel.

'Show him right in,' Graham said.

Phil Algir came into the room, his straw hat in his hand. His handsome face carried just the right expression of sorrow, friendliness and consideration that immediately appealed to Graham. Algir's clothes also met with the doctor's approval. Here, obviously, was a man of substance whose sincerity plainly showed on his face.

'I'm sorry to have to call on you so early,' Algir said in his rich baritone. He allowed himself a slight, sober smile. 'I can imagine, with the end of term so close, you must be fully occupied. But unhappily this is an emergency and I thought I should come at once.'

'Yes, of course,' Dr. Graham waved to a chair. 'Do sit down. How is Mrs. Devon?'

Algir sat down and shook his head.

'She's very bad, I'm afraid. Have you broken the news to Norena yet?'

'Yes, I have done that. She is naturally shocked, but I didn't tell her the worst.'

'I'm afraid it could be the worst. We should hurry. Even now, we could be too late.'

'She's ready, I'm sure.' Graham rang the bell on his desk. 'In which hospital is Mrs. Devon?'

Ready for this question, Algir said glibly, 'I don't know. It was all rather hurried. Mr. Edris forgot to tell me. I propose driving first to his place, and then to the hospital. I will see you are kept informed, doctor.'

The maid came to the door.

'Please tell Miss Devon we are ready,' Graham said.

When the maid had gone, Algir got to his feet and crossed over to the big window. He had to divert Graham's attention and avoid any embarrassing questions. He looked out at the school grounds.

'Nice place you have here, doctor. I'm glad to see it. I often get clients asking for a good school for their daughters. I'll be happy to recommend your school.'

Graham beamed.

'That's very kind of you, Mr. Tebbel. Perhaps you would care to have some copies of our prospectus?'

'Certainly.'

Dr. Graham produced several printed folders which Algir took and began to examine. His interested questions kept Graham's attention from Norena.

Finally, there came a knock on the door. Graham crossed the room and opened the door.

'Come in, Norena. Mr. Tebbel is here.'

The girl came in and stood awkwardly just inside the room. She was wearing a grey pleated skirt, a white shirt and a small black hat and black shoes. She carried over her arm a short coat to match the skirt. She looked what she was, a seriously minded College girl going somewhere in her best clothes.

Graham saw she had been weeping. Her eyes behind the lenses of her glasses were red-rimmed and swollen.

She was very pale, but in control of herself and she managed a faint smile as Algir crossed the room, his own smile friendly but sober.

'We have never met, Norena,' he said, offering his hand. 'I have looked after your mother's affairs for some time now. She has often talked to me about you. I wish we could have met under happier circumstances.'

‘Yes, Mr. Tebbel,’ Norena said and looked away, struggling to control the emotion that surged over her.

‘We’ll get off,’ Algir said, turning to Graham. ‘I’ll telephone you as soon as I have some news.’ He turned to Norena. ‘The car’s at the door. Will you go on ahead?’

Graham took the girl’s hand.

‘Goodbye, Norena. You mustn’t worry. It’ll come out all right. It generally does.’

‘Goodbye, doctor and thanks.’ She turned quickly and left the room.

‘Is her luggage ready?’ Algir asked. ‘I don’t think she’ll be coming back. This is her last term, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it’s her last term. She’s only packed a bag. I’ll have the rest of her things sent on to her home.’

‘Fine. I’ll get off. Well, let’s hope.’

The two men shook hands, then Algir hurried down the steps and got into the Buick by Norena’s side. He sent the car down the long drive-in and out on to the Alain Street. He drove with restrained care through Greater Miami. He itched to shove his foot down hard on the accelerator, but he was very conscious that an accident or a traffic infringement could foul up the most desperate plan he had ever embarked upon to make big money.

It was while he was steering the Buick through the heavy traffic of trucks heading for the Florida Keys that Norena said hesitatingly, ‘Mr. Tebbel, is my mother really dangerously hurt?’

‘She’s pretty bad, Norena,’ Algir said. ‘You mustn’t worry. There’s nothing either of us can do right now.’

‘It was a car, wasn’t it?’

‘That’s right. She stepped off the pavement and the driver didn’t have a chance of stopping.’

‘Was - was she drunk?’

Algir stiffened. He glanced quickly at the girl at his side. She was staring through the windshield, her face pale and set.

‘Drunk? What do you mean? That’s not a nice thing to say about your mother, Norena.’

‘Mummy means more to me than any other person alive,’ the girl said with such fierce passion that Algir winced. ‘I understand her. I know what she has been through. I know she did everything for me. She sacrificed herself for me. I know she drinks. Was she drunk?’

Algir moved uneasily.

‘No,’ he said finally. ‘Now look, Norena, I’ve got some thinking to do. I’m working on a case. You sit quiet, will you? Just don’t worry. I’ll get you to your mother as quickly as I can, alright?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry to be a nuisance.’

Again Algir winced. His big suntanned hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. He didn’t want to know this girl. He wanted her to remain a complete stranger to him as Johnnie Williams had been a complete stranger to him. It had been simple enough for him to walk into Williams’ bedroom and shoot him five times through the heart. He hadn’t known the guy. It was like shooting at a stuffed dummy. If he allowed this girl to talk, to make mental contact with him, how could he bring himself to kill her?

Even now, those few words she had spoken had upset him. He could feel a film of cold sweat on his face and a sick feeling of horror building up inside him.

He was through the congested motorway out of Miami now and was on the first broad stretch of

highway 4A. Leaning forward, his eyes intent on the road ahead, he sent the big car surging forward.

* * *

The aircraft on the night flight from New York touched down at the Miami airport exactly on schedule. As the passengers crowded into the reception lobby, the hands of the wall clock stood at 07.30 hours.

Among the passengers was a slimly built girl of seventeen years of age. There was something elfin-like in her attractive, sharp-featured face. She wore a white headscarf, bottle green suede jacket, tight black pants that fastened under her flat-heeled shoes and a white scarf knotted at her throat. Her bra lifted her breasts to a provocative angle, and her neat, small buttocks had a cultivated ducktail swish that caught the eye of every man in the lobby.

She was very sure of herself. A cigarette drooped from her full red lips, her blue eyes had a flinty hardness, and when the men stared, she stared back with hostile, challenging contempt.

Ira Marsh, Muriel Marsh Devon's youngest sister, had been brought up in a Brooklyn slum. Her sister, twenty-two years her senior, had left home and had disappeared out of the lives of the Marsh family before Ira was born.

Her mother had produced eleven children and Ira was the last of the brood. Four of the boys had been killed in a drunken car crash. Two others were serving life sentences for armed robbery. Four of the girls, including Muriel, had simply walked out of the slum that had served them as a home and hadn't been seen nor heard of since. If it hadn't been for Ticky Edris, Ira would never have learned that her eldest sister lived as a prostitute and a drug addict. Not that she would have cared one way or the other. Her sisters and her brothers meant as much to her as her father, a drunken old lecher, against whom she had to lock her bedroom door.

One evening, some four months ago, a smiling dwarf had been waiting outside her tenement block in a red Mini Cooper. Ira was returning from the Public Baths where she had spent a luxurious hour soaking her beautiful little body in hot water, washing her hair and generally preparing herself for the jive session she always attended on a Sunday night.

At the sight of her, the dwarf slid out of the car and planted himself in front of her. He was wearing a brown sports jacket with patch pockets, grey flannel slacks and a brown baseball cap worn at a jaunty angle over his right eye.

'If you're Ira Marsh,' he said, his smile bright, his eyes watchful, 'I want to talk to you.'

She stared down at the little man, frowning.

'Out of my way, Tom Thumb,' she said sharply. 'I'm fussy who I talk to.'

Edris giggled.

'It's about your sister Muriel. Don't be snooty, baby. Muriel is a special pal of mine.'

Already the women sitting on the iron balconies of the tenement block were staring down at these two. The kids had stopped playing their street games and were converging on them, hooting and pointing at Edris.

Ira swiftly made up her mind. She knew her sister only by name. She found herself suddenly curious to know more about her. She stepped to the car and slid into the passenger's seat. Edris trotted around to the driver's seat and drove down the street, followed by a screaming bunch of kids who were quickly left behind.

‘My name’s Ticky Edris,’ he said as he drove. ‘I’m putting together a little job that could make you and me some money.’

‘Why me?’ Ira said. ‘You know nothing about me. Why me?’

‘There’s nothing I don’t know about you,’ Edris returned. He slowed by a vacant building lot and pulled up.

A month ago in one of her blue moods, Muriel had mentioned her youngest sister. ‘I’ve never even seen her! If I hadn’t run into one of the old crowd living near my home, I wouldn’t have known she was born. Think of it! A sister as old as my daughter, and I’ve never even seen her!’

It was this random remark that had given Edris the key to a problem he had thought up to now insoluble. He had got in touch with an Inquiry Agency in New York and had instructed them to find out everything that was to be found out about a seventeen-year old girl named Ira Marsh. For two hundred dollars, the Agency came up with a five-page report that had given Edris the information he needed and the firm conviction that with this girl, handled right, his problem was practically solved.

From a number of less important details, he learned from the report that Ira Marsh was a wild one. She had a J.D. rating with the local police, but had been smart enough never to have come up before a judge. She was known as an expert shoplifter and store detectives never let her out of their sight when they saw her come in. She was associated with the Moccasin gang, a leading mob of teenage terrorists who were continually clashing with the police and rival gangs in the district. The leader of the Moccasins was Jess Farr, an eighteen-year old thug who had hacked, coshed and cut his way to his present indisputable position. Six months ago, the report stated, Farr had been going round regularly with a girl named Leya Felcher. She was the same age as Farr, a tough, handsome virago who had imagined her position as Farr’s mistress was unassailable. Ira had decided she wanted Farr and she wanted Leya’s position. In a crowded cellar under a warehouse, watched by the male members of the gang with Farr as the prize, the two girls, stripped to the waist, fought nail-tooth-and-fist in the longest and bloodiest battle the Moccasins had ever seen.

Ira had known that she would have to fight for Farr and she had taken the precaution of training for the battle. For three weeks, she had lived like a Spartan and had paid regular visits to Mulligan’s Gym run by an old pugilist who, let into the secret, had trained her as he used to train himself with the gleeful certainty that she couldn’t fail to win.

As Farr’s girl, Ira had become more and more involved with the gang’s activities. She was always on the spot to cheer them into battle. Often she was used as bait to break the uneasy peace that from time to time was arranged between the gangs.

The report concluded with these words: ‘This young girl is shrewd, intelligent, vicious, selfish and amoral. It is the opinion of our investigator that there is nothing she would shrink from to gain her own ends. On the small credit side, she has courage, determination and an aptitude for figures. Whenever she is without funds, which appears to be seldom, she does part-time work for Joe Slessor, a bookmaker, who speaks highly of her. From him she has learned to handle a variety of adding machines and computers.’

On paper, Ira Marsh seemed the ideal candidate for the difficult job Edris had for her. As he sat in the Mini, examining her attractive little face, he became even more confident that she would do.

‘I’ve been making inquiries about you, baby,’ he said. ‘I like what I’ve learned. Do you want to make some money?’

All the time Edris had been driving and now as he talked, Ira had been studying him as narrowly as

he studied her. Her instincts told her this little freak was to be taken seriously.

‘It depends on two things: how much and what I have to do for it,’ she said.

Edris patted the steering wheel with his stumpy hands and smiled.

‘Are you a gambler, baby?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘How much money do you want?’

‘As much as I can get.’

‘I don’t mean that. Do you ever dream about money? I do.’ Edris crossed one short leg over the other. ‘I’m always dreaming about having money. Don’t you?’

‘I guess so.’

‘How much money do you dream about having?’

‘Much more than you could give me.’

‘But how much?’

‘A million dollars.’

‘Why stop there?’ Edris said and giggled. ‘Why not ten million - twenty million?’

She glanced at her cheap wristwatch.

‘Let’s stop playing games. I have to be home in another ten minutes. I have a date tonight.’

‘Suppose I showed you how to make fifty thousand dollars,’ Edris said softly, ‘would you be ready to take a risk?’

She looked at him and she could tell by the expression in his eyes he was serious and she felt a sudden quickening of her blood.

‘What have I to risk? I don’t own anything.’

‘Yes, you do. You have the same possession I have and which I am going to risk. It depends on the value you set on it. Fifty thousand dollars is a nice sum of money. The risk isn’t very great, but it does exist. You will be risking your freedom, baby, as I’ll be risking mine.’

‘What makes you think my freedom is worth fifty thousand dollars? My freedom?’ She laughed. ‘There is nothing I wouldn’t do to have that kind of money.’

He studied the bitter, hard smile that remained after the laughter, and he nodded, satisfied.

‘You’ll have to earn it, baby, make no mistake about it. I have a very special job for you, but you’ll have to earn it.’

‘How?’

‘Before I tell you that, let me tell you the background of this thing.’

It was then she learned about her sister and her marriage, and how her sister had run away with the baby and had finally become a streetwalker.

‘Your sister is a heroin addict,’ Edris said. ‘There’s nothing anyone can do for her. I give her four months. not more. She’s dying on her feet.’

Ira sat forward, her face in her hands, her elbows on her knees, her blue eyes cloudy with concentration, so absorbed that she forgot her date with Jess, forgot the Sunday night jive session, forgot everything except the piping, whispering voice that dripped its poison into her ears.

Finally, Edris got around to explaining what he wanted her to do. It sounded like a plot from some movie, and at first, she decided without telling him, that he was crazy: a freak with a hole in his head, but as he talked on and on, she began to see that such a plan might work and if it did, the money was there.

‘He’s never seen his daughter,’ Edris concluded. ‘He’s heard nothing of her for sixteen years. There is a family resemblance. I can see it. You look uncommonly like Muriel. He’ll see it too. From that angle, there is nothing to worry about. He’ll accept you as his daughter without question. You can see that, can’t you?’

Yes, she could see it. She knew from what her mother had said that she did look like Muriel when Muriel was her age.

‘But what about the daughter? The one I am to impersonate?’ she asked. ‘What about her? Suppose she hears about me?’

‘She won’t,’ Edris said and rubbed his hands together. ‘She’s dead. She died last week. That’s why I’m here. If she was alive, we couldn’t do it. It was only when Muriel told me she was dead that I dreamed up this idea.’ He looked searchingly at her face to see if she accepted these lies. ‘Even now we can’t do anything until Muriel dies. But that won’t be long . . . three or four months.’

Ira moved uneasily.

‘How did the daughter die?’

‘She was swimming, got cramped and drowned,’ Edris lied glibly.

‘Can’t something be done about Muriel?’

‘No. She’s as good as dead now.’

Ira sat silent, staring through the windshield of the car.

‘Well?’ Edris asked impatiently. ‘Will you do it? There’s little risk.’

‘I’ll think about it. It wants a lot of thinking about. Be here this time next Sunday and I’ll tell you one way or the other.’

‘I can’t come up from Paradise City again, baby,’ Edris said. ‘This is part of my yearly vacation. I have to earn a living.’ He took a card from his wallet. ‘Here’s my address. Send me a telegram when you have thought it over. Keep it short: yes or no. There’s no great hurry. We can’t do anything until Muriel dies. Plenty of time to get things right, baby, and they certainly have to be right.’

She thought of this first meeting with Edris as she walked through the reception lobby of the airport and made her way to the bus terminal. She had seen him twice since then. He had put a lot of polish on his plan during the four months’ wait. She couldn’t see now how it could go wrong. She had taken leave of her father, telling him she had a job outside New York and wouldn’t be coming back.

He was too drunk to care. Her one regret was leaving Jess Farr. She didn’t tell him what she was going to do. He would have asked too many questions. She told herself there must be many better and more exciting men to be had when you owned fifty thousand dollars. She told herself that, but she didn’t believe it. She discovered to her irritation that she was more in love with Jess than she realized. She would miss him.

Watched by male eyes, she moved out of the shadows of the airport, crossed into a patch of early morning sun and got aboard the bus for Seacombe.

'This isn't the road to Paradise City!'

They had been driving in silence for some thirty minutes. Now, Algir had suddenly slowed down and swung the Buick off the highway and along a narrow dirt road bordered on either side by citrus shrubs.

'This is all right,' he said curtly, and slightly increased the speed of the car.

'But it isn't!' There was a shrill note of alarm in Norena's voice. 'I know this road it leads to the sea! You've made a mistake, Mr. Tebbel.'

'What's the matter with the sea?' Algir asked, staring in front of him. He couldn't bring himself to look at the girl. 'Don't you like the sea?'

The previous week he had driven along highway 4A, searching for an isolated place where he could kill this girl and get rid of her body. This road they were on now led to the place he had found. He had come down this road every day for five days, always at this time and he had never seen anyone either on the road or the beach. It was a strictly Saturday and Sunday bathing and picnic spot: on weekdays, no one seemed to have the time nor the inclination to bathe there.

'I want to see Mummy as quickly as possible,' the girl said nervously. 'We're wasting time, Mr. Tebbel, coming this way. We must stop and turn back.'

'What makes you think you won't see her this way?' Algir said. 'I didn't say she was in Paradise City, did I?'

'Isn't she? Then where is she?'

'She's in Culver Hospital,' Algir lied. 'This is a short cut to Culver.'

'But it isn't! I know this road. It leads only to the dunes and to the sea.'

'You must leave this to me, Norena,' Algir said, a sudden harsh note in his voice. 'I know what I'm doing.'

She looked at him. He didn't seem to be the same man who had met her in Dr. Graham's study. That man had been charming, kind and sympathetic. But this man . . . Norena experienced a chill of terror. How could a man change so utterly and so quickly? It was like a face that changed in a nightmare.

A heron, startled by the approaching car, flew out of a tree and flapped heavily away. Ahead of them, Norena saw the sea.

'There's the sea,' she said in despair. 'This road leads nowhere except to the sea.'

The citrus shrubs had given way to tall pampas grass that swayed like sinister beckoning fingers in the warm gentle breeze.

'Please stop,' she pleaded. 'Please.'

A hundred yards ahead of them the road came to an end in a big circular turnaround.

As Algir slowed the car, she again looked at him. His face was drawn and glistened with sweat. His eyes were staring. His lips were set in a hard vicious line. The sight of him horrified her. She had an instinctive feeling that he was going to attack her. She had often read the rape and murder cases that from time to time appeared in the newspapers. She had read them without much interest, sure that that sort of thing could never happen to her. In her opinion most of the murdered girls had only themselves to blame for their end. By the way they dressed and generally behaved themselves, they

really did ask for trouble. But why should this man attack her? What had she done?

Unless, of course, he was one of those awful maniacs you read about. But he couldn't be. He was Mummy's lawyer. But did Mummy have a lawyer? She had never mentioned him. Again Norena looked at Algir who had stopped the car and was removing the ignition key.

He didn't look at her. She hated that. If he had looked at her she might have seen what he was planning to do by the expression in his eyes. His movements were slow and deliberate. She noticed his hand was shaking as he withdrew the ignition key.

The beach with its lines of dunes, its yellowing clumps of dried grass and its broad wet ribbon of sand, marking the receding sea, stretched for lonely, empty miles. The breeze had stiffened, blowing the loose dry sand in little swirls that week after week, month after month, year after year formed the high sloping dunes that broke up the flatness of the beach.

She found herself slipping back the door catch. The car door swung open and she was out. Algir's reaching fingers were too late. She felt his grip, but she tore loose and she began to run across the soft sand faster than she had ever run before.

And she could run. She hadn't played hockey and basketball for nothing. She hadn't won the hundred yards at the College sports against stiff opposition for nothing either. Nor had she ever had to race for her life, and as she flashed across the beach that thought that she was racing for her life urged her forward at a speed that made her winning hundred yard sprint look slow.

Taken by surprise, Algir glared after her. He was shaken by the way this girl could run.

If she escaped and talked!

He scrambled out of the car and tore after her. The distance between them must be at least a hundred yards, he thought, and it was increasing. Who would have thought the little bitch could run like this? Her long legs seemed to fly over the sand. Already he was panting. His only exercise was an occasional game of golf. Running like this quickly made him breathless. He kept on, aware that she was drawing further and further away from him. Finally, she disappeared from his sight behind a high dune.

He ran on until he reached the dune. His breathing laboured, his heart hammering, he scrambled up the dune and stopped, his eyes smarting with sweat. He could see her, but now a distant figure silhouetted against the azure blue of the sky. She was still running with long, effortless strides, but she had changed her direction. She was no longer running blindly along the beach that stretched for several miles before it petered out into a vast, swampy cypress forest. She was heading inland now, her back to the sea. Ahead of her was a screen of oak and willow hummocks with the occasional maple tree forcing its way through the dense undergrowth.

Algir had explored these hummocks a few days previously. Through their tangled undergrowth there was a cleared track that ran in a crescent shaped curve and finally came out onto the dirt road they had driven up from highway 4A.

Did she know the track led to the highway? He saw at once his chance of catching her. It was his only chance. He slid back down the sand dune and raced across the sand towards the Buick. Reaching the car, he slid under the steering wheel, put the key into the ignition lock with a shaking hand, started the engine and set the car shooting back down the dirt road.

It took him only a few minutes to reach the T-joint of the dirt road and the track from the hummocks. He drove the Buick under the shade of a willow tree, then taking off his jacket and leaving it in the car, he half ran, half walked down the track until he reached the fringe of the hummocks. He paused to

look back in the direction of the Buick, but the high growing pampas grass hid it from view. Nodding, satisfied, he walked into the undergrowth for a few yards. Then selecting a thick shrub, he sat down behind it. From there, he could see some twenty yards up the track.

There was nothing he could do now, but to wait.

While waiting, he thought of Ticky Edris and this girl, Ira Marsh, that Ticky seemed so pleased with. The whole success of the plan revolved around the girl. If he made a mistake then Johnnie Williams, Muriel Marsh and her daughter would have been murdered for nothing. Maybe he had been crazy to have agreed to go in with Ticky on such a plan, but Ticky had convinced him.

‘I’ve seen her, you haven’t,’ Ticky had said. ‘She’s made for the job. You don’t have to worry about her, Phil. That doll will do anything for money.’

He thought Ticky had been nuts to have promised a teenager fifty thousand dollars. Why give so much of the profit away? Surely, she would have come in on the job for as little as ten thousand?

Ticky smiled his evil smile.

‘What does it matter? Who said she would get any of the money? Relax, Philly-boy, what’s one more body, now we have three?’

Algir wiped the sweat from his forehead. He didn’t trust Ticky. He would have to watch out that Ticky hadn’t ideas about him. Ticky might be thinking, What’s one more body, now I have four?

Algir suspected that Ticky was unbalanced. He had a revenge complex. Ever since he had begun working at La Coquille restaurant, so he had told Algir, he had dreamed of getting even with the rich.

‘You know something?’ he said, one evening when the two men were in Ticky’s apartment. It had been a Thursday, Algir remembered, Ticky’s night off. They had been drinking pretty steadily and by now, Ticky was very drunk. His face was flushed, his eyes glassy and sweat beads sparkled on his forehead. ‘I couldn’t imagine how I could hit back at these rich sons of bitches. To get even with them, I had to have as much money as they had . . . more money. I couldn’t see how I could ever get the money until I went to Mrs. Forrester’s place. What chance had I? I am a misshapen dwarf against a grinning, sneering community of rich bastards who treat me like a jester with their contempt and their stinking jokes. Then one night I went to this old cow’s place and it happened! Now, I’m no longer on my own. I can talk things over with this guy and he’s a lot smarter than I am. You’ve no idea how smart he is.’

Algir, slightly drunk, had stared at the dwarf.

‘What do you mean? Who’s this guy then?’

Edris looked sly. He puffed out his cheeks and fanned his heated face with his stumpy hand.

‘I don’t know who he is. I’ve never seen him, but I hear him. He’s right here,’ and Edris tapped his massive forehead. ‘He talks to me, Phil. It was he who dreamed up this plan. He told me what to do. He, not me.’

Algir didn’t like any of this. He thought Ticky was either crazy or else he was kidding. Either way, Algir didn’t like it.

‘Who’s this Mrs. Forrester?’

‘She’s a table-rapper. Every Thursday evening she holds a séance. Ten people turn up. They each give her a dollar. That’s all she has to live on. I went along one Thursday for the kicks. I hadn’t anything better to do. So I went along and paid my dollar.’ His face now had a dreamy expression. ‘The best and most profitable dollar I’ve ever spent.’

‘What happened then?’ Algir asked, helping himself to Ticky’s whisky.

‘We all sat around an enormous table with a dim red light in the centre. There was some hymn playing on a beat-up record player. We had our hands on the table, our fingers touching. The old girl went off into a trance and then people began asking questions. It was all pretty crummy. They wanted to know about their goddamn relations who were dead. The table moved once for ‘yes’ and twice for ‘no’. Strictly for the kids. If I hadn’t paid my dollar, I would have cleared off. Anyway, my turn came around, and I asked if I was going to make big money pretty soon. Everyone around the table seemed shocked. According to them, you didn’t ask questions like that. Even the goddamn table went into a sulk. It didn’t move. The old girl had some kind of a fit. She fell off her chair. People got up and crowded around her. I was fed up with the whole crummy thing. I went out into the hall to collect my hat. I was putting it on when I heard a man’s voice, as distinctly as I hear your voice, saying, ‘Ticky, you’re going to make big money, but you’ll have to be patient. It may take years, but you’ll get it.’ I was surprised because I couldn’t see anyone in the hall. There was no one in the hall. I thought I had imagined the voice, but when I got home, it started talking to me again, and this time I knew it was real.’ Ticky broke off and squinted at Algir. ‘You think I’m nuts, don’t you?’

‘I think you’re drunk,’ Algir said.

Since then, Ticky had never mentioned the voice again, but Algir was sure the dwarf imagined he still heard it. It worried Algir, but there was nothing he could do about it. A mosquito buzzing suddenly in Algir’s ear disturbed his thoughts. He was lifting his hand to swat the insect when he saw Norena. She was coming silently down the track, like a ghost, her big frightened eyes moving from right to left, from left to right.

Tense, Algir remained motionless, watching her, his suntanned hands turning into fists.

She must have felt she was no longer alone because she stopped abruptly, her hands going to her face. She stared down the track towards the pampas grass, catching her breath in a frightened sob.

Algir could see the panic rising in her face. She was about to turn and run back to the sea as he lifted himself up on his haunches and sprang out of the bush towards her. At the sight of him, she gave a wailing scream of terror. She tried to run, but he grabbed her arm, jerking her against him. He had imagined she would have been easy to handle. He had tremendous confidence in his immense strength, but he found he could scarcely hold her.

Desperate with terror, she kicked, clawed and bit. She didn’t scream anymore. They fought silently and horribly. He kept hitting her across her nose and mouth. Her face now was a mask of blood. She was weakening. Grinning savagely, his breath coming in laboured gasps, he shifted his right hand to her throat, his fingers sinking into her windpipe. As if she realized this was her end, she seemed to go mad. Jerking and twisting in violent convulsions, she nearly broke his hold, but he managed to hang on. He fell forward, bringing her down with him and now he was on top of her, flattening her and his left hand joined his right.

She was still struggling, but life was draining out of her. He increased the pressure on her throat. Her long legs began to thrash, then her heels drummed in the sand. It was her final, feeble effort. Then abruptly she went limp. Her eyes rolled back in the sightless stare of death.

Shuddering, Algir got to his feet. A trickle of blood ran down the side of his neck where she had clawed him. His heart was thumping so violently, he felt suffocated.

Unsteadily, he moved away and sat down abruptly, his back against a tree. He remained still, his head in his hands for some minutes.

Well, it was done, he thought, fear like a cold coil inside him. If he had known it was going to be

like that, he wouldn't have done it. He wouldn't have repeated those last awful moments for all the money in the world. He looked at his strap watch. The time was 08.40 hours. He was behind schedule. With an effort, he got to his feet and walked to where he had left the Buick. He stopped by the car, listening and looking down the dirt road. Only the sound of the sea and the plaintive cries of the gulls came to him. He reached into the glove compartment, took out half a bottle of whisky and gulped down a stiff drink. Then he unlocked the trunk of the car and leaving it half-open, he returned to where he had left the dead girl.

Without looking at her tortured face, he caught hold of her and slung her over his shoulder. She was heavy, and he staggered a little as he walked back to the car. He bundled her into the trunk and closed it. Then getting into the car, he reversed it up the dirt road until he came to the turnaround.

He pulled up, set the brake, got out of the car and opened the trunk. He took out an old Army trenching tool he had picked up in a Miami store. Then he got the girl over his shoulder and carrying the tool in his hand, he walked across the sand to the nearest high sand dune. He dropped her at the foot of the dune, then straightened to look along the miles of deserted beach. Satisfied he was alone, he knelt beside the girl's body and began to undress her. This task sickened him, but it had to be done.

Ticky had said, 'Get all her clothes. They'll have the College laundry marks on them. We can't take a chance.'

He had trouble getting her girdle off. He cursed softly, sweat blinding him, as he wrestled with it. Finally, he got it off. Now she was naked. Around her bruised, swollen throat she wore a gold cross on a thin gold chain. He couldn't leave that on her. He hated touching it. He had been brought up as a Catholic and although nothing of his religion had stuck, the cross reminded him of the church he had gone to as a kid with its blaze of candles, the smell of incense and the throb of the organ.

He dropped the cross into his pocket and made a bundle of her clothes. Then picking up the trenching tool, he climbed up the dune and began shovelling the sand down on the naked, murdered body.

A buzzard circled overhead, its wide wings making a shadow on the sand. It was still circling in ascending spirals long after Algir had finished his gruesome task and had driven away.

* * *

At 09.45 hours, Fred Hess walked down the passage that led to Captain Terrell's office. He rapped on the door, pushed it open and walked into the room.

Terrell was sitting at his desk. Beigler was sitting on the window ledge. Both men were drinking coffee.

'Well, Fred, what have you got?' Terrell asked, pushing a carafe of coffee across the desk and waving to a chair.

Hess sat down and helped himself to a cup of coffee before saying, 'It all points one way, Chief. She killed him and then herself. Lepski has been checking, and here's what we've come up with. Williams went to bed at eight o'clock with a heavy cold. At 10:10 the people across the way thought they heard shots, but weren't sure. They had their TV set on and it was blaring. The husband, Dixon, looked out of the window to see if there was anything to see. Muriel Devon's car was parked outside her bungalow. He went back to the programme. As it finished, he heard

Muriel's car drive away. The doorman at La Coquille saw Muriel arrive in her car. He thought she

was pretty drunk, but she was steady enough to walk so he let her in. She arrived at around eleven so she must have driven straight to the restaurant from her place. It would take that time.

The barman says he saw her come in and Edris put her in the end banquette. The barman says he remained behind the bar the whole time and he is certain no one went near the banquette except Edris who served her with a whisky sour. The hypo that killed her carries some blurred fingerprints, one of them, probably all of them, Muriel's. We haven't found a thing to make us think she didn't kill him and then herself.'

Terrell nodded.

'What did Charmers say about the handwriting on the suicide note?'

'I gave him the specimens we found in her apartment. The handwriting matches. She also owned the gun. She took out a licence three years ago in New York. It's a fact Williams was cheating her. He was planning to go off with a Mrs. Van Wilden, a rich old bitch, living at the Palace Hotel. I've seen and talked to her.' Hess made a grimace. 'When she heard Williams was dead, she had hysterics. She was taking him to the West Indies to manage her estate out there.' Hess sneered. 'She had a lucky break, but I didn't tell her so. Lepski talked around and the neighbours say Williams and Muriel were always fighting. Well, I guess they've had their last fight, no loss.'

Terrell finished his coffee.

'Doc says she died of heroin poisoning. No doubt about that.' He thought for a moment, then shrugged. 'Well, I guess we can close the file. This is one of the easy ones.'

'How about her husband?' Beigler said. 'Do you want me to find him?'

'We'll want him for the inquest,' Terrell said. 'Then there's the daughter.' He scratched the side of his jaw. 'Funny Hamilton hasn't been around this morning.'

Hess grinned.

'Browning's talked to him. He gets so many free meals out of Browning, he's playing this one down. There's barely a mention of the shooting and that's on the back page.'

'I'm glad for the daughter's sake,' Terrell said. 'See if you can find Devon in the book, Joe.'

Beigler crossed to the shelf of reference books and picked up the telephone book. He flicked through the pages.

'Here he is. Melville Devon, 1455, Hillside Crescent. Shall I call the house?'

'Go ahead.'

Beigler put the call through. After a brief delay, a woman's voice said, 'This is Mr. Devon's residence.'

'City Police,' Beigler said. 'Can I talk to Mr. Devon?'

'He's not here. You can get him at the bank.'

'What bank's that?'

'The Florida Safe Deposit,' the woman told him. 'I can give you the number if you'll hold on.'

'That's okay,' Beigler said. 'I can find it, thanks,' and he hung up. 'He works at the Florida Safe Deposit Bank,' he told Terrell.

Terrell frowned, then snapped his fingers.

'I know the fellow. I didn't know his first name. I once played golf with him in the Country Club competition. Nice guy. He's the Vice President of the bank. Important man. Well, what do you know? If Hamilton finds out, even Browning can't stop him publishing a story. Wife of V.P. of Florida Safe Deposit Bank in murder and suicide tangle! Can you imagine? I'll handle this, Joe. I'll call him.'

The telephone bell rang. Beigler picked up the receiver.

‘Ticky Edris asking for the Chief,’ the Desk Sergeant said.

‘Hold it.’ Beigler looked at Terrell. ‘Edris on the line. You want to talk to him?’

Terrell frowned.

‘What does he want?’ He held out his hand for the receiver. When Beigler passed it to him, he said into the mouthpiece, ‘Put him on, Charley.’

Edris came on the line.

‘Captain Terrell?’

‘Yeah. What is it, Edris?’

‘It’s about Norena Devon,’ Edris said in his piping voice. ‘I shouldn’t be bothering you with this, Captain, but I want to trace her father. As a friend of the family, I called the school and Dr. Graham has broken the news to her. She’s on her way home now. She’s very upset. Here’s my problem. There’s no money in the apartment. Of course I can provide for her and I will, but before sticking my neck out, I thought her father should be consulted. He may want to take charge. You see the position I’m in, Captain. I don’t want to put my foot wrong, but I want to be helpful.’

Terrell scratched the side of his jaw as he listened.

‘I’ve located her father, Edris,’ he said finally. ‘I’m going to speak with him right now. For his and his daughter’s sake, the less publicity about all this the better. If you’re such a friend of the family and want to help, you can help. I’m going to talk to the Coroner. It could be fixed that you identify the woman as Muriel Marsh and you give evidence of the relationship between her and Williams. I think the Coroner would agree to leave Norena and her father out of it. It depends on you.’

‘You can count on me, Captain,’ Edris said. ‘I’ll do anything to help. I’m as anxious as you to spare the kid any publicity.’

‘Okay. I’ll talk to Devon and the Coroner. As soon as I know how they feel about it, I’ll telephone you. What’s your number?’

‘Seacombe 556.’

‘Right,’ Terrell said, scribbling the number on his blotter. He hung up and pushed back his chair. ‘All right, boys, you get on with your other jobs. I’ll finish this one off.’

When Hess and Beigler had gone, Terrell called Alec Brewer, the Coroner. He explained the situation to him.

‘Mel Devon?’ Brewer’s voice sounded shocked. ‘He’s an old friend of mine. I never. You’re sure it’s the same man, Frank?’

‘Same name,’ Terrell said. ‘I haven’t talked to him yet. Could be I’m wrong.’

‘You’d better check. I can’t believe it. You check, Frank, and call me back.’

‘Maybe I’d better go down and see him.’

‘You do that, and be careful, Frank. Mel’s an important man in this City.’

The Florida Safe Deposit Bank was founded in 1948 by a syndicate of immensely wealthy men who had either retired to live in Paradise City or who spent three months of the year on vacation there. These men were determined to have a completely safe place in which they could keep their bonds, their cash for gambling, their wives’ jewellery and furs and their gold and silver plate, used from time to time on special occasions. Since the bank had been opened, Paradise City had ceased to have the highest burglary rating of all the rich cities along the Florida coast. It now claimed the distinction of the lowest crime rate with the least number of criminals.

The bank had proved such a success that all the big jewellers, the hotels, the three Casinos and the various private clubs used its modern safes in which to keep their cash and valuables. The Bank had three armoured trucks, each guarded by four ex-Ranger guards, that delivered or collected from its clients, and only once had one of the trucks been attacked. This had been a daring attempt by six vicious gunmen, but the attack had failed. Five of the gunmen and one of the guards had been killed. The reputation of the guards' shooting from this battle scared off any further attempts.

When the Texas oil billionaires invaded Paradise City during the vacation months, they all used the Bank as their pocket book, and during this period, it was rumoured that there were more money, securities and jewellery under its imposing roof than under any other single roof in the world.

Captain Terrell parked his car in one of a number of parking bays, got out and walked up the wide steps to the Bank's entrance.

Two guards, wearing smart grey blouses and breeches, knee boots and peak caps worn straight, Colt .45 automatics on their hips, eyed Terrell, then saluted him.

'Morning, Chief,' one of them said. 'Official?'

'No,' Terrell said and paused. He knew both men. He had shot against them at the .22 Rifle Club and knew them to be exceptional marksmen. 'I wanted to see Mr. Devon.'

'Second desk on the right as you go in,' the guard said.

Terrell nodded and walked into the vast reception hall with its marble pillars, its Ali Baba vases of flowers and its discreet lighting. The hall was circular in shape and between each pillar stood a desk at which an executive sat either writing, telephoning or discussing business with a client.

A thin, balding man, dressed in a dark grey tropical suit sat at the second desk on the right. A mahogany plaque with the word Information in gold letters stood on the desk.

He glanced up. Recognizing Terrell, he nodded and smiled.

'I'd like a word with Mr. Devon,' Terrell said. 'Urgent private business.'

If the man was surprised, he didn't show it.

'Sit down, Captain Terrell,' he said and reached for the telephone. He had a murmured conversation while Terrell sat and looked around the hall. This was the first time he had been inside the bank and he was impressed.

'Mr. Devon will see you right away,' the man said, replacing the receiver. He indicated the elevator at the end of the hall. 'Third floor.'

Terrell nodded his thanks, crossed the hall and entered the elevator. He was whisked up to the third floor where a pretty girl, her dark hair making a neat frame for her face, was waiting. 'Come this way, Captain Terrell,' she said and led him along a wide, long corridor to a door of polished, panelled mahogany. She opened the door and stood aside, murmuring, 'Captain Terrell, Mr. Devon.'

Terrell entered a large airy room, luxuriously furnished with a handsome desk as the only piece of office equipment. Above the wooden carved fireplace hung an early Van Gogh. Lounging chairs, a Louis XIV cabinet, converted into a cocktail cabinet and rich Persian rugs completed the furnishing. Four large windows overlooked the Yacht Club basin and the sea.

The man behind the desk stood up and offered his hand. As Terrell shook hands, he remembered him now more clearly.

Mel Devon was thirty-nine years of age. He was tall, broad shouldered and powerfully built. His close cut brown hair was flecked with grey. His features were regular. His skin was burned brown by the sun and wind, his eyes blue and steady, his mouth firm and humorous. He gave the impression of

ability, shrewdness and kindness.

‘It’s some time since we met, Captain,’ he said, waving Terrell to a chair. ‘I’ve often thought of that game we had. I never see you at the club these days. Don’t tell me you’ve given up golf?’

Terrell sat down.

‘I don’t play as regularly as I would like. I turn out on Saturday mornings but that’s about all the time I can spare.’

‘How’s the game?’

‘Pretty steady. You still playing off six?’

Devon smiled. He seemed pleased Terrell should have remembered his handicap.

‘I’m down to four now.’ He shook his head ruefully. ‘Not my idea. I get an awful beating every now and then.’

He leaned back in his chair and rested his big hands on the desk. His look of inquiry told Terrell that although he was pleased to see him, he was busy.

‘Mr. Devon,’ Terrell began slowly, ‘I’m making inquiries about a woman. It is just possible you may be able to help me. Her name is Muriel Marsh Devon.’

Devon stiffened. His mouth tightened and a sharp probing expression came into his eyes.

‘That’s the name of my wife, Captain,’ he said. ‘Is she in some kind of trouble?’

‘You could call it that,’ he said and scratched the side of his jaw. ‘She died last night - suicide.’

Devon became motionless. He stared fixedly at Terrell who felt sorry for him.

‘It must be close on fifteen years since we parted,’ he said finally. ‘We married when we were kids. I was nineteen at the time. It lasted scarcely two years. Suicide? I’m sorry to hear that. You - you’re sure it is Muriel?’

‘There is a daughter, Norena,’ Terrell said.

‘That’s right. Have you news of her?’

‘She’s arriving in Seacombe some time this morning.’

‘I see. This will be a shock to her.’ Devon looked up.

‘Would you know if she was fond of her mother?’

‘I believe she was,’ Terrell said, hesitated, then went on, ‘The case is a painful one, Mr. Devon. I take it you know nothing about what has been happening to your wife after she left you?’

Looking suddenly apprehensive, Devon shook his head.

Briefly, but omitting no important details, Terrell told him all he had learned of Muriel Marsh Devon. He concluded with the murder of Johnnie Williams and Muriel’s suicide at La Coquille restaurant.

Motionless, a frozen expression on his face, Devon listened.

Having said his say, Terrell got to his feet and walked to the big window and stared down at the busy yachts in the basin. Some moments later, Devon said quietly, ‘Thank you, Captain. It’s not a pretty story, is it? You’re sure Norena knows nothing about her mother’s way of life?’

Terrell returned to his chair and sat down.

‘Edris says not. I can imagine what you are thinking, Mr. Devon, but you mustn’t worry. If handled right, this story can be smothered. I have already talked to Brewer who is, I understand, a friend of yours. I’m pretty sure he will agree to keep both you and your daughter out of this. Besides, Browning is determined to have it hushed up and he has a lot of influence with the press.’

Devon appeared to relax a little.

‘But is it possible to hush it up? This man Edris is a bit of a character, isn’t he? He has often waited on me at the restaurant. There’s something about him I don’t exactly like. Is he to be trusted?’

‘He seems genuinely fond of your daughter. He said he would do whatever he could to keep her name out of this mess. I’m pretty sure you can rely on him.’

‘Do you know anything about him, Captain? I’m sure you realize that if we do manage to hush this up, I could be a perfect target for blackmail. If the story breaks, I would have to resign from the bank. I couldn’t continue to hold my present position here even though I haven’t associated with Muriel for seventeen years. The story is just too sordid.’

‘You don’t have to worry about that,’ Terrell said. ‘We have nothing against Edris. In fact, from what we learn, he has an excellent character.’

‘Then I’ll leave it all to you, Captain, most gratefully. You say Norena is coming back this morning?’

‘So Edris says. He thought you would want to see her as soon as possible.’

‘Of course.’ Devon turned and stared out of the window. ‘It’s hard to believe I now have a seventeen-year old daughter. I always wanted Norena. Taking her from me as Muriel did was the unkindest thing she ever did to me. It’s something I have never been able to forgive her for. I did everything I could to find Norena, but I had no luck. The search went on for over five years, then I gave up. I put her out of my mind.’ He frowned down at his hands. ‘It would have been fun watching her grow up. Now, it seems I have a grown-up daughter with her own ideas, her own way of life about which I know nothing.’ He looked up at Terrell who was now standing. ‘You don’t know anything about her, do you, Captain?’

‘Only what I’ve told you,’ Terrell said and took from his wallet the photograph of Ira Marsh that Edris had planted in Muriel’s bedroom. He put the photograph on the desk in front of Devon. ‘That’s your daughter. My congratulations. I’d say she’s worth the long wait.’

Devon stared at the photograph.

‘Yes. how like her mother she is! What’s Edris’ address?’

Terrell told him and gave him Edris’ telephone number.

‘Maybe you’d better telephone Edris first, Mr. Devon and let him know what you plan to do.’

Devon stared at the photograph again.

‘What I plan to do? It’s obvious, isn’t it? I want Norena to come home.’

* * *

Algir recognized her at once from the photograph Edris had shown him. She was sitting on a wooden bench at the Seacombe bus terminal, her hands between her knees. She was motionless, staring at a patch of oil left by a departing bus.

Although he was badly behind schedule, he stopped the car some yards from her and sitting back, he examined her. He knew from the photograph that she was attractive, but he hadn’t expected her to be so sensually exciting. As he continued to study her he saw by the hard set of her mouth and by the way she slouched on the bench that this was a teenager far in advance of her years who would look on a man his age as old and square whose good looks, charm and experience were as nothing compared with the brash vital energy of some young slob her own age.

Algir was afraid of youth. He was jealous of their vitality and dismayed by their arrogance. His

shield that covered his shallowness was his looks and his charm and these, he knew, cut no ice with the young. With an impatient shrug, he got out of the car and walked over to where the girl was sitting.

‘Hello, Ira,’ he said, pausing before her. ‘Have you been waiting long?’

She stood up, her eyes travelling slowly from his shoes to his face, taking in every detail of his dress with a jeering contempt that angered him.

‘Too long. You’re late,’ she said, looking away from him.

Any kind of criticism invariably sent Algir into a rage. His face flushing, he resisted the urge to slap her. Instead, he grunted, turned and walked to where the Buick was parked. He slid under the steering wheel. When she was seated beside him, he started the engine and drove away from the bus terminal, heading for Edris’ apartment block.

She lit a cigarette, let smoke drift down her nostrils as she said, ‘I thought we were on a tight schedule. What happened to you then? Overslept?’

‘Relax with the mouth,’ Algir snapped. ‘When you’re with me, I do the talking, you listen. Right?’

She cocked her head on one side and studied him.

‘I wouldn’t have thought you had much worth saying. Still, if it’ll oil your ego, I’ll give it a try.’

The muscles in his face tightened.

‘Shut up! I don’t take that kind of talk from a brat like you!’

‘Is that right? Then who do you take it from?’

‘I said shut up, you bitch, unless you want me to shut you up!’

‘I thought that corny dialogue went out with Paul Muni. You go to the movies often?’

His face dark with rage, he called her an obscene name. He had hoped to shock her into silence, but instead, she laughed with genuine amusement.

‘Oh, that’s fab!’ she said. ‘You’re right out of a museum!’

Slightly increasing speed, he drove on, ignoring her and seething with rage. She studied his flushed face and the viciousness of his mouth and shrugged indifferently. She had never been afraid of men. She knew how to look after herself. She had often thought about fear, and after some heart searching, she had finally decided the only two things that could really frighten her were poverty and old age. To remain poor and become old were concrete three dimensional nightmares that truly frightened her. Nothing else, certainly not this big, flash looking dummy at her side.

Finally, when they reached Edris’ apartment block, Algir said, without looking at her, ‘Take the bag on the back seat and get out.’

She got out of the car, lifted the bag from the back seat and then paused to look at him.

‘You watch yourself, Jack,’ she said. ‘At your time of life it’s bad for your arteries to boil over the way you do, not that I care.’

With her ducktail walk, she moved into the lobby of the apartment block, her head held high, arrogant and very sure of herself.

Ticky Edris had been waiting her coming with feverish anxiety. As she rang on the front doorbell, he had been watching the clock on the overmantel with increasing impatience. It was 11.15 hours. Algir had telephoned at 10.30 hours. He had sounded nervy and that was understandable, but, at least, he had assured Ticky that so far, all had gone without a hitch.

‘You remembered to bring her clothes?’ Edris had demanded.

‘Yes. I tell you there’s nothing to worry about. I’m picking up Ira right now.’

‘Nothing to worry about?’ Edris’ voice was shrill. ‘That’s what you think! You’re more than half

an hour late! I had to telephone Terrell. I was scared he would call the school. What made you so late?’

‘Never mind,’ Algir said curtly. ‘I’ll have her with you in half an hour.’

Now here she was, ringing on the front door bell. Edris bounced across the room, into the lobby and snatched open the front door.

‘Come in, come in,’ he urged. ‘Where’s Phil?’

‘We didn’t seem to like each other,’ the girl said, moving into the room. She looked around. ‘He went off as if he had swallowed a bee.’

‘You got her clothes?’

‘Her clothes?’ Ira stared at him.

‘Phil collected her things from the school.’

‘Maybe they are in here,’ she waved to the bag.

‘Open it and see!’

She put the bag on the settee and snapped back the locks. She lifted the lid.

‘Yes: they’re here.’

‘There’s the bedroom. Take them in there and change. Hurry!’

‘What’s all the excitement about?’

‘Devon’s on his way over,’ Edris said, hopping from one foot to the other. ‘And listen, remember, he’s your father. You’re hostile. He wasn’t good to your mother. You were fond of your mother. Play it cool and watch your mouth. You remember all the things I told you?’

‘All right, all right,’ the girl said. ‘I can handle it. Just relax. You’re paying for a performance, and you’ll get it.’

Picking up the bag, she walked briskly into the bedroom and closed the door.

Joy Ansley, back from a three-week vacation spent with her father in the Bahamas, was unpacking. As she moved about her spacious bedroom, she thought a little sadly that the vacation hadn't been much of a success. A woman as hopelessly in love as she was, she thought, as she picked up the last suitcase and put it on the bed, just shouldn't spend three weeks in a romantic place like the Bahamas with an eighty-year old father, spry and alert as he might be. She had missed Mel Devon too much to enjoy herself.

Joy Ansley was thirty-one years of age. She was tall and dark. Her features were good, her dark eyes beautiful. She had poise and a serenity of character that distinguished her immediately in a room full of people. She had met Mel Devon five years ago and had been in love with him ever since. She knew he was married and she quickly discovered he had no intention of getting married again.

She was forced to accept this situation, and she was grateful that he chose her to be his hostess when he entertained, his partner at tennis, his companion for the occasional movie and his confidante. They saw a lot of each other. People talked as people always will talk. Mel was oblivious, and Joy didn't care. Her father, Judge Ansley, watched all this sadly, but wisely said nothing.

This was something these two had to work out for themselves, he decided. He only hoped Mel, whom he liked and admired, wouldn't take too long working it out. Suddenly bored with her unpacking, Joy crossed to the open window and looked out. Her father, a tall, lean old man with wispy white hair, was walking along one of the grass paths, examining the rose bushes for any sign of Aphis.

She smiled at the sight of him and glanced at her watch. It was nearly 16.00 hours: time for his cup of tea. She left the room and ran down the stairs.

As she crossed the hall, the telephone bell rang. It was Mel Devon. The sound of his voice always made her a little breathless. This was the first time since she had got back that they had spoken together.

'Why, Mel,' she said. 'How nice. I was going to call you tonight.'

'How are you, Joy? Did you have a nice vacation?'

'It was fine. I . . .'

'Is the Judge all right?'

'He's wonderful. We were wondering . . .'

'Joy can we meet around six? I want to talk to you.'

The serious note in his voice startled her.

'Yes, of course. Where shall we meet?'

'Would you mind coming to the bank?'

'No, of course not, but it's such a lovely afternoon. Wouldn't you like to come down to the beach hut?'

'No. Please come to the bank, Joy. I'll explain when we meet. Then I'll see you at six?'

'Yes.'

'Come right up. I'll tell Miss Ashley I'm expecting you. Well, then goodbye, my dear for now,' and he hung up.

More slowly, Joy replaced the receiver. She stood thinking, vaguely uneasy, vaguely excited. I

want to talk to you. Was this at last about themselves? She walked across the room and into the sunshine to where the Judge was waiting patiently for his tea.

And now, a few minutes after 18.00 hours, she was sitting in Mel's comfortable office, her fingers clutching her handbag, her heart beating unevenly as she listened to what he was telling her with growing tension and alarm.

Mel, looking tired and strained, had prefaced his talk after greeting her, with an attempt to cushion the shock.

'Joy we've been damn good friends for longer than I can remember. I've often brought my troubles to you and you've always been helpful and understanding. Something pretty rotten happened while you've been away. I want you to know about it. So far only a very few know and I think I can trust them not to talk, but if it does get out, I'll be in a mess. I want you to hear it all from me, rather than later from someone else.'

That hadn't cushioned the shock, but Joy was sufficiently controlled and poised not to let Mel see her sudden apprehension. The idea of anything unpleasant threatening this man's way of life, to her was much worse than if it threatened herself.

'Tell me, Mel,' she said, forcing herself to relax back in the big armchair. 'What is it?'

Mel sat at his desk, his elbows resting on its polished surface, his hands cupping his chin. He told her bluntly about Muriel Marsh Devon and Johnny Williams and about Norena.

Joy listened, thinking gratefully it could be so much worse, but shrinking a little when she realized this man she loved had now a seventeen-year old daughter who was living in his house, probably doing all those things to make him comfortable that Joy had hoped to do and pushing him still further from her by her companionship and love.

'Well, there you are,' Mel concluded. 'It's a sordid thing, isn't it? I suppose it is bound to leak out sooner or later. I can trust Terrell and Brewer. Terrell's men won't talk, but this dwarf worries me. If he wasn't in the know, I would be much happier.'

'But if he is fond of your daughter, why should he make mischief?' Joy asked.

'I know. I've thought of that, but I instinctively don't trust him.' Mel shrugged irritably. 'But that needn't worry us now. It's two weeks since the inquest. Nothing's been said about either Norena or myself. So we must wait and hope.' He sat back, gripping the arms of his chair. 'But it's Norena.' He looked at Joy, then shrugged helplessly. 'I guess I kidded myself. It gave me a terrific bang when Terrell told me that Norena was found after all this time. The thought of having her back and all mine, really did things to me.' He smiled ruefully. 'I guess I was overoptimistic. I suppose it's natural enough that she's on the defensive, not to say hostile. She has been brought up to believe I made her mother's life so unbearable that she left me. It's going to take some living down if I ever do live it down. The fact is, after having her in my home now for two weeks, we're still complete strangers.'

Joy shook her head sympathetically.

'You must be patient, Mel. I understand how you're feeling, but you have to consider her feelings too.'

'I do. She's so unlike what I imagined my daughter would be,' Mel said. 'Frankly, if she wasn't so amazingly like Muriel, it would be hard to believe she was my daughter.'

'What's she doing with herself?'

'That's the trouble. She doesn't seem to show any interest in anything. She spends a lot of time in her room, listening to pop records that frankly drive me scatty.' He smiled ruefully. 'I guess I asked

for that. I gave her a record player and money and she's been buying these damned records ever since. I wanted her to come to the club and get coached for tennis, but that was square. I wanted her to take up riding, but that was also square. I haven't dared suggest golf.'

'But, Mel dear, she's not a boy. Perhaps she isn't interested in sport. A lot of girls aren't.'

'Yes, I guess that's right. I thought it would be fun to play tennis with her and go riding. Yes, I put my foot wrong there.'

'What else does she do?'

'Well, I gave her a car and she goes over to Seacombe a lot.' Mel stared down at his hands. 'She's seeing too much of that damned dwarf. She's much fonder of him than she is of me. There's something unhealthy and unpleasant about him. I'm thinking of putting a stop to her seeing him.'

Joy lifted her dark eyebrows.

'How will you do that, Mel?'

'Well, I'll tell her not to see him.'

'And if she wants to know why?'

He looked sharply at her.

'You don't think I should stop her seeing him?'

'Look at it this way,' Joy said. 'This little man knew her mother well. At the moment he is Norena's feeling of security. She's been suddenly transplanted into comfort and wealth with a man she knows is her father, but who doesn't mean a great deal to her. It's natural she should want to see Edris. is that his name?'

'But he's a dwarf! There's something about him . . . I don't know what it is but I don't like him! Why should a seventeen-year old girl want to spend so much of her time with a dwarf!'

'You leave home at half-past eight and you get back at six-thirty. It's a long day for her to sit at home listening to pop records. Who else is there for her to talk to?'

'If she would come to the club, she would find someone.'

'Oh, no, Mel, be sensible. The women at the club are either married with children or like me, too old to bother with a teenager.'

Mel sat back in his chair and spread out his hands.

'All right. All my ideas are wrong. Suppose you make a suggestion.'

'I should have thought the obvious solution was for her to get a job. That way she will meet people of her own age. She'll be occupied and she won't feel like a fish out of water.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake! I don't want my daughter to work! Why should she? I have all the money either of us need. As a matter of fact she did say something about getting a job at the bank. It's ridiculous. Why should a pretty girl bury herself in this bank?'

'Could you get her in, Mel?'

'It wouldn't be easy. Yes, I guess I could. As V.P. I could arrange it. But I'm not going to do it. I don't want her to go out to work.'

'I think you should.' She glanced at her watch. 'Will you come back to dinner? I know father would like to see you.'

'I would like to see him, but I can't. I can't leave Norena all this time alone. I'm a bit tied up now, Joy. You can see that.'

'I won't suggest she should come too. An eighty-year old Judge and a middle-aged spinster wouldn't be much fun for her.'

‘Where do you get this middle-aged spinster stuff from?’

Joy laughed.

‘You will have to do something. You must let her work here. I am sure it will solve the problem. You usually take my advice. Will you please make arrangements for her to come here as soon as possible?’

‘You really think it would work?’

‘I’m sure of it.’

He hesitated, then nodded.

‘Maybe you’re right. I’ll talk with her. I’ll have to consult Crawsure. He looks after the staff. He won’t like it, but I’ll pull my rank on him.’

Joy got to her feet.

‘It’s my first night back, Mel. Father expects me. I must go. When do we meet?’

‘Tomorrow night? Let’s have dinner at the club.’

‘And Norena?’

‘She’ll be out. She’s out most evenings.’

‘Why not ask her to come with you?’

‘She won’t. She thinks the Club’s square.’

Joy lifted her shoulders. She knew she should press this, but she didn’t. She wanted to have Mel on his own.

‘She’s probably right. Then tomorrow at the Club. Don’t worry too much. It’ll work out. You’ll see.’

When she had gone, Mel sat for some moments thinking. He had always found Joy’s advice sound. Maybe if she had an occupation, Norena would be less hostile. He decided, after further thought, that it was worth a try.

* * *

A little after ten o’clock the following morning, Ticky Edris came out of the shower room, wrapping himself in his dressing gown. He trotted into the kitchenette and plugged in the coffee percolator, then he went to the front door to collect the milk and papers. He paused as the elevator doors swished back and Phil Algir stepped out.

‘Hi, buddy-boy,’ he said and picked up the milk. ‘You’re early. Want to see me?’

Immaculately dressed as usual, Algir pushed past him into the apartment. There was a bad-tempered scowl on his face and Edris could see he was working himself into a rage.

‘Who else do you imagine I want to see?’ Algir demanded, throwing his hat on a chair.

Edris shut the front door and trotted into the living room.

‘Have some coffee? It’s just made.’

‘Stuff it!’ Algir snarled and sat down. He took out a pack of cigarettes and lit a cigarette with an unsteady hand.

‘Something wrong?’

‘How much longer do you imagine I can go on like this?’ Algir demanded, sitting forward and staring at Edris, his pale eyes glittering.

‘I’ll be right back,’ Edris said calmly and trotted into the kitchenette. He returned after a few

moments with the coffee things which he set on the table. He sat down and began pouring coffee into his cup.

‘What’s this bitch doing? Algir snarled.

‘She’s getting established,’ Edris returned, sipping his coffee. ‘What’s eating you, Phil?’

‘I’m skint. It’s all very well for you, you’ve got a job. I can’t stick around here forever without money. Just when do we start operating?’

‘Now look,’ Edris said, his voice sharpening. ‘I warned you this couldn’t be rushed, didn’t I? We make one false move and the whole thing blows up.’ He leaned forward and tapped the table with his stumpy finger. ‘I’ve been dreaming and planning this job now for five years. I’ll wait two more years if I have to to get this thing perfect. She’s got to get into the bank. She’s working on it. That girl’s smart! She’s handling it dead right. The whole trick of this is for her to get in there and become part of the bank’s background. Do you expect that to happen in a couple of days? If she doesn’t become part of the bank’s background, we can’t pull the job. It’s as simple as that. Once she’s in and she’s found out their system, then we start, but not before.’

‘This could take months! What am I going to do for eating money? You’ve got to give me some dough, Ticky! The hotel is pressing me.’

‘I gave you two hundred bucks last week.’ Edris’ face hardened. ‘Do you imagine I’m made of money?’

‘I want another two hundred bucks. You’ll get it back after we’ve pulled the job.’

‘You’ll get a hundred and not a dime more, and you’ll make it last at least two weeks,’ Edris said. He went to his bureau drawer and opened it.

Moving swiftly, Algir got up, crossed the room, gave Edris a hard shove that sent him reeling and dipped into the drawer. He took out a bundle of twenty dollar bills.

‘I’ll help myself, Ticky,’ he said, grinning. ‘You’ll get it back.’

Edris recovered his balance. His face had gone white. His small eyes were like flat bits of black glass. He backed away as Algir counted out three hundred dollars.

‘I’ll make it three,’ Algir said, grinning. ‘That’ll leave you a hundred. That’s enough for you, Ticky. A little guy like you hasn’t the expenses a big guy like me has.’

Ticky was now leaning against his miniature desk. He slid open a drawer and took from it a tiny pistol with a rubber bulb in place of a butt.

‘Put it back!’ he said in a soft, hissing voice. ‘Every damn dollar, Algir! Unless you want a squirt of ammonia in your face!’

Algir stared at the pointing gun, and then looked into Edris’ eyes. He stood there motionless, the money in his hands, his lips moving, as he silently cursed Edris.

‘Put it back!’ Edris repeated.

Algir threw the money into the drawer and moved away.

‘Okay, you stinking freak,’ he snarled, ‘keep your money!’

‘I’m going to,’ Edris said and dropped the pistol into his pocket. ‘Don’t try tricks with me, Philly-boy. I know how to look after myself.’ He went to the drawer, counted out a hundred dollars and tossed the roll on the table.

‘That’s all you’re going to get, make it last!’

The front door bell rang as Algir picked up the money.

Edris shut the bureau drawer, turned the key and put the key in his pocket, then he bounced into the

hall and opened the door.

Ira Marsh stood in the corridor. She was wearing a man's shirt, the tails worn outside her dark blue jeans. There was an expression of excitement in her blue eyes as she came into the apartment.

Algir glared at her.

'What's happening?' he demanded. 'How much longer are you fooling around doing nothing?'

She ignored him. Crossing over to the coffee things, she poured a cup of coffee, then she smiled at Edris as she said, 'I start work at the bank tomorrow.'

Edris lost colour.

'You wouldn't kid about a thing as important as that?' he asked huskily.

'I start work at the bank tomorrow.'

Edris took in a deep breath and suddenly grinned. He clapped his hands together and threw back his head and let out a piercing yell. He sprang up onto his desk, and from the desk, he took a flying leap onto the table and then back onto the floor. He began running round the room as if he were demented, screaming, 'Yipeeeee! Yipeeeee!' until Algir, grinning with excitement, grabbed hold of him and threw him into an armchair.

'Shut up, you crazy bastard,' he said. 'You'll have the cops up here.'

Edris, panting, grinned at Algir, his little eyes sparkling.

'I told you, didn't I? I told you she was smart! I told you she was right for the job.' He sprang up and grabbed Ira around her waist and waltzed her round and round the room. Algir, still grinning, got out of their way. Finally, exhausted, they fell onto the settee. Framing Ira's face with his stumpy hands, Edris bestowed a smacking kiss on her forehead.

Giggling, she shoved him away and sat up.

'You beautiful doll!' Edris exclaimed, sitting on the floor and gazing up at her. 'So you've done it! Tell me. How did you fix it so fast?'

'It was easy. Poor Papa has a lovesick spinster chasing him,' Ira explained. 'He takes his troubles to her. After I had spent nearly two weeks in a mood, playing pop records and being thoroughly bloody minded, poor Papa begins to worry. So he calls in the spinster, and believe it or not, she said just what I knew she would say.' Ira jumped to her feet and pointed dramatically at Edris. 'That girl needs occupation. Put her to work in the bank, ol' pal, ol' pal. That's what the girl needs: occupation and companions of her own age. Papa fell for it. He said if I really wanted to work in the bank, he would fix it. If it would make me happy, I could start tomorrow.' She made a grimace, distorting her face. 'Work! Why do these squares always harp on work?'

Edris howled with laughter.

'But it will make you happy, baby! You'll be close to all that beautiful money! Oh, doll, how I wish I were you! Think of it! Nine to six every day surrounded by billions and billions of lovely, crinkly money!' He sprang to his feet and rushed at her, throwing his stumpy arms around her waist, he pushed his face against her breasts. 'Baby, I love you like I love myself,' he crooned.

Ira shoved him away so violently, he lost his balance and sprawled on the floor.

'Keep your hands to yourself!' she snapped. 'And keep your distance!'

He blinked up at her, then forcing a rueful grin, he got slowly to his feet.

'I didn't mean anything, baby,' he said, going to his armchair and sitting down. His fall had shaken him a little. 'I was only fooling. It's just my way.'

'Well, it's not mine!' Ira snapped and flopped onto the settee.

Algir watched all this, a sneering expression on his face.

‘When you two have done messing each other around,’ he said, ‘suppose we talk business?’

‘Did Devon say in which department of the bank you’d be in?’ Edris asked.

She shook her head.

‘I have an interview with the Staff Manager tomorrow morning. He’s the guy who says where I’m to work.’

‘Don’t forget to tell him you can handle adding machines,’ Edris said. ‘I want you in the accounts department.’ He leaned forward. ‘What we have to find out before we can make a move is where the dead safes are.’

‘What do you mean. dead safes?’

‘Safes that are not used over a long period. There are plenty of them in the bank. I’ve heard people talking in the restaurant about them. These Texas oilmen rent a safe when they come here on vacation, stuff it with money, then go back home and leave the money in the safe until they come back for another vacation. Once you get the run of the accounts department, you’ll be able to find out the numbers of these safes. They’re the ones we want to get at.’

‘You’re crazy!’ Algir put in angrily. ‘Even if we know the numbers, we can never get at them. That’s the safest bank in the world! They have a twenty-four hour guard and it’s crawling with alarms!’

‘Who said anything about getting near them?’ Edris said, grinning. ‘You’ll hear all the details of my plan when I’m ready. This is an operation that works in carefully planned steps. First step: to get her into the bank. She’s in tomorrow. Second step: to find the dead safes. Third step: to find out their system of renting a safe, about the keys and the guards. Step by step, it’s the only way to swing this job.’

‘She could take weeks to find out all that,’ Algir said, looking worried.

‘These things do take time,’ Edris said airily. ‘But even if it takes a year it will be worth the wait.’

Algir started to say something, then seeing Ira was watching him with cool, disconcerting eyes, he got to his feet and made for the door.

‘When do I go into action?’ he demanded, pausing at the door.

‘Could be the fourth step,’ Edris said. ‘Be patient, Phil. The pay-off will be beautiful.’

Algir glared at him, hesitated, then went out, slamming the door.

‘What’s biting him then?’ Ira asked.

Edris shrugged.

‘He’s never happy if he isn’t spending money. Right now, he hasn’t any money to spend.’

‘Just where does he come in on this?’

‘You’ll see. He’s as essential to the plan as you are, but in a different way. How are you making out with Devon?’

She shrugged indifferently.

‘I keep out of his way as much as I can.’ She leaned back against the settee. ‘I didn’t think it would be so damned dull living in a rich man’s house. I hope this isn’t going to last too long. I’m crazy with boredom.’

Edris studied her, his eyes suddenly hard.

‘You can’t expect to pick up fifty thousand bucks without working for it. What’s the matter with you? You’ve got clothes, a car, a fine home, money. What more do you want?’

‘I know all that. I just get bored. that’s all.’

‘Okay, get bored. It’s better to be bored than hungry, dirty and skint. Just remember that. And listen, Ira, watch it! Don’t start looking around for your kind of fun. You step out of character and you’ll be fired out of the bank faster than a sputnik. That bank’s as respectable as a church. If you weren’t the daughter of Melville Devon you would never have got in. And don’t kid yourself. They’ve checked on your school record. Norena’s record. She worked damn hard and was as respectable as a nun. She was just the kind of creep they want in the bank, and remember, you are her now. You get drunk, fool with boys, get laid and they find out. Bingo! We’re all out of business.’ He sat forward, his face puffy with congested blood. ‘If we come unstuck because you can’t be bored for a few weeks, the newspapers won’t dare print the details of the things I’ll do to you!’

She sat motionless, looking into the vicious eyes that glared into hers, then she got to her feet.

‘Don’t threaten me, Pint-size,’ she said, with arrogant contempt. ‘There are things I could do to you the newspapers wouldn’t print either.’

Edris suddenly laughed.

‘Baby, you have loads of guts. I love you, but remember what I’ve said: be bored and be careful.’

‘Don’t expect to see much of me after today,’ she said, moving to the door. ‘I’m a working girl now. When I have something for you I’ll call. So long, Ticky,’ and she let herself out of the apartment, closing the door softly after her.

* * *

A little after ten o’clock on Sunday morning, Mel Devon pulled up outside Judge Ansley’s house and tapped the horn button of his Mercedes convertible.

Joy, who had been awaiting his signal, came down the steps of the house and opened the gate. She was wearing a black sweater and white slacks and carried a beach bag.

Mel slid out of the car and came around to open the car door for her.

‘Hello there. You all ready?’

‘Yes, I’m ready.’ She looked at him, smiling. She was relieved to see how fit and well he looked. The worried, harassed expression he had been wearing last time she had seen him had vanished. For the moment, anyway, he obviously had nothing on his mind to worry him. ‘Lovely to see you again.’

‘You too,’ he said, helping her into the car. ‘How’s the Judge?’

‘He’s fine. He hopes you’ll have lunch with us.’

‘Why, sure, I’d like to. Norena’s spending the day at the Club.’ He looked at her, smiling. ‘You know, Joy, I don’t know what I’d do without you. The way you solve my problems is nobody’s business. I may be a smart banker, but when it comes to running my private life, I don’t seem able to cope without you.’

She looked away.

‘I don’t know, Mel. I think you are quite capable of looking after yourself, but it’s nice to hear I am useful sometimes.’

He patted her hand. They were now driving along the promenade towards Paradise Bay where Mel had a beach cabin.

‘Thanks to you, Norena no longer presents a problem. You were absolutely right about her needing

occupation. Since she's been working at the bank, she's a different girl.'

'I'm so pleased! How long has she been there now?'

'Must be a couple of weeks. yes, she started Monday, two weeks ago.' He frowned, then looked quickly at her. 'How time rushes by! That means I haven't seen you for two weeks, Joy, that's too long.'

'I've missed you,' Joy said quietly. He had no need to remind her how long it had been. Every day she had been hopefully expecting him to call her. 'You must be pretty occupied.'

'I'll say.' He laughed. 'I've been showing Norena the town. We've been here, there and everywhere. Cinemas, theatres, jam sessions, the lot!'

Joy stared in front of her.

'So you're getting along with Norena now?'

'Well, I suppose so.' His face clouded a little. 'Frankly, I think it would be a lot better for both of us if she could find friends of her own age to go around with. She makes me feel damned old. I guess she now regards me as harmless and convenient. I get the idea she puts up with me because there is no one else. That's why I insisted on her joining the Bank's Club. She didn't want to at first, but I've finally persuaded her. Now, she plans to spend the weekends there.'

Joy relaxed a little.

'Is she making friends?'

'I guess so. I don't think youngsters like being questioned too much. I've told her she can bring anyone she likes back to the house, but she hasn't so far. At least, I feel I have broken the ice, but she certainly isn't what you could call affectionate.'

'You mustn't expect too much at once.'

'I keep telling myself that, but I have an idea, she hasn't any affection in her make-up. She seems wrapped in ice.' He shrugged. 'Still, it may work out. At least, I can live with her without worrying too much and we talk a lot. Some of her ideas are pretty hair raising. Things slip out. It's just talk, of course, because when I tackle her, she beats a retreat. It's just being young, I guess.'

'What kind of things?'

'Standards of living, I guess. I'm afraid her mother influenced her. She has a pretty amoral outlook on life. It's damn odd because Dr. Graham gave her a wonderful buildup when Crawsure talked to him. She either fooled him or else she's had a sudden change.'

'I still don't quite know what you mean, Mel.'

'It's a bit too involved to go into now. Things pop out. Sometimes when she is reading the newspaper, she passes an opinion. Some fella rescued a kid from a blazing car and later died of burns. She called him a sucker. Some old lady had her savings stolen. Norena said if she couldn't take care of her money at that age, she deserved to lose it. You remember that big jewel robbery last week? She called the thieves smart. She meant it too. That's only the fringe of it. It's often cropping up. I really do think she's amoral.'

'Oh, now, Mel, you mustn't say that. The young talk that way these days. It's their method of expressing themselves. It's smart to be hard, cynical and unsympathetic. It probably amuses her to shock you.'

'You may be right. I expect all that from other kids, but not my own.'

'As Dr. Graham has given her such a glowing report, I'd ignore what she says. She probably thinks she has to hold her end up with her clever father. How is she getting on at the bank?'

‘Nothing wrong there.’ Mel’s face brightened. ‘She’s made a big hit with Crawsure. He didn’t want to have her and he damned well wouldn’t have had her if she hadn’t been my daughter. As it was, he talked to Dr. Graham before he would give her an interview. She seems to have talent for figures. She’s working in the accounts department and Crawsure says she’s doing a real job of work.’

‘Well, that’s wonderful.’

‘Takes after me,’ Mel said with a grin. ‘She is really interested in how the bank operates. I wouldn’t have believed it. She’s always asking questions. and good questions too. Only last night, she challenged our right to call ourselves the ‘Safest Bank in the World.’ She had to agree, after I had explained our security system, that it was no idle boast. The interest she’s showing could develop into her making a career for herself in the bank.’

‘Don’t you believe it. She’ll fall in love,’ Joy said, ‘then your old bank will mean as much to her as it does to me.’

Mel laughed.

‘Yes you’re right as usual.’

‘Does she see the dwarf now?’

‘No, I’m glad to say. She’s too busy to get over to Seacombe. I’m sure she doesn’t miss him. Now she has a home, the bank and the Club, she’s forgotten him.’

He would have been disagreeably surprised if he could have seen Ira at that moment. She was parking her T.R.4 outside Ticky Edris’ apartment block, and a few minutes after leaving her car, she was ringing on his front door bell. Edris came bouncing to open the door and when he saw her, he stood aside to let her in. There was no welcoming smile on his face.

He had had a bad two weeks. Algir had been again worrying him for money, and he was getting alarmed at the rate his savings were dwindling. If Algir wasn’t cast to play such an important role in the plan, Edris would have got rid of him, but this he knew was now impossible and there seemed nothing he could say or do to curb Algir’s extravagances.

He had had no word from Ira during these weeks.

Several times he had been tempted to telephone her, but he remembered she had said she would call him when she had something for him, and although urged by Algir to contact her, he had refrained from doing so. He had faith in her. He knew she couldn’t rush this thing.

‘I was beginning to worry about you, baby,’ he said as he followed her into his living room. ‘I hoped to have heard from you before this.’

Algir came in from the bedroom. He had spent the night with Edris as he was having trouble at his hotel over his bill.

‘Well, about time!’ he exclaimed when he saw Ira. ‘What’s been happening? We’ve been waiting two goddamn weeks for you to get up off your arse and do something! It’s fine for you, living rich, but how’s about me? What’s been happening?’

‘Knock it off!’ Edris snapped. ‘Sit down, Ira. You got something?’

She wandered over to a lounging chair and sat down.

For a long moment, she stared at Algir, then with a contemptuous grimace, she looked at Edris.

‘If this birdbrain doesn’t stop picking on me,’ she said, ‘I’ll walk right out of here. I mean it! Just because the slob can’t keep his money in his pockets doesn’t mean he can lean his weight on me!’

Algir started to say something, but Edris cut in, ‘I said knock it off! Leave her alone!’ To Ira, he went on, ‘Okay, baby, don’t worry about him. How’s it been going?’

‘I have most of the dope you want. It hasn’t been easy and I’ve had to watch my step, but I’ve got it.’ She opened her handbag and took out a folded sheet of paper. ‘How’s that for a start?’

Edris took the paper from her. He unfolded and examined it. After a few moments, he asked, ‘The dead safes?’

‘Some of them. There are others, but these are rented by the big spenders. There’s no record of what the safes contain. The clients open the safes themselves and the bank isn’t responsible for their contents, but judging by the size of their drawings, they should be loaded,’ Ira said. ‘I’ve found out there are five Texas oilmen due to leave at the end of the week. They’ve been winning thousands of dollars at the Casino. It’s an even bet they’ll leave their winnings in their safes before returning to Texas. You’ll find the numbers of the five safes in the second column.’

‘What’s the good of having the numbers of the damned safes?’ Algir snarled. ‘We want what’s in the safes!’

Neither Ira nor Edris paid any attention to him.

‘This is fine, baby,’ Edris said. ‘Now we want to find out how the security system works.’

‘I’ve found that out.’ Ira opened her bag and took out a pack of cigarettes. She lit a cigarette, then went on, ‘I talked to Papa. He thinks I’m a career girl. He told me how the system works and if he doesn’t know, then no one does.’

Edris leaned forward, his little eyes sparkling.

‘How does it work?’

‘I’ll tell you this much: you don’t stand a prayer bursting into the bank at night. There are six armed guards and each of them has been screened. They are picked men and it would be like handling dynamite to try and get at them. They are on constant patrol with dogs all during the night. The safes are below the bank in a vault lined with three inch steel and backed with four foot concrete walls. At closing time, the vaults are flooded. The water is drained out by a timing clock device at 06.00 hours and dried out by heater fans. So you can skip any idea of breaking into the vaults during the night.’

Algir savagely ground his cigarette into the ashtray.

‘I told you all along it was crazy even to think of getting at those safes!’ he snarled at Edris. ‘We’re just damn well wasting our time.’

‘Wrap up!’ Edris said, not looking at him. ‘How about during the day, baby?’

‘Still too tough. There are twelve guards patrolling. The grill to the vaults is kept locked and guarded by two guards with automatic rifles. They look big and tough enough to scare an army. The place is crawling with alarms. Papa said if twenty men went into the bank with smoke bombs and guns, they wouldn’t stand a hope. There’s a guard in a bulletproof glass tower who checks everyone in. You can’t get near him. If anything should start, he presses a button that closes and locks all the exits. The vaults are flooded and the cop house is alerted. So a bust in during office hours is strictly for the birds.’

Edris chuckled and rubbed his stumpy hands together.

‘They’ve certainly thought of everything, haven’t they, baby? Now, tell me something. Who does go into the vaults?’

‘The clients.’

‘No one else?’

Ira smiled.

‘Now you’re getting warm. Yes, there’s someone else. There’s a receptionist who takes the clients

to their safes.'

Edris nodded.

'I've heard about her. You met her yet?'

'I've met her. Her name's Doris Kirby. She's thirty-three and she's been doing the job now for eight years. You could no more get to her than you could get to a bishop.'

'Know where she lives, baby?'

'No, but I can find out.'

Edris nodded.

'You find out, baby, as soon as you can. Phone me the address. It's as urgent as that.'

'Okay.'

'Just what does she do, baby? Do you know that?'

'Imagine you're a client,' Ira settled further into the cushions of the settee, 'and you want to rent a safe. You go to the bank and you fill in a form. Name, address and telephone number; how long and how often you want to use the safe. You are given a key. If you lose it, the lock has to be forced: there are no duplicates. Each safe has two locks. You have one key and the bank has a pass key to the other lock. The safes can't be opened unless both keys are used. The Kirby girl takes care of the pass key which she gives to the guard when she leaves. When you want to use the safe, you go to the guard at the grill. You show him your key which is numbered. He checks the number which tells him your name and address. He also has a photograph of you. Each key has its own password. You give him that and if he is then satisfied, he lets you go beyond the grill. At the foot of the stairs, the Kirby girl is sitting at a desk. You give her your number and she takes you to your safe. She unlocks the first lock with the pass key and then leaves you if you are likely to be long. You unlock the second lock with your key, put in or take out your money, and then ring a bell. Kirby comes back, locks her lock and takes you to the grill. That's how it works and that's what she does.'

Edris grinned evilly.

'Fine, baby, fine, fine! I thought it would take you at least a month to come up with all that dope. You're smart and I love you!'

'You think all that crap's fine?' Algir exploded. 'Okay, you tell me how we get at the money in those safes! I don't give a damn about their system. How do we get at the money?'

'Phil, buddy-boy, this is where you start doing some work. You've been bellyaching about this long wait, now the wait's over. Your first job is to get little Miss Kirby out of the way. Nothing drastic. She's to go on sick leave for at least a week. Can you fix that?'

Algir looked startled.

'Well, go on why do we want her out of the way?'

'Because, baby here is going to take her place. Aren't you, baby doll?'

'That's the idea,' Ira said, 'but Crawsure's got the last word on that.'

'No, he hasn't,' Edris said, grinning. 'Your Papa has baby, and he's the big shot in the bank. You'll tell Papa you want the chance to get to know some of his important clients. He'll fall for that line especially if you point out Kirby won't be away for long and the short experience will do you good. Explain that to Papa, and I bet you won't have any trouble.'

Algir was now showing interest.

'She takes an impression of the pass key? That's it, isn't it?' he said, sitting forward.

'She takes an impression not only of the pass key but of the client's keys as well, especially those

five Texans' keys.'

'How does she do that? Just now she said the clients kept their keys. How does she get hold of them?'

'She sexes the keys out of them,' Edris said. Simpering, he held out his stumpy hand, 'If you will give me your key, Mr. Clunkerhead, I will be happy to open the safe for you.'

'These Texans are hardboiled. Maybe they'll tell her to go to hell.'

'Would you tell a girl as pretty as this one to go to hell Phil?'

Algir regarded Ira critically. She put out her tongue at him.

'Yeah, maybe you have something. What will she use?'

'A little putty held in her left hand. You're the boy who will cut the keys. You'd better talk it over with her, show her what you want.'

'Those keys could be tricky to cut,' Algir said. 'Depends on how complicated the locks are.'

'Why should they be all that complicated with a security system as good as they have? I'll bet they are just locks and just keys. Anyway, you'll know tomorrow. You'll have one of the keys for yourself.'

Algir put his head on one side.

'How come?'

'Tomorrow, you are going to the bank and you're renting a safe. You'll take with you a fat, sealed envelope full of cut newspapers. This, you will explain, is your gambling money. You want to draw money out and pay money in every day. You'll meet Doris Kirby. You'll take a good look at her so you'll know her again. You'll leave the envelope in your safe and you'll take away the key. You'll then be able to decide how complicated it will be to cut keys of the same pattern. In the evening, you'll arrange for Miss Kirby to fall ill, have an accident, get a bellyache or whatever it is you decide on to get her out of the way. But remember one thing: she holds an important position in the bank. If anything odd happens to her, the security people may smell a rat, and the cops must be kept out. So watch it, Phil.'

Algir scowled down at the floor.

'How about a little nudge with my car?' he asked finally.

'Hit and run,' Edris said gently. 'That's police business.'

'Does she live alone?'

'Yes,' Ira said. 'She has a top-floor apartment. She did tell me that.'

'If it's a walk-up, a string across the top of the stairs would do it,' Algir said. 'That okay? She just breaks a leg?'

'Fine, so long as she doesn't break her neck,' Edris said. 'We don't want the cops in on this.'

'Get me the address,' Algir said to Ira. 'I'll look the place over as soon as you get the address to me.'

Ira nodded, then glancing at her watch, she got to her feet.

'Is there anything else, Ticky? I'm supposed to be at the club. Papa might telephone. If he finds out I'm not there, he'll start wondering.'

'That's all for now, baby. You're doing fine. I mean it. Just keep going like this and you'll soon have real money to burn and I mean real money.'

'You don't imagine I'm doing this for kicks, do you?' She moved to the door. 'So long, Ticky.' To Algir, she said, 'Let's see your speed, birdbrain. It's time you did something to earn your living,' and

she went out.

‘I’d like to get that little bitch all to myself,’ Algir said, his face congested. ‘I’d like to hear her squeal before I took her apart.’

Edris giggled.

‘You will, Philly-boy. Have patience. She’s far too young to have so much money.’

‘I still don’t get this,’ Algir said, lighting a cigarette. ‘Why do I need to rent a safe?’

‘Oh, for Pete’s sake! Use your brains, buddy-boy. It’ll be Ira’s job to take the money from the other safes and put it in your safe. You’ll call every day and collect the money which the bank will imagine belongs to you. How else do you think we can get the money out of the vaults? Can’t you see how simple it is once we have the duplicate keys and Ira working for us? She will have the run of the vaults for as long as Kirby is away. She will keep feeding your safe with money from the safes she is able to open. They will be dead safes, so it will be months before they find out there’s anything missing, and by then, we’ll be miles away.’

Algir sat motionless, gaping at him.

‘Judas!’ he said finally in an awe-stricken voice.

‘Sweet, isn’t it?’ Edris hugged himself. ‘And there are millions of dollars to be lifted. It’s the sweetest, loveliest take ever thought of.’ Throwing back his head, he yelled, ‘Yipeee!’ with all the force of his lungs.

The following morning at 09.15 hours Mel was in his office, the morning's mail and various reports on his desk before him. As he was reaching for a Stock Market report a gentle tap sounded on the door that led directly to his private elevator: a door he seldom used as he preferred to walk through the main entrance to the bank, taking the opportunity for a word here and there with the staff. No one ever knocked on this door and he stared at it, wondering if he had heard aright. The knock was repeated.

Frowning, he decided this was so extraordinary, Miss Ashley, his secretary, would have to deal with it. As he reached for the bell push, he heard a soft whisper through the door panels, 'Daddy it's me.'

Mel suddenly grinned. He got to his feet, looking a little anxiously at the door leading to the anteroom. If Miss Ashley suspected someone was disturbing him at this hour, she would be shocked and indignant, but the faint clack of her typewriter told him she was occupied. He went to the door, unlocked and opened it.

Ira slipped in. Her blue eyes were guileless, her smile confident. She was wearing a slate grey frock with white collars and cuffs, and around her slim waist was a broad black patent leather belt. Her blonde hair glittered like burnished copper in the sunlight coming through the big open windows.

'I know. I know,' she said, keeping her voice down. 'You don't have to tell me, Daddy. I know I shouldn't be here and Ashley would swallow her bridgework if she knew, but I just had to see you.'

'I suppose you realize you've broken one of the most sacred rules of the bank by coming here at this hour and by my private entrance?' Mel said, sitting behind his desk.

Ira pushed aside some papers on his desk, hoisted herself up onto the desk and adjusted her skirt. Mel thought she looked enchanting and the smile she gave him went to his heart and his head.

'I'll never do it again, but this happens to be very important,' she said. 'Doris Kirby has had an accident and I want to take her place in the vaults.'

Mel leaned back in his chair.

'How do you know she has had an accident? Is it serious?'

'Everyone's talking about it downstairs,' Ira said airily. 'She's hurt quite badly: a broken arm and three fractured ribs. She was foolish enough to fall down a flight of stairs last night. Now listen, Daddy, let's be sorry for Doris some other time. What is of immediate importance is I want to take her place. That's why I am here. I want you to tell old Crawsure I'm to have Doris's job until she is well. I want you to do this right now before he has time to think of someone else to replace her.'

'I'm certainly not,' Mel began firmly, but she put her hand across his lips.

'Don't say anything you'll regret later, Daddy dear. Just listen to me. If I'm going to be of any real use to you and to the bank, I should get to know your important clients. After all, I am your daughter. They will be as interested to meet me as I will to meet them. You can't expect me to take a great deal of interest in the bank unless I have met some of the clients, can you? By meeting them, my work will come alive. Old Crawsure will have difficulty in replacing Doris. A lot of the staff are on vacation. There is also the security risk to consider. As your daughter, old Crawsure can't object to me being in the vaults. So you see I am the obvious choice since I want to do the work.'

Mel looked at her. How like Muriel she was, he thought, and had a sudden bitter pang that his

marriage hadn't worked out. Norena had the same brittle beauty, the same hardness, the same calculated persuasion Muriel always used when she wanted to get her own way.

'It's not much fun, Norena, doing Doris's work. You'll be in the vaults all day. I think you'll soon get tired of it.'

'Do you imagine it is fun handling a computer?' Ira asked, lifting her eyebrows. 'Let me remind you, Daddy, I'm not here for fun. I'm here to gain experience of banking methods.'

'Oh, come on!' Mel said and laughed. 'Don't expect me to swallow that one. Just why do you want to work in the vaults, Norena?'

She met his gaze steadily, very confident that she could handle this big, handsome man.

'I want to meet some of the richest people in the world. that's why. They are unknown species to me. I want to examine them, listen to them, learn from them.'

Mel hesitated, then shrugged. It could be a good idea, he thought, and was delighted she was showing so much interest in the bank.

'I don't know what Crawsure's going to say about it,' he said doubtfully.

'Don't ask him, Daddy, just tell him. You're the Big Wheel around here. You don't ask, you order,' and picking up the telephone receiver, she said to the operator, 'Connect Mr. Devon with Mr. Crawsure, please,' and then with a little flourish and an enchanting smile, she handed the receiver to Mel.

* * *

At lunch time, Ira left the bank and drove rapidly along the broad promenade, weaving her T.R.4 through the traffic, indifferent to the male eyes and the occasional whistles. At the end of the promenade, she turned down a narrow street and pulled up outside a small pizza restaurant.

Leaving the car, she entered the dimly-lit restaurant and walked to the bar.

Algir was sitting at the end of the bar, a Martini before him, a cigarette drooping from his thin lips.

Ira joined him and ordered a Coke which Algir paid for grudgingly. When the barman had gone to the other end of the bar, Ira opened her handbag and took from it a small cardboard box. This she slid over to Algir.

'That's the impression of the pass key,' she said, not looking at him. 'Tell Ticky there's no trouble. As soon as I can get the impressions of other keys, I'll let you have them.'

Algir opened the box and examined the impression made in a lump of putty. He saw at once that he would have little trouble in cutting the key, and he nodded.

'This is okay.'

Ira finished her drink and slid off the stool.

'Don't rush away,' Algir said, staring at her slim body. 'I'll buy you a pizza.'

'Buy yourself one. I don't need one,' she returned and swiftly left the restaurant, got into her car and drove back along the promenade. She stopped outside her usual snack bar, went in and ordered a chicken sandwich on rye bread. While she was eating the sandwich, her mind was busy.

She had now been away from New York for a month. The sudden change from poverty to riches hadn't made the impact on her that she had imagined it would. Looking back, she realized since she had left New York, she hadn't had a moment of real happiness. She knew why. There was no fun living in luxury, owning a car and having unlimited pocket money without Jess Farr to share it all

with her.

Without him, life was flat and stale: a photograph out of focus. She missed their physical relationship. At least four nights a week, after the jam session, Farr took her back to his sordid little room where they made violent and often brutal love. As she sat in the sunshine, nibbling at her sandwich, her body clamoured for Farr.

Now she had succeeded in getting into the vaults, she decided she wasn't going to wait much longer. During the past days, she had been coming around to the idea that Jess must be given the chance of joining her. Whether he would or not remained to be seen. For all she knew, he might have found another girl. She had never been sure of him.

He had used her body and had been content to go around with her, but she wasn't at all sure how he felt towards her. At least, this was something she would know if she wrote to him, telling him to come. If he didn't come, then that was that, but if he did . . .

Having him in Paradise City would be dangerous, she told herself as she paid her check. But this she would explain to him. Jess was no fool. He would understand her position. He would have to keep out of Mel Devon's way. Ticky and Algir mustn't have the slightest suspicion that he had joined her.

She would have to buy him an air passage from New York to Miami. She had no idea how much that would cost. She would also have to provide him with funds. When Jess wanted money, he stole it. She couldn't have him doing that here.

As she got into her car, she decided it would be asking for trouble to bring Jess out here until she had raised some money. The money she got from the first safe she opened would have to go to Jess. That was the obvious way to do it.

A vague feeling of uneasiness stirred at the back of her mind. She remembered Edris' warning. He was as dangerous as a rattlesnake, and now she was planning to double-cross him. She stiffened her back. No pint-sized dwarf could scare her, she told herself. She wanted Jess, and she was going to have him.

* * *

Six feet of brawn and muscle, his leathery complexion riddled with tiny burst veins, his bulbous nose pock marked, Hyam Wanassee looked what he was: a roughneck Texas millionaire.

This was his last day of a six-week vacation at Paradise City. He and his wife were leaving on the night flight for Texas, and he was leaving with considerable regret. The thought of returning to the sandstorms, the wind and the ulcer-forming pressure of Texas depressed him. At sixty-three, he found the desk work, the long hours in the oil fields and the nag-nag-nag of the telephone a drudgery.

If he had been allowed to have his own way, he would have happily retired to Paradise City, leaving his son to take care of his oil wells. He liked nothing better than to sit on the beach and watch the girls in their skimpy bikinis, drink whisky, eat seafood and in the evenings, gamble at the Casino. But his skinny, ageing wife would have none of that. 'When a man retires he gets into mischief,' she had said often enough, 'and that's one thing you're not going to do, Hyam, as long as I have breath in my body!'

At 15.00 hours Wanassee's chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce pulled up outside the Florida Safe Deposit Bank. Wanassee left the car and climbed the steps to the bank's entrance.

He was a well-known figure at the bank and the guards respectfully saluted him.

The guards at the grill, leading to the vaults, always dispensed with the formalities of identifying him. One of them saluted, then unlocked the grill and motioned him to the stairs.

‘This is my last visit, boys, until next year,’ Wanassee said, pausing. ‘It has gone goddamn fast this time.’

One of the guards said he hoped Wanassee had had a fine time. The other said it would be a pleasure to see him again.

Wanassee nodded, pleased, then walked down the well-lighted steps into the coolness of the vast vaults. The only fault he found with the bank was that they should have employed that stick of a girl Doris whatever-her-name-was.

Down in the quiet narrow lanes of the vaults, there was a chance for a little fun if you had a pretty girl in charge of the desk, but who would want to make a pass at a flat-chested, pratless virgin like Doris?

But . . . Hello! Hello! Hello! Who was this? He came to an abrupt standstill and gaped.

Ira had been warned by the Head Teller that Wanassee would be arriving. She had been told that he was a very valuable client worth some eighteen million dollars and was to be received as royalty.

She was sitting at her desk as Wanassee came down the stairs. She looked up, smiled and stood up. The light from the overhead lamp fell fully on her.

‘Hi!’ Wanassee exclaimed. ‘Where did you spring from? What’s a pretty little girl like you doing down here all on your own?’

‘Good afternoon, Mr. Wanassee,’ Ira said, coming around her desk. ‘I’ve taken Miss Kirby’s place for a week or so. She’s had an accident.’

‘Is that right?’ Wanassee was staring at Ira’s long, lovely legs. ‘An accident, huh? Don’t tell me some hero has knocked her up?’

Ira laughed.

‘Oh, no, Mr. Wanassee, she fell down stairs.’

‘That’s the best thing she could have done,’ Wanassee moved a little closer. This was really a doll, he was thinking. Just his luck that he was leaving that night. ‘And who are you, honey? What’s your name?’

‘Norena Devon.’

‘Devon? The same name as the V.P.?’

‘He’s my father.’

‘Is that right?’ Wanassee looked astonished. ‘Your father? Well, hang me for a hog! I’ve been coming to this joint now for the past ten years and I was never told Mel had a daughter. and what a daughter!’

Ira looked demure.

‘I’ve just left school, Mr. Wanassee. Now I’m working here.’

‘Do you like it?’

‘It’s all right. It’s nice meeting Daddy’s favourite clients.’

Wanassee grinned.

‘That include me?’

She looked at him: an up from under look that she knew always excited the men, especially the older men.

‘Why, of course, Mr. Wanassee. Daddy told me to be specially nice to you.’

‘Did he? But wouldn’t you have been if he hadn’t told you?’

She lowered her eyes.

‘I should think every girl would be nice to you, Mr. Wanassee. You look just like one of those big Western movie stars. I can imagine you on a horse.’

Wanassee puffed out his chest.

‘Yeah. there’s not many guys my age as big and strong as I am.’

‘Your age? Why, Mr. Wanassee, what do you mean? You’re not old.’

It was easy after that. She led him on, got him to talk about himself, no difficult task, stood staring up at him, her eyes glowing with admiration, and when she finally held out her hand and asked for his key, he handed it to her without pausing in his account of how he had made his millions. Still talking he followed her along the narrow lane that led to his safe. She had no difficulty in pressing the key into the putty she had concealed in her left hand. Her body, moving ahead of him, hid what she was doing.

In any case, Wanassee was fully occupied staring at her neat little bottom as it ducktailed along in front of him. Pausing at the safe, she unlocked both locks and handed him his key.

‘I’ll leave you now, Mr. Wanassee. If there’s anything I can do just ring for me.’

‘You stay right where you are, honey,’ Wanassee said. ‘This won’t take a second.’

He opened the safe and taking a bulky envelope from his pocket, he tossed it carelessly into the safe.

Ira felt her heart give a little lurch of excitement as she peered over his shoulder. The safe was crammed with one hundred dollar bills. She had never seen so much money. She had only a brief glimpse as Wanassee slammed the door shut. He turned the key and stood aside.

‘Lock it up, honey,’ he said, dropping the key into his pocket.

Moving past him, Ira put the pass key into the second lock.

Wanassee eyed her back. The lust that was always close to the surface broke through his control. This was too good an opportunity to miss. His urge was so strong, he didn’t even wonder if she would make a fuss.

As Ira locked the safe, she felt Wanassee’s hot fingers cup her left buttock and gently squeeze it. Controlling the impulse to swing around and plant her fist in his mouth, she remained motionless, letting him squeeze again before she looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes big and startled.

‘Oh, Mr. Wanassee, you shouldn’t do that. Really, you shouldn’t.’

Suddenly ashamed of himself and a little frightened, Wanassee moved hurriedly away from her.

‘That’s right,’ he said huskily. ‘I don’t know what got into me. I’m sorry, honey. I shouldn’t have done it.’

She turned and smiled brightly at him.

‘But I’d rather it was you if it has to be someone, Mr. Wanassee. You’ve no idea how I’m pestered in the subway. Those men are horrible, but you . . . well, you’re different.’

Wanassee blew out his cheeks with relief. He must have been crazy to have touched her like that. Suppose she had yelled. Suppose she had complained to her father?

‘By God, Norena, that’s pretty nice of you,’ he said. ‘I shouldn’t have done it. I know how a little girl like you can get pestered.’ He took out his wallet, selected a hundred dollar bill, folded it and pressed it into her hand. ‘Don’t refuse an old man, honey. You forget what I did, huh? You buy

yourself something. some frillies, and don't tell your Pa.' Patting her shoulder, he turned and lumbered away down the lane.

Ira put her tongue out after him.

'You cheap creep!' she said under her breath. 'What a shock you're going to get when you come back next year!'

* * *

Ticky Edris parked his car and got out stiffly, aware that his back was aching. The long, hard hours at La Coquille restaurant were exhausting him. Now the end was in sight, the work seemed harder and the hours endless. He looked at his wrist watch. The time was 02.55. A hell of a time to get back from work! He glanced up at the apartment block and was surprised to see the light was on in his sitting room.

It wasn't usual for Algir to be waiting up. Had something gone wrong? Exerting himself, he trotted across the sidewalk, and up the steps and across the lobby to the elevator.

He would be thankful when Algir got some money, he thought, as the elevator took him up to his apartment. Having him as a boarder was not Ticky's idea of fun. He unlocked the front door of the apartment and entered the living room.

Algir was sitting before the kitchen table he had brought into the living room and which he had converted into a workbench. On the table was a small foot-driven lathe, a vice and a number of tools. To one side was a pile of key blanks.

'You're working late,' Edris said, crossing over to the cocktail cabinet. 'What's new?'

'Knock it off, this is tricky!' Algir grunted.

Edris poured himself a stiff whisky, kicked off his shoes and sat down heavily in his armchair. He watched Algir as he used a fine, rattail file on a key blank. After some ten minutes, Algir pushed back his chair with a sigh of relief.

'I guess that's it. That's taken me four blasted hours to get right.' He got to his feet and fixed himself a whisky. 'Ira was here this evening. She brought a beautiful impression of a key belonging to Hyam Wanassee's safe.'

Edris slopped his drink.

'Wanassee! He's about the richest! He eats regularly at La Coquille. He tips fifteen fish at a throw!'

'He left by the evening plane. She's going to empty his safe tomorrow morning. That's why I'm working this late. There could be enough in that box to put us in the gravy for the next six months!'

'This is the beginning of it, Phil! Tomorrow she may get hold of another key. You've got to keep at it! No slacking off. You've got to cut those keys as fast as she gives you the impressions. I tell you: this could net a million . . . more!'

Algir nodded. He sipped his whisky and then leaned forward.

'Something is bothering me, Ticky. Something maybe you have missed out on.'

Edris looked sharply at him.

'What is it?'

'Did it ever occur to you that Ira might cheat us?' Algir said. 'She transfers the money into my safe. Later, I come around and pick up the money and bring it here. What's to stop her transferring only part

of the money and keeping the bulk of it herself?’

‘How would she get it out?’ Edris said, his eyes hardening. ‘You get it out because the bank thinks it belongs to you. She wouldn’t dare risk taking a pile of money out with those guards at the grill.’

‘They think she’s Devon’s daughter. If she took a big handbag down with her, she could take out quite a lot of money.’

Edris thought about this.

‘If she’s crazy enough to take the risk,’ he said finally, ‘I can’t see how we stop her.’

‘Yeah. Well, I thought I’d mention it.’

Edris stared thoughtfully at him, then got to his feet.

‘I’m going to hit the hay.’ He wandered to the bedroom door, paused and again stared at Algir.

‘You’ve given me an idea, Philly-boy. If she could cheat us; you could cheat me, couldn’t you? You could stash away some of the money she puts in the safe and bring the rest to me, couldn’t you?’

‘I wouldn’t do that to you, Ticky,’ Algir said, his eyes meeting Edris’. ‘We’re partners.’

‘It was just an idea. Not a healthy one. If I found out anyone was cheating me, I’d fix him so he wouldn’t cheat anyone again.’

‘Oh, go to bed!’ Algir said impatiently. ‘I’ve still got work to do.’ He returned to the table and sat down.

Edris stared at his back for a long moment, then went into the bedroom and shut the door.

* * *

At 08.50 hours the following morning, Ira hurried into a coffee bar a hundred yards or so from the entrance to the bank. Algir was sitting at a table in a corner. At this hour the bar was deserted and they had arranged to meet here as it was near the bank and their meeting would go unnoticed.

Ira sat down beside Algir. As the negro barman started towards them, she waved him away.

‘I’m not stopping,’ she said. ‘I don’t want anything.’

Shrugging, the negro returned to the racing sheet he was studying.

‘Have you got it?’ she asked Algir.

‘Yeah.’ He handed her the key, using the top of the table to shield the movement. ‘It should work. I’ll be in at eleven o’clock. I’ll bring a briefcase with me. Can you transfer the money to my safe by eleven?’

‘I think so. I’ll start as soon as I get down to the vaults. It’s not going to be too easy. His safe is at one end of the vault: yours at the other, but so long as no one comes down, I can do it.’

‘Watch it. Don’t take any chances. It’s better to wait than mess it. You won’t get a second chance.’

She slipped the key into her handbag. Algir eyed the bag curiously. It was fairly big, and he thought she could take out quite a sizeable sum of money in that.

‘Do they let you take that bag into the vaults?’ he asked casually.

She looked sharply at him.

‘Why not? A girl has to have a bag.’ She got to her feet. ‘I must run. I don’t want to be late.’

‘See you at eleven.’

She nodded and walked quickly out into the sunshine.

Getting into her car, she drove to the staff parking lot behind the bank. She was nervous and tense. She had in her bag a letter she had written the previous night to Jess. It had been a difficult letter to

write because she had been afraid to tell him about the bank in case he had lost interest in her. She had simply said that she was now in Paradise City, that she missed him and wanted him to join her. She added that she had come into some money and there was enough for his fare and for them to live comfortably for some time.

The grill leading to the vaults was not unlocked until 09.45 hours. The three-quarters of an hour wait dragged interminably. She did a little work in the accounts department, talked to one or two of the girl clerks and tried not to look at the wall clock every few minutes. Finally, it was time, and picking up her handbag, she walked briskly across the lobby and to the grill where the two guards saluted her.

‘Morning, miss,’ Aldwick, the elder of the two, said. ‘Just opening now.’ He was a powerfully-built man with reddish hair and a freckled, good natured face. His companion, Dodge, was dark and tough looking. He merely glanced at Ira and then glanced away.

Aldwick handed her the pass key and as she was signing the receipt, he said, ‘Should be a busy day today, miss. A lot of our clients are going home. Mr. Ross and Mr. Lanza will be in around midday. You watch out for them: two of our biggest clients.’

‘Are they going away?’ Ira asked.

‘Yeah. This is the end of their vacation. Mr. Lanza goes back to Texas. Mr. Ross returns to New York.’

‘I’ll watch out for them.’ She smiled brightly and went down the stairs to her desk.

She stood for a moment by the desk, looking up the steps. From that angle, she could see the feet of the two guards. If they stooped low, they could see her, but not unless they did stoop low. She put her handbag on the desk, unlocked one of the drawers and took out the visitors’ register. This she placed on the desk. She put away her handbag, looked at her watch and saw it was three minutes to ten o’clock.

Her heart was beating rapidly and she was feeling a little sick. She put her hand in her skirt pocket and felt the key Algir had given her. She hesitated for a moment, then with another quick glance up the stairs, she walked rapidly along the narrow lane, turned left and continued on down the lane to Wanassee’s safe.

It wasn’t until she stood before the safe that she realised fully just how dangerous this job was that she had undertaken to do. Someone could come down the steps, reach her desk, without her knowing. From where she stood now, she couldn’t see her desk, but if that someone, wondering where she was, came quietly to the entrance of this lane she was in, he could see her as she opened Wanassee’s safe.

She looked at her watch. The time was four minutes after ten. Doris had told her that none of the clients ever came as early as this, but she would have to be ready in case they did. For a brief moment, Ira’s nerve failed and she made a movement to return to her desk, then remembering Jess and knowing she wouldn’t see him again unless she did open the safe, she steeled herself and sank the pass key into the first lock. She turned the key. Then taking Algir’s key, she slipped that into the second lock. She had some difficulty turning the key, but by using some force, she succeeded. She stood for a long moment, her hands clammy with sweat, listening. She heard nothing. Suppose a client was waiting at her desk? What would he do? How long would he wait before he told the guards that she was missing from her post?

She had to know. Running silently to the end of the lane, she peered around the corner towards her desk. No one waited for her. She could hear the shuffle of the guards’ boots as they paced slowly

backwards and forwards. She could hear the faint hum of voices and fainter still, the clack of typewriters.

She wiped her hands on her skirt, then drawing in a deep breath, she ran back to Wanassee's safe. She pulled the door open. The sight of the stack upon stack upon stack of neatly packeted one hundred dollar bills turned her mouth dry. She reached in and took out one of the packets.

There were twenty-five bills in this packet. 2,500 dollars!

More money than she had ever touched in her life. But it wasn't enough for Jess's fare and his living expenses. She took out another packet, then pulling up her skirt, she tucked the two packets down her girdle. She had purposely put on a girdle that morning and a loose-fitting pleated skirt. It took her several moments to arrange the bills.

Finally, sure they wouldn't slip, she dropped her skirt. She turned back to the safe. Now she had to carry as much of this remaining money to Algir's safe. There was so much of it! She would have to make at least three journeys. Again her nerve almost failed, then forcing herself to do it, she pulled out as many packets as her fingers could grip. These she put on the floor in a neat pile, then she reached into the safe again. As she gripped more of the packets, she heard approaching footsteps.

For a brief, horrible moment, the shock was so great that she blacked out. She leaned against the wall, her heart scarcely beating, her body cold with terror.

Someone was coming down the steps!

Leaving the money on the floor and the safe open, she ran blindly down the lane, reached the end and came out into the lane leading to her desk.

Standing by her desk, looking towards her, his eyebrows lifted in disapproving inquiry, was Mel Devon.

She remained motionless. She thought of the open safe and the money on the floor. He had only to walk ten yards to see what she had been up to, and he was already moving in her direction!

With an effort that drove the blood from her face, she controlled her panic and forced herself to walk down the lane towards him.

She heard herself say, 'Why, hello, Daddy.'

Mel paused and waited for her to reach him.

'What are you up to?' he asked, looking intently at her. 'Is anything wrong?'

'Wrong? Why, no. Mr. Lanza is coming at midday. I was just checking to make sure that I could find his safe,' she lied glibly, marvelling at herself for inventing this excuse on the spur of the moment.

'Oh, I was wondering where you were.' He looked again intently at her. 'Are you sure there's nothing wrong? You look very white.'

'There's nothing wrong.'

She moved past him to her desk. He turned and followed her.

'Aren't you feeling well, Norena?'

She turned impatiently.

'Oh, be still! If you must know, I have the curse. I always look like this when I have it.'

Startled and a little embarrassed, Mel reached for the visitors' register and glanced at it.

'I'm sorry, hon. Trust me to put my foot wrong. Anyone been in yet?'

'No.'

'Did you find Lanza's safe?'

‘Yes.’

She sat down at the desk, opened a drawer and took out a pile of account sheets.

‘If there’s nothing else, Daddy, I had better get on. I have these to check.’

‘I just came down for a look around. I like to see the place is well kept. You get on with your work,’ and to her horror, he turned and began walking slowly down the narrow lane in the direction of Wanassee’s safe.

‘Daddy!’

Her voice had gone shrill.

He turned.

‘Yes?’

She thought desperately for an excuse to hold him.

‘When am I going to meet Joy Ansley?’ she blurted out, instinctively feeling that if anything would attract him away from Wanassee’s safe, Joy Ansley’s name would and she was right. Surprised pleasure lit up his face.

‘I thought you didn’t want to meet her,’ he said, coming back to the desk.

‘Yes, I’d like to meet her, if she wants to meet me.’

‘She does. We often talk about you. We’re having dinner together tonight. Why not come along?’

‘All right.’ She played a scale along the edge of her desk. ‘You’re in love with her, aren’t you?’

‘I’ve known her a long time,’ Mel said carefully.

‘Are you going to marry her?’

He frowned at her. She wasn’t looking at him. She seemed more intent on the scale she kept playing than on what he would say.

‘Would you mind?’

She looked up then.

‘I have my own life to lead, you have yours. It’s nothing to do with me what you do.’

‘Oh, come, Norena, that’s not true.’ He sat on the desk. ‘You’re my daughter. My home’s your home now. If I married Joy and she came to live with us, would you mind?’

‘So you are thinking of marrying her?’

‘Now your mother is dead - yes, I’m thinking about it. I’ve waited alone now for sixteen years. But would you mind?’

‘No.’

He studied her expressionless face.

‘Sure?’

‘When I say a thing I mean it. I said no, and I mean no.’

‘You’ll like her, Norena. She’ll be company for you.’

‘I don’t want company. She’ll be company for you. Let’s get that straight. I’ll get married one of these days. You’ll be glad of her then. You’d better get it over with. I wouldn’t have waited for a man as long as she’s waited for you.’

‘You don’t mind speaking your mind, do you?’

‘Why should I?’

He laughed.

‘Well, then, tonight. After you’ve met Joy, we’ll have another talk.’

‘You either love her or you don’t,’ Ira said, staring up at him. ‘If you love her, you should marry

her. If you don't, tell her so and let her off the hook.'

The telephone bell rang. Ira picked up the receiver.

'I believe Mr. Devon is with you, Miss Devon,' the operator said. 'Mr. Goldsand is waiting for Mr. Devon.'

Ira drew in a quick breath of relief.

'You're wanted in your office, Daddy,' she said, replacing the receiver. 'Goldsand. whoever he is.'

'Oh, yes. See you when you get home,' Mel said and walked with long strides up the stairs and out of the vaults.

As soon as he was out of sight, Ira sprang up and raced to Wanassee's safe. She snatched up the packets of money and threw them back into the safe, slammed the door shut, locked it, and removing the keys, she ran back to her desk.

She sat motionless for several minutes recovering from her fright, then after listening, she opened her handbag, pulled up her skirt, took out the money she had stolen and crammed the two packets into her bag which she put in the drawer.

A few minutes to eleven o'clock, Algir identified himself to the two guards who unlocked the grill and waved him to the steps. He was carrying a briefcase and he was tense with excitement. At last, he was thinking, my money problems are over. But as soon as he saw Ira's white, tense face, he knew something had gone wrong.

'What's up?' he snapped, keeping his voice low. 'Won't the key fit?'

'It fits all right.' She got up and came around the desk. 'I was nearly caught. I can't handle this on my own!'

'You mean you haven't got the guts to handle it,' Algir snarled, blood rushing to his face.

'Oh, wrap up! Ticky and you were crazy to imagine I could do it alone! I was crazy to agree to try. Wanassee's safe is right down there. Anyone can come down here while I'm emptying the safe and I wouldn't know until they were right on me. Devon came down. He nearly caught me. I had the money on the floor and the safe door open.'

Algir immediately saw the problem. He could tell by her tenseness what a fright she had had. This had been Ticky's idea. He hadn't given it enough thought.

'You're right. I can see you can't handle it alone. Okay, I'm here now. I'll do it while you keep watch. Where are the keys?'

She gave them to him.

'Where's the safe?'

'First on the left down the lane. A.472.'

'If anyone comes down who could cause trouble, drop that on the floor. He nodded to a copper ashtray standing on the desk. 'Okay.'

She nodded.

'Much money in the safe?'

'More than you can carry.'

'You would be surprised how much I can carry when it's money.'

He left her and walked fast towards Wanassee's safe.

Ira lay in her bed, unable to sleep. The moonlight coming through the open window made patterns on the white carpet. Somewhere in the bungalow, a clock began to strike midnight.

What kept her awake was the nagging and persistent thought that she was now a fully-fledged thief. The petty thieving in which she had been so successful when she used to raid the stores in New York had been J.D. stuff, but now she had graduated into Big Time and she could go away for a long stretch if she were caught! And she nearly had been caught. A cold wave of shame ran through her as she imagined what Mel's expression would have been like if he had seen her at Wanassee's safe. Shame was something she had never experienced before, and she didn't like it.

These past weeks, she thought, had done something to her. She was growing soft. She could feel it. Reluctant to admit it, she knew that living with Mel, seeing him every day, becoming more and more aware of his affection for her was having a disconcerting impact on her. She was not only beginning to get used to, but actually liking, this orderly way of life she was now living: having a routine, getting up at the same time in the morning, going to work, making a success of it, especially making a success of it and gaining a background she knew she could never hope to have without Mel's guidance and his position at the bank.

She moved uneasily in the bed. She was also worried that the meeting with Joy Ansley had been such a success. Determined to play it cool when she met Joy, she found her hostility no weapon against Joy's warm serene friendliness. The three of them had dinner at the Beach Club and it had been fun to watch the swimmers in the floodlit pool and to listen to the dance band that played soft, expert swing. After dinner, Mel had driven them to Joy's home where Ira had met Judge Ansley.

Six weeks ago, the idea of meeting a judge would have made her hoot with laughter, but this tall, thin eighty-year old man with his clear, penetrating grey eyes had impressed her as no other man had impressed her before. He had been casual and kindly, making her feel at home, taking her off to his study to show her his small, but interesting Black Museum, mementoes of his various murder trials. In spite of trying to think all this was square, Ira found herself sorry when Mel had come along and said it was time to go home.

'Come and see me again,' the Judge had said. 'I get lonely for young faces. Come on Sunday and have tea with me. Joy will be on the beach with your father. If you haven't anything better to do, we could keep each other company.'

She had very nearly said she would come, then feeling she must be getting soft in the head even to think of keeping an old square like the Judge company, she had said she was tied up for the weekend and had abruptly turned away.

But now, lying in bed, she wanted to talk to the Judge again.

'But I'm not going to,' she said, half aloud. 'What's the matter with me, for God's sake! Jess will be here by Sunday. Jess!'

At lunch time she had mailed the letter to Jess and had sent 500 dollars in a separate registered packet for his fare and his immediate expenses. She had sent the money with a little qualm. Suppose he kept it and didn't come?

Because the thought of Jess quickened her blood and set her heart thumping, she forced herself to think of the events of the afternoon.

She had had little difficulty in getting the impression of Mr. Lanza's key. This short, fat Texan had been a second Hyam Wanassee. He not only took liberties with her, but had tried to kiss her and it was only when she threatened to call the guards that he reluctantly had left her alone. But she had taken the impression of his key although he had sent her away before he opened the safe.

The other client, Mr. Ross, had been a tall dark Jew with steady, flinty eyes and who had his key to his safe on a long gold chain attached to his trouser button. She knew instinctively that he wouldn't part with his key and she made no attempt to get it from him.

Anyway, she thought, two out of three wasn't a bad average. Edris couldn't complain. On leaving the bank, she had gone to the coffee bar across the street and had given Algir the impression of Lanza's key.

He said, 'I'll be along at eleven. I haven't seen Ticky yet. We'll meet at his place tomorrow after six and we'll split the loot. Wanassee's little lot comes to around fifty thousand dollars. Tough you didn't get Ross's key. I bet there's a raft of a lot of money in his safe.'

'I can't work miracles,' she had said curtly and as she walked back to her car, it dawned on her that she was glad she hadn't succeeded with Ross.

Why had she been glad? she asked herself as she stared up at the moonlit ceiling. And another thing, she now realized, she hadn't been excited when Algir had told her Wanassee's take had been fifty thousand dollars. Six weeks ago she would have gone crazy with excitement.

It was then she began to realize she didn't need money any longer. She had got what she had always wanted: security, position, a home, a car and a father. She had obtained all this without risk. No one was ever likely to find out she wasn't Norena Devon, but if she continued to steal money from the bank, someone could find out and then she'd be in a hell of a mess.

She half sat up in bed. Suppose she didn't go on with it? she thought. Suppose she told Ticky she couldn't get hold of anymore key impressions? She remembered the vicious expression in the dwarf's eyes when he had warned her about getting bored. She mustn't underrate him. He was dangerous. She would have to be careful how she handled him. Maybe the easiest way would be to ask Mel to transfer her back to the accounts department. Ticky would have no answer to that one.

She finally decided she would do nothing until Jess arrived. She would feel safer with him to protect her. He could more than take care of Ticky and Algir. At the end of the week she would ask Mel to transfer her from the vaults and during the two remaining days, she would pretend she couldn't get hold of anymore keys.

Relaxed, now she had come to this decision, she turned over and closed her eyes.

* * *

A few minutes to eleven o'clock the following morning, Algir came down into the vaults.

Ira was returning from conducting one of the clients to his safe and she paused when she saw Algir. He was wearing a new tropical cream-coloured suit and a new straw hat. She thought uneasily that he was already spending his share of the money and she wondered with a stab of alarm if the money could possibly be traced.

'Hello there,' Algir said, grinning. He seemed full of confidence and as she reached him, she smelt whisky on his breath. 'Let's get at it, baby,' and he waved his briefcase.

'Keep your voice down,' she said sharply. 'There are three clients down here.'

‘Who cares? They don’t know which is my safe. Come, on, baby, shake the lead.’

She led him along a narrow lane to Lanza’s safe.

‘Here we go,’ Algir said as she unlocked her lock. ‘You get back to your desk.’

She left him as he took the key he had cut the previous night from his pocket. She found another client had arrived and she took him to his safe. As she returned once more to her desk, she saw Algir come out of the lane where Lanza’s safe was. His face was dark with rage and there was an ugly gleam in his eyes.

‘What is it?’ she asked, staring at him.

‘Nothing in it!’ he snarled. ‘Just stock coupons and share certificates. All that goddamn work for nothing!’

She felt a wave of relief run over her.

‘It’s not my fault!’

‘You’d better hustle up some more key impressions! Get another by lunchtime! I’ll be waiting at the bar across the way!’

‘I’ll do what I can.’

He glared murderously at her.

‘It had better be better than that!’ he snarled as he walked away.

She returned to her desk and sat down. She was getting nervous: yet another sign, she thought, of growing soft. A month ago, she would have spat at Algir if he had threatened her, now the sight of his rage-congested face had shaken her.

Then she remembered seeing in one of the desk drawers a number of keys to vacant safes that were rented to new clients. She would take impressions of three or four of them! They would keep Algir busy. How was she to know if a safe was empty or not?

At midday, she walked into the coffee bar to find Algir at his usual table. As soon as he saw her, he got to his feet.

‘Get anything?’ he demanded.

She could feel his feverish impatience.

She nodded.

‘Two,’ and she handed him the small box containing two impressions she had made of the keys to the vacant safes.

‘Who do they belong to?’

‘Mr. Cruikshank and Mrs. Rhindlander,’ she lied, inventing the names on the spur of the moment. ‘They are both rich and both leaving tonight.’

‘Did you see inside their safes?’

‘No.’

He stared suspiciously at her and she had to force herself to meet his gaze.

‘Then how did you get the impressions?’

‘They let me unlock the safes, but not open the doors. Satisfied?’

‘Well, for your sake, I hope there’s more in them than that sonofabitch Lanza had!’

‘Can I help it if there’s no money in the safes?’ Ira snapped. ‘I do what Ticky tells me to do. I can’t work miracles.’

Algir studied her.

‘I’ve heard that one before. See you at Ticky’s place at six,’ and pushing past her, he left the cafe.

Ira didn't want to go to Ticky's apartment, but she was scared not to go. They were going to split up Wanassee's take. What was she going to do with her share? She wondered. If she could get it back into Wanassee's safe she would have done so, but Algir had kept the duplicate key. She decided she would ask Ticky to keep it for her, explaining she had no safe place to keep it. If there was trouble, at least she could prove she hadn't touched the money herself.

As she was leaving the bank a few minutes after six, she saw Mel crossing the lobby and she paused to smile at him.

'What sort of day?' he asked, taking her arm and walking with her down the steps to the staff parking lot.

'Oh, all right.'

'You don't sound very enthusiastic' He looked at her and seeing her shrug, he went on, 'Are you getting bored with being down there? If you are, you can relax. You'll only have to do it for another two weeks.'

She stiffened and abruptly came to a standstill.

'Two weeks? But I don't want to be down there that long! I want to go back to the accounts department at the end of this week!'

He smiled at her.

'You must take your job seriously, Norena. Now Miss Kirby won't be back for at least two months, Crawsure thinks it would be a good opportunity to make a change. We are getting a male clerk from our New York branch to take over, but he can't get here before the end of the month. You'll have to carry on until then.'

Ira started to protest, but stopped when she saw he was looking curiously at her.

'After all, Norena, you did want to go down there. I warned you you would be bored, but now we don't seem able to do without you.' He smiled. 'Okay?'

Two more weeks! she thought in alarm. She couldn't fool Ticky and Algir for two more weeks and yet she couldn't refuse. Then she thought of Jess and the telegram she had received that afternoon. He would be arriving tonight. With Jess around, she would be safe.

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Oh, I guess so.'

'Fine. I'm on my way to see Joy,' Mel said. 'I'm going to ask her to marry me, Norena. Want to come along and keep the Judge company?'

She shook her head.

'Not tonight, Daddy. I've things to do.' She began to move towards her car, paused and looked at him. 'Good luck.'

Mel watched her as she walked to the car, got in and drove away and he drew in a deep breath. It was beginning to work, he told himself. She was not only settling down, but she was beginning to accept him.

* * *

Ira drove fast to Seacombe. She arrived outside Edris' apartment block and leaving her car, she entered the building aware that her heart was beating a little too rapidly and that she was nervous.

As the elevator took her up to the top floor, she told herself that she had nothing to be frightened

about. It would be tomorrow when Algir found the two empty safes that trouble could start, but by then Jess would be here and he would look after her.

She paused outside Edris' front door, still aware that her heart was thumping. She had an instinctive feeling for danger, and she was feeling it now. She hesitated, then with her teeth set hard, she reached out and pressed the bell button.

There was a moment's delay, then the door jerked open and Edris looked up at her. His face was pale and his small eyes were as expressionless as polished glass.

'There you are,' he said. 'You're late. Come on in.'

She hesitated. Through the open doorway, she could see Algir standing by the window, his hands in his pockets, a cigarette hanging from his thin lips.

'Well, come on in,' Edris said and she was quick to hear the controlled impatience in his voice.

She walked into the big living room and Edris shut the door. Her heart gave a little lurch as she distinctly heard the key turn in the lock. She kept moving until she reached the centre of the room and she paused.

Then suddenly she was back once more in the atmosphere of a Brooklyn alley. Like a tiger-cat sensing danger, she was no longer afraid. Under this sudden hidden threat, the veneer of softness that had coated her during the past weeks peeled away.

She took three quick steps that brought her to the nearest wall, turned and faced Edris and Algir, her eyes dark and glittering, her mouth a thin line.

'All right, you bitch,' Algir said, his voice husky with rage. 'You're going to get it. I've been waiting to give it to you ever since we met, and now I'm going to strip the goddamn meat off your back!'

As he began to fumble at the buckle of his belt, Ira looked quickly around for a weapon. Close to her was a heavy ashtray and she snatched it up as Algir slid the belt free of its loops.

'You make a move towards me, creep,' she said, her voice steady, her face white but determined, 'and this goes through the window. Then you can talk to the cops when they come.'

'Knock it off!' Edris said sharply to Algir. 'I'm handling this. I told you, didn't I? I'm handling it!'

Algir hesitated, glaring at Ira, then with a grunt of exasperation he tossed the belt on the settee.

'All right,' Edris said and moving to his armchair he sat down. 'Sit down, Ira. Philly-boy, you squat too.'

Ira looked from Edris to Algir and then, still holding the ashtray she sat on a straight back chair which stood against the wall. Her mouth was dry and her heart pounding. What had gone wrong? she asked herself. She was more scared of Edris than of Algir. The dwarf's calmness had a sinister quality that was far more dangerous than Algir's blustering rage.

Muttering under his breath, Algir sat down.

Edris looked at Ira.

'I thought you were smart,' he said softly. 'It would have been easy to have given Phil names that meant something, but you were dumb enough to dream up those two names. Your Mr. Cruikshank and your Mrs. Rhindlander don't have accounts with the bank. I checked.'

Ira forced her face to remain expressionless. Yes, that had been a dumb move, she thought, but how was she to know this freak was even suspicious of her?

'What's the idea?' Edris went on. 'Did you also know there would be no money in Lanza's safe?'

'I didn't know,' she said.

‘Those two keys you gave Phil. Who do they belong to?’

She hesitated, then she decided to put her cards face up on the table. The showdown was coming quicker than she wanted it to, but these two daren’t touch her in Ticky’s apartment. She could hear the strains of music coming from the television set in the apartment below. She wasn’t alone in the building. She could throw the ashtray through the closed window before they could reach her and she could scream. No, they wouldn’t dare touch her here.

‘No one,’ she said quietly. ‘The safes are vacant.’

Algir called her an obscene name. He looked as if he were about to throw himself at her, but Edris motioned him to stay where he was.

‘Run out of guts, Ira?’ Edris asked, crossing his short legs, his eyes glinting evilly.

‘That’s it. I’m quitting. You can dream up another idea to fill your pockets and you can leave me out of it.’

‘I knew this could happen, but I thought it wouldn’t happen with you. I reckoned you were perfect for the job. You’re still perfect for the job, Ira, only you don’t know it.’

She didn’t say anything.

‘You’re going on with the job,’ Edris said quietly. ‘Tomorrow you’re going to give Phil at least two key impressions and they’re going to be keys to safes with money in them. Do you understand? You do that and I’ll forget this little lapse.’

‘I’ve quitted,’ Ira said. ‘I’m staying that way.’

‘Let me get at this bitch,’ Algir exploded. ‘I’ll . . .’

‘Wrap up!’ Edris snapped, not taking his eyes off Ira. ‘You’ve got what you want, isn’t that it, Ira? You’ve got a home, money, and a father. That’s it, isn’t it? The spur for money isn’t pricking your hide now, is it?’

‘That’s about it, and there’s nothing you can do about it, Ticky.’

‘Is that right?’ Edris smiled. ‘The spur is pricking me still, baby. I haven’t got what I want.’

‘Then go ahead and get it, but leave me out of it!’

‘No, baby, you’re in it and you stay in it.’

Ira stared at him for a long moment, then she got to her feet.

‘I’m leaving now. If either of you have other ideas, this goes through the window,’ she said, hefting the ashtray in her hands.

‘Don’t be in such a hurry, baby,’ Edris said mildly. ‘I want to tell you why you’re still with us. You’re with us because you can’t get out of it. You like Devon, don’t you?’

Ira remained motionless.

‘Like him? Why should I like him?’

‘Oh, come off it,’ Edris said and laughed. ‘Do you imagine I haven’t seen the change in you? He’s a pretty good daddy, isn’t he? He gives you everything you want. Quite a change from your other daddy, isn’t he?’

Ira suddenly felt cold.

‘I wonder what Devon would say if your drunken daddy walked into the bank and claimed you?’ Edris went on. ‘What a lot of talking you would have to do, baby. I don’t think you could talk yourself out of that spot. And another thing, when the news broke you were Devon’s sister-in-law and not his daughter and you two had been living together for weeks, what a beautiful stink that would make in this sweet smelling City. And then the press would nose out about Muriel’s past life. How long do

you imagine Devon would remain in his job when that dirt got out? It wouldn't be such fun for you then, would it, baby doll?'

Still Ira said nothing. Edris could see by the way she flinched that he had scored.

'So let's forget it,' he went on. 'Philly-boy will be down at the cafe tomorrow morning for at least two key impressions. Have them ready for him, baby, unless, of course, you want to see your real daddy again. And another thing, you don't get your split now until you've done your job, but that shouldn't worry you with Devon to wipe your nose and keep you in money, should it?'

Ira stared at him for a long moment, then she put down the ashtray, unlocked the door and went out.

Edris looked at Algir and winked.

'The psychological approach, buddy-boy, is always better than violence. The stupid little creep is half in love with Devon. You'll get the keys tomorrow. Want to bet on it?'

* * *

As Ira made her way to the arrival centre of the Miami airport, the hands of the big wall clock moved to 20.15 hours. She had ten minutes to wait before Jess' aircraft touched down.

During the drive from Edris' apartment, her mind had been seething for ways and means of getting out of the trap she had walked into. It was a cunning trap because Ticky knew she couldn't give him away without implicating herself. He had also guessed that she was fonder of Devon than she had realized, but she realized it now. The thought of involving him in a scandal that could lose him his position in the bank was unbearable to her. The thought too of losing her new home and all that went with it was equally unbearable. There must be a way out, she kept telling herself, but she couldn't think of one. Her only hope now was Jess. Jess was full of ideas. If she explained the position to him, she felt hopeful that he could come up with a solution. She refused to remember that most of his ideas in the past had been childish and unsuccessful. She also refused to admit that he couldn't possibly compete against Edris' experience and shrewd cunning. She kept telling herself that Jess would find a way out. She was sure of it.

The arrival of the New York plane was announced over the public address system and she walked over to the observation window.

A few minutes later she watched the big plane come taxiing down the runway. There was a slight delay, then the passengers began to cross the tarmac towards the arrival centre.

She caught sight of Jess and she stiffened, her heart suddenly sinking. She had sent him money for clothes and she had hoped he would have made himself presentable, but she had forgotten that Jess never bothered about his appearance. He was still wearing the faded blue, skintight jeans and the old black leather windcheater he had been wearing when last she had seen him. His Mexican-style boots were cracked and down at heel. Slung over his shoulder, he carried a dirty orange coloured duffle bag.

Jess was tall and thin with narrow shoulders, large red hands and long stork-like legs. His black greasy hair reached to his collar and was worn in a thick quaff that hung over his eyes. His features were regular and good except for a mouth that was too small and too thin. His complexion was sallow and his right cheek deeply scarred from a bottle attack in his early days as a gang leader. He looked as if he hadn't washed for some days and he was in need of a shave.

Ira watched him as he walked arrogantly across the tarmac, surrounded by well-dressed, smart

looking businessmen and their wives. By their glances at him, she could see they were startled and annoyed that such a beatnik should be travelling with them.

As she watched him, she realized with sudden panic how much she had changed during the past weeks and how her new environment had altered her standards and her outlook. She found herself asking if she could really have been so in love with this dirty looking bum. Could this really be the Jess who she had fought to keep and whose wishes she had slavishly obeyed? Again she experienced a feeling of hot shame and she had a sudden urge to get away before he saw her.

She pulled herself together. She had sent for him and he was here. She couldn't run away. He had her address and if he didn't find her waiting for him, he would come to her home and what would Mel say? At all costs, she decided, she must keep him away from Mel. But where could she take him right now? Somehow she had to persuade him to clean himself up and get some new clothes. She thought of Mel's beach cabin. That would be the place. He could stay there for the night. She could get him some clothes. Mel wouldn't be using the cabin until Sunday.

She walked slowly to the arrival exit and stood by a column, watching the passengers as they filtered through. Then she saw Jess, his lean jaws moving as he chewed gum, a bad-tempered expression on his face. He jostled through the crowd, not caring who he elbowed out of his way, and finally paused as he broke free from the stream of moving people.

Bracing herself, Ira walked up to him.

'Hello, Jess, so you've got here.'

For a brief moment, she could see by the blank expression in his eyes that he didn't recognize her, then he did. He gaped at her, shaken by the change in her, but he quickly recovered.

'Jeepers! Look who's here!' he exclaimed. 'You've got yourself all tarted up for God's sake, haven't you?'

Ira had had no time to change out of her office clothes and she was aware that she looked too prim, too square and too everything that Jess despised. Her neat grey dress with its white collar and cuffs, her black nylon stockings and court shoes were the uniform of the class of people Jess hated most. 'Creeps who bootlick the squares,' was his constant description of them.

'This is an act,' she said defensively. 'Come on, Jess, I've lots to tell you, but let's get out of here.'

'Yeah? Suppose I don't want to listen? What the hell do you mean by walking out on me the way you did?' Jess's thin face darkened. 'I've a mind to poke you in the kisser here and now!'

'Oh, grow up!' she snapped, suddenly furious with him. 'If you can't, go home!' She turned and walked quickly out of the building and over to where she had parked her T.R.4.

Startled, Jess gaped after her, then shouldering his bag, he went along. He joined her as she slid under the wheel.

She watched him look the car over, a bewildered, envious expression on his face.

'This yours?'

'It's mine.'

'Judas!' He sucked in his breath. 'What's been going on? You really mean it's yours?' He now looked so stunned that Ira nearly laughed at him.

She opened the off-side door.

'Get in, Jess.'

He moved around the car, slid in beside her and slammed the door. Now he was close to her she could smell the dirt on him and the stale sweat from his clothes. The smell brought back a vivid and

frightening picture of her sordid home, her drunken father, the dirt and the bedbugs, and she shuddered.

‘Can you drive it?’ he asked, staring at the dashboard with round eyes.

‘Of course. I used to drive Joe’s car when he would let me and it was twice this size.’

Jess scratched his head, scattering scurf on his collar.

As Ira pressed the starter button, he said, ‘Where the hell did all that money come from you sent me?’

‘It’s a long story. It’ll wait,’ Ira said as she set the car moving. Jess’s sudden uneasiness and his loss of confidence pleased her. ‘And you, Jess? What have you been doing since I left?’

‘Doing?’ He became hostile again. ‘I’ve been doing what I like doing. Nothing!’

A stupid remark, she found herself thinking. You haven’t changed, Jess. It’s only now I can see what a lout and a layabout you are. You haven’t changed, but I have.

‘How’s the gang?’ she asked for something to say.

‘What do you care about the goddamn gang?’

‘I can ask, can’t I?’

‘The gang’s all right. What’s all this crap about anyway? I’ve got to get back. The gang can’t manage without me.’

‘Who cares? You can manage without them, can’t you?’

He moved uneasily.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Oh, never mind. Why didn’t you get yourself some clothes, Jess? I sent you enough money.’

‘What the hell do I want clothes for?’

‘Paradise City isn’t New York. You can get picked up by the cops looking the way you do.’

‘Frig the cops!’

‘What did you do with all that money, lose it?’

‘I got some of it. What’s it to you? It’s mine, isn’t it?’

She shrugged her shoulders, dismayed that she was so bored with this lout. She was now on Highway 4A and she concentrated on her driving, effortlessly whipping the small car past the big Cadillacs, the Buicks and the Fords, but careful not to exceed the speed limit. She didn’t want a cop after her with Jess in the car.

‘Can’t you drive faster than this?’ he demanded, glad for a chance to criticize. ‘Let me take it. I’ll show you how to drive a car!’

‘It’s fast enough. The cops are hot here.’

He grunted, then asked, ‘Where are we going?’

‘Somewhere where we can talk.’

He stared uneasily at her, not sure how to handle her. This was an entirely new Ira to him. Baffled, he lit a cigarette and slumped into a surly silence.

It took them a little more than an hour’s fast driving to reach the beach cabin. By then it was dark and the beach deserted.

The cabin was a luxury three-room pine wood structure that stood in the shade of three palm trees and was set well away from the other beach cabins which were in darkness. It was Club night, and none of the regulars came to the beach this night.

‘Here we are,’ she said, getting out of the car. ‘Hungry?’

‘What do you think?’ He got out of the car and looked at the cabin, distrust and suspicion in his eyes. ‘You going to bust in?’

‘I have the key.’ She went on ahead, unlocked the door, switched on the light and motioned him in.

He walked into the big lounge with the suspicious movements of a cat, entering a strange room. Crossing to the windows, she quickly drew the curtains.

‘Well, what do you know!’ he exclaimed, staring around the room. ‘Quite a joint! Who does it belong to?’

‘That’s part of the story,’ she said. ‘Make yourself at home. I’ll get some food.’

While she was preparing a cold meal from the well-stocked refrigerator, she wondered just how much she should tell him. She knew it would be dangerous to let him know the amount of money Edris hoped to steal from the bank. This she would play down, but the rest of it, if he was going to help her, he had to know. She now regretted asking him to come out here, but she had to have help, and he was the only one available who might help her.

During the meal, she told him the whole story. He listened without interruption, savagely stuffing cold chicken into his mouth as if he hadn’t had a meal in days. When there was nothing more to eat, he lounged back in the chair, a cigarette hanging from his thin lips, still silent until she had finished her story.

‘Well, that’s it,’ she concluded. ‘I was crazy to have done it, and now I can’t get out of it. What am I to do?’

‘Why do you want to get out of it?’ he demanded.

‘I don’t need the money. I have everything I want now without taking any risk. Can’t you see that? If I go on robbing the bank, it’s bound to be found out and then I’m in trouble.’

‘How much is the bank job worth to you?’

‘About five thousand,’ she lied. ‘That’s what Edris promised me. At the time it seemed a fortune, but now . . . well, it wouldn’t last long and I would be on the run.’

A calculating expression came into Jess’s eyes.

‘What’s Edris getting out of it?’

‘Twenty thousand, something like that. I don’t know exactly how much.’

‘Yeah? I bet! Don’t tell me he would go to all this trouble for twenty grand. He’s fooling you. I bet every time Algir gets money out of that bank, it’s big money.’

‘He’s only taken one lot out and it was for five thousand, six hundred,’ Ira said, uneasy to see the greed that had lit up Jess’s face.

‘If he takes that out every day, it could soon mount up. No, they’re fooling you. The thing to do.’

‘I don’t care if they are fooling me!’ Ira broke in desperately. ‘I want to get out! I’m satisfied with what I’ve got! I want you to help me handle those two, Jess.’

He began to pick his nose, staring blankly at her. She could see he wasn’t listening to what she was saying.

‘Jess! Did you hear what I said?’

‘Aw, pipe down! Let a man think!’

She watched him and waited impatiently.

‘Do you have to do that?’ she said, revolted at what he was doing to his nose.

‘Shut up!’ An ugly gleam came into his eyes. ‘I won’t tell you again!’ He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lit a cigarette. ‘You know that’s a smart idea. That guy Edris has got brains.’

‘What idea?’

‘That dead safe gimmick is fab. You’re nuts to want to quit.’

She drew in a long, deep breath. She might have known it, she thought bitterly.

‘But, Jess, can’t you see the risk? I could go to prison for years.’

‘Why didn’t you think of that before?’

He was staring at her, his eyes narrowed.

‘Because I wanted easy money and I got carried away. Now I don’t need money, I don’t have to take risks. How many more times do I have to tell you?’

He drew on his cigarette, letting smoke drift out of his nostrils.

‘So what’s in it for me? You quit and I get nothing. You stay with Edris, and we split.’

‘It’s too big for us, Jess. If you help me, I’ll get you some money. I promise. I’ll get you some.’

‘How much?’

‘I don’t know. It depends. I would have to get it from Devon. Three or four hundred, Jess.’

‘Don’t talk wet! You’ve just told me Edris has promised you five thousand. Now listen, you stick with him! Understand? I’m telling you! If he makes trouble for you, I’ll handle him, but he won’t if you do what he wants and that’s what you’re going to do! If you think I’m going to let five grand slip through our fingers because you’ve run out of guts, you’ve got another think coming!’

Ira turned white. She felt a sudden rush of fury sweep through her.

‘You don’t tell me what to do!’ she cried. ‘I’m not . . .’

His open hand moved so quickly she couldn’t avoid it.

His palm exploded on the side of her cheek with the noise like the bursting of a paper bag. She reeled over and sprawled flat on her back.

Dazed, she began to struggle up. He kicked her viciously, the toe of his boot thudding into her thigh.

Her eyes blazing, she squirmed out of range and scrambled to her feet. He was standing now, his eyes watchful, his hands hanging limply at his side: an attitude of watchfulness she had seen often enough in his street fights. She knew he was as quick and deadly as a mongoose in a fight and she checked the impulse to rush at him.

‘Get out of here!’ she exclaimed, pointing to the door. ‘I shouldn’t have brought you here. I don’t want any more to do with you. Ever! Get out!’

‘I’ll go when I’m good and ready.’ He slipped out of his leather jacket which he tossed on a chair. ‘You’re in for a beating. You’ve got a big head. This is Jess, remember? Get your clothes off! You’re going through the wringer!’

She faced him, her eyes glittering.

‘Get out! I’m not afraid of you, you stinker! I was crazy to have imagined a spineless layabout like you could help me! Get out!’

He took three quick shuffling steps towards her, avoided by a shift of his head her hook fingers that slashed at his face, then sank his fist into the arch below her short ribs with all the force of his lean, stringy muscles.

The agony of the blow dropped her to her knees. He lifted his fist and clubbed her on the side of the head. Dazed, unable to breathe, she collapsed on her back. She felt his fingers hook into the collar of her dress and she tried feebly to claw his hand. Then she felt a violent jerk and her dress ripped open. As she tried to roll away from him, his fist snapped against the side of her jaw, stunning her.

Cursing softly, his breath whistling through his clenched teeth, Jess ripped the rest of her clothes

from her. She vaguely became aware of his weight on her and of pain, but she was too stunned to care. After a while his weight lifted off her.

‘Okay, baby,’ she heard him say. He sounded a long way off. ‘I’ll be seeing you. You do what Edris tells you or I’ll give it to you again. Hear me?’

She lay still, her eyes closed, pain in her head, her ribs, and her groin. She heard him moving about the cabin, but she hadn’t the strength to care what he was doing. Hot tears ran down her face, tears that surprised her because she had always imagined she was too tough to cry.

He came over to her and kicked her gently in her aching ribs.

‘I’ve taken your dough, baby,’ she heard him say. ‘You can get more. I can’t. So long.’

She heard him cross the lounge, open the door and go out into the night, slamming the door. Silence settled over the cabin, broken only by the soft despairing sound of her crying.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was close on an hour later when Jess, hidden in the shadows of the palm trees, saw Ira come out of the cabin. She was now wearing slacks and a beach jacket and Jess grinned to himself. He watched her lock the cabin door and put the key on one of the rafters supporting the cabin's roof. Then, moving slowly and painfully, she got into the T.R.4 and drove away.

Jess stood up and stretched. He felt satiated and relaxed and pleased with himself. He walked over to the cabin, took the key from its hiding place, unlocked the door and entered the living room. Turning on the lights, he tossed his duffle bag on the settee.

He felt in need of a drink. Going over to the cocktail cabinet he poured a stiff whisky into a glass. He went into the kitchen and got ice from the refrigerator, then he returned to the living room and dropped into one of the lounging chairs.

Jess, old pal, he thought, make yourself at home. You've got yourself into a sweet setup but you'll have to be smart to handle it right. You've shown that doll you're still the boss. She'll give you all the money you ask for. If she doesn't, all you have to do is threaten to talk to that punk Devon.

He gulped down the whisky, sighed and let the glass drop on the rug. May as well stay the night, he thought. Let's take a look at the bedroom.

Humming under his breath, he walked across to the bedroom which had a double bed and was comfortably furnished.

Very nice, he thought, and stripping off his jacket, he tossed it on a chair. Then he went to the built-in closet, opened it and examined the beach wear he found in it. The clothes were all too big for his lean, narrow frame and with a grimace of disgust, he turned his attention to the chest of drawers.

The shirts, handkerchiefs and socks he found in the drawers were of no interest to him. He opened the last drawer and stiffened. Half hidden by a beach towel lay a .38 Colt automatic. For a long moment he stared at the gun, then with a prickle of excitement, he cautiously picked it up.

Ever since he had become the leader of the Moccasin gang, he had longed to own a gun. It had been his dream and his ambition. His breath whistled through his pinched nostrils as he examined the gun. After some moments, he discovered how to remove the clip and he found it held five cartridges. He sat on the bed, the clip in one hand, the gun in the other and stared with blank eyes at the opposite wall.

For a long time, he sat motionless, his mind busy, then finally a sly grin lit up his face and he nodded. He now knew what he was going to do. A gun, he thought, made him anyone's equal. He could forget the small time stuff of getting money out of Ira. He was now in the position to make a big, quick killing.

Replacing the clip, he put the gun down on the bedside table and kicking off his boots, he flopped on the bed. He was still grinning as he reached out and snapped off the light.

* * *

Mel was finishing breakfast when Ira came into the lounge. He had been disappointed when he had returned the previous night soon after eleven o'clock to find the bungalow in darkness and Ira in bed. He had wanted to wake her up and tell her his news, but reluctantly decided not to disturb her. He had gone to bed much to Ira's relief.

She had heard him come in and she had prayed he wouldn't come to her room. She had passed a sleepless night, her mind tormented, her body aching. What was Jess now planning to do? she kept asking herself. She was sure he wouldn't return to New York. She blamed herself for being such a fool as to tell him her story. She was now entirely in his hands. How could she have ever loved him?

Forcing herself not to think of Jess, she began to think of Edris. Here again, she could find no solution. She couldn't even run away. Mel would immediately alert the police and if they found her, the whole story might come out.

Looking at her as she came in, Mel was startled to see how pale she was.

'Hello,' he said, lowering the newspaper he was glancing at. 'You look a bit under the weather. Were you late last night?'

'No.' She sat down and listlessly poured herself a cup of coffee. 'I'm all right. Don't fuss.' Forcing herself to look at him, she asked, 'Well? What did Joy say?'

Mel grinned happily.

'We're getting married at the end of the month. I'll have some free time then for the honeymoon. You won't mind being left alone for four weeks?'

She immediately saw this could be her chance. With Mel out of the way, she would tell Mrs. Sterling she was going to stay with a friend and then quietly leave Paradise City. By the time Mel got back, she would be far away: just where she would go, she had no idea, but she would go.

'No, of course not. Have you made plans yet?'

'We'll go to Venice, Italy. They say it's just the place for a honeymoon.'

She finished her coffee.

'Hmm. sounds nice. Well, my best wishes, Daddy.'

'Thanks.' He got up and came around to her. He rested his hand lightly on her shoulder. 'You and Joy will get along fine together.'

He bent and kissed her on her cheek.

She stiffened, feeling a rush of emotion flow through her. Getting abruptly to her feet, she walked to the door.

'I must get off. See you tonight, Daddy,' she said and went quickly from the room.

Mel stared after her, a puzzled expression in his eyes, then with a shake of his head, he picked up his briefcase as he heard the T.R.4 roar away.

* * *

Soon after eleven o'clock, a tall, well-dressed woman came down the steps to the vault. She was Mrs. Marc Garland, the wife of the millionaire steel magnate. Ira had been alerted by one of the guards that she was coming.

'She and her old man are leaving for New York this afternoon,' he told her. 'They cleaned up big at the Casino last night. I guess she's going to stash her loot away. Watch her: she can get bitchy when she feels that way.'

Ira stood up as Mrs. Garland reached the bottom of the steps.

'Good morning, Mrs. Garland,' she said politely.

'You're Mel's daughter, aren't you?' Mrs. Garland said, smiling. 'I've heard a lot about you.' She sat down in the visitor's chair by Ira's desk. 'I knew your mother years ago, Norena.' She studied Ira.

‘You’re very alike. I hear Mel’s getting married. Will you like that?’

‘Oh, yes, Mrs. Garland. I’m very happy for him.’

‘You’ve met Joy of course?’

‘Yes.’

‘She’s nice, isn’t she?’

‘I like her very much.’

‘I’m sorry I haven’t met you before. We always have lots of young people up at our place. Next year you must meet my son when he comes down here for the vacation.’

She opened a large handbag and took from it a heavily sealed envelope. ‘Would you be nice and put this in my safe? Here’s the key.’

‘Of course, Mrs. Garland,’ Ira said, her heart suddenly racing. She took the envelope and the key. Then she went around her desk, opened the drawer and took out the pass key. For a moment she hesitated, then picked up the small lump of putty she kept in the drawer. Concealing it in her hand, she hurried down the lane, turned right and reached the Garlands’ safe. She carefully took the impression of the key before she opened the safe. Then she paused. Why bother to take the impression? She had only to put the envelope down the front of her girdle to save Algir the task of cutting the key.

Let him cut it! she thought. He won’t get the money now before Monday. As she put the envelope into the safe, she glanced at the safe’s contents. There were several jewel boxes and a number of thick envelopes to match the one she had just put in. She closed the safe door and locked it.

As she turned she became aware that Mrs. Garland had wandered to the head of the lane and was idly watching her. Ira felt a rush of cold blood up her spine. What an escape! she thought, for a moment unnerved. If she hadn’t put the envelope in the safe, Mrs. Garland would have seen her stealing it!

‘If you ever come to New York,’ Mrs. Garland said as Ira joined her, ‘do look us up. I’m always trying to persuade your father to stay with us, but he’s so occupied.’

‘I’d like to,’ Ira said, trying to steady her voice, ‘but I’m afraid it’s not likely I’ll get to New York.’

‘Well, if you do, remember. Goodbye, Norena,’ and leaving her, Mrs. Garland hurried away.

At lunchtime Ira went over to the cafe where Algir was waiting.

‘Well?’ he demanded as she joined him.

Silently she handed him the box containing the key impression.

‘Who’s this belong to?’

‘Mrs. Marc Garland.’

‘Any money in the safe?’

‘Yes, a lot.’

‘Okay. I don’t have to tell you what to expect if you’re lying,’ he said, slipping the box in his pocket. ‘You won’t get a second chance, you little creep. Remember that!’

She turned away and walked out of the cafe. She was so occupied with her thoughts she failed to see Jess Farr across the street in a shabby Ford he had rented. Neither did Algir notice him as he drove off in his Buick.

A cigarette hanging from his thin lips, Jess set the Ford in motion and followed Algir back to Edris’ apartment block.

Fred Hess settled himself more comfortably against the sand dune and released a small, contented belch. He had just completed an excellent picnic lunch, the sun was warm, the breeze gentle and the sound of the sea soporific.

This was his first free weekend from police headquarters for some time and this Saturday morning, he had decided to take his wife Maria and his son Fred to a favourite bathing place they used and to spend the day there.

The only fly in the ointment, Hess thought as he folded his hands over his paunch, was Junior. Hess liked other people's children, but he wasn't all worked up about his own. The trouble was, he so often thought, the brat's spoilt. Maria, a doting mother, but a stern wife, wouldn't let him lay a hand on the kid, and if ever a child needed a constant wallop on his fat backside it was Fred Hess junior.

But for the moment all was peace. Maria had taken Junior down to the sea where he was busy splashing water at her white dress and enjoying himself.

Hess had announced that he was taking a nap. Junior had wanted him to play ball. There had been a heated argument, and Maria fearing for her husband's blood pressure had grabbed Junior's hand and had dragged him out of the hearing of Hess's highly coloured vocabulary.

This was the life! Hess thought as he closed his eyes.

What more could a man want? It was pleasant to think of the others sweating it out in the hot, stuffy Detectives' room at headquarters. Joe Beigler was duty sergeant, and right now he would be answering the telephone, trying to sound polite as the callers asked their crummy questions or told him about the dog they had lost or the car they had had stolen. Well, Joe was welcome to all that. Hess grunted happily and let himself drift off into sleep.

He slept for fifteen minutes, then the arrival of Junior brought him scowlingly awake. It gave him some satisfaction to see Maria examining her dress with apprehension. If she would let the kid throw water at her, then that was her funeral.

'Go away,' he said to his son, a small, fat boy with an aggressive chin and a determined expression that made him the image of his father. 'See how far you can run without your legs falling off.'

The boy ignored him. He picked up his sand spade and approaching his mother, said, 'I want to bury pop.'

Maria sat down in the shade. She was a large comfortable looking woman of thirty-five. She wasn't a beauty, but she had strength of character and kindness, and Hess, after ten years of married life, wouldn't have exchanged her for any other woman in the world.

'Well, all right,' she said, 'but do it quietly. Your daddy's tired and wants to rest.'

'Hey!' Hess said indignantly. 'I want to be left in peace and I'm not going to be buried!'

'I want to bury pop!' Junior said, thrusting out his chin.

'Now, Fred,' Maria chided, 'you know all kids like to bury people.'

'Is that right? Then let him bury you.' Hess also thrust out his chin. 'He's not burying me!'

'I want to bury pop!' Junior cried, raising his voice.

'He doesn't want to bury me, honey,' Maria pointed out. 'He wants to bury you.'

'I'm not deaf. If he comes near me, he'll get a thick ear.'

'Now look, Fred, you mustn't be selfish. It's Junior's day out as well as yours,' Maria said. 'I

can't see how it can bother you if he puts a little sand on you. Kids like to do it.'

'I don't give a goddamn what kids like. I don't like it!'

Hess said, growing red in the face.

'Fred Hess! I'm ashamed of you using language like that before your own son!' Maria exclaimed, genuinely shocked.

'Goddamn! Goddamn! Goddamn!' Junior cried, hopping up and down, happily aware that his father was now in the wrong and determined to profit by it.

'Junior, stop it!' Maria said severely. 'Don't let me ever hear that word from you again.'

'I don't see why. Pop uses it!' Junior said with a cunning look at his father.

'Daddy shouldn't use it,' Maria said.

'Naughty old pop! Naughty old pop!' Junior sang, dancing up and down. 'He shouldn't use goddamn, but he does!'

'Now see what you've done,' Maria said angrily, glaring at her husband.

Hess thought it rather funny, but he kept his face straight with an effort.

'The kid's got to learn sometime,' he said airily. 'Now you beat it, Junior. I want to sleep.'

'I want to bury pop,' Junior said, a whine in his voice.

There was a long pause, while Maria looked exasperatedly at her husband.

'If you want any peace, Fred, you'd better let him do it. You know what he is. He'll go on like this all the afternoon.'

'I want to bury pop!' Junior screamed at the top of his voice, sensing victory.

'Perhaps if I fetched him one,' Hess said in a wheedling voice. 'Just a little clump on his ear. Won't hurt him much. Stun him a bit. What do you say?'

'Fred Hess!' Maria said in an awful voice.

Hess shrugged.

'Oh, well, no harm in suggesting it.'

Junior who knew he was safe from his father's heavy hand so long as his mother was there began to grow red in the face while he screamed he wanted to bury his father.

'Hey, Junior,' Hess said, suddenly inspired. 'I want to tell you something.'

Junior paused in his noise and looked suspiciously at his father.

'What?'

'You see that big sand dune over there. the big one?' Hess said, pointing to a high bank of sand some hundred yards away.

Junior stared at it.

'Yes.'

'I'll tell you something very interesting about it, but first you must promise never to tell anyone. It's a great big secret.'

Junior began to look interested.

'What sort of secret?'

Hess beckoned.

'Come closer. I don't want anyone to hear this.'

Intrigued now, Junior approached his father and knelt by his side.

Hess resisted the temptation to slap him. Lowering his voice, he said, 'An old man went to sleep there last night. He's a nice old man. He likes kids. He carries lots of meat pies around with him to

give to kids.'

If there was one thing Junior liked more than another, it was a meat pie and Hess knew it. The boy's face lit up.

'What happened to him then?' he asked, staring across at the sand dune.

'He got buried,' Hess said. 'He got buried right under that big sand dune. He was asleep and the wind blew and the sand buried him and all his pies. You go and dig him up.'

'Are the pies still there?'

'Of course they are,' Hess said. 'Nice big pies with pastry made with butter and lots of juicy meat in thick, rich gravy.' His own eloquence made him suddenly hungry and he wished Maria had thought to bring some pies for a teatime snack.

'Gee!' Junior's eyes widened. 'But how's the old man, isn't he dead, buried like that?'

'He's all right. He'll be so pleased if you dig him up. He'll give you all his pies. You go and see.'

Junior hesitated. He wasn't quite sure if Hess was having a game with him or not.

'Will you come and help me dig him up?' he asked.

'I certainly will,' Hess said, making a show of getting up. He had anticipated this request and was ready for it. 'But if I help you, we'll have to share the pies. My share will be bigger than yours because I am bigger than you.'

Junior scowled.

'I don't see why you should have more pies than me.'

'Well, I do. I'm bigger and more hungry.'

Junior hesitated.

'I'll do it myself then,' he declared and catching up his spade, he began running towards the sand dune.

'I'm ashamed of you,' Maria said, trying to keep her face straight. 'Telling lies like that. You'll be sorry. Just wait till he finds out there are no pies.'

Hess grinned and settled down once again.

'By the time he has, it'll be time to go home,' he said. 'Now, I'm going to sleep.'

He looked over to where his son was frantically digging, gave a beatific smile and closed his eyes. He hadn't been asleep for more than ten minutes when he was awakened by Junior's excited screams. He struggled upright, his face red with wrath.

His son was dancing up and down, waving to him.

'Pop! Come quick!' he screamed. 'It isn't the old man. it's a woman and she stinks!'

* * *

Dr. Lowis came striding across the beach as the police photographer completed his work.

Terrell, Beigler and Hess stood near the high sand dune while members of the Homicide squad carefully completed removing the body Junior had found from its shallow grave.

'She's all yours,' Terrell said to Lowis. 'Let's have a quick report, doc. Looks like she's been strangled.'

Lowis nodded and went over to the body.

'You know,' Hess said inflating his chest, 'that kid of mine will make a great cop. If it hadn't been for him, the stiff could have remained there forever.'

‘Takes after you,’ Beigler said with a grin.

‘Yeah. It’s the way I brought him up,’ Hess said, pleased.

‘All right, boys,’ Terrell said. ‘Let’s get at it. Get some more men up here, Fred. Every inch of this ground around here has to be searched.’

Hess nodded and hurried off.

‘With her face the way it is,’ Beigler said gloomily, ‘we could have trouble identifying her, Chief. The killer must have either taken her clothes or buried them somewhere.’

‘Any girls missing within the past six weeks?’ Terrell asked.

‘Not in our district.’

‘We’ll wait to hear what doc has to say, then you get back to headquarters. We want a description of her in the papers tomorrow and on the radio and TV tonight. You handle that, Joe.’

‘Okay.’ Beigler watched the breeze send swirls of sand moving along the beach. ‘This shifting sand isn’t going to help. We can’t hope to find any prints. He must have brought her out by car and he must have come prepared. The sand there is too hard for him to have dug the grave with his hands. He must have had a spade with him.’

Terrell nodded.

‘Yes, and he didn’t want her identified. A run-of-the- mill rapist doesn’t take the woman’s clothes away. He must have known if she is identified, she could be hooked to him and that means they must have known each other.’

An ambulance appeared up the dirt road and parked by the police cars. Two interns came hurrying across the sand with a stretcher. Hess who had been using the short wave radio joined Terrell and Beigler.

‘The boys are on their way now,’ he said and then went on to speak to the three Homicide detectives who were on hands and knees carefully sifting the loose sand of the grave.

The two interns waited until Dr. Lewis had completed his hurried examination of the body, then at a nod from him, they opened the stretcher, scooped the body onto it, covered it with a canvas sheet and hurried away with it to the ambulance.

Terrell and Beigler moved over to Dr. Lewis who was shutting his bag.

‘Well, doc?’

‘Murder. strangulation with some violence,’ Lewis said briskly. ‘She’s been dead about six weeks. Putrefaction is well advanced. She put up a struggle. What’s left of her face has extensive bruising. I can give you more details when I get her to the morgue.’

‘Was she raped?’ Terrell asked.

‘No.’

Terrell and Beigler exchanged glances, then Terrell shrugged. They now had to find a motive for the murder.

‘What age would she have been, Doc?’

‘Between seventeen and nineteen.’

‘Any identifying marks?’

‘No.’

‘Is she a natural blonde?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Okay. Let’s have your report soonest. She wasn’t pregnant, was she?’ Terrell was still hoping to

get at the motive.

‘She was a virgin.’ Nodding, Dr. Lowis set off across the beach towards his car.

‘Okay, Joe, you get off,’ Terrell said. ‘Check with Miami for any missing girl of her age. If they don’t come up with anything, we’ll have to throw the net further. Get the press on the job and alert the radio and TV people. I want lots of publicity on this one. It’s our best chance of identifying her.’

Beigler went off and Terrell joined Hess.

‘Anything, Fred?’

‘She wasn’t murdered here,’ Hess said, looking up. He was squatting on the sand, examining the grave. ‘She must have bled from the nose and mouth, but there’s no trace of blood. As soon as the boys arrive, I’ll get them to search those hummocks.’ He pointed. ‘Could be he did it there.’

‘We won’t be able to do much more tonight,’ Terrell said, looking up at the darkening sky. ‘Another hour and there won’t be light enough to see in there. Well, I’ll leave it to you. I’ll get back to headquarters.’

Four hours later, Terrell still at his desk called his wife, Caroline.

‘I’m going to be late, honey,’ he said. ‘Another couple of hours at least.’ He briefly told her about finding the body. ‘This one’s going to be tricky.’

‘All right, Frank,’ Caroline said. ‘I’ll keep something for you in the oven. Do you know who the girl is?’

‘That’s the trouble. We’ve got no lead on her at all.’ As he was speaking Beigler came in. Terrell raised his eyebrows at him. Beigler shook his head. ‘Well, I’ve got to get on. See you sometime, honey,’ and he hung up.

‘Nothing?’ he said to Beigler.

‘Not yet. Miami and Jacksonville have no missing girl. They’re checking the villages. Got doc’s report yet?’

‘Yes. It’s here.’ Terrell waved to a number of typewritten sheets on his desk. ‘Nothing much to help us. She was strangled violently. The cartilages of the larynx and the hyoid bone were fractured. Her nose was broken. Whoever hit her had a heavy punch. She has no operation scars, no birth marks. She came from a good type of family. Her nails and her hair were well looked after.’

‘How about her teeth?’

‘No luck there. She had a perfect set of teeth. No dental work in her mouth at all.’

Beigler poured himself a cup of coffee from the carton on the desk.

‘Any news of Fred?’ Terrell asked, also helping himself to coffee.

‘He’s still out there. He persuaded the fire brigade to join him with arc lamps.’ Beigler grinned. ‘You know what Fred is like. Once he gets stuck into a killing, he’ll go on until he turns up something.’

‘Yeah.’ Terrell pulled Lowis’ report towards him and began to study it again.

Beigler finished his coffee, lit a cigarette and then pushed himself away from the wall he was leaning against.

‘I guess I’ll get back to my desk,’ he said.

‘There’s one thing.’ Terrell looked up from the report. ‘Not that it helps much. She was killed less than an hour after having had breakfast. So it was a daylight killing.’

Beigler grunted.

‘What was she doing out there so early?’

‘She could have been a late riser and had breakfast late.’

‘Yeah.’ Beigler shrugged. ‘I’ll be around, Chief,’ and he went out of the room.

Terrell relaxed in his chair, his mind busy. As ideas came to him, he jotted them down on a scratch pad. After a while he pushed the pad away, got up and wandered into the Detectives’ room.

Beigler was reading a report. Lepski was pounding a typewriter. Jacoby was talking on the telephone. The hands of the wall clock pointed to 21.05 hours. The three men looked up at Terrell.

‘I’m going home,’ he said to Beigler, ‘but I’ll be back in a couple of hours, then you can get off. There’s not much more we can do tonight. We might get a break from the TV or the papers tomorrow morning. Someone might have seen her, but six weeks is a long time.’ As he turned to the door, it opened and Hess, his fat face shining with sweat, his eyes gleaming, came in.

‘I’ve found where she was knocked off, Chief,’ he said. ‘And I’ve found something else.’ He put on Beigler’s desk a pair of pale blue plastic framed spectacles. The right lens was missing and the left ear piece was broken off short.

‘This was under a shrub about three feet from where she died.’

Beigler got to his feet and peered at the spectacles.

Lepski joined him.

‘Let’s have it, Fred,’ Terrell said, sitting on the side of the desk and picking up the spectacles.

‘We went into the hummocks,’ Hess said. ‘With the lights to help out it wasn’t too bad. After a while we came on a narrow footpath that leads to the dirt road from highway 4A. At the end of the path we found the grass flattened and the sand churned up as if there had been a struggle. There was blood on the sand and on the leaves of a shrub. Not far from the shrub is a dense thicket and behind it we found heel impressions of a man’s shoe. Jack’s bringing the plaster casts as soon as they’ve set. Looks like the killer was hiding in the thicket waiting for her and jumped out on her. His first punch probably knocked her glasses off.’

Terrell squinted through the lens.

‘Quite a lot of magnification here. Lepski, take this down to the lab boys right away. With any luck this could be an out-of-the-way lens. Get all you can on the frames.’

He glanced at Hess. ‘Find any bits of the other lens, Fred?’

‘Got them here.’ Hess took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Lepski who went off fast.

‘I’ll be in my office,’ Terrell said, thinking regretfully of the ‘something’ in the oven, waiting for him. ‘Let’s have your report as fast as you can type it, Fred,’ and he returned to his office to telephone Caroline.

Ticky Edris opened his eyes and blinked at the bedside clock. The time was 08.30 hours and the morning sun was bright against the drawn curtains.

Through his bedroom door, he could hear Algir's snores. Algir had been up, working on the key, when Edris had returned from La Coquille restaurant a little after 03.00 hours.

Edris felt a prickle of excitement as he thought about the key. He had overheard one of Garland's friends who was dining at the restaurant say the Garlands had won over a hundred thousand dollars on their last night at the Casino.

Even if Mrs. Garland had only stashed away half their winnings, the key would be more than worth the trouble Algir had taken with it.

He closed his eyes, and for some minutes, he dozed, but his mind became too active for further sleep and throwing off the sheet, he clambered out of bed. He walked silently into the sitting room. Algir was sleeping on the settee. He stirred uneasily as Edris went into the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, shaved and showered, Edris went to the front door to collect the milk and the morning newspaper.

Algir stirred and sat up as Edris came into the sitting room.

'Getting coffee?' he asked hopefully as he stretched.

'Yeah.' Edris walked into the kitchenette and plugged in the percolator. Then, leaning against the wall, he flicked open the newspaper.

The banner headlines splashed across the paper made him catch his breath. He stared, the paper rustling in his hands that had become unsteady. His mouth turned dry and his heart began to skip beats: *Unknown Blonde Found Strangled at Coral Cove.*

Unmindful of the coffee that was beginning to boil, Edris read the account of the finding of the body, stared at the photograph of Hess's fat son, then switching off the percolator, he walked stiffly into the sitting room. He was so mad and shaken he could have killed Algir.

Algir was sitting on the bed. He had put on a light dressing gown and he was yawning and scratching his head. When he saw Edris' white face and the rage smouldering in his eyes, he stiffened.

'What's up?'

Silently, Edris handed him the newspaper.

Algir read the headlines, then the blood drained out of his face. He got unsteadily to his feet.

'Judas!' he gasped. 'They've found her!' He tried to read the account but his hands shook so violently and his eyes were so blurred with fear he couldn't read what was written there. Cursing, he flung the newspaper to the floor.

'What do they say?'

Edris went to the cocktail cabinet and poured two stiff whiskies into tot glasses.

'What do they say, damn you!' Algir shouted.

'Knock it off!' Edris snarled. 'Here, drink this.'

Algir grabbed the glass and tossed the whisky down his throat. He poured himself another.

'I'm getting out of here!' he muttered. 'Damn you, Ticky! I should never have listened to your crack-brained scheme. I . . .'

'Shut up!' Edris' voice was vicious. 'It's all your fault! I told you to bury her somewhere safe!

Buried! You slob! For a kid to dig her up! You call that burying?’

Algir drank the whisky and again filled his glass. The whisky warmed him and he began to recover his nerve. He sat down and picked up the newspaper.

‘I buried her all right. This is bad luck.’

‘Yeah? I could kill you, you slob!’ Edris was dancing with rage. ‘You’ve blown the lid of the most beautiful take in the world! Damn you! Why didn’t I do it myself?’

Steadier now, Algir picked up the newspaper and read the account. Then he said, ‘Well, they don’t seem to know who she is and they say there are no clues. As long as Ira acts her part, how can they guess the bitch is Norena?’

Edris controlled his rage. He snatched the newspaper from Algir, sat down and reread the account.

‘Yeah,’ he said finally. ‘We could still swing it. Maybe they’ll never find out who she is.’

‘Oh, no!’ Algir said getting in a panic again. ‘I’m clearing out. This isn’t safe anymore. I know cops. They hold back when they talk to the press. They could know who she is right at this very minute.’

‘The chances are they’ll never find out who she is,’ Edris said. ‘They’ve got nothing to go on. It says her face has been half eaten away by ants and what’s left of it is unrecognizable. It says she has no identifying marks and no dental work. So how the hell can they identify her?’

Algir thought about this, but he wasn’t convinced.

‘But suppose they have found something and they’re keeping it back?’

‘Found what?’ Edris snarled. ‘If they had, they would put it in the paper. They want to identify her, don’t they?’

Algir blew out his cheeks. He finished his whisky, then feeling slightly drunk, he began to prowls around the room.

‘All the same, I’m going, Ticky. I have twenty thousand dollars and that’ll hold me. I’ll try to get on a plane to Cuba this afternoon.’

The last thing Edris wanted now was for Algir to quit. Without him, he couldn’t hope to lay his hands on the Garland money. Containing his temper with difficulty, he picked up the key to the Garland safe that was lying on the table and shook it in Algir’s face.

‘This could be worth a hundred grand!’ he shrilled. ‘Are you passing up that kind of money?’

Algir hesitated.

‘We can’t pull the job until tomorrow, by then they may know who she is. Once they know that, they’ll go to the school and that teacher will give them a description of me. It’ll be easy for them to pick me up. No, the hell with the money! I’m going while the going’s good.’

‘To hell with fifty thousand dollars? Are you crazy?’ Edris cried, jumping to his feet. ‘How long do you imagine twenty thousand fish will last you? Now, listen, Phil, do what I’m going to do. We’ll both leave tomorrow afternoon. I’ll come with you to Cuba, but we’ll have the Garland money with us.’

Algir glared at him.

‘I wouldn’t take you with me to hell! Every cop in the country could spot you, you stinking freak! Going around with you would be like hanging a neon sign around my neck.’

Edris was so enraged he could scarcely breathe. With sweat running down his face, he somehow managed to control himself.

‘Well, all right,’ he said, his voice strangled. ‘Then we split up, but we’ll get the Garland take

first.'

'Not me!' Algir said. 'I'm leaving this afternoon.'

Edris looked at him for a long moment, his little eyes red with hate, then he realized he just had to persuade this gutless creep to cooperate and he quickly decided to play on Algir's greed.

'Okay then, if you feel that way about it, then I'll take the lot.'

Algir paused in his pacing to stare at Edris.

'What do you mean?'

'We're partners but if you're running out on me, then I'm entitled to all the money I get from the Garland safe.'

'You can't get it, you fool! You can't get it without me!'

'Yeah? You're wrong, I can make Ira bring it out. It's in a fat envelope. All she has to do is to stick the envelope down her pants and walk out with it and she'll damn well do it or I'll fix her!'

'But listen, you stupid punk,' Algir said, his eyes uneasy now, 'the cops will have you by tomorrow morning. Can't you see that? If they find out Ira isn't Norena and they will, she'll talk, and then you're in the crap.'

'I'm telling you they won't find out that fast,' Edris said calmly. 'I'm willing to take that risk for dough like this. I know Terrell. Okay, he's sure, but he's slow. I could stay right here in this apartment for another week and still be safe.'

Algir poured himself another drink. His face was thoughtful now and watching him, Edris could see he was nibbling at the bait.

'You really think that?' Algir said, turning to face Edris.

'Of course I do. You don't imagine I'd risk my neck if I wasn't sure?'

Algir tossed the whisky down his throat. He told himself he would be crazy to let Edris have that hundred thousand fish when half of it rightly belonged to him.

'Well, maybe I will wait until tomorrow,' he said slowly. 'I could get the afternoon plane out tomorrow.'

'If you're still nervous, get off today,' Edris said, now enjoying himself. 'Besides, I could use your share, Philly boy. You get off now.'

'Shut up, damn you!' Algir snarled. 'Half that money belongs to me and I'm going to have it!'

'Well, okay, if you've made up your goddamn mind,' Edris said and he went into the kitchenette and started the coffee brewing again.

He had to have Algir, he thought, but he cursed the day he had picked him. Algir was right. As soon as he got the money, he would have to get out of Paradise City. The cops could pick him up so easily. He had only to show himself on the street for anyone to recognize him. But there was still a chance the cops wouldn't identify the girl. He would clear out and wait. If nothing happened after a few months, he would come back. Ira would still be at the bank. He would find someone else to take Algir's place.

His scheme wasn't entirely sunk.

But where to go until he was sure he was safe?

Mexico? Could be an idea. He poured coffee into two cups. It wasn't as if he would be short of money. He might have himself a good time in Mexico. And if Algir really imagined he was going to get his share, he was in for a surprise.

All Algir was going to get for being a hero was a slug in the back.

* * *

For some, this hot Sunday passed slowly; for others it passed fast.

Ira thought the day would never end. Soon after ten, Mel had left to meet Joy. They planned to spend the day at the beach cabin. He asked Ira along, but she had refused.

‘You two love birds want to be alone. I’m fine,’ she had said with a lightness she didn’t feel. ‘I’m going to the Club.’

When Mel had gone, she went up to her room and sat by the open window. She had twelve days ahead of her before she left. She still wasn’t sure where she would go. She wasn’t afraid of the future. She knew how to look after herself, but she bitterly regretted leaving Mel, this house and her room.

She lit a cigarette and put her feet up on the window sill. She hated the thought of Edris and Algir getting away with the money she had helped them to steal, but there was nothing she could do about that without getting into trouble herself. At least, by going away, she would stop them getting any more. But for twelve more days she would have to go on getting key impressions for them and this worried her.

After much thought, she finally decided what she would do when Mel and Joy left for their honeymoon. Her best plan would be to drive to the beach cabin, change into the clothes she had come in to Paradise City, tint her hair dark, leave the car and walk to the highway where she could catch a Greyhound bus to Miami. From there, she would take another bus to Texas. With the money she had saved, she would have no trouble, and once in Texas, she would get a job.

* * *

The day passed slowly for Algir who sat by the radio listening to every news announcement, afraid to go out and cursing himself for ever getting involved with Edris. Around ten o’clock, he called the airport and booked a seat for the Havana flight the following afternoon. He packed his bag. Then with nothing else to do, he again sat before the radio, sweating it out and reading and rereading the newspaper account of the finding of Norena’s body.

Edris was much more in control of his nerves. He left the apartment while Algir was calling the airport. He drove to La Coquille restaurant where he found the maître d’hôtel planning the menu for the evening. He told him that he had to go to New York where an old friend was dying and asking for him. Louis said he could go if he had to, but he couldn’t expect to be paid while he was away.

‘That’s all right,’ Edris said, longing to spit in Louis’ face, but determined to keep up good appearances to the end. ‘I understand that. I’ll get back as fast as I can, but I could be away for ten days. I’m sorry, Mr. Louis, to let you down.’

Outside the maître d’hôtel’s office, he made an obscene gesture at the door before going down to where he had parked his car. He drove to the airport and booked a seat on the Mexican flight, leaving the next afternoon.

The time was now midday. He drove back to Paradise City, parked his Mini and went to a nearby bar. He ordered a double whisky on the rocks and a chicken and ham sandwich. While he was eating, Bert Hamilton of the Sun wandered in.

‘Hello there,’ Hamilton drawled, coming to rest beside Edris. ‘How’s my court jester?’

Edris smiled at him.

‘Swell. How’s yourself?’

‘Lousy.’ Hamilton ordered a straight whisky. ‘I was up nearly all night with this murder thing. You read about it?’

‘Sure.’ Edris finished his drink and ordered another. ‘I always read your rag, Bert. What’s new?’

‘Nothing so far. No one knows who the girl is. Between you and me, I don’t think they’re going to find out either, but don’t quote me. Whoever she is, she must have come from miles away. The cops have reports in from all Florida now and there are no girls matching her description missing. So now they’re spreading the net. She could come from New York. anywhere.’

‘Captain Terrell’s a smart man,’ Edris said. ‘He’ll find her if anyone can.’ He looked questioningly at Hamilton.

‘Haven’t they one single clue then?’

Hamilton, who hadn’t been told about the spectacles, shook his head.

‘Not one, no scars, no dental work, fingerprints don’t help, no body marks, no nothing.’

Edris finished his drink and slid off the stool. He felt suddenly relaxed and carefree.

‘Well, I’ll get along. See you, Bert,’ and nodding he bounced out of the bar.

* * *

The day dragged for Jess Farr. He spent it on a deserted part of the beach by himself. He was anxious that no one should see him. It would be a lot safer for him, he reasoned, after he had done what he planned to do the following morning if no one remembered him. He also remembered what Ira had said about the cops picking him up, dressed the way he was. He wasn’t going to let that happen if he could help it.

So he planned to stay on the beach and sleep in the rented car. He had brought food with him. He swam, smoked and drank too much. He hated being alone. He thought the day would never end.

* * *

The day passed too swiftly for the men of the Homicide squad. Every available man at the headquarters had been thrown into a search for information regarding the broken spectacles. The lab boys had come up with some useful information considering what they had had to work on.

At 07.45 Terrell was still at his desk. Beigler and Hess were with him. The three men were drinking coffee and smoking. Terrell was looking through the report from the lab for the third time. He seemed to be trying to squeeze more information out of it than it actually contained. The lab boys had classified the two lenses of the broken spectacles. They said the owner of the spectacles suffered from acute astigmatism and would have to wear the spectacles constantly. The right eye was more affected than the left.

This was something to work on and raised Terrell’s hopes.

He had already sent three of his men out to all the wholesale opticians within a radius of a hundred miles as a start.

‘Never mind that it’s Sunday. Find out where the top man lives and get him to open up the factory,’ Terrell said. ‘I want to know who those lenses were supplied to and I want to know today!’

He had told Jacoby to call the hospitals and eye specialists listed in the classified telephone book.

Another three men were trying to trace the factory that had made the plastic frames of the

spectacles. Here again, this would be no easy task as the factories would be shut for the weekend, but Terrell would listen to no objections.

He now picked up the report on the plaster casts of the heel impressions found near Coral Cove. The report was brief but interesting. The man they were looking for was close on six feet tall and weighed 190 pounds. The number 10 shoes he was wearing were practically new. They were supplied by 'The Man's Shop', a swank outfitters in Paradise City. A police officer was already on his way to try to find the assistant who had recently sold such a pair of shoes.

Putting down the report, Terrell said, 'What's your next move, Fred?'

'I guess I'll go out to Coral Cove and see what the boys are doing. It's light enough now for a good look around. Okay with you, Chief?'

Terrell nodded and when Hess had gone, he poured more coffee into his paper cup and looked over at Beigler.

'I was hoping something would break after last night's broadcast.'

'Saturday night's a bad night. Most folk are out. There's a repeat in five minutes. I'll get back to my desk,' Beigler said, moving to the door.

When he had gone, Terrell took a towel and shaving kit from his desk drawer and went along to the Men's room.

Beigler found Lepski sitting in the Detectives' room, smoking and dozing. Jacoby was talking on the telephone. As Beigler sat down and lit a cigarette, Jacoby replaced the receiver and swung around in his chair.

'Dr. Hunstein has two patients with eyes that match our prescription,' he said. 'A girl of twenty-three and another of twenty-five. Both blondes. Both local girls.'

'Find out if they are missing and find out if they've ever owned a pair of blue plastic spectacles,' Beigler said, then looked at Lepski as Jacoby began to dial. 'Those spectacles need not have anything to do with the stiff. Thought of that?'

'You're paid to do the thinking, Sarg,' Lepski said with a grin. 'I'm only paid to do the leg work.'

Ten minutes talking by Jacoby produced the information that neither of the girls were missing and neither of them had ever owned a pair of blue plastic spectacles.

'Keep at it,' Beigler said, drawing a line through Dr. Hunstein's name.

The telephone bell rang. Beigler sighed and lifted the receiver. Then began a stream of useless information inspired by the broadcast appeal that had to be checked and that poured into Beigler's ear for the rest of the morning.

At lunchtime, Terrell ate a sandwich and then decided to go to Coral Cove to see what Hess was doing. As he got into his car, he thought that the morning had gone like a flash and they were no further to finding out who the girl was than if they had all spent a nice relaxing morning at home.

He remained with Hess for two hours. Every inch of the hummocks and the surrounding ground had been searched and had produced not one single clue.

'A stiff 'un,' Hess growled, wiping his sweating face. 'I'll come back with you, Chief. Maybe by now there's a lead on those spectacles.'

Back at headquarters, they found Beigler with the first of the lists of names and addresses that had just come in.

'Believe it or not, we have thirty-two girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five who wear spectacles of our prescription,' he told Terrell. 'Three of them live here. Ten in Miami. Twelve in

Jacksonville. Three in Tampa and the rest along the Keys. None of them have been reported missing, but that doesn't mean they aren't missing.'

Terrell grunted.

'Get Max onto it. Let's find out if they owned the spectacles.'

Beigler gave the list to Jacoby who went over to the telephone, a resigned expression on his face.

'There's a guy on his way in who might be interesting,' Beigler went on to Terrell. 'He claims he saw a girl and a man driving towards Coral Cove around eight o'clock in the morning on the 17th of last month. that would be six weeks ago.'

Terrell's face brightened.

'Fine. When he arrives, bring him to my office.' Seeing Lepski was about to light a cigarette, he said, 'Give Max a hand with that list. I want some action around here!'

When he had gone, Lepski lifted his eyebrows.

'Getting the old man worried?' he asked.

'It's getting me worried!' Beigler snapped. 'Get going! Do some work!'

Lepski joined Jacoby and pulled another telephone towards him. He examined the list of names and addresses, then said, 'Hey Joe! You see the Devon girl is on this list?'

Beigler looked at him, an exasperated expression in his eyes.

'Yeah. I can read. What of it? We know she's not missing. So what?'

Lepski stubbed out his cigarette and lit another before saying, 'Only she doesn't wear spectacles.'

'So what?' Beigler snapped. 'Get on with it, Tom, for Pete's sake! The trouble with you is you prefer to yak than to work!'

'I said she doesn't wear spectacles, Joe,' Lepski said, patiently. 'I've seen her four or five times driving her car. She doesn't wear spectacles!'

Beigler stared at him, sudden interest in his eyes. He reached forward and picked up the Lab report on the lens. Then he stared at Lepski again.

'I may like yakiting,' Lepski said dryly, 'but I'm a damn fine cop. The nickel dropped yet, Joe?'

'It says here the owner of the spectacles has to wear them constantly,' Beigler said, frowning. 'You say her name's on that list supplied by Dr. Weidman and she doesn't wear spectacles?'

'You're coming along fine, Joe. Watch you don't bust a vein in your brain.'

Beigler got to his feet and went over to where Lepski was sitting. He picked up the list and studied it.

'That's right. Norena Devon, Graham Co-Ed School, Miami.' He rubbed his jaw. 'Could be a mistake. I'll talk to Weidman.'

He crossed back to his desk and put a call through to Dr. Weidman's office in Miami. The answering nurse said Dr. Weidman was out and wouldn't be back until nine o'clock. She sounded a little hurt that anyone would want to talk to the doctor on such a nice, sunny Sunday afternoon as this one was.

'This is Paradise City police,' Beigler said. 'I want information on one of Dr. Weidman's patients.'

'I'm afraid I can't discuss Dr. Weidman's patients with anyone over the telephone,' the nurse said primly. 'You must come and see the doctor if you need information,' and she hung up.

'Cow!' Beigler said and slammed down the receiver. 'Hey, Tom! Get off your arse. Go out to Miami and find Dr. Weidman. We can't wait until he comes back. Talk to him. You know what we

want.'

Lepski jumped to his feet. Anything was better than staying in the hot, stuffy, Detectives' room.

'Okay, Sarg, I'll find him,' he said and hurried off.

The telephone bell rang.

Charley, the desk sergeant, said, 'Joe, I've got Mr. Harry Tullas down here. He says you want to see him.'

Tullas was the man who had phoned in, claiming to have seen a girl and a man driving towards Coral Cove.

'Shoot him up, Charlie,' Beigler said.

Harry Tullas was a tall, heavily built man, wearing a cheap, but carefully pressed suit. As Beigler got up and shook hands with him, he guessed Tullas was a salesman of some kind, and he was right.

'Thank you for coming in, Mr. Tullas,' he said. 'The Chief wants to meet you. Will you come along with me?'

'Glad to,' Tullas said. 'I only hope I'm not wasting your time.'

Beigler led him into Terrell's office and introduced him.

'Sit down, Mr. Tullas,' Terrell said, waving to a chair. 'I understand you think you can help us.'

'I listened to this broadcast this morning. I remembered this girl so I thought it wouldn't do any harm to give you a call.'

'I wish everyone was as public-spirited,' Terrell said with feeling. 'Have some coffee?'

'No, thanks, never touch it.'

At a nod from Terrell, Beigler poured two paper cups of coffee, one for Terrell and the other for himself. Both men always worked better with coffee at their elbows.

'Well now, Mr. Tullas.'

'I represent Mellor's Products, Captain,' Tullas said. 'Grocery. I call on all the little stores out this way from Miami to Key West. On 17th of last month I made an early start. I left Miami at seven-thirty in the morning.'

'Just a moment, Mr. Tullas. Let's get all this straight. We haven't your address, have we?' Terrell broke in.

'377 Biscayne Street, Miami.'

'Thanks. Now go on.'

'I got onto 4A and I was heading for Seacombe where I had a couple of calls to make,' Tullas continued. 'The traffic was pretty heavy. In front of me was a Roadmaster Buick convertible with the top down. A man was driving and a blonde girl was at his side. The traffic was moving along around fifty miles an hour. Then suddenly this guy indicated by his trafficator he was going to turn right. I had to brake pretty quickly because I hadn't expected him to turn right.'

'Why was that?' Terrell asked.

'All the traffic was heading for Seacombe. The road this guy was turning into is the dirt road to Coral Cove. People just don't go to Coral Cove during the week. It leads to nowhere but the sea. It's a weekend place. I go there sometimes on Sundays with the kids.'

'What time would this be?'

'A little after eight o'clock. These two weren't dressed for the beach. I thought it was a little odd. Then when I heard the broadcast, I thought I should call you.'

'You did right. They went up this road and you lost sight of them?'

‘Yeah, but, later, I saw the man again in Seacombe.’

‘Tell me about the girl. Can you describe her?’

‘She looked around seventeen or eighteen. She wore a white shirt and a small black hat. Oh, yes, she wore blue framed glasses.’

Terrell and Beigler exchanged glances.

‘You say you saw the man again?’

‘That’s correct. I had made my calls in Seacombe and I was at the bus terminal filling up with gas. This guy pulled up near where I was standing. I recognized the car and I recognized him. He got out of the car and went over to where a girl was sitting.’

‘Just a moment, Mr. Tullas. What about the other girl?’

‘She wasn’t with him this time.’

Again Terrell and Beigler exchanged glances.

‘Now you say he picked up another girl?’

‘That’s right.’ Tullas grinned. ‘I’m a respectably married man with three kids, Captain, but this girl certainly attracted my attention. I reckon every man around had an eye on her. She had more sex in her little finger than some of the sex kittens you read about have in their whole bodies. Well, this guy went over to her and said something. She said something to him. Whatever it was she said, it made him pretty mad. He got red in the face and he turned around and went back to his car. I’ve never seen a guy get so mad so quickly. I was interested, you understand, because I had seen him go up the dirt road with this other girl and here he was with another girl. Well, as I said, he got mad and I thought for a moment this glamour puss had given him the brush, but no, she got up and went after him and got into the car. They drove away, heading for Paradise City. That’s the last I saw of them.’

‘Did you get the licence number of the car?’

‘Why, no. I wasn’t interested in the car. It was a Buick Roadmaster convertible. That’s all I can tell you about it.’

‘Colour?’

‘Two tone: red and blue.’

‘New?’

‘About a year.’

‘And this man? Can you describe him?’

‘Sure. He looked like a law officer. That would be my guess or maybe a bank official. He was around six foot tall with massive shoulders; around 200 pounds at a guess. Handsome, blond, suntanned. He had a close cut moustache. He was wearing a brown straw hat and a fawn suit: a snappy dresser.’

Beigler suddenly sat forward. Something had nudged his memory.

‘Mr. Tullas, what age would this guy be?’

‘Oh, thirty-eight. forty.’

‘Was there anything else you noticed about his face: something particular?’

Tullas frowned.

‘I don’t know what you mean by particular, he had a cleft chin: sort of gave him a racy look, you know what I mean, like a film star.’

Beigler snatched up the telephone receiver while Terrell stared expectantly at him.

‘Max? Get me that photo of Phil Algir the New York police sent us. You know, the con man,’

Beigler said.

‘Algir?’ Terrell said, lifting his bushy eyebrows.

Beigler replaced the receiver.

‘Could be wrong, but the description fits. He ducked out of New York while they were getting a warrant for him. Could be him.’

‘While we’re waiting, can you describe this girl who went with him?’ Terrell asked Tullas.

‘You bet I can! I first saw her as I parked my car to make a call. She got off the Miami airport bus and she walked over to a bench and sat down. I spotted her because she had this ducktail walk.’ Tullas grinned. ‘She was certainly waving her prat around, Captain. Seen nothing like it since Monroe.’

‘What age would she be?’

‘Oh, eighteen or nineteen. She was about five foot six and well built. She wore a dark green suede jacket and tight black pants. She had on a white head scarf.’

‘She came off the airport bus?’

‘Yeah. She was still sitting on the bench when I had finished my call. Then this guy came up.’

Jacoby came in and put a file on the desk and then went away.

Beigler took a photograph they had been sent from the file and put it in front of Tullas.

‘That him?’ he asked.

Tullas stared at the photograph, then nodded.

‘Yeah. that’s him!’

When Tullas had gone, Terrell said, ‘Looks like we’ve got our break. Get after Algir, Joe. He may still be here, but I doubt it. Tell Hess I want him.’

Hess came into Terrell’s office a few minutes later.

Quickly Terrell told him what Tullas had said.

‘I don’t know who this girl is Algir picked up, but find her. She could lead us to him. She got off the airport bus a little after 08.15 hours. She must have come in on the New York flight. Check it, Fred.’

* * *

Hess walked into the Air Control office at the Miami Airport. A girl paused in her typing and looked inquiringly at him.

‘Paradise City police,’ Hess said and flashed his badge. As the girl got hastily to her feet and came over to the dividing counter, he went on. ‘I want to see the passengers list New York flight arriving here 07.30 hours on the 17th of last month.’

‘Yes, sir. I can give you that.’

She went away and Hess wandered over to a bench seat and sat down. He had left Terrell talking to the New York police on the telephone. An all-out hunt for Algir was being organized. What puzzled Hess after reading Algir’s record was why he had turned killer. There was no hint of violence in his long police record. Algir was a smooth operator. He didn’t have to use violence.

The girl came back with the passengers’ list.

‘You can keep that, sir,’ she said, handing it to Hess.

He studied the thirty-two names. One name made him stiffen and frown.

Ira Marsh.

That's damn odd, he thought. Marsh? Could it be a coincidence? Muriel Marsh. Ira Marsh. Relations?

'Got any dope on this woman. Ira Marsh?' he asked the girl who was watching him with interest.

'I have a copy of her ticket if that would help you.'

'Yeah. let's see it.'

The girl went to the file and after a little delay produced the ticket. It told him that Ira Marsh was travelling alone and she lived at 579, East Battery Street, New York.

'Thanks,' Hess said and leaving the office, he walked over to the Police Control barrier.

An hour and a half later, he was back at Police Headquarters, reporting to Terrell.

'The girl Tullas saw at the Seacombe bus terminal is Ira Marsh,' he said as he helped himself to coffee. 'The boys at the Control barrier remember her. She seems to have imprinted herself on a lot of guys' minds. Ira Marsh was on the New York flight. She took a bus from the airport to Seacombe. The point is who is Ira Marsh? We have her address. How's about getting New York to find out more about her?'

'Do that,' Terrell said, 'and fast. Find out if she happens to be related to Devon's wife. She could have come down for the funeral, but what's she doing with Algir?'

Hess had scarcely left the room when Beigler and Lepski came in.

'Tom's got something that could mean something, Chief,' Beigler said. 'Among the names of the girls who might have worn those spectacles is Norena Devon. Lepski has seen the girl driving around four or five times during the past weeks. He says she doesn't wear spectacles. I sent him to talk to Dr. Weidman who issued a prescription. Take it from there, Tom.'

'Well, I saw this guy,' Lepski said. 'There's no mistake. Norena Devon has acute astigmatism. The right eye worse than the left. I showed the doc the lens and he says it was made to his prescription. He's given me the name of the optician but the guy who fitted the glasses is away somewhere for the weekend. He'll be back Tuesday morning.'

Terrell rubbed the back of his neck, frowning at Lepski.

'I don't get any of this. Why are you wasting your time chasing after this when we know Miss Devon isn't missing?'

Lepski shifted his feet.

'I thought it was odd. Miss Devon doesn't wear spectacles.'

'You mean she never wears them?'

'I wouldn't say that, but according to doc she would be half blind if she didn't wear them always.'

'Don't you know girls don't like wearing glasses?'

Terrell said impatiently. 'She probably goes around half blind. Girls are like that.'

'She drives a car without them.'

'Okay, okay, I'll talk to her father when I have time. Now, for God's sake, Tom, let's get down to something that's important.' He looked at his watch. 'It's close on nine o'clock and we've missed the news broadcast. Get Algir's description out on the seven-thirty news broadcast tomorrow morning. Take that photo and start working the hotels. See if he's staying in town. Get going!'

Lepski took the photograph, exchanged glances with Beigler and went out.

Terrell said, 'And, Joe, don't send men out on unimportant assignments when we want every man we can get to work on Algir. You should know better than to bother about Mel Devon's daughter.'

‘Yes, Chief,’ Beigler said, crestfallen. ‘I thought it was odd.’

‘All right skip it!’ Terrell snapped. ‘Suppose you call up that dwarf Edris and find out if Muriel Devon ever mentioned this girl, Ira Marsh to him.’

‘He’ll be at the restaurant now.’

‘Call him there.’

Beigler went back to his desk. Hess was replacing the receiver on his desk.

‘They’re sending someone to East Battery Street and they’ll be calling back,’ he said, yawned and stood up to stretch. ‘Looks like another late night.’

Beigler grunted. He dialled La Coquille restaurant.

After a short delay, Louis, the maître d’hôtel, answered.

‘City Police. I want to talk to Edris,’ Beigler said.

‘He’s not here.’

‘Where is he?’

‘New York. He won’t be back for ten days. He’s visiting a dying friend.’

‘Well, at least he’s got a friend,’ Beigler said, and hung up.

Hess said, ‘You know what foxed me is why Algir turned killer. It’s rare for a con man to do that. What’s the motive? Must have been something pretty big.’

Beigler pulled the telephone towards him.

‘You worry about it,’ he said. ‘I’ve got my own worries.’ He called the General Motors Night Service.

When a man answered, he said, ‘Paradise City Police. I’m trying to trace a Buick Roadmaster convertible. Two tone: blue and red, probably last year’s model. Any ideas?’

‘We’ve got three of them in the garage right now,’ the man told him.

‘The owner is six foot tall, big, blue eyes, blond hair and a snappy dresser.’

‘Oh, sure. We know him, Mr. Harry Chambers. He’s visiting down here.’

‘You haven’t his car there?’ Beigler said, sitting on the edge of his chair.

‘No. It was in last week. Haven’t seen him since then.’

‘He owe you anything?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll find out. Hold on.’

Beigler sat back and winked at Hess.

‘Got him first shot. Who says I’m not one hell of a detective?’

‘Luck,’ Hess said sourly.

The man came back on the line.

‘No. He paid up on the ninth. Our clerk got the idea he was leaving town.’

‘Know his address?’

‘He was staying at the Regent.’

‘Do you remember if this guy had a cleft chin?’

‘Sure. Big enough to lose a marble in.’

‘Thanks,’ Beigler said and smiling happily, he replaced the receiver. ‘He’s at the Regent or was and Tom’s walking his legs off trying to find him!’

Hess reached for the telephone. He called the radio room and told them to contact Lepski fast and tell him to go to the Regent Hotel.

Lepski picked up the message as he was driving along the Promenade. He swung the car down a

side street and made for the Regent Hotel.

Ten minutes later, he was calling Terrell.

‘Algir left the Regent on the ninth; left no forwarding address. Looks like he’s left town.’

‘He could have run short of money. Start checking on the cheaper joints,’ Terrell said. ‘He could still be here.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Lepski said and after he had hung up, he groaned.

Ticky Edris came out of the kitchenette, carrying a jug of coffee which he put on the table. He had slept badly and was edgy. During the night he had lain in the dark and brooded about his now uncertain future. He hated being forced to leave his apartment and all because Algir was an irresponsible, unreliable sonofabitch. He glanced at Algir, the hate in his eyes scarcely concealed, as he poured two cups of coffee.

Algir sat in the armchair, smoking. He also had slept badly, and there were dark smudges under his eyes. He kept looking towards the clock, waiting impatiently for the 07.34 hours news broadcast.

‘Hasn’t the paper come yet?’ he demanded as he reached for his cup of coffee.

‘No!’ Edris went over to the cocktail cabinet and added a liberal shot of brandy to his coffee.

‘I’ll have some of that,’ Algir said.

Edris gave him the bottle and as Algir poured the brandy into his cup, he again looked at the clock. It was 07.27 hours. Had the clock stopped? He checked his wristwatch and grunted with impatience.

‘Oh, relax!’ Edris said irritably. ‘I tell you we’re in the clear! Hamilton said the cops haven’t a clue. He doesn’t think they’ll ever find out who she is.’

‘That bum! What does he know about it?’ Algir sipped his coffee, then reaching forward, he snapped on the radio. The two men listened impatiently to the tag end of a swing number and then with even more impatience to the political news. Then finally, they stiffened to attention as the announcer continued, ‘There have been new developments in the Coral Cove murder case. The police want to interview Phillip Algir, alias Harry Chambers, last known address The Regent Hotel, Paradise City, who they believe can help them in their inquiries. Algir’s description is as follows: height six foot; weight 190 pounds; broad shoulders, blond, small moustache, blue eyes and a deep cleft in his chin. Last seen, he was wearing a fawn—coloured suit and a chocolate coloured straw hat with a red band. He was driving a convertible Roadmaster Buick, two toned red and blue, licence number NY 4599. If anyone has information concerning this man’s whereabouts, please telephone Police headquarters: Paradise 0010 immediately.’

The two men sat stunned for some thirty seconds while dance music filled the yawning silence between them. Then Algir suddenly came to life. With a muttered curse, he flung his coffee cup at Edris. The cup exploded in fragments against Edris’ chest, splashing hot coffee in his face.

‘You slob!’ Algir yelled, jumping to his feet. ‘I’ll kill you for this! God damn you! I’ll tear your stinking heart out!’

Edris slid off the settee as Algir rushed at him. Quick as a lizard he avoided Algir’s groping hands and darted into his bedroom, slamming and locking the door.

Cursing, Algir drove his shoulder against the door panel. The door quivered, but held. He stood back, panting, glaring at the door, his hands clenching and unclenching. Then the full impact of the broadcast hit him and he nearly threw up. He sat down, swallowing bile, his body cold, icy sweat beading his face, his teeth chattering.

In his bedroom, also scared witless, sure that Algir would murder him if he could get at him, Edris rushed to his chest of drawers, jerked open the lower drawer and searched frantically for the .25 automatic pistol he kept there. He couldn’t find it. Flinging everything out of the drawer, he satisfied himself the gun wasn’t there. Algir must have taken it, he thought. No one else could have taken it but

Algir. His legs shaking, he abruptly sat on the bed, staring at the door like a terrified bird facing a snake.

It wasn't until Algir had drunk half the bottle of brandy and some twenty minutes had elapsed that he began to recover his nerve. They hadn't got him yet, he told himself. He was in a jam, but he still had a chance if he used his head. The cops would be watching the airport and the railroad station. They would be looking out for his car on the road. The Havana flight was down the drain. Even if they weren't watching the road, he dare not use the Buick which at this moment was safely out of sight in Edris' lock-up garage.

Well, that damned dwarf had got him into this and now he would have to get him out of it! He got to his feet and went over to the bedroom door.

'All right, Ticky,' he said. 'Come on out. I won't touch you. We've got to talk this one over. Come on out!'

'I'm staying here,' Edris said. He was changing into a dry shirt. 'I don't trust you.'

'Don't be a fool. We're wasting time. We're both in this. We've got to talk about it.'

Edris hesitated. Algir's voice was no longer angry. He knew Algir's temper went as quickly as it came but he wished he had his gun. He slid into another suit, then as Algir again shouted to him to come out, he unlocked the door and cautiously opened it.

Algir was standing in the middle of the room. In his right hand, he held Edris' gun, pointing at the floor.

Edris paused. His face twitched as he stared at the gun.

'All right, all right, you yellow freak,' Algir snarled. 'I'm not going to do anything to you.'

'Gimme that gun! It's mine!' Edris said, moving into the sitting room.

'You're safer without it,' Algir said, dropping the gun into his pocket. 'Sit down! We've got to talk.'

Edris sat down, his mind busy. How had the cops got onto Algir? he asked himself. He knew if they caught him, he would talk. Algir would have no qualms about implicating him; Edris was sure of that. There was only one thing to do. He would have to catch Algir off guard and kill him before the cops did catch him.

Algir was saying, 'We're both in this, Ticky. It doesn't look as if the cops are on to you or they would have been here by now. It doesn't look as if they are on to Ira yet. They couldn't suppress the news if they knew she wasn't Norena. Now, listen, we stand a small chance of beating this rap. We might just make it in your Mini. If we can get as far as Miami, I know a guy who will keep us under the wraps until the heat cools. This guy has connections and he can get us onto a boat for Cuba, but it'll cost. He's expensive. Before we leave here, we've got to scrape up every dollar we can lay our hands on. So we've just got to make a try at the Garland loot.'

Edris stared at him. He knew what Algir was saying about getting as much money as they could together made sense, but not from the bank! That was crazy!

'You can't go to the bank, you hunk head,' he snarled. 'They'll spot you.'

'Who says I'm going to the bank? Until it's time to move, I'm staying right here,' Algir said. He pointed to the telephone. 'Call Ira! Tell her to meet you at the café opposite the bank in half an hour. You said yesterday, if I quit, she would bring the money out. Well, that's just what she's going to do! I don't give a damn how you persuade her, but persuade her! Tell her as soon as the vaults are open for her to get the money, then she must tell the guards she is feeling ill and she must leave the bank.'

You'll be waiting at the cafe. Go on, telephone her how!'

Edris hesitated.

Cursing, Algir pulled the gun from his pocket and pointed it at Edris.

'If you don't do it, I'll kill you! Do it, damn you!'

Edris walked slowly over to the telephone. He dialled a number after first checking in the book. A woman's voice answered: 'This is Mr. Devon's residence.'

'I want to speak to Miss Devon,' Edris said.

The woman told him to hold on. There was a short delay, then Ira came to the telephone.

'This is Ticky,' Edris said. 'I want you to meet me at the cafe opposite the bank in half an hour.'

'Why?' Ira demanded, her voice a little shrill.

'Never mind why, do what I say or you'll be sorry!' and Edris hung up.

Algir got to his feet. He still kept Edris covered.

'I want your share of the Wanassee take, Ticky. Twenty-five thousand. Hurry it up! I'll keep it as security. You're not walking out on me with Garland's money. Hand it over!'

Edris saw the threat in Algir's eyes and he didn't argue.

He went to a drawer in his desk, pulled it right out, groped at the back and brought out a thick sealed envelope. He threw it at Algir.

Algir tore open the envelope, satisfied himself it contained Edris' share of Wanassee's money, then put it in his pocket.

'You'll get it all back, Ticky. Now beat it! Time's running out.'

With murder in his heart, his face convulsed with rage, Edris bounced out of the apartment, slamming the door after him.

* * *

Joe Beigler sat at his desk, his face a little drawn, his eyes a little sunken. He had been at his desk now for eight nonstop hours coping with reports, telephone calls and radio messages that kept coming in concerning Algir and the Coral Cove murder.

Every available detective was out checking on the stream of information that Beigler kept passing on. The Detectives' room was deserted except for Beigler who wished someone had the time to bring him some coffee.

The telephone bell rang for the twelfth time in the hour.

Grunting, he scooped up the receiver.

'That you, Joe? This is Aldwick, security guard, Florida Safe Deposit Bank.'

'Hello, Jim, what do you want?'

'This guy, Algir. We know him here. He's rented a safe and he comes in and out every day.'

'Is that right?' Beigler came to attention. 'What's he doing renting a safe with you?'

'Big gambling man, that's his story. Registered in the name of Lowson Forester, but the description matches and I recognize him from the picture in the papers. It's Algir all right.'

'Look, Jim, I'll send someone down as soon as I have a man to spare. Maybe he has something in his safe we should look at.'

'You're unlucky. We can't open the safe without his key.'

'You can bust it open, can't you?'

‘That’s for Mr. Devon to say.’

‘Okay, as soon as I have a man I’ll send him down, but if Algir shows up before then, will you handle him?’

‘You bet. Nothing I’d like better. So long, Joe, don’t over work,’ and Aldwick hung up.

Beigler scribbled a note on a scrap of paper and spiked it. The telephone bell rang again and shaking his head, he lifted the receiver.

* * *

Ira walked into the cafe and paused to accustom her eyes to the dim light after the glare of the early morning sun. She saw Edris waving to her from the far end of the bar and reluctantly, she walked down the aisle and joined him.

She knew something was badly wrong by his tense expression and by the whiteness of his face, and she felt a chill creep up her spine. Neither of them said anything until the barman had taken her order for coffee.

She had been lucky, she told herself that Mel hadn’t come down for breakfast before she left. He would have been certain to have questioned her for leaving so early.

She had told Mrs. Sterling she had an early date and couldn’t wait for breakfast. Now she was here, she couldn’t imagine what Edris wanted, and as she stared at him, seeing the way his eyes kept shifting and the sweat beads on his narrow forehead, she felt frightened.

Edris didn’t waste any time.

‘Seen the papers this morning?’ he demanded abruptly.

She shook her head.

‘Phil’s in trouble. The cops are looking for him. We haven’t much time, baby, so listen carefully. You’re getting the Garland money.’

He slid the key Algir had cut across the table to her.

‘Oh, no!’ Ira said, shrinking away from the key.

‘Shut up! Phil can’t get it. He has to keep under the wraps so you’re going to get it.’

‘I can’t! It’s too dangerous!’

Edris snarled at her. He looked like a vicious, cornered animal.

‘Save your breath!’ He pulled from his hip pocket a copy of the Paradise City Sun he had brought with him.

‘Take a look at this.’

She stared at the photograph of Algir on the front page of the paper and at the banner headlines. With growing horror, she read that Algir was wanted for questioning by the police in connection with the murder of the unknown girl found at Coral Cove.

Murder! Algir!

She stared stupidly at Edris.

‘I don’t understand. Did he . . .?’

‘It’s time you did understand,’ Edris said, his voice a hissing whisper. ‘That was crap I told you that Norena was drowned. She was in the way so Phil took her from the school before he collected you and he wrung her neck. The stupid slob didn’t bury her deep enough so they’ve found what’s left of her!’

Ira thought she was going to faint. She gripped the edge of the table with both hands, steadying herself, feeling the blood drain out of her face.

‘So they’re on to him and they’re hunting for him,’ Edris went on, watching her. ‘He needs money for a quick getaway. You’re going to get it for him or we’ll all be in the cart. Understand? If they catch him, he’ll sing his head off, and you and me will be down a very deep hole.’

‘I won’t do it!’ Ira said huskily. ‘It’s nothing to do with me. I didn’t know.’

‘Oh, shut up! You’ll do it!’ Edris said viciously. ‘Do you imagine the cops will ever believe you didn’t know that Algir knocked her off so you could take her place? This is a murder rap, baby, and you’ll be nailed as an accessory. You’ll draw life. Phil and I will go to the gas box, but you’ll spend the rest of your days in another kind of box with bars. Personally I prefer gas.’

Ira shivered.

‘Now use your head. You get the money for us and you’ll be in the clear,’ Edris said. ‘They can never hope to find out who the dead girl really is so long as they don’t catch Phil. I’m leaving, but you can stay. You’re the one in the gravy. You can still keep your home and still keep in the clear so long as Phil and me get the money. Can’t you see that? This is your big chance, but you’ve got to pay for it.’ He looked at his watch. The time was 08.50 hours. ‘Now, come on, doll, tell me you’re going to do it!’

Ira sat for a long moment, motionless. If she could only get rid of these two animals, she told herself, she would do anything!

Finally, she nodded.

‘I’ll try,’ she said, not looking at him.

‘You’ll do better than that. Listen carefully: as soon as the vault is open, get the money. Stick it in your pants. Tell whoever it is you have to tell you’re feeling sick. You’ve eaten something bad or something. Ask to go home. I’ll be waiting right here. Give me the money and go home and you’ll be in the clear. Phil and I will be out of Paradise City by eleven. Do you dig all that?’

She was getting over the shock now and her panic was subsiding. This was an all or nothing chance, she told herself. Once she was rid of these two, she might even be able to hold onto this new way of life she loved so much.

‘I’ll do it,’ she said breathlessly. ‘I’ll get you the money,’ and she stood up.

Edris stared at her.

‘I’ll be waiting, baby. Remember, you slip up and we’re all done for, remember that.’

She walked unsteadily out of the cafe and across the street to the bank. She was sick with fear. She was only just beginning to accept the fact that Algir had actually murdered Mel’s daughter. She was sure if Mel ever found out, he wouldn’t believe she had had no part in the murder.

She had to get the money to get rid of these two. If they were caught! She shivered at the thought of trying to explain and convince Mel and the police she hadn’t known that Algir had murdered Norena. She knew Edris was right, they would never believe her.

The next hour passed agonizingly slowly. She sat at her desk in the accounts department aimlessly turning sheets of paper, too fearful to know what she was doing. One of the girl clerks, passing, stopped to ask her if she was all right.

‘You look terrible, Norena. Don’t you think you should go home?’

‘I’m all right,’ Ira said curtly. ‘Don’t fuss.’

The girl looked at her again, then shrugging, she went away.

As the hands of the wall clock slowly moved to 09.45 hours, Ira got up and walked across the main hall towards the vault. Aldwick wasn't there and this surprised her. The other guard was unlocking the grill.

'Where's Aldwick?' she asked, pausing as he slid back the grill.

'Busy,' he said curtly and handed her the pass key.

She went quickly down the steps, snapping on the lights of the vault. Reaching her desk, she paused for a long moment to listen, aware that her heart was hammering and her mouth was unbearably dry. Hearing only the hum of voices and the shuffling of feet from the main lobby, she walked quickly down the lane that led to the Garland safe.

Taking the key Edris had given her from her pocket, she pushed it into the first lock and turned the key. Then using her pass key, she unlocked the second lock. She looked back over her shoulder down the long lane, then seeing no one, she opened the safe door, snatched out the bulky envelope which she had put into the safe only a few days ago, shut the safe door and relocked it.

She pulled up her skirt and slipped the envelope inside her panties, flattening the envelope against her stomach. She adjusted the elastic band so that it was firmly against the envelope, then she dropped her skirt.

She walked quickly back to her desk, her face white, her hands trembling. She put the pass key into the desk drawer and locked the drawer. As she did so, Aldwick, the guard came down the steps.

'Morning, Miss Devon,' he said and looked sharply at her. 'Mr. Devon is asking for you. He wants you right away.' He looked at her again. 'Something wrong, Miss?'

'It's all right. I'm - I'm not feeling very well. My father wants me?'

'Yes, miss.'

'The pass key is in this drawer. I'll leave the key in the lock,' she said, and nodding, she hurried up the steps and into the main hall. She made her way to Mel's office, rapped on the door and entered. She came to an abrupt standstill when she saw Mel wasn't alone. With him was

Detective 2nd Grade Tom Lepski who was standing by the window, looking towards her. She knew at once he was a detective, and it was only by an effort of will that she came further into the room.

'You - you wanted me, daddy?'

'Yes,' Mel said, getting to his feet. 'This is Detective Lepski of police headquarters.' Seeing her white, frightened face, he went on, smiling, 'Nothing to be worried about, my dear. He thinks you might be able to help him . . . just a few questions.'

Lepski was a little puzzled. Why was the girl so obviously scared? She looked ill, as if she might faint at any moment. Why?

'Sit down, Miss Devon,' he said, softening his usual tough cop voice. 'I won't keep you long.'

This was the girl, he was thinking, who needed to wear spectacles all the time, and yet she wasn't even wearing them in the bank!

Ira sat down on an upright chair near Mel's desk. She gripped her trembling hands firmly between her knees and forced herself to meet Lepski's cop stare.

'You have seen this man?' Lepski asked, producing a photograph of Algir and handing it to her.

Ira stared at it and nodded.

'Yes. It's Mr. Forester.'

'How often did he come to the bank, Miss Devon?'

Lepski returned the photograph to his wallet and produced a notebook.

‘Every day.’

‘You went with him to unlock his safe?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Did you ever have the opportunity of seeing inside his safe?’

‘No. When I had unlocked the first lock, I always left him.’

‘Did he ever give you any idea what he was putting in or taking out of his safe?’

‘No.’

While he was asking these questions, Lepski was writing both questions and answers in his notebook. He had had a sudden idea and he wanted to put it to a test.

‘He left the Regent Hotel on 9th of this month, Miss Devon. He didn’t give you a change of address?’

‘No.’

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

‘No.’

Lepski slipped in his catch question.

‘Did he ever mention a Dr. Weidman of Miami?’

‘No.’

‘Do you know Dr. Weidman, Miss Devon?’

Ira stiffened. She looked at Lepski who was writing in his notebook, his face expressionless.

‘No, I don’t.’

‘You have never heard of him?’

‘No.’

Well, what do you know? Lepski thought. Weidman had Norena’s card on his files. He had tested her for glasses and here she was saying she had never heard of him. What the hell was all this?

Play it cool, he told himself. Don’t start anything you can’t finish. He was aware that Mel was looking at him with a puzzled stare.

‘When Forester came to the bank, he always had a briefcase with him?’

‘Yes.’

‘You have no idea what was in the briefcase?’

‘No.’

Lepski wrote for a moment, then looked up and smiled.

‘That’s all, Miss Devon. You might just look at this and see if I’ve got it right. If I have, will you initial it?’

He handed the notebook to Ira who took it reluctantly.

‘What’s the idea?’ Mel asked sharply. ‘She hasn’t made a statement. What do you want her to initial it for?’

Lepski gave him a guileless smile.

‘It’s a new police regulation, Mr. Devon. Nothing to it. Just to keep our record straight.’

Mel shrugged and smiled reassuringly at Ira.

‘Read it through then, hon and initial it.’

Ira read the tiny, neat handwriting. Her instinct for danger was sounding an alarm bell. She had a feeling that she was walking into some kind of trap, but she had no idea what the trap was.

‘Yes, it’s all right,’ she said and took the ballpoint Lepski handed her. She scribbled her initials at the bottom of the page.

Lepski got to his feet, took the notebook from her and thanked her.

There’s nothing the matter with this girl’s eyesight, he was thinking. Just what could this mean?

‘Oh, one more question, Miss Devon. Have you ever heard of a girl named Ira Marsh?’

Ira seemed to shrink in her chair. Her face turned so white Mel jumped to his feet.

‘No - no. I’ve never heard of her!’

‘Norena! Aren’t you well?’ Mel asked, coming around his desk and reaching her.

‘No, daddy. I feel awful,’ Ira said. ‘I ate something last night, may I go home? I’ll be all right if I just lie down.’

Mel looked at Lepski.

‘Will you run along officer? You see how it is.’

‘Sure, sure,’ Lepski said. ‘I’m sorry,’ and with his eyes glittering with excitement, he left the room.

‘I’ll get someone to take you home, darling,’ Mel said. ‘I’m so sorry. Now, don’t you worry.’

‘Oh, don’t fuss!’ Ira said, pulling herself together. She got to her feet. ‘I don’t want anyone to see me home. I’m not dying!’ and turning, she went quickly from the room, leaving him staring blankly after her.

* * *

Ticky Edris sat with his little legs dangling, his face a mask of sweat, his shifty eyes constantly going to his watch. How much longer was she going to be? He wondered. It was now 10.43 hours. Had something gone wrong? Had someone caught her opening the safe?

Then he saw her. She came into the bar, upright, arrogant, her chin thrust out, her face white, her eyes steady. She came down the aisle between the tables without hurrying. He was suddenly reminded of her when he first met her: hard, confident and as tough as tempered steel. He wiped his sweating face as he stared up at her.

She put both hands on the table and leaned towards him, her blue eyes glittering.

‘Did you get it?’ Edris asked, wondering what had come over her, vaguely frightened by this change in her.

‘I’ll ask the questions,’ she said. ‘You murdered my sister, didn’t you?’

Edris flinched. He showed his teeth in a snarl.

‘What the hell’s that to do with it?’ he demanded. ‘She was dying. I didn’t murder her! I helped her on her way out. What do you care? Did you get it?’

‘That suicide note. Did you write it?’

‘Yeah. so what? I wrote the other letters the cops found in her apartment so the handwriting matched. So what? Did you get the money, damn you!’

‘You murdered her lover too, didn’t you?’

‘Oh, knock it off! If you must know, Phil did it. We had to set up this thing, baby. They were both in the way.’ He banged the table with his small fist. ‘Did you get the money?’

‘I got it. A cop was in the bank. He asked me if I knew a girl named Ira Marsh.’

Edris’ face went slack.

‘Yes, little man,’ Ira said softly. ‘It won’t be long now. How crazy could I have been to have done

this thing with you? How crazy? They know. Well, a few more hours, not longer.'

Edris slid off his chair.

'Give me the money! You come with me, baby. You and me can get out of here! We've still got a chance. Come on, give me the money!'

'I put it back in the safe. Why should I make more trouble for myself? So long, Ticky. It won't be long. We'll meet again in the cop house,' and turning, she walked swiftly out of the cafe and into the glare of the sun.

* * *

Jess Farr, seated in the rented Ford, his hands resting lightly on the steering wheel, a puzzled expression on his face, watched Ira leave the cafe opposite the Florida Safe Deposit Bank.

He had been parked under the palm trees now for the past hour. He had seen Ticky Edris arrive. He had seen Ira enter the cafe and after a few minutes come out, looking as if her world had fallen apart. He had watched her enter the bank.

He waited impatiently for Edris to appear, but he didn't. All this puzzled Jess. Why had Edris turned up instead of Algir? It never occurred to Jess to buy a newspaper. He never read newspapers: he never read anything.

He lit a cigarette and settled himself more comfortably and continued to wait. An hour and three-quarters crawled by and he began to lose his nerve. If he remained much longer parked here, he thought, some cop would start to get nosey and then he could be in trouble. Then just as he was deciding to change his parking place, he saw Ira again come from the bank and walk quickly over to the cafe. He stiffened to attention because there was a marked change in Ira's appearance. This was the old Ira he had known in New York. That walk. that tense, hard expression, that set of her shoulders. He flicked the butt of his cigarette out of the car window as he watched her enter the cafe. She had got the dough, he thought. He was sure of that, and he reached forward to switch on the ignition. She only remained in the cafe for a few minutes. She came out and hurried to the parking lot behind the bank. As he lost sight of her, he saw Edris come trotting out of the cafe.

He stared at Edris as other people, passing along the sidewalk, were staring. The dwarf looked half demented. His face was the colour of wax. His small mouth was twitching. His stumpy hands flopped against his sides like newly landed fish as he bounced and hopped towards his parked Mini.

What the hell was up? Jess asked himself, pressing down the starter. As Edris got into his car and slammed the door, Jess began to edge the Ford out of the parking bay. The Mini took off and headed towards Seacombe.

Jess went after it.

* * *

Lepski stood by his car, hesitating. There was one small chance he could take to set his mind at rest. Should he take it? If it didn't come off, the Chief wouldn't be pleased, but if it did . . .!

Lepski abruptly made up his mind. He got into his car, started the engine and swung the car into the traffic. Driving carefully and fast, he headed for highway 4A and for Miami.

Once free of the traffic congestion and when he had reached the beginning of the highway, he glanced at his watch. The time was 10.36 hours. He was due back at headquarters at 11.30 hours. He

would certainly have to shift if he hoped to be back anywhere near that time. He spotted a patrol officer, sitting astride his parked motorcycle, checking the busy traffic. He pulled up beside him.

‘Hi, Tim,’ he said. ‘I have an emergency in my hair. Will you open up the way for me? First stop Graham Co-Ed School, Miami. Let’s get there in thirty minutes flat.’

The traffic cop grinned as he gunned his engine to life.

‘Can’t be done,’ he said. ‘Thirty-eight and a half minutes if you can keep up with me.’

Nodding, Lepski let the cop go on ahead, then he went after him. The cop opened up with his siren, and as the traffic hurriedly shifted to the right, he twisted the hand throttle.

As Lepski shoved his foot down on the gas pedal, he thought that the Chief would flip his lid if he could see him now, blasting along the highway at 124 miles an hour. The long, straight highway seemed to melt away under the flying wheels. The cars Lepski passed were grey smudges that flinched over the whoosh of air that hit them as he overtook. He crouched a little, holding the steering wheel firmly, his eyes riveted on the patrol officer’s back.

He kept fifty yards behind him, and as the speed moved slowly up to 130 miles an hour, he thought a little fearfully that a front blowout now would win him only a very modest casket and a deep hole in the ground.

Twenty minutes later, they were reaching the end of the highway and the cop raised his hand, signalling to Lepski to reduce speed. They both entered the outskirts of Miami at seventy miles an hour that seemed a crawl after the ferocious speed on the highway.

Sixteen minutes later, they were driving sedately up the carriage way leading to the Graham Co-Ed School.

Lepski pulled up and got out. His legs were a little shaky, but he grinned cheerfully at the patrol officer who grinned back.

‘Nice driving, Tim,’ he said. ‘There’s a repeat performance. I want you to take me back when I’m through here.’

‘Okay,’ the patrol officer said. ‘We’ll clip a few minutes off on the way back. The traffic won’t be so heavy.’

Lepski walked up the steps and rang the bell. Dr. Graham himself opened the door.

‘Morning, Sir,’ Lepski said. ‘Paradise City Police. I think you could help me. Could I come in?’

Graham nodded and stood aside.

‘I hope this won’t take long, officer,’ he said as he led the way into his study. ‘I have an appointment.’

‘Shouldn’t take long, sir,’ Lepski said, taking the chair Graham waved to. ‘I’m making inquiries concerning a pupil of yours: Norena Marsh Devon.’

Graham looked vaguely startled.

‘She’s left us now. She . . .’

‘Yeah, I know that. Tell me, Doctor, she wore spectacles. right?’

‘Yes, she did.’

‘Could she read without them?’

‘Certainly not. She always wore them. I don’t understand. What . . .’

‘Were the frames of her spectacles made of blue plastic?’

Graham stared blankly.

‘Come to think of it, they were blue. I don’t know about being plastic. Could you explain just why

you are asking these questions?’

‘We have reason to believe that Norena Devon is the unidentified girl found murdered at Coral Cove,’ Lepski said, gravely.

Graham stiffened, shocked.

‘Good gracious! What makes . . .’

‘I’ll ask the questions, doctor,’ Lepski said firmly. He took from his wallet Algir’s photograph.

‘Seen this man before?’

‘Why, yes. That’s Mr. Tebbel, Norena’s mother’s attorney.’

Lepski drew in a long slow breath. So he had been right!

‘Have you a photograph of Norena Devon?’ he asked.

‘Why, yes, I have. We always have class photographs taken at the end of term,’ Graham said, and getting to his feet he walked over to a filing cabinet. After a moment’s delay, he produced a photograph.

He crossed the room and handed the photograph to Lepski.

Half out of his mind with fear, Edris drove fast along the highway towards Seacombe. He was so preoccupied with his thoughts for his safety that he failed to notice the dusty Ford that tagged along in his rear.

There wasn't a moment to lose, he told himself. Already the cops might be looking for him. He too had contacts along the Waterfront. His best bet was to get on a boat for Mexico.

But first, he had to take a chance and return to his apartment. He must get his money from Algir. Without money, he was sunk! He would have to kill Algir. If he didn't, Algir would kill him. He would also have to find where Algir had hidden his own share of the Wanassee take. But before he could kill Algir, he had to get a gun!

Reaching the outskirts of Seacombe, he swung the little car down a narrow road that led to the sea.

Startled, Jess slammed on his brakes, stopping the Ford. He got out of the car and ran to the top of the road. He was in time to see the Mini turn right at the end of the road and disappear. He ran back to the Ford and drove down the road, cautiously and slowly.

Edris parked the Mini, then ran with bouncing hops over to a shabby bar that catered primarily for the crews of the deep sea fishing yachts, moored in the harbour. At this hour, the bar was deserted and Harry Morris, the owner, a big, hairy, scowling man was propping up the bar, reading a racing sheet.

He grinned when he saw Edris.

'Hi, Ticky!' He folded the racing sheet and stared down at Edris' white, sweating face. 'What's eating you, pal?'

'I'm in a jam, Harry,' Edris said, trying to control his uneven breathing. 'Don't ask questions. it's cop trouble. Can you get me on a boat to Mexico?'

Morris's eyes widened. For a moment he wondered if Edris was kidding, then again looking at the dwarf's face, he decided he wasn't.

'It could be fixed, Ticky, but it'll cost. There's a boat sailing at ten tonight. I could fix it for you, set you back three grand.'

Edris winced.

'Can't you do better than that, Harry? I'll need my money.'

'I'll do what I can, but this guy is kind of greedy.'

'I've got a little business to handle and then I'll be back. Can you keep me under the wraps until the boat sails?'

'Of course, Ticky. For you, I'll do anything.'

'Another thing. I want a gun with a silencer, and I want it right now.'

Morris stared at him.

'What for?'

'Don't ask questions, Harry. I want it now.'

'Well, okay. Sure you don't want me to handle it for you?'

Edris grinned wolfishly.

'I can handle it. Snap it up, Harry, I'm running out of time.'

Morris nodded and walked through a doorway at the back of the bar. He returned in a few minutes, carrying a brown paper parcel. This he handed to Edris.

‘It’s clean, Ticky. I don’t want to see it again. The silencer is good for three shots, no more. You sure you know what you’re doing?’

‘I know,’ Edris said grimly. ‘Thanks, Harry. I’ll be back in a couple of hours,’ and he hurried out of the bar and back to the Mini.

Getting into the car, he unwrapped the parcel and examined the .38 automatic. He screwed the silencer into the barrel and put the gun on the seat beside him. He put his hat over the gun. Then he started the car and drove towards his apartment.

Jess Farr, parked further along the waterfront, went after him.

Arriving outside the apartment block, Edris scooped up his hat and the gun and leaving the ignition key in the lock, he got out of the car. He skipped across the sidewalk and bounced up the steps. Entering the lobby, he got into the elevator and was shot up to the floor of his apartment.

As he paused outside the front door to search for his key, he glanced at his watch. The time was 11.43 hours. He unlocked the door and cautiously entered the lobby.

‘Phil?’

He dropped his hat on a chair and holding the gun behind his back and the newspaper he had bought in his left hand, he moved forward into the lounge.

Algir was standing by the window, Edris’ .25 in his hand, his eyes wary, his face tense. He lifted the gun and pointed it at Edris.

‘Did you get it?’ he demanded. ‘Don’t come any closer!’

‘What’s this all about?’ Edris said, cocking his head on one side. Behind his back, his thumb slid off the safety catch on the gun.

‘I don’t trust you, you stinking freak,’ Algir said. ‘Did you get the money?’

‘Of course I got it, and I got a newspaper too. It has a lovely big photo of you, buddy-boy, right on the front page.’ Edris tossed the newspaper towards Algir. The paper unfolded as it fell at Algir’s feet, front page up.

Off guard, Algir looked down, saw the photograph of himself and began to curse. This was the last sound on this earth that he was to make. Edris lifted his gun and shot him through the head.

Algir’s knees crumpled and he began to slide to the floor. Edris, his lips drawn off his teeth, shot him through the chest.

Algir sprawled on the floor, blood running down the side of his face. He moved his hands feebly and his mouth worked, then his eyes rolled back. He shivered and his jaw dropped.

Edris drew in a long, deep breath. He unscrewed the silencer and put it in his pocket. He put the gun on the table. Without looking at Algir, he went into his bedroom for the canvas hold-all he had already packed.

He then set about searching the apartment for Algir’s share of the money. It took him some ten minutes to find it, tucked behind a reproduction of an early Picasso. He counted the money, muttering to himself when he found Algir had only sixteen thousand dollars left of his share of the take.

Edris stuffed the money into his hip pocket. He then put the envelope containing his share in the inside pocket of his jacket. He paused to look around the apartment, feeling a sudden sadness to be leaving it. He looked down at Algir whose head lay in a halo of blood and whose

expression of terror made Edris grimace, then he picked up his bag and walked slowly to the front door.

It was hard to believe, he thought, he would never see this home again, but at least he had money

and a chance to get to Mexico. He would begin a new life for himself. Money unlocked most doors. Without it you were sunk.

He opened the front door, then stopped abruptly.

Gun in hand, Jess Farr stood in the corridor, facing him. The gun pointed at Edris' face.

Edris closed his eyes and then opened them. The shock of seeing this lanky beatnik with a gun stopped his heart for a brief moment and then sent it racing madly.

'Back in!' Jess said viciously, 'and watch it!'

Sick despair gripping him, Edris slowly moved back into the living room. Jess followed him and kicked the front door shut. He stiffened at the sight of Algir's dead body. He had never seen death before. A cold coil of fear gripped his guts.

'Put the bag down, turn around and get your hands up!' he snapped.

'Now listen.' Edris began, forcing a wheedling smile to his ashen face.

'Do it pig face!' Jess yelled at him, threatening him with the gun.

Edris caught his breath in a sob. He dropped the bag, turned and as he began to raise his hands, Jess took a quick step forward and slammed the gun barrel down on his head.

* * *

It did Lepski a power of good to watch Terrell's face as he told his story. Beigler, leaning against the wall, behind Terrell's desk, was also good to look at.

Lepski couldn't restrain his grin of triumph as he concluded, 'And here's a photograph of Norena Devon, Chief. I got it from her school,' and with a flourish, he laid the photograph on Terrell's desk.

Both Terrell and Beigler leaned forward and peered at the group of girls shown in the photograph.

'She's the second on the left, back row,' Lepski said.

'Nice work, Tom,' Terrell said after staring at the plain looking girl who wore spectacles. 'So who's this girl Devon imagines is his daughter?'

'Ira Marsh. Muriel's sister,' Beigler put in. 'I've just got the New York police report. Ira Marsh left New York on the night of the 16th. She hasn't been seen since. It jells, Chief.'

'But why?' Terrell stared at Beigler, frowning. 'We're missing out on something big here. Why did Algir substitute Ira for Norena? He must have had a reason.'

'She'll tell us. Let's pick her up.'

'We won't rush it,' Terrell said. 'I'll talk to Devon first.' He frowned. 'This dwarf Edris, he must have planted her photo in Muriel's bedroom. He was the one who sold Algir to Dr. Graham. Get after him, Joe! Get after him fast!'

'He's supposed to be in New York,' Beigler said.

'Alert the New York police. It may be a bluff. He may still be here. Try his home, Joe.'

Beigler nodded and hurried from the room.

'Get the airport covered and road blocks set up, Tom,' Terrell went on. 'Looking the way he does, he can't get far, but I'm not taking chances with that little snake.' He got to his feet and picked up the photograph from his desk.

'I'll see Devon.'

Lepski reached for the telephone.

'If you don't get promotion for this, old son, old son,' he said to himself, 'you'll never get it.'

Jess rode down in the elevator. He hadn't waited to count the money he had taken from Edris' unconscious body, but he knew it was more money than he had expected to find. He must get out of Florida fast, he told himself. He would leave the rented car at Fernandia and take the train to Atlanta. He would stay there until he knew which way the cat was jumping. With all that money, he hadn't a care in the world.

In spite of his elation he was still shocked by Algir's death. It was obvious that Edris who he had left sprawled on the floor, unconscious, had murdered him. As he got into the Ford, he wondered what Edris would do and where he would go.

Serve the little freak right! Jess thought as he trod on the starter. This squared it for the way he had treated Ira. What about Ira? Jess frowned. He was half tempted to try to find her. It would be more fun travelling with her than alone. Then he shook his head. Better not. It wouldn't be long before the cops got wise to her and then he'd land in real trouble along with her. No, he'd travel alone. There would be time to find a girl when he reached Atlanta.

He drove towards Miami. The midday traffic was heavy and the way out of Seacombe was irritatingly slow. But Jess confined his impatience. It was a sweet set up, he thought, slowing as the traffic built up to yet another jam. Edris wouldn't dare squeal. Algir was dead. Ira didn't know he had the money. It was sweet! Talk about the perfect steal!

The traffic ahead speeded up and Jess changed from second to third. Ahead of him he saw the traffic lights. He wondered if he could beat them. The car ahead of him suddenly surged forward, leaving him behind. Jess couldn't resist shoving down on the gas pedal. As he did so the lights five yards ahead turned red.

Cursing, he slammed on his brakes and skidded to a standstill, a yard over the line. Then before he could reverse, he was thrown forward with a sickening shock as a car behind him crashed into the back of the Ford.

Jess turned in his seat, snarling with fury. He could see the driver, a fat, elderly man getting out of his car. Then he heard the sound he most dreaded - the sound of a police whistle.

His heart suddenly hammering he snatched the automatic from his hip pocket with the intention of hiding it in the glove compartment when a hard, cop voice bawled, 'Hold it!'

He looked up. A big red-faced policeman was staring at him through the off-side window. He had come up without Jess seeing him. The cop already had his gun in his hand and he was pointing it at Jess.

'Put that gun down!' The cop said, steel in his voice. 'Quick!'

Half blubbing with fear and rage, Jess let the gun drop on the car seat and he held up his hands. His door jerked open and another cop grabbed him and hauled him into the street.

Car horns were sounding.

People were pausing and staring.

'Watch him,' the other cop bawled. 'He's just ditched a rod!'

The red-faced cop grinned and slapped Jess across the face, sending him staggering. Then he reached out and before Jess knew what was happening, handcuffs were pinching his wrists.

He felt the packet of money he had stuffed inside his shirt shift and before he could stop it, the

money began to spill out onto the road.

‘Hey, what do you know?’ The red-faced cop exclaimed, his eyes opening wide. ‘This punk is bleeding dough!’

* * *

Ticky Edris opened his eyes. The pain in his head was so bad he let out a low, whinnying moan. He lay still, trying to remember what had happened, then he remembered.

It took him several long painful minutes to sit up. He held his aching head between his stumpy hands until his head began to clear and the sharp gnawing pain subside.

He pushed himself to his knees and then up onto his feet. He took two staggering steps forward. His left shoe squelched in the drying pool of blood from Algir’s wound and he shuddered, trying to wipe his shoe clean on the carpet. He moved on as if fifty years had been put on his life during the half hour he had been unconscious. He reached the cocktail cabinet, opened it with an unsteady hand and grabbed the bottle of whisky. He took out the cork, letting it drop on the carpet and raised the bottle to his lips. He drank long and steadily, feeling the spirit fan through his body, giving him back warmth and life.

Gasping, he set the bottle down and patted his hip pocket. He knew it was a useless gesture. The money was gone.

He walked unsteadily into the bathroom and bathed his head and face. His mind was too numbed to work. He stood looking at himself in the mirror and he felt his heart shrink at the sight of himself. He looked like a little wizened old man moving to his death. He looked as if he could die in a very few hours.

He turned away and returned to the living room. He picked up the whisky bottle and took another long drink. He belched as he sat down in his miniature armchair and put his feet up on the foot stool.

There would be no boat now to Mexico, he thought.

Without money, Ticky, old buddy-boy, you’re sunk. May as well face it. No good running away. No good making any more plans. You’re in the deep, deep hole and you’ll never get out of it.

He looked over at Algir and his lips came off his teeth in a snarl of hate. Just because that dead lump of nothingness, that flash dumb sonofabitch was too stupid and too lazy to have buried a body deep enough. Just that - only that to foul up the sweetest set up for the Big Take ever dreamed up.

Edris drank a little more whisky. He was drunk now: drunk and sorry for himself. He began to cry, tears flowing down his shrivelled face while he gently beat his stumpy hands together.

Beigler and Hess found him like that, still crying, when they burst into the apartment some twenty-five minutes later.

Ticky Edris went with them without any fuss. What did it matter? he said to himself as he stumped down the steps to the waiting police car. What did anything matter now? You made plans; you played your cards right, then some slob spoils it all.

‘It’s the way the cookie crumbles,’ he said half aloud as he got into the police car, and because he was so very drunk, he put his stumpy hands over his face and began to cry again.

* * *

Dear Mel,

I can't call you daddy any more, can I? This is just to say goodbye and to say I am sorry.

I don't expect you to believe me, but I honestly didn't know they had killed your daughter. They told me she had died in a drowning accident.

I know I shouldn't have taken her place, but there are so many things in my life I shouldn't have done. I did get a lot of happiness with you. . . it was a funny sort of happiness which I knew all along couldn't last.

I'm going for a swim now. I shall go on swimming until I can't swim anymore. I hope, by doing this, I'll save you from getting too involved in this mess. I would like to think you will miss me a little. I am glad about Joy; she'll make you happy and you've earned it.

So goodbye, and please try to believe I really wouldn't have done it if I had known about Norena.

Love, Ira.

She put down the ballpoint and read the letter through.

She was in the beach cabin and she had on a white bikini that made her skin look more bronze than it was. She was very quiet and unemotional as she put the letter in an envelope and sealed it. She wrote Devon's name on the envelope and propped it against a flower vase on the table.

She stood up, looked briefly around the room, then walked out into the hot sunshine.

In the far distance, she could see people bathing, but they were too far away to worry her. With long, easy strides, she walked down to the sea, her head held high, her mouth firm, her eyes dry. She walked into the sea and began to swim with powerful strokes that took her swiftly away from the land, and the new way of life that she had found but that wasn't for her.