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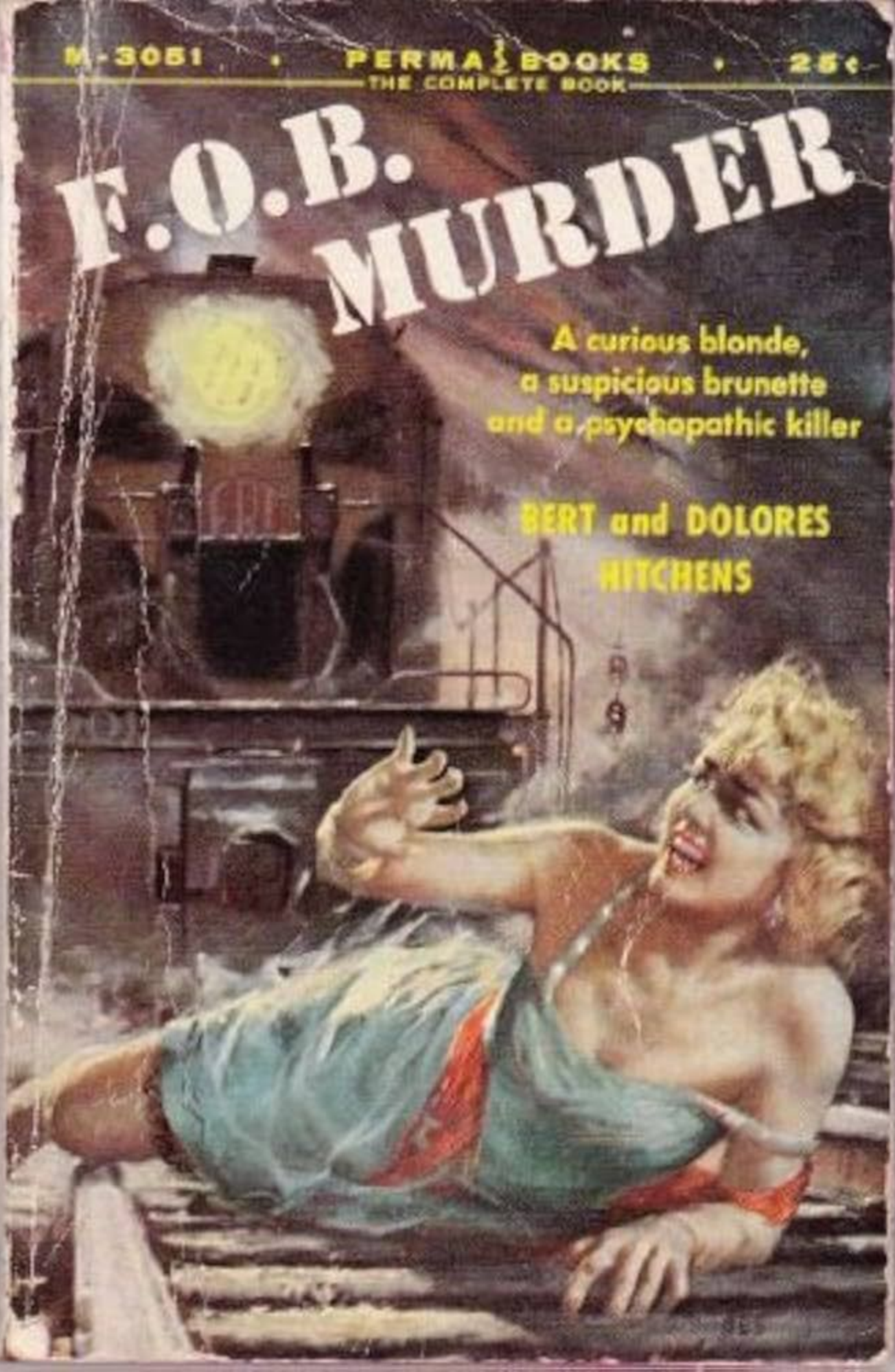
THE COMPLETE BOOK

F.O.B. MURDER

A curious blonde,
a suspicious brunette
and a psychopathic killer

BERT and DOLORES
HITCHENS



F. O. B.

Murder

by Bert and Dolores Hitchens

F.O.B. MURDER

by Dolores Hitchens

SLEEP WITH STRANGERS
BEAT BACK THE TIDE
TERROR LURKS IN DARKNESS
NETS TO CATCH THE WIND
STAIRWAY TO AN EMPTY ROOM

A CRIME CLUB SELECTION

Collins and McKechnie, special agents of the railroad police in Los Angeles, had a number of problems on their hands. There was the matter of that starving, badly beaten young Mexican whom Collins had found in the refrigerator car. He had whispered, "*Joya*"—Spanish for "jewelry."

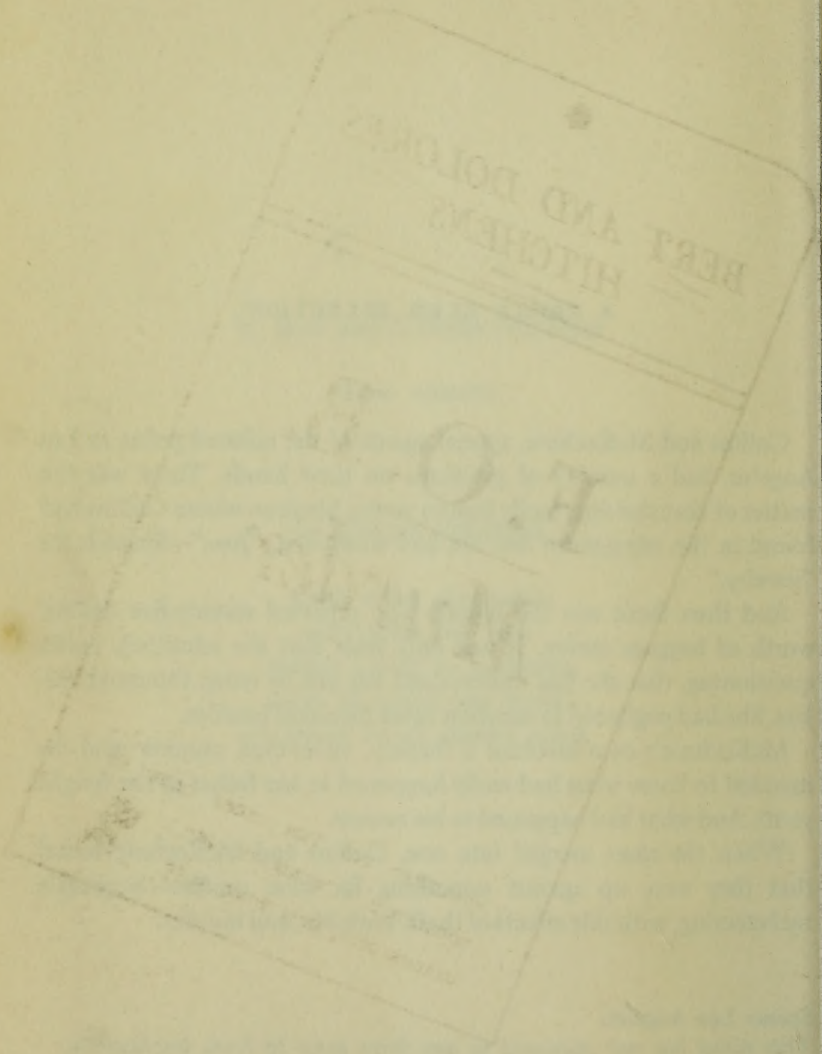
And then there was the blonde who reported seventy-five dollars' worth of baggage stolen. It was only later that she admitted, under questioning, that she had undervalued her loss by many thousand dollars. She had neglected to mention those diamond baubles.

McKechnie's case involved a shapely, violet-eyed number who demanded to know what had *really* happened to her father in the freight yards. And what had happened to his money.

When the cases merged into one, Collins and McKechnie found that they were up against something far from routine—large-scale racketeering, with side effects of theft, brutality, and murder.

Scene: Los Angeles.
This novel has not appeared in any form prior to book publication.

Something Special



BERT AND DOLORES HITCHENS

F.O.B. *Murder*

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This story is fiction,
and the characters and incidents have no relation to actual fact.
Any similarity of name or circumstance
is purely coincidental.

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This book is respectfully
dedicated
to the men of the
Railroad Police

F. O. B.

Murder

CHAPTER ONE

THE OWL TRAIN from San Francisco, drawing into the outskirts of Los Angeles, passed the Brett Street yards at about six o'clock in the morning. This was summer; at that hour the day was already bright and warm. The engineer from his cab noticed a yellow flag tied to the brake wheel of a refrigerator car which stood among others on a siding immediately to the right of the main track. As this signal was a common one, meaning "proceed with caution," and since the train was, according to regulations, doing just that, the engineer was inclined to dismiss the flag as an uncalled-for addition to the multitude of signals by which his progress was controlled.

However, the position of the flag, high on the end of the roof of the car instead of stuck beside the track where it commonly belonged, was unusual enough so that a little later he telephoned the item in to the special agent's office.

In the downtown office of the special agent, the yellow flag went into the hopper of the day's investigations and in due time a railroad dick was on his way to the Brett Street yards. He was a short stocky man by the name of Collins, of mixed Irish and Mexican descent, dark-haired, dressed with taste and some masculine flair, who could have passed for a prosperous shopowner out running down a shipment of merchandise but who would scarcely ever have been taken for a cop. The business of the yellow flag hadn't sounded like much, and Collins

was expected to take care of it quickly before going on to work on a more important matter concerning some missing luggage.

He parked the company car near the yard office, located a yard patrolman, and together they walked track until they found the yellow flag.

The cut of empties consisted mostly of reefers—refrigerator cars—and tank cars, and the car with the yellow flag was about at the middle of the cut.

Looking for the reason for the flag, Collins and the patrolman examined all track in the vicinity of the siding. They checked switches. Everything seemed normal. There were no blue flags out, to indicate a carman at work. Some distance away a Diesel switcher sat on another siding, its motors idling. There was nothing else, nothing at all wrong.

The patrolman then climbed the car and removed the yellow flag. When he came down, his face was thoughtful and he told Collins, "The bunker door on the roof is up. I thought I heard something inside there."

Collins stepped to the door, opened it, and then, taking care not to damage his trouser knees, boosted himself inside. The air was stuffy, and over in the shadows against the far wall lay the figure of a man. The detective approached with caution, watchful of the apparently sleeping figure. As if his steps aroused the other, there was a harsh groan. Collins's eye, growing accustomed to the dimmer light, took in details. The man was dressed in a blue shirt open at the throat, blue denim pants rather soiled, and tennis sneakers which looked almost new. There was no coat, no hat, no baggage or bundle. The man had black hair, a swarthy complexion, a somewhat Indian cast to his features. Mexican, Collins thought. He bent above the man on the floor and in that instant met his eyes.

Collins thought he'd never seen such a look. There was no recognition. There was terror, raw, naked, as if frozen into the flesh, the brain, the very skull. Collins asked, "*Como se llama?*"

There was no indication that the other had heard Collins's request for his name. Collins went on to ask for identification papers; there was no response to this, either. The hands with their broken nails

fluttered a little on the floor. He'd spent a lot of time scr ching at the locked door, Collins decided. "He's in bad shape," he said to the patrolman, who had come in. "I'd better see if there is any identification on him." As he bent closer, Collins thought that he caught a whisper. "*Joya* . . ." Afterward he was not entirely sure of the word, or even that the man had spoken. He examined the pockets of the shabby pants and found a few coins.

Collins hadn't expected to find papers. He had decided by now that this was a member of Wetbacks, Anonymous. The Mexican had slipped into the car somewhere near the border, perhaps in the lettuce fields of Imperial Valley, and had had the bad luck to have the door slammed on him. The big doors of the refrigerator cars sealed tightly; their catches were like those on an icebox. He was lucky the bunker lids were up.

Collins returned the three *pesos* and the sixteen cents American to the pants pockets. He urged the Mexican to stand, to try to walk; but the other continued to lie, under the terror something in him broken and deranged, a lostness bred of fear too terrible to endure. The patrolman said, "I wonder how long he's been here."

"Too long," Collins answered. He suggested that the patrolman get to the nearest phone as quickly as possible, call the Los Angeles police, and arrange for an ambulance.

When the patrolman had gone Collins tried again; he asked the man on the floor how long he'd been in the car. For the first time there seemed a stir of intelligence in the glassy black eyes. Finally, in Spanish, the other asked Collins what day this was, and when Collins said it was Tuesday, the stammering whisper answered, "*Cuatro dias* . . ."

Four days . . .

"Rough luck," Collins answered. "What's your name?"

"Ramos." There was a long hesitation. "Isidro Ramos. Where is this place?"

"Los Angeles. Where did you get on?"

"Los Angeles?" He gave it the soft Spanish pronunciation. Then his head turned a trifle and his glance flickered toward the door—as if,

Collins thought, he expected something to be there waiting for him. "No . . . no." The terror squeezed back into his face, his jaw clenched, the eyes grew fixed.

"You'll be okay now," Collins said, trying to reassure him. "Where'd you cross the border? Mexicali?"

There was no answer. Some flies had wandered in out of the sun, drawn perhaps by the close fetid odor, and now one of them settled on Ramos's cheek and crawled slowly toward his eye. Collins brushed at it roughly. He remembered all at once a time when he had been a kid and his dog had been very sick, and that at last when the dog had lain still and indifferent, letting the flies crawl on him without snapping at them, he had known somehow that the dog was going to die.

In turning his head the man on the floor had bared a small stain, a circle of coagulated blood. Collins saw that behind his ear the flesh was swollen and purple. He'd banged himself in here, perhaps trying to crawl up the steel lattice that shut off the ice compartments. Then, in the dim light that never brightened beyond twilight, he'd lain down to die. It must be Death he expected to see waiting at the door.

Collins was glad, when the police ambulance arrived, to be rid of the responsibility of the wetback. The man's terror, out of all proportion to his condition, had had something uncanny in it. After all, even a man like Ramos should have known that reefers are in too much demand to sit for long unnoticed on a siding. They were shunted by thousands into the vegetable fields, the fruit orchards, of Imperial, of Arizona; and the growers were always begging for more. It was surprising that the car with Ramos in it hadn't been opened before this. Before the yellow flag . . .

Collins thought about the yellow flag while he got back into the car, turned from the yard into the Brett Street traffic, and worked his way across town to Wilshire Boulevard and the hotel address of the woman who had lost the luggage. It seemed logical, at least on the surface, that the purpose of tying the flag to the car had been to call attention to the wetback. But there were inconsistencies. The person who had tied the flag to the reefer could just as well have opened the catch on the door and let Ramos go free.

Collins mulled over theories, discarding most of them; but there was one which had possibilities. Say that Ramos had had a companion, or companions, and there had been a fight. He'd been shut in to stop the argument or to delay pursuit. Later, one of his opponents had felt compunction, returned to fix the yellow flag.

The trouble with this idea, of course, was that a telephone call to the yard office would have served the same purpose, involved much less risk of attention, and been quicker and at least as anonymous as the other.

Collins reproved himself. He wasn't supposed to develop theories. His reports concerned facts; and the facts here were that there had been a yellow flag and a man who appeared to be a Mexican national. These were the things he would turn in on his report.

The hotel on Wilshire wasn't one of the big ones, but it was nice. Four stories, buff-colored brick, set among hibiscus, red cannas, and climbing white roses. Not much lawn; land was expensive out here. Collins went into the small neat lobby where a maid was using a vacuum cleaner, where a clerk in a white jacket looked at him remotely from behind a counter. He said, "Is Miss Cannelbury in?"

The clerk nodded and stepped over to a PBX and plugged in a line. "Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Mr. Collins. From the railroad. It's about her missing luggage."

The clerk shot him a second look, obviously surmising Collins's official capacity. People were always a little surprised that Collins was a cop; he was used to it. While the clerk talked into the phone Collins inspected his shoes. The shine was still almost perfect, but there was a minute scuffed place, acquired no doubt during his climb into the reefer, which would have to be dyed. The clerk laid down his headset. "She says to come up. Room 412. The elevator is self-operating."

The elevator smelled clean, as if the neat colored maid had been at work in it. Collins stepped in, punched a button, watched the door close, shutting out the view of the lobby. In another minute or so he was looking at the door of Miss Cannelbury's room.

Her complaint about the missing bags had gone through the usual channels. She'd reported the loss to a redcap operating one of the

baggage trolleys to the taxi stand. The redcap had gone back to check with the Pullman porter; the porter had examined the compartment just vacated by Miss Cannelbury. There being no stray suitcases in the room, the passage, or the vestibule of the car, Miss Cannelbury was sent along to Lost and Found. Here a clerk took down a description of the missing luggage.

The baggageman at the Union Depot in due course reported the loss to the district baggage agent of the railroad on which Miss Cannelbury had entered Los Angeles. The district baggage agent broadcast the loss to various departments, including the office of the special agent.

And so here was Collins, ringing the bell beside Miss Cannelbury's door.

She answered his ring at once, opened the door, invited him inside. She was much younger, somehow, than Collins had expected, a slim girl with ashy blond hair, big green eyes, a mouth startlingly crimson. She looked, Collins thought, as if she had been experimenting with lipstick—someone else's. It was too dark for her pale complexion, too thickly and inexpertly applied. Collins, a bachelor, had a keen appreciation of make-up which enhanced the looks of the wearer. Also of dress—and Miss Cannelbury's gray pongee gown lacked fit in important spots. It had cost money, Collins thought, but she'd been cheated. She said politely, "Yes, sir? You're from the baggage people? Won't you sit down?" She indicated a couple of chairs beside the windows.

The view was nice from up here and there was a breeze through the screens. Collins sat down, dropped his hat on the floor beside the chair. She put herself opposite, folding her hands on the lap of the gray gown. He said, "My name is Collins. I'm an investigator in the special agent's office. We haven't found your luggage, Miss Cannelbury, so I've come to do a bit more checking." He fished out a copy of the notice from Lost and Found.

"I'll be glad to help, of course." She hesitated briefly. "Special agent's office—what's that?"

His eyes met hers, held them for a moment. "Railroad police, miss."

Her smile seemed mechanical. "I didn't realize . . . This is just a case of some missing bags, small ones. I mean, that sounds sort of—of serious."

"Tracing lost luggage is a part of our job too," he answered. Referring to the paper he held, he said, "You packed the bags in Chicago."

"That's right," she agreed. "On Wednesday morning of last week. I kept them with me in the compartment. There were things in both bags I needed every day."

Collins flattened the sheet against his knee. "According to this, you last saw the bags on the baggage trolley beside the train."

She nodded. "When the train came into Union Station I left my compartment and went to the vestibule of the car. My bags had already been taken by the porter, and as I stood waiting to get off, I saw the porter hand them down along with others to the redcap on the station platform. There was this little wheeled cart, sort of low, open on either side, and the redcap was piling all of the baggage on it. Mine were on top."

"You went on into the station then?"

"Yes. Through the station and out to the taxi rank. I waited there for a while. There was more than one cart brought out, and I kept looking to see which one had my bags on it. Then I grew uneasy and spoke to the redcap who had pushed one of the trolleys."

Collins knew the rest of the routine; he didn't pursue it. "When you saw these bags passed out from the vestibule, were you positive they were yours?"

"One of them is unmistakable. It's a canvas-covered overnight case and it faded and I painted it. There aren't many pieces of pink luggage, Mr. Collins." She smiled at him and he noticed her fine even white teeth and wished she hadn't smeared herself so with the dark lipstick. "The other case is alligator, and it, too——"

"Real alligator?"

It checked what she meant to say; there was a blank instant of waiting. "No, as a matter of fact—though it's an excellent imitation——"

"You've put a total value of seventy-five dollars on the two bags,"

he pointed out. "I was going to say that a real alligator bag would, by itself, be worth that."

"Yes, of course." She refolded her hands; a touch of nervousness had come into her manner.

Collins made a note on the sheet of paper. "Now, getting down to the contents——"

"I've made a list." She rose quickly, went to a small desk, took a page from a tablet which lay open there. She came back, sat down, and gave the piece of paper to Collins.

Her handwriting was round, plain, and neat. Under the heading *Pink Bag*, she'd written: "two nightdresses, two nylon blouses, comb and brush set (plastic), toothbrush and miscellaneous cosmetics, felt house slippers, writing materials." Under *Alligator Bag* were listed: "three nylon nightdresses, one pair white satin pumps, miscellaneous costume jewelry."

Collins tapped the sheet with a forefinger. "Was there identification inside the bags?"

She shook her head. "We had—— I mean, there were tags on the handles, cardboard tags supplied by the ticket agency."

He'd caught that word *we*. "You were traveling alone?"

"Not all of the way. I shared a compartment with a friend as far as—as El Paso." She looked so shy, so uncomfortable over this that Collins wondered about the friend. Male, perhaps, and they'd passed as married. Or perhaps he was being unjust to her. She didn't, somehow, impress him as a wild type in spite of the excess of lipstick. The lipstick was an experiment, a mistake. Probably the friend had been a girl, and Miss Cannelbury was just bashful about discussing her private affairs.

Collins gave her back the sheet of paper. "I take it the seventy-five dollars was an estimate, a round sum. But we'll need an approximate value on each of these items." He saw the way she looked at the page, as if some worry were involved with it, and added, "You may be cheating yourself. Seventy-five may not cover it. Take the jewelry, for instance. Even costume jewelry comes high these days." In Collins's memory were the bills of last Christmas.

"I made the lists so that the bags could be identified as mine and

returned promptly to me." She fiddled with the sheet of paper. "That's all I want. Just to get the bags back."

"If we don't get them back, you'll have to be paid their value."

"I'm not interested in the money." She was frowning at him, the greenish eyes pin-pointed with worry, concentration. "If you pay me, then you'll forget about them, you won't look for them any longer."

He saw what it was that caused her anxiety. "Oh no, if they're found at any time you'll get them."

"But isn't it getting sort of *late*? I lost them last Friday." She stood up and went to the window and adjusted the blind; Collins sensed she was covering a nervous tension. "Where could they be?"

Collins felt like saying that in view of his experiences in other baggage mishaps they might well be pulling into New York City, but he resisted the impulse. "It's quite possible they're stored in Union Station, checked through some error, and that we'll run them down soon."

"I wish I had them now." She went over to the small desk, sat down, took up a pen, began to make jottings on the sheet of paper.

"While you're at it," Collins suggested, "will you itemize the jewelry piece by piece? We'll need that if it comes to putting in a claim."

He saw her hand jerk and heard the scratch the pen made; and in the instant of silence he sensed her dismay at what must be the blot on the paper. But her voice was even and controlled. "Certainly. I suppose you'll want a complete description?"

"Just a word or two will do."

She went back to writing. Outside in the fine summer day a mockingbird began to sing, and the voices of the kids in Westlake Park were screechy with excitement.

CHAPTER TWO

AT TEN O'CLOCK THAT MORNING in the special agent's office on the eighth floor, the Chief, Ryerson, came out of his inner sanctum, followed by a young woman. The Chief was big, florid, in his fifties; though right now he had a bright gleam in his eye that made him seem a little younger. The girl was slender, with pale brown hair tied back in a blue scarf, wearing a white sleeveless dress, white high-heeled pumps, white lace gloves, and carrying a small white handbag. Her arms and throat were smoothly brown. She wasn't an obviously pretty girl at first glance, though there was something rather different, arresting, in the way she held her head and in the high cheekbones and thick-lashed violet eyes.

She followed Ryerson over to the only occupied desk, by the windows that opened on the light-well. A man rose as they approached, and Ryerson said, "Glad I caught you, McKechnie. This is Miss Nora Cathcart. She wants some information and I told her you were her man." He gave Miss Cathcart a look that was a shade too interested to be fatherly, beamed at her thanks, and went back to his glass-enclosed and green-carpeted private retreat.

The Chief wasn't especially impressionable where women were concerned, so McKechnie took a good look at the girl who had aroused the gleam. She was a pretty smooth article; there was nothing cheap or flashy about her; and after studying the line of the soft brown throat he wondered if there was a gleam in his eye too. He brought her a chair and asked what he could do for her.

She wasted no time. "The police sergeant suggested I come here.

I'm trying to find out something about an accident in your freight yards. Do you remember a man named Cathcart?"

McKechnie had been thinking back. This girl had come in about five minutes ago, looked across at him, decided instead to try the inner office, where she could see the Chief at his big desk. "Cathcart?" McKechnie put himself to search his memory. "I'm afraid not. Is he a brakeman? Switchman? The Chief should have mentioned that accidents to personnel aren't handled by this office."

"He isn't an employee," she said. "He was riding in one of your boxcars."

The polite smile went out of McKechnie's expression and he said, "You mean a trespasser? A bum?" Too late, he remembered the girl's name as Ryerson had introduced her.

"My father." Her gaze had dropped to the desk, to McKechnie's reports spread out there. "Last Friday afternoon he fell, or was thrown, from a moving train in your East Los Angeles yards. He was knocked unconscious and severely injured. Now he's in General Hospital and can't recall much of what happened." She waited, as if expecting McKechnie to supply the rest of the story.

McKechnie had propped his arms on his desk, folded his hands, and was staring at her over his knuckles. She looked so healthy, alert, and immaculate, it was hard to connect her with the type of creature who inhabited the boxcars. But his memory had begun to supply a few details. "I remember—a call came in that this trespasser had been hurt, knocked out, and the patrolman thought that since the ambulance hadn't arrived yet one of us might want to have a look. I went out there."

Under the tan, a faint pallor had crept into her face; she avoided meeting McKechnie's eyes, as if sensing the cynical surprise she might find there. "Were there many people around?"

"Not over a half dozen. About the time Jenkins got there two witnesses came in—through the gate, according to their stories—and were trying to help the man who had been hurt." He'd started to say "your father," but when he had remembered the wizened character in the

ragged overalls the words refused to come. "These two and Jenkins were the only ones inside the fence until after I arrived."

"Had the train gone on?"

"No. It wasn't a train, really. A Diesel engine was switching a cut of empties. At slow speed, I might add. One of the two witnesses saw the jump——"

"Why do you call it that?"

"Using his words." He reached for a drawer of the desk, then hesitated as a new idea came to him. "Look, miss, if you're trying to find evidence for a lawsuit, forget it. The railroad has no responsibility for trespassers."

"I'm not thinking of a suit. I just want the truth. While you were there, did my father say anything?"

"If he did, I didn't catch it." There was subtle enmity growing between them, McKechnie realized. He'd made a tactless remark about her father, of course, but, more than that, she seemed to think he was hiding something to protect the company. "The man who claimed to have seen him jump said he landed on his head. He didn't seem to be in very good shape while I was there."

Her hands twisted on the small handbag in her lap. "Who put him in the ambulance?"

"The fellows in the white coats. Who else?" McKechnie had located the report on Cathcart. He skipped it toward her across the desk. "There are the names of the witnesses. Healy and Abbotsford. As I remember, Healy didn't seem to have an address. I think he could have been a bum off the boxcars. Abbotsford had pretty good clothes, looked like a salesman or businessman, could have been driving by to some wholesaler in the neighborhood. It's a factory and warehouse district."

"Did *he* give an address?"

"It's down there. Somewhere in Huntington Park."

She took a small silver pen from her purse, wrote down on the back of an envelope the information she wanted, put the report back on the desk. "I'd like to talk to the patrolman if I might."

"I'll see if I can locate him." McKechnie was reaching for the phone when another phone, one on an empty desk, began to ring. The office

man was busy with the Chief. McKechnie said, "Excuse me, please," and went over to answer.

When he left the phone he went into the Chief's office, where the famous green carpet was soft underfoot and the air smelled of the Chief's cigar smoke. "I just had a call from the East L.A. yards," McKechnie told him. "They've found some rifled baggage out there. You want me to take a look?"

"Good idea." Ryerson glanced through the glass pane at the girl sitting straight, holding her head high. "You finished with Miss Cathcart?"

"She wants to talk to Jenkins about the accident to her father. I thought if she wanted a ride I'd take her out there."

The Chief nodded. It was possible that some of his interest in Miss Cathcart was curiosity, like McKechnie's, as to what she had in common with a boxcar bum. McKechnie returned to his desk. The look that Miss Cathcart gave him as he sat down had resentment in it. Probably she thought he was giving her a brush-off. He put away the papers he'd been working on and said, "If you'll come with me I'll take you to Jenkins now. I'm going out there on another matter."

"Thank you." A touch of embarrassment entered her manner; perhaps she was mentally canceling some of the harsh things she'd thought about him. "I hope I'm not putting you to any trouble."

McKechnie, in that moment, decided that she was a girl who got by easily on her smooth good looks, liked to have people jumping around doing favors for her. He said with a shade too much emphasis, "I was going anyway."

There was no more conversation between them going down in the elevator, nor in the basement garage where McKechnie checked out a company car. Once in the street, McKechnie was engrossed in getting through traffic. They went up Main Street, skid row, and some of the sights were interesting, but the girl sat quietly, her hands in their little white gloves folded on the white purse, her face inattentive and full of thought, as if she might be considering the condition of her father in the hospital.

At the East L.A. yards they left the car in the parking space and

headed for a small yardmaster's office. Jenkins stood at the door. Inside on the desk were a couple of small suitcases. When Jenkins looked at Miss Cathcart his eyes widened. He was big, taller than McKechnie's six feet one. Better-looking, too; McKechnie admitted it to himself, and always felt like jeering at himself for the touch of envy. No Black Irish in Jenkins; he had a Saxon fairness, curly blond hair, gray eyes, a big firm dimpled chin. In addition to looks, Jenkins had ambition and energy, and it was perfectly obvious that he intended to work right up to the top and occupy the little glassed-in room with the green carpet and the rich cigar-smoke smell.

"Miss Cathcart, may I present Patrolman Jenkins?" McKechnie said, making a formal business of it. "He can tell you about the accident to your father. What's this?" He indicated the open bags in which feminine garments were tumbled.

"Found them in a car on the rip track," Jenkins said. "Could have been there a week. The car's jacked up, they're working under it." The khaki uniform made Jenkins's shoulders look wider than normal, showed off the breadth of his chest. He was smiling at Miss Cathcart.

McKechnie separated some of the garments to look at the bags. He got the impression right away of a striking difference in quality between them. One was canvas-covered, so-called airplane luggage which sold from towering pyramids in any drugstore; and then somebody had painted it a deep pink. The pink color was chipped here and there; no effort had been made to touch up these spots. The second bag, in spite of the dust and a few scratches, had an expensive look. It was alligator, lined in dark blue suède, the lid mirrored inside, some crystal-and-silver containers fitted into slots at the front. In the mirror, as he moved it, McKechnie got a glimpse of Miss Cathcart and Jenkins. They had moved a few steps away and she was asking Jenkins about her father.

McKechnie examined the contents. Lots of nightgowns, some white satin pumps at which he took a puzzled second look, a couple of blouses, cosmetics of the dime-store variety tumbled together, leaking oil and perfume. And something more, a funny detail: in the bag with the white satin pumps were a few grains of rice. He knew all at once what the new satin shoes had half called to memory. A wedding.

Well, this was an example of rough luck, having a honeymoon marred by a baggage thief. He stuffed the contents into the bags, snapped the catches, looked for any trace of identifying tickets. There were none.

He heard Miss Cathcart say to Jenkins, "My father was carrying a sum of money. Perhaps as much as three or four thousand dollars. He'd worked hard for it, and now it's gone. The hospital people say there wasn't a cent in his pockets."

Jenkins looked as if he were feeling very sorry for her. "I wish I knew something that would help."

"Do you think the ambulance men might have taken it?"

Jenkins shook his head embarrassedly. McKechnie wished Jenkins didn't look so much like a movie juvenile, full of hammy sympathy and noble character. "You're putting me on the spot, Miss Cathcart. I couldn't swear to the honesty of those fellows on the ambulance. I don't doubt they're picked for the job and are as straight as they come. But lots of good barrels have one rotten apple."

There speaks the wholesome country lad, McKechnie thought. Jenkins had confided once that he'd been raised on a New Hampshire farm, came from old Pilgrim stock. No need to dislike him because the McKechnies fled Ireland during a potato famine. "By the way, wasn't Clay here with you last Friday?"

Jenkins nodded. "Yes, he was."

"Maybe he saw something," McKechnie suggested. "Have you asked him?"

"He was working on another job," Jenkins said. "Collins was down here, and they were checking cars. He might have some information, but I doubt it."

"There's a chance," McKechnie insisted, mostly just to disagree with Jenkins. "Maybe he caught sight of Miss Cathcart's father, saw him with someone else, before the accident."

"If he had seen him, he would have run him out," Jenkins said firmly. Then he remembered Miss Cathcart's feelings. "Don't take what I say personally, please. Technically your father was a trespasser here."

One of her gloved hands brushed at the hair which clung, damp with

heat, to the back of her neck. "I know that. I can't imagine why he came home as he did, riding a freight train. He had money for a ticket."

"You're sure he came into town on a freight?" Jenkins wondered. "Most of the characters we find around here are on their way out, looking for an empty car to stow away in."

"He wrote me that he was going to save the price of a ticket." She glanced swiftly at McKechnie, some sort of challenge in her look, as if daring him to say what he thought of this. "My dad's getting along in years. In some ways he's a little childish. He wanted to save what he had for—for something else."

"It's too bad it turned out as it did," McKechnie said, meaning it. "I still think you should talk to Clay."

"He's off on Tuesday," Jenkins put in.

"I know where he lives. It's not much out of the way, going back to the office. We could stop there." He saw the sudden gratitude in the girl's violet eyes and hated the rush of pleasure in himself that answered. She'd have *him* jumping around if he didn't watch it. He must remember that the world had a lot of good-looking girls in it, lots of smooth brown shoulders, round throats, white lace gloves.

Not many blue-violet eyes, though.

"Don't you want to see where I found that luggage?" Jenkins asked, his expression superior, amused.

"I sure do." He followed Jenkins out, expecting the girl to wait for him in the office; but when he looked back she was coming after them, gazing all around at the long lines of empties in the yard. The sun was hot and the shadows of the boxcars were black as ink on the pale brown earth. The slight breeze had a dusty smell with overtones of warm grease and musty fruit. A couple of Diesel switchers were puffing, out of sight in the distance. He heard an exclamation from Miss Cathcart and looked back to see her standing on one foot, rubbing an ankle. "You'd better wait at the office."

The sun on her hair brought out reddish glints. He could see perspiration on her temples. "I want to see where my father got hurt."

"There's nothing to see, miss." What did she expect, for God's sake? Some clue popping up out of the ballast?

"I want to look, anyway."

A stubborn and obnoxious female. McKechnie turned his back on her, went after Jenkins. The repair track—rip track to those in the yard—was just ahead, a half dozen cars on it in the process of having minor damages fixed up.

Most of the work was being concentrated on a car of red-ball merchandise, hurry-up stuff. The car toward which Jenkins led McKechnie had been jacked up, the wheels taken off; probably they'd been flattened in a quick stop. Nobody was working under it now. The door was open and Jenkins hopped in with a swift, athletic leap. The car had not been cleaned; on the floor lay pieces of broken packing cases and heavy paper and a few scraps of wire. In a corner McKechnie noted a few rinds of bread, an empty wine bottle. Jenkins jerked his head toward the opposite end of the car. "Down there, under some dunnage. When I saw that pink color, I thought for a minute I might have found a body." He laughed, as if embarrassed at his own mistake.

McKechnie went to the end of the car and squatted there and poked around in the rubbish. It all looked worn and dusty and as if it had been in the car for some time, except for a few scraps of bright white confetti. McKechnie picked up one of the confetti pieces, found it stiffer than he had expected, examined it and others for markings. There were tag ends of lettering, nothing decipherable. McKechnie stood up and went back to the door. "When do you think you looked in here last? Before you found the luggage——"

Jenkins shrugged. "I don't know. I glance into hundreds a week. Why don't you ask the rip-track foreman if he's seen anyone around?"

McKechnie nodded, didn't thank Jenkins for telling him his job. He went out and found the foreman and inquired about any hobos, strangers, and found out that the foreman hadn't seen anybody. None of the rip-track crew had mentioned seeing a trespasser. All of this time the girl stood off a little distance, her hair bright in the sun, the smooth brown shoulders gleaming, the white-gloved hands

clenched on the handle of her purse as if she were holding something in check. Her temper, probably, McKechnie decided.

Jenkins went over to her and said, loud enough for McKechnie to hear, "There isn't any use for you to go look at the spot where your father fell. I wish I could say that you might find some evidence there, something to account for what happened, but you wouldn't. It's just a track like any of these. The boxcar he fell from was empty, and it's gone now anyway. You'll just be hurting yourself needlessly." He sounded very sincere, sympathetic, consoling.

"There wasn't any money," she said huskily, as if she didn't believe it.

He was firm. "No, there wasn't any money."

McKechnie walked over and said, "I remember the spot; we'll stop there if you want to, Miss Cathcart."

Jenkins gave him a thin smile with reproval mixed up in it. "Excuse me then, will you? I've got to check a couple of special-protection cars up at the other end of the yard." He ticked his cap at Miss Cathcart, eyed her with a lot of sympathy, one long look, and left them. He looked big and brisk and full of animal strength, walking off with his shoulders squared inside the khaki shirt. McKechnie touched Miss Cathcart's arm, turning her in the opposite direction. She'd stared long enough at Jenkins's handsome physique, and time was passing. McKechnie took her across a few tracks, judged with his eye the distance from the fence, the street on which traffic spun past.

"About here." They stopped. The girl looked around, and he knew that the sunny empty space was a disappointment to her.

"I wish I knew," she whispered. "I wish I knew." She wasn't talking to McKechnie; the whisper was an echo of the tormenting puzzle in her mind.

Their shadows were black and small beside their feet, and from the street came the smell of gasoline fumes, dust raised by the traffic, a gutter odor of old papers and orange rinds and dead leaves and stale water. McKechnie thought she looked lost and alone in that moment. He said, almost liking her, "Don't give up. We'll go talk to Clay."

CHAPTER THREE

As McKechnie, with the two bags in his hands, ushered the girl toward the car, his gaze settled on the steel-link fence dividing the freight yard from the passenger-coach yard. The commissary building bulked large just beyond the gate. In its upper floors were the offices of diner personnel and purchasing; downstairs were big storage and kitchen facilities. Much of the diner food entered the trains pre-cooked, and McKechnie imagined he detected an odor of turkeys roasting. Beyond the sprawling tan-colored building lay the myriad tracks of the coach yard, on these tracks long lines of coaches waiting to go through the washers. Some were the trains of glittering streamliners, others were the familiar black oblong cars of McKechnie's childhood memories. Trains had always fascinated him. When he was a kid his ambition had been to grow up to become an engineer. Somehow it hadn't worked out that way. When he'd come back from the Army he had gone into the special agent's office, starting, like Jenkins, as a patrolman. At least trains were a part of his life even if he didn't help run one.

At this moment, studying the long lines of coaches, it occurred to him that the bags he carried should much more logically have turned up in the other yard. They didn't belong in a boxcar, had no resemblance to the ordinary baggage of a hobo, even ignoring the feminine contents. The alligator bag, at least, gave off an aura of good taste, money, luxury. It belonged in one of the private compartments of a streamliner.

He wondered why it hadn't been sold in a pawnshop. Obviously, once acquired by the thief, taken to the seclusion of the car on the rip

track, there was no reason its ultimate value shouldn't have been converted into cash. He speculated as to what could have interrupted the normal succession of events, causing the bags to be hidden under the debris in the car.

Perhaps the thief had been frightened by the approach of a patrolman or by the activities of the repair crews. Or perhaps—an idea that floated in from nowhere—perhaps the thief had been startled and delighted by some unexpected bonus, something the bags had contained, of unusual value, which had made the rest of the loot seem unimportant.

He put the two small suitcases on the rear seat, closed the door, got in behind the wheel. The girl was looking out through the windshield at the bright sun, the gleaming tracks, the dusty boxcars. "He's going to die." Her hands moved on the purse handle, crossing each other, gripping, almost tearing the frail white gloves. "They didn't tell me at the hospital, but I knew. He can't live, hurt like that."

McKechnie, discomfited, wished he had Jenkins's gift of easy and open sympathy. He said, "Getting off a train is a dangerous business, even for old-timers, men who do it dozens of times a day for years." He went on to tell her of the patrolman hurt last week. "The train wasn't even moving. He missed a grab-iron somehow and fell, broke a leg and a wrist."

She threw a glance at him, not really seeing him, her eyes full of fear. "Who would want to hurt my father? Who'd want him to die?"

McKechnie started the car, pulled out of the parking lot. "Where had he been?"

"Out in the desert. In Arizona."

Yes, the old man had been the type, McKechnie remembered. Wrinkled, sun-bitten, callused. "Prospecting?"

"Yes."

"Did he find anything?"

"He located a claim he was sure had uranium on it. He wrote a couple of letters full of plans; he was going to get someone to finance him, dig the mine, send me the profits to bank. Then he wrote a brief note. His partner had changed his mind and wanted to sell out. There was

an offer, several thousand, and he wanted to take it and go home."

"Why didn't your father send you the money? Or at least put it into traveler's checks?"

"You'd have to know Dad to understand why he never did things like that. When he was young he mined in Mexico, he always carried a lot of money with him in gold. He was used to having a lot of cash on him."

"I can't figure it, though," McKechnie protested, "coming in on a freight when he had the price of a ticket so many times over."

"Perhaps it was his clothes." She frowned, shook her head a little. "I was surprised when they showed me the things he'd worn. Somewhere he must have lost his suit, the one he left home in. He wouldn't get on a passenger train wearing those dirty overalls. And Dad was funny, Scotch, in things like that. He wouldn't buy a new suit with clothes hanging in the closet at home. Perhaps the way he was dressed accounts for his being on the freight train."

"From what you say, mining was a lifelong business with him."

"No, that wasn't true. While Mother lived, Dad ran a wholesale grocery supply business."

"Here in town?"

"Yes. It wasn't a big firm. He carried specialties."

This could account for the old man's choice of transportation, though, McKechnie thought. You didn't have anything to do with shipping by rail without learning about the difficulty of keeping hobos out of boxcars, filled or empty. "How long since he decided to try mining again?"

They had turned into a street that led into a residential neighborhood, away from heavy traffic, commercial establishments.

"He'd been restless all last winter. Mother died in the fall. He sold his business right after the funeral, said he couldn't stand keeping on with it, it didn't seem important any more. I'm gone at work all day. Most days," she offered, as if explaining this particular Tuesday. McKechnie wanted to ask her where she worked, but didn't. "I guess Dad was lonely; he decided to go back into what he'd done when he was young."

"What did he tell you of the accident?"

"He can't seem to remember it. He talks about Mother quite a bit, just little snatches, remembering things that happened when she was alive. His mind seems to have—gone back. He doesn't even seem to know anything about the Arizona trip."

"Then how can you be sure he *was* carrying money?"

"I know he was." The eyes, startlingly blue, met McKechnie's without hesitation. The round chin lifted a little. "I know."

"Jenkins said that the boxcar was empty. That means your father was alone in it."

"The car was empty when people *got there*," she pointed out. "I don't think anyone who was very quick would have any trouble getting away in there. That's why I wanted to see the place, to see just how it might have happened."

McKechnie thought back over the girl's story. There seemed very little positive fact in it. She didn't know how much money her dad had had, if any. Judging by the way he was dressed and his being in the boxcar, McKechnie would have said the probability was that he'd lost his money in Arizona, gambling, perhaps. If there'd been any money in the first place——

"How much equipment did he take with him? I understand hunting for uranium involves Geiger counters and some other expensive gadgets."

"He had a partner."

"Someone you knew?"

She shook her head. "An old friend he met in Phoenix. If—if nothing comes of what I do here, I may go to Phoenix."

"If you do, check with our special agent on the chance he may have something." McKechnie sensed in her a terrific determination and drive. She meant to find out the last possible scrap about the accident to her father. Well, too, there was money involved in it, and she might have her mind on that. It was nothing for which to think less of her, an entirely human preoccupation. Never build them up into angels, McKechnie told himself inwardly: then you weren't disappointed.

Clay's place was at the end of the block, up against the side of a hill

where the street met a dead end, and a lot of gardening had been spread out over the slope and on the yard. There were banks of pink ivy geranium and blue lantana, extremely green grass cut short and trimmed precisely around the edges, and borders of bold yellow cannas. Clay and his wife and his two kids, a boy about ten and a girl of eight, sat on the front porch. They looked as if they were resting after a hard session of mowing and weeding. The kids on the steps had Cokes in their hands. Clay and his wife, in wicker chairs, had beer.

McKechnie and the girl went up a path made of flagstones laid in the grass, and he introduced her to the Clays and explained their business. Mrs. Clay was a very friendly woman; she bustled around getting chairs for the visitors. Clay wiped the sweat off his face with a handkerchief, asked them if they'd like a cold beer. The girl accepted. McKechnie had to refuse on account of Rule G.

Clay was big, redheaded, bulging inside the T-shirt and O.D. shorts he had on. His wife was thin, dark, her sallow complexion not complimented by the harsh blue of her sun suit. Somehow, though, they matched each other. You couldn't be around them long without sensing a comradeship, shared mutual interests, a live-and-let-live tolerance of other people. McKechnie thought, among the married couples he knew, the Clays had survived the loss of romantic passion and the oncoming of domesticity better than most.

The kids went into the house, politely removing themselves from the position of eavesdroppers, and the girl told Clay about the accident to her dad. She hadn't finished before Clay began to shake his head.

"I heard about it from Jenkins. He had this fellow in the office, talking it over."

McKechnie was surprised. He hadn't heard of any additional questioning. "You mean, one of the witnesses?"

"I thought so. A fellow named Healy. He seemed to know a lot about it. He was telling Jenkins about the scream when I came in."

"What was this?" the girl demanded.

"I heard him tell Jenkins that just before your father leaped out of

the moving car there was a God-awful scream from someplace. Jenkins seemed to think he must have heard a whistle."

Mrs. Clay gave the girl a big frosty glass. "Sit back and relax, Miss Cathcart. Gee, isn't it hot?"

"The breeze gets cut off by the hill here," Clay explained, a mechanical remark he must have made a thousand times before. "Well, they argued about it and Jenkins said he'd make a note. Jenkins told me what had happened. He seemed to think your dad was in bad shape."

She looked down into the frosty beer and nodded briefly.

"I wish I *had* seen something," Clay finished.

McKechnie recalled another detail. "Jenkins said you and Collins were out in the yard at the time."

"We'd had a carload of whiskey, a Mammoth Drug shipment, broken into the night before. We were checking seals to see if anything else had been opened."

"Collins handles baggage, mostly," McKechnie said idly.

"Well, the boss sent him out on this whiskey." Clay gave his wife his glass with the unspoken suggestion that she fill it. She finished her own, went off into the house. "When I reported Friday morning, the night man, Ross—you know him—said there was a car of whiskey came in on the fast manifest, tagged for Malpais Valley. The valley drag left and Ross checked it as it went out, and the car wasn't with it. This was just before I came on."

Mrs. Clay came back with new supplies, including a bowl of peanuts, and Clay downed his beer with a long look over it at the lawn, as if the grass were responsible for his thirst. McKechnie sampled the peanuts, found them crisp and salty.

Clay went on, "I was out in the yard looking for the car when a switchman, a fellow named Branham, came up and said he'd noticed a car on the hold track, tagged with the code word for whiskey, with its seals broken. I went over there, and it was just what he said it was; the seals were gone and it had been hit pretty hard because there was space in the doorway for at least six cases."

"How did it happen to be on the hold track?"

"Well, that's what Collins tried to find out. He checked with the

yard clerk; there was nothing on the waybill to account for a hold tag."

"Something fishy there," McKechnie said.

"Sure, I knew that. That's why I called Ryerson." Clay set down his glass on the floor beside his feet. He looked at the girl, sitting there tensely, disappointment thinly concealed on her face. "Miss Cathcart, I'm sorry about your father, but there just isn't anything at all I can add to what Jenkins told you."

"You added the scream," she said in a sort of thin voice.

"Well, Jenkins seemed to think there'd been a whistle going off about then."

"Perhaps it was my father screaming," she said, and McKechnie felt sympathy for her, for her determination to find out what had really happened to the old man. "Perhaps someone was trying to push him out, trying to kill him."

"I don't think the intent could have been murder. Even supposing there was someone doing what you say. Too much chance he'd roll, get up with just a few bruises," McKechnie explained.

"He was thrown out on his head," she answered in the firm, quiet voice McKechnie didn't like because it sounded as if she thought he was stupid. "The person with him intended it to kill him."

Clay said, "How about another glass of beer?"

"Thanks. Not this time." Her smile included Mrs. Clay, who was looking with a touch of envy at the beautiful brown shoulders, the round arms, the soft hair. And, McKechnie thought, the violet eyes. Miss Cathcart stood up, shook hands with the Clays, said good-by to the kids, who were staring out through the screen.

"Come back again," Mrs. Clay invited, with just the merest flick of a glance toward McKechnie. Trying to see how the land lay. Woman-like, looking for signs of a budding romance. McKechnie put on an expression of deliberate boredom.

"I will," the girl answered. "We're practically neighbors." In the car she looked at McKechnie and said, "I do live close. If you could drop me off——"

He nodded. "I thought you might have a car parked downtown."

"I went in on the bus."

She directed him at the next few corners, and they pulled up soon in front of a four-flat, old-fashioned but neatly cared for, on a shady tree-lined street. This was an old part of Los Angeles, by-passed by the rushing traffic, a backwater. The houses had gingerbread cornices, big front porches, potted hydrangeas by the steps. Some of the sidewalks were cracked by the roots of the huge old trees. Miss Cathcart got out of the car quickly, before McKechnie could come around and let her out, and stood in the open door to thank him. "I appreciate what you've done. You've been very kind."

For some reason McKechnie wanted to prolong the moment. In retrospect it seemed a very short time that they had spent together. And he hadn't helped her to find out anything new. "Call me and tell me what you find out from the witnesses," he said finally. She nodded. She stood in the cool shade, but the marks of the trip through the freight yard were plain: dust on the white pumps and on the hem of the summer dress, a smudge on one of the lace gloves, her hair still damp with sweat.

"I'll call you."

Their eyes met, and for just an instant McKechnie was uncomfortable. She was pretty in an odd way, a way you didn't notice until you were saying good-by. Until it was a little too late——

He realized with a sort of shock that it had taken him all this while to get over the idea that for a father she had a hobo in a boxcar.

McKechnie carried the two bags up in the elevator to the special agent's office, set them on Collins's desk. He went in to speak to Ryerson, and while he was there Collins came in. Through the glass McKechnie saw Collins spot the bags and, by the look of recognition, that he knew them. When he came out Collins had the lids up and was sorting out the contents.

Collins said, "You called the district baggage office yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Where'd they turn up?"

McKechnie told him about the boxcar in the East L.A. yards, the

bags being hidden in the dunnage. While he was talking, Collins reached for the phone, called the district baggage office on the fourth floor. When he had finished talking to the clerk there, McKechnie said, "There's something I want to mention before I forget it. You were in the East L.A. yards last Friday, looking at cars with Clay."

Collins pushed the stuff back into the bags and snapped the lids. "Yes, that's right. He had a carload of whiskey opened."

"He told me that the car had been spotted by a switchman named Branham. I don't know whether you remember that cookie or not. He's been in trouble. He was charged with infraction of Rule G about six months ago but got out of it. He's noted for a nasty temper, had a fight with another switchman last year sometime."

Collins's expression had grown thoughtful. "We've got a file on it. Come to think, the scuttlebutt has it Branham's been drinking again, is due to face another Rule G investigation if he doesn't snap out of it."

"He's the type who might be interested in a carload of whiskey on the hold track," McKechnie suggested.

"You're so right." Collins winked at his fellow investigator.

"Who put the car on the hold track?" McKechnie wondered.

"As far as I can find out, it was simply an error. The yard clerk mixed it up with another car nearby, put the wrong tag on it. Wouldn't happen again in a blue moon." Collins picked up the bags, went into the inner sanctum to speak to Ryerson, came out again in a minute. "I'm taking these down to the fourth floor, then on out to the girl who lost them. You eating at Lofton's tonight?"

"I guess so. See you there about six?"

"Okay, boy." Collins nodded and went out, the bags hanging from either hand, the pink bag spotted and shabby, the alligator bag as glossy as silk.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN Miss Cannelbury answered the door Collins noted some changes in her. She was wearing a different dress, a thin lilac cotton; and though it fit her a lot better, it was a much cheaper piece of merchandise than the gray pongee. She didn't have on the dark lipstick, so that her mouth looked pale. She was wearing horn-rimmed glasses that made her green eyes owlish. Collins, in the instant of appraisal, got the funny impression that she'd gone back to being herself. He said, "Well, one of our investigators found them."

Her gaze had already fallen to his hands, had fastened on the bags. She trembled violently and fell against the lintel. For a moment, in astonishment, Collins thought she was going to faint. He was prepared to drop the bags and catch her. But with a kind of struggle she gained control of herself. "Come in, please. Put them on the table."

Collins walked to the table across the room and put the bags there side by side. In the office of the district baggage agent a clerk had typed up a list of all the stuff in the bags; Collins now took a copy of this from his pocket and spread it on the table by the suitcases. Miss Cannelbury walked over and leaned against the edge of the table and smiled at him. It was a shaky but terrifically grateful smile.

"You'll never have any idea of what this means to me." She looked quickly at the pink case and then with a sidelong movement of her eyes at the one made of alligator. "I had no idea you people were so efficient."

"I'm afraid we don't deserve the compliment. Not all of your belongings are in there."

She stood transfixed, as if Collins had just hit her over the head.

"Will you look at these, please?" Collins opened both bags and took out the blouses, the gowns, the white pumps, the mess of cosmetics. He spread all of these things out upon the table. "I'll have to have your signature on this paper, indicating you've received what's listed here."

She was staring at the alligator bag, nothing sidelong about her gaze now. Her hands were lifted in an attitude of horror. "What have you done?"

"There's no jewelry," Collins said, uncomfortable because of her extreme reaction. "You'll put in a claim, of course."

She tore frantically through the clothes and then without answering she staggered off. The bed was in an alcove, partially screened, and she fell there with a harsh, chopped-off cry and lay without moving. Collins had faced anger and upbraiding and was used to sarcasm; he'd never seen anything like this. He went after her, wondering if she was suffering some sort of fit. But he had no sooner reached the foot of the bed than she jerked to a sitting position. The glasses were crooked, twisted awry by the fall; she couldn't have seen much through them. It didn't seem to bother her. She cried hoarsely, "Where did you find them?"

"I didn't. One of our patrolmen found them in an empty boxcar in the East Los Angeles freight yards."

She seemed to think this over, or at least it took a long time to sink in. "How could they have gotten there?"

"I don't know, miss."

She tried to find him through the crooked lenses. "But you're a detective, a policeman!"

"We didn't catch the thief, Miss Cannelbury. The bags must have been stolen Friday, when you arrived. They'd been rifled and hidden in the car long before our patrolman stumbled on them."

Her head drooped forward, her hair swinging about her face, and Collins expected her to fall. But then came a sudden change; she leaped up and rushed at him, wearing a grimace of fury and outrage. "What a *crazy* railroad! What a bunch of—of *knuckleheads!*" Her shrill voice had risen to a scream, and Collins wondered how long it

would take the manager to get there. "I'm going to call the Los Angeles police and report you to them!" She lifted her fists; he sensed the impulse to beat him in the face.

"It's your privilege," Collins said, his expression impassive. "But something more useful would be to draw up a perfect description of the jewelry, so that the police pawnshop detail can watch for it."

She ground her teeth. "I *did* describe it!"

"Just briefly, remember? Just enough to help identify the bags as yours if they were found. Costume jewelry doesn't bring much and isn't often hocked, but there's a chance, and the police could catch it. They'll need lots of details, even sketches if you can manage them."

Inwardly he was wondering why a woman who set so much store by gewgaws didn't keep photographs of them in case of loss. He noted, though, that his words had calmed her somewhat. After a period of what seemed stunned thought she went back to the table and looked at the stuff there, lifting the gowns and blouses aimlessly. She avoided touching the white satin shoes. The fit of rage had left her weak and shaky; Collins saw the trembling of her fingers. By and by she straightened the glasses, tucked back a few strands of the ash-blond hair, turned to face him. "I'm afraid that I told you a lie."

Collins raised his eyebrows, waited, sizing her up. She showed the effects of shock and fright. She was pale, her eyes were dilated behind the lenses, her skin shone with moisture.

"Won't you sit down?" she invited. "We'd better talk about it."

Collins sat down. He was thoroughly on guard now. She was going to change her story; he was beginning to have a hunch what the new story would be. She took the chair she'd occupied earlier, put her feet precisely together, her fingers twining.

"I should have told you at once," she began. "The jewelry is worth a great deal of money. It isn't costume jewelry at all. Every piece of it is real."

"About how much *is* it worth?"

"I don't want to put a round figure on it. I'll have to write home for papers, jewelers' receipts, and so forth. It will take a little time."

"Well, just roughly."

"Many thousands of dollars." She must have seen disbelief flare in his face, and his contempt for what he thought a poor attempt at fraud, for she hurried on, stammering. "That's why I didn't tell you the truth, why I was afraid. You can't trust anyone. Not even policemen. If you'd known the real value of all those diamonds you might have——"

"Thanks," Collins interrupted flatly. "Is it insured?"

"No." She hesitated, looking wretchedly everywhere but at Collins. "That is, I don't believe so."

"You'd better wire at once and find out. The insurance company will have a good description of the pieces and their men will help investigate the theft."

Her hands jumped. "No, I'm sure none of it was insured."

"This will make a considerable difference in your claim," he said with heavy emphasis.

The agitation returned; she stumbled from the chair and began to pace the floor. "Please understand, I don't intend to put in a claim. I just want the jewelry back."

He watched her curiously. Fear is contagious; he almost felt like getting up and racing around the room with her. "Not putting in a claim gives no guarantee of its return."

"I want you to keep looking!" She was beating her fists together now; tears had begun to well from the corners of her eyes. "There has to be something, some clue you can work on! Did you go inside that boxcar, examine every cranny? Did you test for fingerprints? *Did you?*"

Collins shook his head. "It would be an impossible job, miss."

"You didn't even see the boxcar!" she cried, her voice full of horrified doubt, the flesh suddenly drawn thin around her eyes so that they stood out enormously behind the lenses.

"If there had been a clue to the thief, McKechnie would have found it."

"McKechnie? Who's he?"

"Another investigator."

"Did he know the luggage was mine, that it was stolen Friday?"

The mad eyes staring into his own raised goose-pimples on Collins.

"No, he didn't know the bags were yours. How could he? The tags are gone. He could judge for himself that it was stolen stuff, taken into the empty car to be looked over. Hobos don't carry suitcases."

"Why weren't they found before?" She had begun to creep nearer, as if Collins represented some prey to be caught unaware. Collins got up and went over to the edge of the table, sat there. "How could it have been so long?"

"The bags were concealed under some dunnage, material used to pack crates and boxes to keep them from bumping each other."

"Don't they sweep out boxcars, though? I seem to remember reading in some railroad magazine on the train, after a car makes a trip it's checked over, cleaned up." This was said in a desperate rush.

"This car was sitting on the rip track."

"What's that?"

"I should have said repair track." He went on slowly, "I might find out how long the car had been in the yard. If it hadn't been where it was, with crews working, people around it, some hobo should have noticed what was left of your belongings, sold the clothes and the bags in a secondhand store."

She paused, stood teetering on some invisible point of balance.

"If the car has been on the rip track since Friday or before, it probably indicates that your luggage was taken there for examination right after the theft. But if the car came in since Friday——"

"He must have had them somewhere else! There'll be some clue." To Collins's horror she dropped to her knees and crawled to him and clutched at his legs. It was a moment of such roaring embarrassment that he almost bolted; and all the while he tried to pull her to her feet she was babbling about his kindness and honesty and her gratitude and how sure she was that he was going to find those diamonds.

He got her back into the chair at last. He was so wet with sweat he could feel his shirt sticking to his back, and his collar was clammy. He had decided during those moments when she had gripped his knees that she was crazy. He'd suspected her of silly trickery, but the truth was more charitable. She was simply off her rocker.

But now her calm, her sudden control surprised him. She took a

handkerchief from the pocket of the lilac dress, wiped her eyes, cleaned the glasses, brushed some moisture from her pale mouth. "Forgive me. I was rather excited for a moment."

He was sticking strictly to business. "Will you sign this statement itemizing the articles which have been returned to you?"

"Of course." She went to the desk for a pen, came to the table, wrote her name at the bottom of the page Collins had put down. She didn't read the list and Collins knew that she was not interested in anything except the jewelry. She put down the pen and looked at him. "Are these freight yards you mention anywhere near the Union Station?"

"No."

"How were these bags transported there? I mean, really, why take them at all around another sort of train?"

She seemed so normal, so reasonable, without any sign of hysterics, that he decided to risk carrying on a conversation again. "There is one possible connection between your train and the freight yards. After you left it, your car was moved to the passenger-coach yards for a routine cleaning. The East L.A. freight yards adjoin the passenger-coach yards."

She trembled a little, but her green eyes remained steadily on his. "You mean, my bags were put back on the train somehow——"

He nodded.

"By some tramp?"

He shook his head. "An ordinary hobo would be pretty noticeable around a passenger platform. I don't know how your bags might have happened to be put back on the train."

"Aren't there other possibilities?"

"Millions of them," Collins growled, foreseeing the work to be done. He picked up the paper, folded it, glancing at her name in passing. The round hand, very black ink, said *Jane Elizabeth Cannelbury*. The biggest puzzle of all hadn't been mentioned between them. Why had she let thousands of dollars in diamonds ride off out of sight on a baggage trolley?

He had no intention of poking her up about it.

"I'd like a complete description of the jewelry," he reminded.

She nodded, her eyes fixed on the bags. "Will you give me until tomorrow? I'll have it all written down by then." She reached out a hand, stroked the fine alligator grain. "How thoroughly did you examine these, Mr. Collins?"

In answer, and sensing that her interest lay in the alligator case, he picked it up and turned it around, looking at it from all angles, running his fingers over the soft suède lining. He put it down, picked up the shabby pink case—and got a surprise. Under it, one of the copper brads on which it sat was bent, crooked, and in the tiny crack was caught a bit of white paper. Cardboard. A dimpled texture like vellum. Two lines of torn lettering. He thought, pulling it out, it must be part of a calling card.

She was peering over his shoulder, her breath hot against his cheek. "What is it?"

"I'm trying to make it out." She was crowding him, so he moved away a little, turned the scrap of paper so that the light from the windows illuminated the lettering.

EST B. ABBOTSFOR
OPPY STATE FOOD PROD

"It's part of a business card, isn't it? Don't you think that's what it is?" She tried to snatch it from his hand.

"Looks like it," Collins agreed. He went quickly to the desk where the phone sat, where a directory lay on a low shelf. He put down the scrap of cardboard and she pounced on it like a cat. He took the directory to a chair, began to leaf through its pages. There was a Forrest B. Abbotsford in Huntington Park, a number on Beech Drive. The Poppy State Food Products Company was out in East L.A., on Commercial Way. Collins well remembered the big warehouse; it dominated the district; and Poppy State shipped a lot of goods, canned and dried fruits mostly. He went back to the phone and put in a call to the Poppy State offices.

They had a Mr. Abbotsford, all right; he was an assistant sales manager. Right now he was out on a business call, but was due back at

any moment. Would Collins like to leave his name? Collins said it wasn't necessary, he'd call again later.

The girl was hopping around the room, wild-eyed, clutching the bit of pasteboard as though it were one of the missing diamonds. She paused long enough to ask, "What did they tell you?"

"He's with them, all right. Sales manager. Assistant sales manager, I should say."

"And he's a *crook*?"

It took Collins a moment to realize that she'd jumped to the conclusion that Abbotsford was the thief. "Wait a minute. Let's take things a little slower. You don't know yet——"

"I'm going to his house! I'll confront him!"

Collins set himself to calm her. He pointed out the damage that might be done by hasty, inconsidered action. If Abbotsford by a stroke of luck was actually in on the theft, her rushing to his house would only give warning, prepare him to resist the efforts of the police. If he was an honest citizen with information which might be useful, her acting as if he were a criminal would antagonize him. It took considerable argument, but Miss Cannelbury agreed at last to hold off. Temporarily. She warned Collins with a touch of hysteria he'd have to produce results pretty quick.

She kept the scrap of card. Wild horses couldn't have gotten it away from her.

Collins left. He had what he'd come for, the signed paper acknowledging the return of her belongings, except for the jewelry. The paper and what it signified seemed of little importance now. The case had taken an unexpected twist, an ominous twist. Of course no railroad takes responsibility for jewels of great value, hand-checked in such casual manner from the Pullman to the taxi stand; but this was not the point that worried Collins. The girl was a nut. She was capable of great violence. It would take very little to start her into an attack on anyone she thought was interfering with her recovery of the jewels.

He became aware of one change in himself. At some time during the latter part of their interview she'd convinced him about the jewelry. He

had no doubt at all now but that it was what she said it was, a collection of much value, genuine diamonds set in solid gold.

Tomorrow she'd have a detailed description of each piece for him. Right now it was time for lunch.

He stopped on the way back into the downtown district at a fountain lunch, had there a roast pork sandwich, carrot salad, buttermilk, apple pie with cheese. He picked up a paper outside and looked at the Hollywood Park entries for the day. He and McKechnie had a difference of opinion on a couple of thoroughbreds; he wanted to see if either of them was running.

There were no familiar names, nothing that roused his interest.

The L.A. traffic grumbled past, the sun was hot, the blue smog hovered over the tops of the trees in Westlake Park. At this moment McKechnie was on his way south to the Vernon district, where some fusees and torpedoes had been stolen from a switchman's shanty. It took him the afternoon to find witnesses, to get the names of some of the kids involved, to go with the local juvenile officer to the boys' homes, and to recover, eventually, most of the loot. The job did not involve such concentration that he was unable to think now and then of the girl who had come to the office that morning to find out what had happened to her dad.

He'd better check with Jenkins about that fellow Healy, about Healy's story of hearing a scream. It wasn't down anywhere in the report.

CHAPTER FIVE

COLLINS walked up to the receptionist's desk and said, "I'd like to see Mr. Abbotsford, please."

The little brunette wore a tight blue sweater, a string of big imitation pearls. The pearls were no brighter than her teeth. "Yes, sir. Whom shall I say is calling, please?"

"Collins. I'm in the special agent's office." He named his railroad. The girl nodded, clicked on a gadget, spoke honeyed words to Mr. Abbotsford.

She said to Collins, "Go down the hall to the stairs. Mr. Abbotsford's office is at the top of the stairs, first door to your right. His name is on the panel."

Abbotsford's office wasn't big, but it was well furnished, air-conditioned, the light muted by aluminum awnings outside the windows. Abbotsford was at the water cooler in the corner; he turned around as Collins came in. He was around fifty, Collins thought, a well-built man with a good sun tan, neat gray hair, a long face with a tolerant, friendly expression. "Take a chair," he invited. He dropped the paper cup into a wastebasket, went over to sit down behind the desk.

Collins was looking at the view. Past a couple of parking lots on which stood long rows of truck trailers, a few low buildings, some spur tracks, there was a complete panorama of the East L.A. freight yards and the passenger-coach yards. The office was close enough and not too high, so that details were quite plain. He could see a patrolman walking a beat, the crews just coming back to the jobs on the rip track, and

over at the commissary building beyond the fence, a wholesale butcher's rig delivering sides of beef.

"The light bothering you?" Abbotsford swung his chair, made as if to reach for the window blind.

"Not a bit, thanks." Collins transferred his attention to the man. The suit Abbotsford wore was of dark blue serge, very good quality; Collins suspected that the material had been imported. The brocade tie was gray, the shirt an off-white silk with a shadow weave. The clothes showed care as well as good taste. Collins said, "I'm on a case concerning some luggage. Do you know a Miss Cannelbury?"

"Odd name." Abbotsford thought about it, one elbow on the desk, his finger rubbing his temple. "It doesn't ring a bell. Sorry."

"Have you recently been in the Union Station?"

Abbotsford smiled slightly. "No, not within several months. You spoke of luggage. Is that where——"

"That's where it disappeared," Collins said quickly.

"What brought you to me?" The smile had gone away and Abbotsford's manner was noticeably cooler.

"One of your calling cards."

With a shrug Abbotsford reached into an inner pocket of his suit, took out a card, flipped it across the desk to Collins. "One like that?"

"Part of one like that."

"Don't be so guarded," Abbotsford said, as if trying to sound amused. "If my business card was found on the spot where luggage vanished, I'm afraid I can't help you. I've given out a lot of cards in the two and a half years I've been with Poppy State. You might say I've papered the wholesale district with them. I couldn't possibly keep track of them, tell you the names of a tenth of the people who must have one."

"A bit of your card was attached to the rifled suitcase." Collins nodded toward the window, the panorama of the freight yards below. "In an empty boxcar."

His eyes blank, Abbotsford swung round as if to see for himself what nonsense Collins meant. "Down there? I must pass those yards on an average of four or five times a day."

"That doesn't answer the question."

A touch of anger flared in Abbotsford's eyes, and Collins got the uncomfortable impression that he might be handling him wrong. "I'm sorry, Mr. Collins. There doesn't seem to be anything I can add."

"Perhaps you dropped a card in a boxcar being loaded somewhere—on one of your spur tracks here, for instance."

Abbotsford brushed aside the suggestion with a shake of his head. "No, I don't have anything to do with that end of the business." For an instant he paused, and Collins thought that he meant to add something more which had just occurred to him. But finally, all he said was, "My job is selling; I never meddle with shipping."

Collins rose. "Thanks for your time, sir."

Abbotsford got up and ushered him to the head of the stairs. His air of polite good humor had returned. While they shook hands in parting, Collins noted that the other man took notice of his clothes, and he was glad he had worn the ten-dollar tie. It was over a year old, but the pale blue fleur-de-lis on eggshell satin still looked rich. He thought that Abbotsford even showed a spark of envy.

When McKechnie got back to the office late in the afternoon he called the L.A. police and found out to which hospital they'd taken old man Cathcart. From Emergency, Cathcart had gone to General. McKechnie put in a call to General, finally got a floor supervisor, and from her he learned that Cathcart had died during the afternoon. He was thinking that after dinner he might run out and see Miss Cathcart, offer his sympathy, when Ryerson stuck his head out of the inner sanctum and asked McKechnie to come in.

Ryerson sat on the edge of his big desk, puffing a cigar, one leg swinging. "Jenkins just called from East L.A. He says there's a setup out there we might be interested in. Last Thursday night they had a carload of whiskey on the hold track. Clay found it, broken open. Now the outcheck has come through and the consignee reports over four hundred dollars' worth of liquor missing."

McKechnie sensed what was coming. "Collins handled it," he said. "I heard about it from him."

Ryerson stared at him through the smoke. "Of course Collins's job

is baggage, mostly. He was here, I sent him out. What Jenkins is steamed up about is this. There's another carload of liquor on the hold track. It belongs there; it's being held for shipper's orders."

Ryerson was going to ask for a stake-out. McKechnie knew it. He felt a surge of unreasonable irritation. There were seven investigators attached to the special agent's office, and this one night he'd picked to go see a girl who'd just lost her dad, who might be lonely, who might like to know that a cop was interested. He jammed his hands into his pockets. Ryerson didn't miss the gesture. "Got something doing?"

He could have lied and said he had a date, but there had been times in the past when Ryerson could have lied to him and hadn't. "Just a wild idea. You remember the girl who was here this morning?"

Ryerson nodded. "Her dad fell out of a boxcar."

"He's dead. He died in General Hospital this afternoon."

Ryerson puffed thoughtfully. "She didn't think it was an accident."

"She says he was thrown out on his head."

"What were you going to do about it?"

"I thought I'd go see her."

There was a drawn-out moment of silence.

Ryerson got off the edge of the desk and went around to his chair, sat down, put the cigar in an ash tray. "I had a call from Price this afternoon." Price was an FBI man who had been in the office many times. "He wanted to get in touch with Cathcart's daughter; somebody had told him she was coming here. Cathcart found something out there in the desert that interested Uncle Whiskers. Then he dropped from sight."

"I don't think she knows anything about what he found."

"Well, Price wants to talk to her about it." Ryerson looked absently at some reports spread out on his desk. "I was going to suggest that you see her tomorrow."

"All right." McKechnie resigned himself; you didn't crowd the FBI. "Who's on at East L.A. yards from four to twelve?"

"Betchel. He'll stake out with you. I'll leave orders for Sanderson to relieve you when he comes on at twelve." Sanderson was the sergeant in charge from twelve to eight. "I happened to think, there'll be some-

body here about Cathcart tomorrow from L.A.P.D. You got anything new for them?"

"No, nothing. The whole situation, Cathcart being on a freight train in the first place, sounds funny as hell, but I still think the fall must have been an accident. If it wasn't, why didn't at least one of the witnesses see somebody?"

"Sometimes what they see isn't what happened," Ryerson pointed out.

McKechnie went back to his desk, got out the report on the accident to Cathcart, and looked it over. He remembered the differences between the two who had claimed to see Cathcart fall: Healy, small, round, shabby, bulgy-eyed; Abbotsford, the typical solid citizen, probably a prosperous salesman or an executive. A funny pair, when you stopped to think, to have witnessed together the fatal accident of a desert prospector from Arizona.

Sitting there, he thought of the girl. She'd be broken with grief; he remembered the torn note in her voice when she'd spoken of her premonition that her father was going to die. The father and the girl had been alone after the mother had died. Not close, though—he recalled her words, that she'd been gone at work all day, the father had grown restless. She was a practical person, obviously; she'd held the job rather than stay home to keep the old man company. Her father had gone off to hunt for uranium in the desert. Perhaps the practicality extended to the amount of grief she might suffer too. Perhaps her determination to recover that money would cut short the tears.

Maybe it was just as well he hadn't gone to her home after all.

In the office Collins was talking to Ryerson about Miss Cannelbury. He told Ryerson most of it, but omitted the part where she'd crawled to him, clung hysterically to his knees. The very memory of it made Collins want to blush for her. He tried to put over to the boss the twin impressions that the girl was a little nuts and that her story about the diamonds had the ring of truth.

"After I left Abbotsford I checked up on the boxcar where the bags were found. It had been on the rip track since Thursday. My guess is, the two bags were slipped back into the train, hidden in it somewhere,

taken out when it reached the coach yards, carried from the coach yards to the car on the rip track. This would be around noon, Friday. The crews would be off for lunch. The bags were rifled then, the rest of the stuff abandoned when the value of the jewelry was realized."

"There's more than meets the eye there," Ryerson pointed out. "Damned few hobos would recognize genuine stones when they saw them. Packed like that in an overnight bag, a hobo would take them for costume stuff."

"I thought of it," Collins agreed uneasily.

"Somebody knew the real thing. And quick." Ryerson began to light a new cigar. "You might think they'd spotted the bag, noticed the jewelry, on the train. But in that case, why take both cases? Why not just take the one with the jewelry in it?"

Collins lit a cigarette and the two men sat for a few moments in silence. The windows facing the light-well held a gray, dusty glow, and the traffic outside, muted and far away as it was, nevertheless conveyed a sense of nerve-scratching homebound hurry. "The pink bag was a damned shabby affair," Collins said finally.

"And the other one isn't?"

"The alligator bag cost money. She said at first it was imitation, but I'm inclined to think that then, as with the jewelry, she was lying."

"Have you talked to the Pullman porter yet?"

Collins shook his head. "He's in Chicago. He'll be back here on Sunday."

"Send a wire, then."

Collins brushed at a spot of ash on his knee. "This thing reminds me of a few others, thefts like it, spaced out over the last few months. In each case the luggage disappeared after it had been placed on the redcap's trolley. I think somebody's figured out a pretty neat scheme and that more than one are in it. The bags go back on the train, end up in the coach yards, get smuggled out under the activities of the cleaning crews. This is the first time we've recovered anything in the yards, giving a clue to the method. It's the first time anything so valuable has been taken too."

Ryerson's eyes looked flat, pale, introspective; his face had a sudden

attentiveness, as though he were listening to something from the past. "Somebody got excited. Too excited to wait, to keep hands off until he was out of the yards."

"Looks that way, yes."

"Work on it," Ryerson advised. "It won't sound good in the papers."

The patrons of Lofton's were all of a pattern, neat bachelor types who seemed settled in their ways. Lofton's was long since settled in its way: it had remained in the same spot on Spring Street for more than fifty years. The marble tile floor was spotless, the fans in the ceiling noiseless, the tablecloths gleaming. Even better than the food, which was good, was the sense of uncrowded leisure.

Collins and another investigator named Shipley were at a table in a rear corner when McKechnie came in. Shipley looked up at his approach and said, "Well, the Black Irish are with us." Collins muttered a greeting; he had a paper open and was reading a clothing ad. One of the better-grade men's stores had some suits marked down from a hundred ten to eighty-nine fifty. McKechnie sat down, laid his own paper on the table.

"Goldy's Lad is running tomorrow," he said casually.

Collins promptly turned to the sports section. "He won't do it."

"I think he will. They've been prepping for this."

Collins ran his eye down the race entries. "Seventh? Sugartoe will smother him at the finish."

"Five says he doesn't."

"I've got tomorrow off. I'll put in some bets for you," Shipley offered. "Why take it out on each other? I'm going anyway."

Collins took two dollars out of his pocket and handed it to Shipley. McKechnie followed it with a five. The waiter, a tall thin gentleman with an air of having recently descended from waiting upon royalty, came over and asked for their orders. "Three roast beefs," Collins said. "French fries on two. One carrot salad." The waiter looked pained.

When he had gone away, Shipley said, "Someday I'm going to shock the old boy and order chicken."

"He should kick. We get fish on Friday," said McKechnie. He and Collins went back to arguing about horses.

When the soup had come and gone Shipley protested, "My God, the conversation never changes. Why don't you two talk about women? Or even about your jobs?" For some reason both McKechnie and Collins at once fell silent. Shipley regarded them with uncertainty, then with surprise. McKechnie seemed withdrawn, thoughtful, and Collins looked embarrassed. The waiter sidled up with his shredded-carrot salad and Collins applied himself to it. With unnatural concentration McKechnie measured sugar and cream into his coffee. "Did I say something?" Shipley wondered. "Have you boys been on the carpet in Ryerson's office? Or could it possibly be that you've fallen for a couple of dames?"

Collins smiled bleakly into his salad. McKechnie looked perfectly blank.

"What gives with you two?" Shipley demanded.

"For me, I've got a stake-out," McKechnie said. "East L.A. yards. You remember the car on the hold track?" He was looking at Collins. "The whiskey?"

Collins looked up. "What's there tonight? More of the same?"

McKechnie nodded. He was looking around at the restaurant, clean and bright, with the fans stirring the air, the waiters moving precisely with their trays of food. Somewhere in the dusk of the freight yards was a boxcar full of liquor, a bait, a trap. Tonight in the yards it would be dusty and dark, noisy with switchers, and all of his concentration would be necessary to separate from the rest the sounds of quiet footsteps, the shape of the quarry no more than a shadow among other shadows.

Or the waiting could be all in vain, the trap unsprung, the weariness soured by frustration.

The waiter came with the three plates of roast beef. He put the two side orders of french fries exactly in front of McKechnie's place and Shipley's. Without being told, he had brought Collins's glass of buttermilk. He looked at the three men with an air of hopeless resignation. "Pie, gentlemen?"

"Apple with cheese," said Collins.

"Cheese," agreed Shipley.

"Apple with pistachio-nut ice cream," McKechnie instructed without even thinking about it.

A flintlike expression settled in the waiter's eyes and he seemed at that instant almost at the verge of revolt, almost ready to break the age-old rule of Lofton's and protest an order given by a customer. Perhaps what restrained him at the brink of eruption was the thought that these regulars never failed to leave a tip.

He went out into the kitchen, and at the dessert counter he lined up the three cuts of pie. On two he placed wedges of soft yellow cheese. His hand shook, reaching for the ice cream scoop. When he had fixed the three plates of pie on his tray he paused, studying with despair the array of meringues, puddings, pastries. Lofton's was famous for a crisp torte. None of the three had ever tasted it.

He had figured out long ago that the three were bachelors; no breed of man ate so monotonously. What they needed was to get married. Their wives, being women, would feed them a different dessert every night.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PATROLMAN, BETCHEL, was waiting for McKechnie in a small room off the yard office which had been set aside for the police force. There were three straight chairs in it and an old desk whose nicked surface was worn clean of polish. Betchel was big, young, and capable; but he somehow avoided giving off Jenkins's offensive sheen of coming success. He was plodding and thorough, a practical hard worker. McKechnie liked him. They talked for a couple of minutes before going

out into the yards. Betchel didn't have much hope for the stake-out; he thought it was too soon after the other theft for the thieves to risk a repeat job.

They cut across tracks toward a huddle of boxcars. There were lights in the distance, switchers working; but on the hold track it was fairly dark, almost quiet. McKechnie had brought a flashlight from the office. He followed Betchel, reading tags on the cars. Betchel outlined the situation. On one side of the car containing the liquor was a switchman's shanty. On the opposite side sat a string of empties. One of them could take the shanty, the other could occupy an empty. McKechnie chose the empty because it was closest. Inwardly he didn't agree with Betchel; he was convinced that the successful theft of the previous week would embolden the thieves rather than make them cautious.

He parted from Betchel, pulled himself into the black interior of a boxcar, settled down to wait. There was nothing to do but listen and watch. Time passed very slowly. After about an hour he heard approaching footsteps, got to his feet, waited. But this proved to be a yard clerk with a bobbing light, who tacked a new tag on the carload of liquor. When he had gone McKechnie hopped down, walked to the tag and put his light on it, and found that the car had been released to a local wholesaler. It would be moved as soon as a switcher could get around to it. McKechnie went back to his vigil.

It was close to midnight when more steps were heard, echoing faintly in the narrow alley between the two rows of cars. McKechnie pulled himself up, flattened beside the inner edge of the door, which was open a couple of feet. The steps came up, slowed, stopped. Through narrowed lids McKechnie could make out the vague shape of a man paused opposite the tag on the car he was watching. Suddenly a small flame spurted, yellow as gold against the dark. McKechnie drew back a little. He could see a man's head, hatless, partially bald, a round face, two gleaming eyes, and against the red wall of the other car the square white tag with its code word for whiskey.

He waited without moving. The other man appeared to fish through his clothes before bringing a cigarette up slowly to his lips. He touched

the lighter flame to the cigarette, drew the flame away. The brown bulging eyes darted this way and that; then he blew smoke into the dark on a great, gusty breath, and McKechnie thought that a smile touched his mouth briefly. Still the flame in his hand continued to burn, wavering a little in the slight wind, its gleam distorting the dim rectangular shapes of the cars.

A minute or more passed in silence. The man on the ground seemed to be listening to the switchers at the other end of the yards. His gaze, McKechnie thought, slid over more than once toward the door behind which he was hidden. All at once the man dropped to his knees, lowered the small flame, as if he had dropped something and was searching for it. McKechnie smiled thinly to himself. There would be no legs showing through the space under the cars, and the light should draw Betchel's attention and put him on guard also. This fellow was not a clever worker.

McKechnie shifted a foot to relieve his awkward position, and there was a scratch of sound from beneath his shoe. The man on the ground lifted his head, stood up, snapped off the flame. He coughed loudly and began to walk away.

McKechnie swung through the open door, dropped lightly to the ground, clicked on his light. Its beam caught the other man walking rapidly, by now some distance down the track. "Hey, you! Healy!"

At the mention of his name, Healy flicked a glance over the shoulder of his red plaid jacket, surprise in his staring eyes.

"Hold it!" McKechnie shouted.

Healy turned around, kept on walking backward, as if reluctant to stand still while McKechnie bore down on him. "Yeah? Who says?"

"You know me." McKechnie frisked him quickly with one hand. Healy had no weapon on him. He stood passive, smoking the cigarette, his protuberant brown eyes roving. His breath had an adenoidal loudness and effort, and by this McKechnie judged the degree of his fright. "What're you doing here?"

"Look, man——" Healy gestured with his outspread hands, as if offering McKechnie evidence of his innocence. "I take a short cut through here. Don't bother to tell me, I know I'm trespassing."

"You're going to get thrown in the can."

"I don't deserve it. There's a bar across lots, Shiney's Tavern, and I go there evenings for a couple of beers, and the long way around is a mile or more."

"The long way around is the way you'd better take, mister. What were you doing by that boxcar?"

"You mean, when I stopped to light a cigarette?"

"You were reading the tag by that light."

Healy's eyes gleamed in the beam of McKechnie's flash like round wet marbles. His voice grew high and squeaky as he protested his ignorance of the tag and whatever it was inside the car. McKechnie ignored all this. He signaled Betchel with the light and, when the patrolman came running, told him he was taking Healy in.

"Please!" Healy was growing abject. "I'm just the innocent bystander caught in the gears. No crook, honest. A citizen."

"Last Friday you were a citizen without an address," McKechnie reminded. "Definition, vagrant."

"Sure, sure, I just didn't want to get mixed up in anything later, that old guy hopping out on his head like that. I lied, I'll admit that. I should have told you. I'm staying at the Toler House."

"You come with me," McKechnie said grimly.

McKechnie closed the door between the small room and the yard office. Healy sat down nervously on the edge of a chair. He had quit drawing on the cigarette and it had gone out, still hung between his lips, bent in the middle so that there was something wormlike in its shape. "You got me all wrong, man."

McKechnie was writing. "Toler House, huh? How long have you been in that flea trap?"

"It's not so bad."

"How long?"

"A couple of weeks."

"Who do you know here in the yards?"

"Nobody." Healy's round jaws wobbled. "Well, you."

"Why did you stop by that boxcar on the hold track?"

Again Healy made the gesture, lifting his hands beggingly. "Believe

me, one boxcar looks like another. And one track like another." He shook his head wonderingly. "Nights I go through here, no trouble, I bother nobody, then this happens—I didn't do nothing."

"How many nights have you trespassed in these yards?"

Healy seemed to sink into dejection. He mumbled that he'd been going through the yards to Shiney's Tavern every night of this week and last.

"What time did you go through on Thursday?"

Healy shrugged. He was looking mournfully at a patched spot on the knee of his olive-drab pants. "How should I remember? Some nights, like tonight, I don't hit Shiney's right away; I stop in at a couple of other bars, shoot the breeze——"

"Where do you work?"

"Well, right now I'm—unemployed. Just temporarily. I was in Arizona until three weeks ago, foreman in a tomato-canning plant, got the sack because the boss thought I was making a play for a greaser kid he had his eye on. You can check it. Supra-Vit-All, offices in Phoenix." The eager, bulging eyes implored McKechnie to believe it. "I came back to L.A. on the fifteenth of June. I got a job lined up with a trucking outfit; I'll go to work any day now."

McKechnie looked with cold eyes at the pudgy, agitated figure. "How did you get here from Arizona?"

Healy rubbed a hand around over his face, as if wiping off some invisible evidence of wrongdoing. "Well, I could lie about it, but I won't. I came in on a gondola full of pipe. I got off right here in these yards. Shiney's was the first place I hit. I kind of liked a waitress in there, so I've been going back."

McKechnie capped his pen and put it into his coat pocket. "Okay," he said matter-of-factly, "let's go over to Shiney's and see if they know you."

Healy seemed flabbergasted. His mouth dropped open, the cigarette spinning to the floor, and his hands twitched aimlessly on the knees of the olive-drab pants. "Now?"

"Sure, now. How can we prove your story isn't a fake otherwise?"

Healy quivered, as if he'd been touched by something cold. "Look,

they might not like it, me coming in almost under arrest, you might say, and a cop wanting to know what my regular habits are and so forth."

"They won't even think twice about it." McKechnie stood up. Healy made no move to rise. His face had paled to the color of tallow.

"Do you have to do this?"

"Hell, no. I can run you in."

Healy's bulging eyes studied a peeling spot on the wall while he slowly got his feet under him and stood up. His breathing had taken on the loud, stricken quality that McKechnie had noticed previously. "You cops!" He shook his head. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not sore, I know you're just doing a job. Only, why does it have to be me?" He made a lugubrious face, a childish grimace of disappointment. "I'm the original hard-luck kid." He still hadn't moved away from the chair.

"Come on." McKechnie decided that Healy expected his story to fall apart, to have the people in Shiney's disown him. He kept a sharp eye out as they picked their way across tracks and between strings of boxcars, half expecting Healy to make a break. Under Healy's forlorn appeal for sympathy, McKechnie sensed something alert and desperate.

Healy's progress grew noticeably dragging as they approached the gate, the street beyond, the lighted front of the tavern. He coughed repeatedly and cast sharp, begging glances toward McKechnie. On the sidewalk in front of Shiney's he stopped and made a last stand.

"Look, this gal in there, this waitress, she's married, see? And maybe her old man will be hanging around. I can't go up to her and say, 'Look, sweetums, tell the big Black Irish cop I'm a regular customer, you see me in here every night, I'm hanging around like a bee around a rose.' "

McKechnie bent a stare on him. The glare from the sign above the tavern door showed Healy's shabbiness, the fringe of hair too long behind his ears, the soiled spots on the red plaid jacket. And more, it laid bare the genuine worry in his wet brown eyes. For an instant McKechnie was tempted to let him go. Then a detail, a phrase from Healy, returned to mind.

"If you know I'm Black Irish, you know a hell of a lot for somebody

who just comes through nights on a short cut, who just got in two weeks ago from Arizona."

Healy laughed tinnily, ended on a clucking note. "You know something? I never met an Irishman yet who had any idea he was wearing the map of Ireland for a face."

McKechnie shoved him toward the doorway. "Inside."

Shiney's, located as it was near the yards and near some commercial establishments which kept open around the clock, had a brisk evening trade. The bar was full; most of the tables were occupied. There were quite a few women of varying ages and degrees of prettiness. Laughter and talk gave the juke box some stiff competition, and from the back came the clatter of a bowling machine, the shouts of players. McKechnie took Healy down to the far end of the bar, where the head bartender stood, keeping an eye on everybody while he sacked some change.

"Hello, Mac."

The bartender's eyes moved over them carefully. He knew McKechnie. His glance on Healy was indifferent. "What'll you have?"

"Nothing tonight." He jerked his head toward Healy. "Does this man come in here regularly?"

The bartender studied Healy as though he were exhibiting signs of some frightening disease. "What's the beef?"

"He's been using the yards for a short cut, he says."

The bartender thought it over. Healy's breathing was audible above the clack of bowling balls, the music, the rattle of glassware. "Yeah, it could be. I see him most nights. Later than this, usually."

Healy went on sucking in air and whistling it out.

McKechnie looked around. "Where's the boss?"

"Mr. Morgan spends most of his time at the new place out in the valley. The Blue Antelope. On Ventura Boulevard near Sepulveda. Real high-class joint, nothing like this." The bartender's survey of his carousing customers was sourly contemptuous. "He's got a real show, too, a master of ceremonies, a line of strippers, a comedian, puppets even! You ought to see them things. Talk about dirt!" There was sudden lewd softness around his mouth.

McKechnie spoke to Healy. "Is your friend here?"

Healy's frightened stare switched to a tall blonde in a blue uniform at a booth across the room. She was taking a round of drinks off her tray. When she bent forward over the table, McKechnie could see the rolled tops of her stockings, the white flesh above. Her figure looked good, narrow-waisted, with long firm legs. But as she turned, counting the change left on her tray, McKechnie was disappointed: her face was narrow and petulant and over-made-up between wings of frizzy light-colored hair.

"Her name's Mabel," Healy said in a conspirator's whisper.

McKechnie looked at Mac, the bartender. "I'd like to speak to her."

Mac nodded. "Sure, why not?" He caught Mabel's eye and nodded, and she smiled and began to thread her way toward them through the tables. As she passed one table, a man in workman's overalls reached out, patted her on the buttock. She slapped his hand playfully.

When she got close to them her gaze fixed on Healy. "Hello there. How's tricks?" Smile and coy remark were both automatic. There was a look in her eye as if she could total the cash on Healy's unprepossessing person.

Healy stuttered, the note of fright in his voice like a crackle of runaway electricity. "Hon, you tell this gentleman, this cop here, that I've——"

"Never mind." McKechnie spoke pleasantly to the girl. "Do you know this man? His name, where he lives?"

She shrugged. "Sure, he comes in alla time. Biff Healy. He lives across the yards somewheres. What was the name of that rooming house, baby?"

Healy opened his mouth, but McKechnie's glance shut him up.

She had a quick mind; she took in Healy's distress and McKechnie's watchful doubt in the space of one breath. McKechnie could see that she set herself to remember. She frowned a little. "Me and him went out a couple of times while my old man was out of town on a steamfitting job. Nothing funny about it, you understand. We were strictly platoonic."

Healy's asthmatic struggle for air filled the instant of silence like a whistle.

Her bright, knowing gaze settled on McKechnie's face. "I guess it was Toler, the name. The Toler House. Lots of old houses over there, they've turned them into hotels, sort of, and given them fancy names."

"Hon, you've taken me off the hook!" Healy cried. He seemed about to collapse.

"Oh, it wasn't nothing," the girl protested. Her glance at the little fat man in danger of fainting with relief was amused and affectionate. "You've been nice to me. I'm glad to return a favor. Alla time, I'm looking for a good deed to fill my Girl Scout pledges." She giggled.

The bartender, too, seemed mellowed all at once. "One on the house, men?"

Healy licked his lips. McKechnie said, "Sorry, I'm working. He'll take you up on it, I imagine." He nodded his thanks to the girl and to Mac and started for the door. He had expected Healy to stay at the bar and was surprised on reaching the sidewalk to find the pudgy figure at his elbow.

"You been decent to me, copper," Healy wheezed at him, "and I'm going to give you something in return. Like the little girl says, I got to alla time be looking for something for my good deed. My old lady got me to join the Boy Scouts when I was twelve, and I was good at it, and maybe if my good deeds had kept on being really good ones I wouldn't be down on my luck today and cutting across freight yards to a bar." The words were tumbling over each other, and Healy's gaze roved the street in such nervous haste that McKechnie wondered if the little man suspected something of waiting for him, hidden menacingly in the shadows between the warehouses. "It's about that old boy falling out of the boxcar."

McKechnie was stung by disgust with himself, his forgetfulness. Here was the chance to check Clay's story, and he'd almost let it slip.

"Just one thing!" Healy had lifted a finger; it was plump, white, the nail none too clean, but in the glow of Shiney's neon doorway there was something exclamatory, arresting about it. "You know that other fellow, the other witness you found there?"

"Abbotsford." McKechnie remembered the tall, well-built, well-dressed man.

"Yeah. I heard him telling you he was just driving by, had been stopped in the traffic, when he happened to glance over and see the old man getting a scalp massage the hard way. But here's the truth, so help me! Abbotsford didn't nowheres near come through that gate."

"What do you mean?"

"He couldn't have been going past in the street. Because I was on the sidewalk by the gate, standing there smoking and watching traffic, and no car stopped. I saw the old man do his swan dive; I waited a couple of minutes to see if I'd be needed or whether the flatfoot in the yards had caught it—and when I finally went in, Abbotsford was already there. He'd been inside all the time."

CHAPTER SEVEN

McKechnie said, "He took a chance, then, telling me he'd run in off the street."

"Who'd listen to me?" Healy said querulously. "He was all dressed up, he'd been to a barber, he was passing out business cards. I kept my mouth shut. Maybe I'm sticking my neck out now."

"No, I'm glad you told me." McKechnie wasn't sure that the story could be believed, but he wanted Healy to think he believed it. Healy was wary of suspicion, aching to be insulted. "But by the way, since you were watching traffic in the street, how did it happen you saw something in the yards behind you?"

"I got no eyes in the back of my head," Healy mourned. "But there

was this God-awful screeching. I looked back. The old man leaped out on his noggin."

"Do you think the old man was screaming?"

"No. Somehow, I don't."

"Why not?"

Healy's bulging brown eyes grew worried. "Damned if I know. It just didn't sound like no old man. I thought at the time it might have been a Mex. You know"—he spread his hands again—"just a feeling."

"You were a little distance away. Between you and the car where the old man fell there is a hold track, a rip track, one or two more."

"Sure, and my eyes aren't what they were twenty years ago, either," Healy said pitiably. "But I still don't think the old man was doing the yelling. I think somebody was yelling for him."

"Jenkins, the patrolman, thinks a whistle blew about then."

Healy's nervous stare searched all the crevices between the buildings. "Sure, I got nobody on my side."

"Come up to the special agent's office tomorrow and dictate all this to the office man. I'll tell him you're coming; he'll know what it's all about."

"I got to sign something?"

"If you're telling the truth, you shouldn't mind."

Healy nodded mournfully. "Can I go now?"

"Just don't take short cuts through those yards."

Healy hunched the red plaid jacket up around his ears. He scurried down the empty street as McKechnie turned back through the gate into the freight yards. McKechnie was figuring his excess hours; the total had to be turned in every two weeks, the accumulated time balanced by days off. In the back of his mind, waiting to be sorted and studied, were some interesting items. Healy's fright at going into Shiney's Tavern stuck out above others. Why had Healy been so afraid? Both the bartender and the waitress backed up his tale of being in the tavern every night.

When McKechnie found the carload of whiskey again, it was being moved and Betchel was headed back for the yard office. This was the end of the stake-out. Nothing had been stolen. Healy's stopping where

he had, the lighting of the flame by which he could have read the code word on the car were circumstances to be filed away. The next time Healy was caught in the yards he'd be in trouble.

McKechnie and Betchel talked for a couple of minutes in the small room off the yard office, and then McKechnie headed for home. His way took him through the downtown district, still well lit but with most of the theater crowds gone home, with most of the restaurants closed or closing, traffic islands deserted, newsboys silent. McKechnie had been East a few times and remembered vividly the mob in Times Square after midnight, and always thought to himself that L.A. had some of the attributes of a village.

He rented an apartment on the first floor of a four-flat in the Silver Lake district. It was high on the hill facing the reservoir and now, late in the summer night, was cooled by breezes from the sea. McKechnie put his car in the garage at the rear, went in through the back door, took a can of beer from the refrigerator in passing. In the living room he drank the beer and read an afternoon paper, then undressed and showered, put on pajamas and robe, went back to the kitchen, and made coffee and a scrambled-egg sandwich.

He was tired; he'd think about Healy tomorrow, about Healy's fright at being taken to Shiney's, the scream that Healy claimed to have heard just as Miss Cathcart's father dived out to acquire his fatal injuries.

Just before drifting into sleep, McKechnie had a vivid memory of the girl. He saw in his mind's image the clean brown shoulders, the slim arms, the way she'd looked in at him from the curb before her home. The thought must have been part dream, because the image in his mind spoke clearly, saying, "He was thrown out on his head. Who would want to kill my father?"

And in the half dream he told her, "Don't worry. The FBI will take care of that."

The clock beside his bed ticked on in the dark. It was a quarter of two.

At two-fifteen Collins woke from sleep and sat up. The windows had

a greenish glow from a night light in the courtyard three floors below; and for a moment, as was usual, he confused the glow with the beginnings of dawn. He rubbed his eyes and fought sleep away and tried to remember what had awakened him. A nightmare. Something about the Mexican in the reefer.

Collins swung his feet to the floor, clicked the little lamp on the stand beside his bed. The room sprang to life, neat and well furnished. He shared the place with his sister. She was a secretary for an oil firm; her husband had died in Korea. Sitting there in the bed, Collins wondered if some sound from Teresa had been the lever which had pried him from the grip of the dream. He padded over to the door into the hall, which had been left ajar for ventilation, and listened. But Teresa's door had no light under it, and the apartment seemed entirely silent.

He went back to bed, switched off the lamp, lay down with his crossed hands under his neck. The dream had been painfully vivid, not with physical details, but with a nameless panic which had given it the impact of disaster. He'd been kneeling on the floor of the reefer, trying to get the Mexican to talk to him; not speaking, just compelling the other by an act of will. There'd been some sort of thing, some menace, outside; the Mexican could see it, but unless he could tell Collins in time the thing could devour them both. Just remembering the dream made Collins sweat a bit; the tag ends of fright still floated in his head.

As he had bent closer to the dark face on the floor, demanding the name of the danger, the Mexican had begun to shrivel, dying in some way worse than death, skin and bone fretting to ashes, while his feeble voice at last gave up a single word, *joya, joya.*

Collins sat up again abruptly, jerked on the light, stared at the familiar room as if it were unknown to him.

In Spanish, *joya* meant *jewelry. Jewelry.*

That was the thing his mind was forcing back on him, using the nightmare as a tool. The Mexican, he remembered, had been shut into the reefer since Friday. On Friday, Miss Cannelbury's bags had been stolen, her mysterious jewels rifled from them. Other things crowded in now. He'd thought that the Mexican must be a wetback and had been

shut in the car in the Imperial Valley or somewhere else near the border. But this had been faulty reasoning; a moment's deliberation would have shown him his error. Reefers didn't move north from Imperial empty; they came full of lettuce and melons, tomatoes, green spinach and fresh fruit, and iced to the gills. Isidro Ramos hadn't come from the border in that car.

"I'm asking for a damned miracle," he said half aloud, and with amusement mounting under the excitement. The Brett Street yards were miles across town from the East L.A. yards where the bags had turned up. And if Ramos had caught a glimpse of the loot in the Brett Street yards on Friday, it meant that Collins's carefully worked-out theory about the transfer of the luggage from the coach yards had been shot full of holes.

He couldn't let it alone. Restless, he got up and went out to the kitchen and put a flame under the percolator. He sat in the breakfast nook, drinking coffee, until after three. His sister came once to look in sleepily at him. She was a tall blond woman with a subdued taste in clothes, and when she caught sight of Collins's pajamas, the red silk creations with the masculine design of headlong black stallions, she nodded and said, "No wonder you can't sleep. I might have known, all those hoofbeats——" And then went back to bed.

At the office next morning, Collins got to work at once tracing the reefer. He called the jumbo clerk at the East L.A. yard office, learned from him that the reefer had come into town under load last Wednesday. Then Collins got the car clerk, gave him the car number and the date of arrival, and asked for its subsequent movements. The car had gone into the East L.A. yard's team track and had been unloaded there by Greenbloom Produce. On Sunday it had been moved to the Brett Street yards; there it was due to go through the reefer cleaning racks.

Collins headed for the East L.A. yards in a company car.

At nine-thirty McKechnie was at his desk, using the phone. On the other end of the wire was the FBI, wanting information about the whiskey shipment which had been broken open; any interstate cargo was their baby, and McKechnie now had the details sent in by the consignee, the amount of the loss and the strip numbers on the miss-

ing cases of liquor. As he talked he glanced toward the door and for an instant the illusion hit him, that Miss Cathcart was crossing the office, picking her way between desks, and headed his way.

He was aware of a rush of feeling, an unfamiliar warmth and anticipation, before realizing that though it was a girl it was not Miss Cathcart. This girl was taller, her hair was paler and had a flyaway quality. There was something awkward and ill-fitting about her gray silk dress. She was putting a pair of spectacles into a black handbag. There was much too much color on her lips.

She stopped beside a desk and spoke to the man there, another investigator, who was writing up a report; and he nodded in McKechnie's direction. She came on, her stare fixed as if she might be a little nearsighted.

"Are you Mr. McKechnie?"

He had risen. "Yes, miss. Will you excuse me while I finish this call?"

She sat down; McKechnie wound up what he had to tell the FBI. When he had hung up, she said quickly, "Are you the man who found my bags yesterday?"

"Two bags? One pink, one alligator?"

"Yes, they're the ones. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"No, not at all." He looked at her curiously, wondering what Collins had failed to tell her that she needed to get from him. "You understand, I'm not the original finder. Our patrolman in the yards, Jenkins, made the discovery."

It seemed to hit her as a terrific setback. She looked dazedly at a point just beyond his head, licking her lips; and there was a sudden frost of sweat on her temples. "You—you didn't see the spot, examine the spot, where they were found?"

"Yes, I did that."

It revived her somewhat. Her eyes came back into focus. "Do you mind describing minutely what you saw in that boxcar?"

He leaned toward her, trying to crush down an uneasy feeling that she couldn't quite hear what he was going to say. "There's often a lot of trash scattered in the cars after the shipments have been removed."

"Dunnage," she said quietly.

"That's right. There was a heap of this stuff which had been piled around your bags, hiding them from anyone glancing in through the door."

"Do you think they'd been there since Friday?"

"It's possible."

She moistened the red stuff on her lips with the tip of her tongue and smiled. McKechnie couldn't be sure, and the idea dismayed him—but he got an impression of amateurish allure, enticement. The green eyes swam in a mist of tears that had nothing to do with grief. She was definitely nearsighted, should have kept her glasses on. "I'm trying not to be a nuisance, Mr. McKechnie. But I do wish you'd describe the stuff on the floor of the boxcar."

He said slowly, "There were some scraps of gray paper, soft stuff that might have been packed between cases. Excelsior. A few broken sticks—reinforcements, I guess, which had split off the outside of some large container. Wire, several feet of it."

"Nothing else?"

He concentrated on remembering the interior of the car on the rip track, on being patient with her. She seemed under a terrible strain. "I seem to recall some scraps of cardboard, white confetti-like bits. I don't know what these may have been originally. At the opposite end of the car from where Jenkins found your bags were a wine bottle and a few crusts of bread."

The swimming eyes searched him. "What did that mean?"

"Someone had been in there having a cheap meal and a cheap drink."

"Some—some tramp?"

"I think so."

"How much of a guard, of surveillance, is kept over the freight yards?"

McKechnie shrugged. "We do the best we can. It would take an army to completely screen out all the hobos and trespassers. You see, the cars in the freight yards are coming and going constantly, being switched to the repair tracks, the team track——"

"What's that?"

"People who don't have a private spur can unload merchandise in the yards from what is called the team track. It's a facility for smaller firms, or for firms too far from the main lines to make building a spur profitable."

She thought it over, apparently; McKechnie thought that she was trying to visualize the scene in which her luggage had been found. He wondered if she might also be trying to trip Collins up someway. "It would be impossible, then, to trace back, to find out exactly who was in the yards during the time my bags were there?"

"Quite impossible." He saw the light die on her face. "Except for the patrolmen and operating personnel—and I don't think they're the people you're interested in."

She didn't answer. She had opened the handbag, was taking from it a sheet of paper. "Will you give this to Mr. Collins? It's a description of the jewelry which was missing from my alligator case. Tell him I tried to make sketches, and they looked so awkward, so unlike the real thing, I thought they'd only be a detriment." She rose; the overfull skirt of the gray dress hung bulkily against her knees. She leaned toward McKechnie, who had risen, and he caught from her an odor of powder and lavender cologne. "Tell Mr. Collins I've decided to give him the rough estimate of value he wanted. The jewelry is worth approximately sixty thousand dollars."

McKechnie took the sheet she handed him, moving mechanically, his mind tied up by the size of the sum she had just mentioned.

She stepped back from the desk. "Tell him I don't intend to put in a claim. I just want my gems back." With a last smile, a last dampening of the thick paint on her mouth, she turned away and walked across the office and out of the door.

McKechnie stood looking after her. All kinds of people were all in the day's work, but this girl was somehow, disturbingly, a new one. There was a kind of imbalance about her, as if she were fighting her way through a buffeting wind, or as if somewhere deep inside something in the machinery of her ego had been broken. McKechnie was suddenly reminded of a demented woman he had escorted from Colton. Every once in a while somebody on a train started acting up, and

in such cases an investigator was dispatched to sit with them, to bring them safely to their destination. In this case a little old lady of about seventy had begun to croon and sing and to wear a shoebox on her head. While McKechnie had sat opposite, on the way into L.A., she had told him that under the seat were her three babies. He'd known there were no babies there, but on departing had been unable to resist a quick look, had found the dolls she had carried packed in the shoebox. She hadn't been violent or even unpleasant; there was just something off center inside, a wheel missing a cog, a switch sputtering.

Something in the girl's looks, her manner, had reminded him of the old lady with the babies. You felt like looking under a chair, just in case. You felt like reading the list she'd handed you in the same way, to see how much resembled the truth, how much was ludicrous fake.

He read the list, and the hairs moved on his neck. He took the list in to Ryerson.

Out in the hall beside the elevator doors Jane Cannelbury stood with eyes squeezed shut, shoulders trembling. Waves of rage and frustration beat through her mind. The man in the office had been like the other, like Mr. Collins; he'd looked at her with dislike, suspicion, cold irreverence. It just didn't seem to penetrate that she might be an heiress, that she could rightfully lay claim to the beautiful, precious jewels, that the gray pongee gown and the sleek handbag and the shoes with their awkward heels represented money. Men were blind, they wouldn't understand. She pounded the wall beside the button and sucked in a breath, hard, and a woman standing beside her coughed to let her know she wasn't alone.

Jane opened her eyes and stood straight, controlled the shaking of her muscles. No one could even guess what she'd gone through, was going through this moment. The woman waiting near her was tall and gaunt, in dowdy clothes, old knitted gloves with dirt on the fingertips. The blank eyes under a crooked brim surveyed Jane without interest or liking.

"What very poor service," Jane said stiffly.

"You ain't seen nothing," said the woman.

"It's stuffy here in the hall."

"Go over and take a breath from the air-well," the woman advised. She smiled a little, showing yellowed and crooked teeth. "I saw you looking a little green. Pregnant?"

Jane turned her back, controlling a desire to vomit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS HER STOMACH, Jane decided, going down in the elevator. The fright and disappointment over the loss of the diamonds had given her indigestion. She walked through the corridor to the street, an uneasy hand over her midriff, the awkward heels clacking on the terrazzo floor, because when she felt ill it was hard to manage the oversize shoes. Her head throbbed. She felt like crying. Then a new idea occurred to her. Rich people didn't suffer discomfort; they demanded remedies. Doctors waited on them solicitously; nurses hurried to measure and compound medicines. She noted the sign over the drugstore on the corner and turned in, passing piles of beach balls, racks of books, a counter full of liquor, mountains of phonograph records and towels, to the prescription department in the rear.

A gray-haired man with a faintly unshaven look, wearing a white smock, rose from a stool as she approached. "Yes, miss, what can I do for you?"

His politeness, his interest flattered and warmed her. "I feel very queasy."

He nodded and pursed his mouth. "Upset stomach? Acid? Burning indigestion?"

"Yes, that's exactly how I feel."

He turned from her to examine shelves full of bottles. He was de-

liberate, cautious, as though Jane's troubles were almost his own. She had slipped a hand into her purse to take out the glasses in order to see what he would eventually choose, but now she let them lie.

He faced her, a narrow blue bottle in his hand. "This is mild but very effective. We put it up ourselves for our own customers, so I can recommend it without any reservation."

Jane took the bottle and looked at it, not very closely. "How do you take it?"

"In water." He waited, fiddling with a pencil which lay beside the cash register, giving her time to make up her mind. "If you like, I can bring a glass of water from the fountain. If you're in discomfort now, I meant to say."

"That's very kind of you. I hope that it isn't too much trouble." She felt her face flushing, moisture in her eyes, and had difficulty keeping her voice steady. He was so thoughtful, so fatherly. He seemed an embodiment of all wise, elderly men whose interest was in humanity rather than in themselves. "How much is the bottle?"

"One dollar seventy-five," he murmured, dismissing it.

Jane didn't protest. She always thought of medicines as terribly complex and eerily concocted; and she had never heard of the practice of some chain drug concerns, the bottling of simple remedies under smartly scientific names, instructing their clerks to push them. She paid for the antacid and the clerk brought the water. She thanked him with feeling. When she went out again, the bottle in her handbag, she was conscious of definite improvement.

She walked for some blocks westward and came to Pershing Square, where she visited the ladies' rest room. Here she put on the glasses again. Her eyes stung; they were growing very tired. Looking at herself in the mirror, she examined the rouge on her lips, tucked back the flyaway hair. In one corner of the room was a telephone booth. In turning from the mirror she stopped, facing it, as if it represented some puzzle, some problem, which she hadn't as yet solved.

Her mouth twisted, experimenting perhaps with words; but at last she went up to the park and sat on a bench in the sun. The morning was warm and golden. She thought that several people looked closely

at her as they walked past, and her pleasure at the attention was mixed with a suffocating self-consciousness. She was careful to keep her feet together, her knees straight. The line of the overfull skirt drooped to her ankles, but this she thought looked rich and graceful. Some children raced by chasing a pigeon; she lifted the toes of the awkward shoes to save them from harm.

After a time the warmth became unpleasant. She began to think of the cool room in the hotel on Wilshire. The loneliness of sitting indoors with nothing to do, the boredom almost, caused her to hesitate. At last she went back down into the ladies' rest room and bathed her wrists in cold water at a basin. Again as she turned she looked fixedly at the phone in its booth. This time, after a moment, she went into the booth and shut the door behind her.

She put in change, dialed for the operator, and requested a Santa Monica number. A woman's voice, a frail reedy crackling, came on the wire.

"Aunt Dolly?"

"Who is this?"

"It's I. Jane. Don't you know my voice?"

There was a space of dead silence, and then the woman in Santa Monica began to speak so rapidly that Jane couldn't understand her.

"Slow down, Aunt Dolly! I don't know what you're saying!"

The crackling became a scream. "Where are you?"

"I'm here in town. Los Angeles."

Questions poured from the telephone. Jane lifted the receiver from her ear slightly; a removed expression settled in her face. She seemed divided between pity and ennui. By and by one question began to be repeated over and over, and Jane answered it slowly, "Yes, Auntie, yes, I'm quite all right. There are reasons I haven't been home yet. I'll explain later."

"Charles Lippert has been calling me frantically from San Diego. Where is Ida? Is she with you? Why hasn't she gone down there to be with him?"

Jane lifted a hand and traced a pattern on the pebbled wall. The metal felt cool under her fingers. Cool and thickly painted and slightly

yielding. She shut her eyes. I'm on a quiz program, she thought; I've been blindfolded and stuck into a strange place and told to identify my surroundings. All the other, the slower contestants have been eliminated. This is the final question. The prize for answering correctly is five thousand dollars. All of the studio audience is on the edge of its seat, thousands—no, millions—more are watching breathlessly at home on their TV screens. The technicians are trying to confuse me with noises—boat whistles, foghorns, lapping water, a chugging motor—to make me think this place is somewhere at sea. I'm allowed to feel of just a small section of wall, one foot square, but in spite of the distractions, just from——

"Where is Ida Lippert?" screamed the telephone.

—just from the texture of the wall I'm able to tell that I am in a telephone booth, and I say to the quiz master——

"Jane! Jane!"

—not laughing much. After all, I'm now worth five thousand in cash—but rather soberly I say, "It's a telephone booth, I knew it from the crinkled metal wall." And he's so astounded, the audience is shouting, and I——

The telephone gasped and fell silent, as if the woman with the reedy, infirm voice had run out of breath. Jane let her dream float away. She spoke softly into the receiver. "I called because I didn't want you to worry."

"Oh my God, Jane," wept the phone, "what have you done?"

"Good-by," Jane said. "I love you, Auntie. Take care of yourself." She sent an affectionate kiss into the receiver before she hung up.

She went back to the mirror and inspected the lipstick, then walked up into the sunlight. She was a little tired now, she decided, and somewhat lethargic from sitting in the warmth. It would be nice to go to the hotel and take off the heavy pongee dress and the large awkward shoes, to stretch out on the wide bed and shut her eyes.

After a while, during the afternoon sometime, Mr. Collins would come back and tell her that her jewelry had been recovered. He would take from a briefcase the long strands and curlecues of rippling light

and leave them there with her, and she could play with them forever and ever.

Two detectives from the Los Angeles Police Department came in to see McKechnie almost as soon as the girl had gone. They wanted to talk about Cathcart's fatal accident. McKechnie suggested that they talk also to Jenkins, and when they left for the yards he went along.

It was warm in the East L.A. yards. The air was still and heavy, the steel rails glittered under the sun, the shadows beneath the boxcars looked velvety against the bare brown earth. Jenkins stood near the yard office, talking to another man, who looked over his shoulder quickly when he heard their approaching footsteps. This second man was short and dark, with a narrow acne-marked face and prominent front teeth which gave him somehow the belligerence of an irritable squirrel. McKechnie knew him: this was Branham, the switchman who had reported the first broken carload of whiskey on the hold track. Branham seemed seized with hurry once his eye fell on McKechnie; he apparently muttered a brief good-by to Jenkins and walked away. McKechnie got the impression of anger and ill feeling between the two. Branham's lips had been tight across his prominent teeth, and Jenkins's fair skin had a hot color under it.

Jenkins recognized the two men from L.A.P.D., nodded a greeting, listened to their explanations of why they were there. He didn't particularly stare at McKechnie, indeed appeared to notice him only briefly before turning to the two police detectives; but McKechnie sensed that his every move was under surveillance. He wondered what would happen should he take off after Branham.

Jenkins said with a touch of stiffness, "What I know about the old man's accident is down in the report, on file in the office."

McKechnie put in: "A couple of details have come up."

One of the police detectives said, "Well, show us where it happened."

Jenkins led the way. A switcher was moving a string of cars and they had to go a long way around it, and when they came near the fence they were some distance from the gate through which Healy claimed

to have entered—farther, McKechnie thought, than he remembered from the incident of last Friday. But Jenkins paused and said firmly, "Just about here."

"Where were you?" said the older of the two officers with McKechnie.

"On my rounds." Jenkins seemed to be trying to control an irritation that must have been left over from his talk with Branham. Now he looked at McKechnie. "What details?"

McKechnie didn't answer. The police detective wanted to know exactly where Jenkins was, whether he was within sight of the car from which Cathcart had fallen.

"I was in sight but not looking at it," Jenkins said with a tone of pinning down something troublesome.

"Which direction?"

Jenkins pointed toward the gate. "Up that way. The train was moving south. I was near the end opposite from the switcher. I think the last car was just about passing me when I heard something strike the gravel behind me and turned around."

McKechnie said slowly, "If you were up toward the gate, you should know who came in through it."

Jenkins took off his cap and mopped the sweatband with his handkerchief. "Sure, I know who came in. The two witnesses. You saw them; they were here when you got here."

"Did their stories agree from the beginning?"

Jenkins's blond eyebrows shot up. "As far as I remember. Why not? What was there to see but the old man flopping out on his head? Though, to be honest, I was glad that one witness was a decent type, well dressed, dependable. The other one was a bum. I don't recall either name, but they're in the report."

"I have the names," McKechnie said. "But I don't agree that Abbotsford's version of the accident is more reliable than Healy's just because the man wears better clothes."

Some more color stole up into Jenkins's fair skin; he seemed to be gripping his temper. "You misunderstood. Of course the good clothes are no guarantee of honesty. I meant that Healy might have had rea-

sons for lying, being what he was, perhaps hanging around the yards for purposes he couldn't admit."

"You've seen Healy before, perhaps?"

Jenkins frowned. "I may have. There's something a little familiar about him."

"Keep an eye out for him. Run him in if you catch him here. He was in here late last night."

Jenkins took on a speculative air, as if thinking over the affairs of yesterday, possibly remembering his report and advice to Ryerson concerning the carload of whiskey on the hold track.

"Getting back to this accident, this man Cathcart," said one of the city detectives, obviously wanting to get on with his own job, "how badly scratched up was he when you first reached him?"

"What you'd expect, hitting the gravel like that," said Jenkins.

"He spin around much when he hit?" asked the other city man.

Jenkins hesitated. Lines deepened at the corners of his mouth. McKechnie got the impression somehow that Jenkins wasn't sure on the point but that once he picked out his answer he'd stick to it with bulldog tenacity. McKechnie tried to distract him, to sidetrack him from fixing upon a position from which he couldn't back down. "Maybe you didn't catch all of it," he offered. "It must have happened pretty fast."

"Yes. Yes, it did," Jenkins said thoughtfully.

"You are sure, though, that Cathcart hit on his head?"

"I'm sure of that much," Jenkins answered positively.

"Now, this scream heard by one witness," said the older city detective. "You got any opinion about that? Could it have been the old man, losing his balance, maybe? Trying to catch a handhold as he fell?"

A flash of surprise lit Jenkins's face when the detective mentioned the scream. Apparently he was aware that no mention of the scream heard by Healy had been embodied in the report. McKechnie had spoken of it in the office without saying anything about Jenkins's odd silence on the point. "A scream?" His eyes roved the hot, bright yards, followed a line of moving cars, and the moment of silence lengthened.

"Didn't you have a second, later interview with Healy?" McKechnie suggested. "I think Clay heard some of it."

Jenkins seemed suddenly relieved to know McKechnie's source of information. "Sure, I guess he did at that. As I mentioned before, I couldn't put much stock in Healy's version of the accident. He's a pretty shabby character all around."

"We're going to have to talk to him," said the second city detective. "I don't think you've got an accident here. I think you've got a homicide."

"I don't understand," Jenkins protested.

"Some of the old man's injuries were what you might expect, him hitting the ground like that. A couple of neck vertebrae cracked, bad abrasions on his face and scalp. What doesn't fit is a hell of a wallop he got at the base of the skull. I don't see how he lit on top of his head and got that."

Jenkins swallowed visibly. "No, that doesn't fit."

"Nothing you know to account for it?"

"Sorry, not a thing."

The two city detectives made a final cursory examination of the vicinity, thanked Jenkins for his opinions, turned to walk away toward the parking area. Jenkins fell in behind them, in step with McKechnie. He said in a low tone, "Why didn't you tip me off? I didn't look so smart there."

"You did all right."

"You should have tipped me what they were looking for," Jenkins insisted. Behind narrowed lids, his eyes blazed strangely. "We're on the same team, you know."

"They didn't tell me they suspected homicide."

"But you knew *something!*" Jenkins accused.

"His daughter says he was killed."

"What does she know about it?"

McKechnie found himself staring at Jenkins curiously. "She knew her old man pretty well, I imagine."

Jenkins muttered something under his breath about an old bum.

McKechnie said, "He wasn't the usual hobo. There's something the

FBI is interested in, a claim of some kind he's supposed to have located out in Arizona. I'm beginning to have a hunch this will turn into something interesting."

Jenkins was staring straight ahead now at the backs of the city detectives. "I liked her looks. Real neat. Maybe it's true, as you say—he wasn't the ordinary scum we chase out of boxcars."

"He'd been prospecting in the desert. She thinks he lost his good clothes somehow, came in on a freight because he didn't want to spend money for others."

Jenkins nodded, as if adding the information to some store within his mind. "I wish I knew something to tell her, some piece of information she'd appreciate. I'd look her up and talk to her. I think I might go places with that baby."

McKechnie, by no stretch of imagination a prude, felt a flare of anger and disgust. He curbed an unreasonable impulse to smash Jenkins in the mouth. He said with deceptive mildness, "I didn't think you let women distract you."

"Distract me? From what?"

"From the big push. The green carpet. Ryerson's desk."

Jenkins's face stiffened. "That's a long way off for somebody like me."

"Time goes by mighty fast. You'll be surprised."

Jenkins stopped, settled back on his heels. In the parking area the city detectives were climbing into their Ford. "I guess you liked the girl yourself. That's it, isn't it?"

"Keep your nose clean," McKechnie growled. "You won't look pretty behind Ryerson's desk with your teeth out."

CHAPTER NINE

McKechnie had been in the Toler House before, though not recently. He remembered the smell of the place, a little like rotted onions, and the clerk in his undershirt with hair from his chest sticking up over the neckband, the unclean hands virtuously displaying the register full of John Smiths and Bill Joneses. "Healy ain't in," the clerk informed the Los Angeles detectives. "He went out early. Here's his key in the slot."

The city man nodded. "We'll go up and knock anyway."

McKechnie followed, up some stairs from which the linoleum treads were peeling, down a hall in which the rotted onions were enrichened with neglected laundry and spilled beer. Healy's door was locked and no one answered their knocking. Downstairs, the black-haired clerk smirked at them.

"Didn't raise him?"

"When does he usually come in?" the older city man asked.

The clerk shrugged. "Late afternoons sometimes. Sometimes not. I got too much to do, really, to be watching these crumbs in their wanderings."

There was no curiosity in the clerk as to what they might want with Healy. This was an old story in Toler House. McKechnie went to the counter, leaned there, looking at the register. He flipped back a page or two. "When did Healy rent his room here?"

"It's there," the clerk said. "Thursday, I think it was."

"Less than a week."

"That's right."

McKechnie's lips formed a faint smile. He'd been inclined to believe Healy's story of last night, and here it was already falling apart. Healy hadn't been here the two weeks he'd claimed. McKechnie asked, "Does he have many visitors?"

The clerk's eyes rolled in mock dismay. "Look, mister, with my time taken up the way it is, like I told you——"

McKechnie's smile showed the edges of his teeth. "Yes, but you'd better tell me again."

"Oh well. There was a blonde. Couple of times. I know her, she's a beer-joint waitress."

"I know her too," McKechnie said. The two city men had drawn into the alcove containing the desk-counter, were standing still, listening. "Let's have some more."

"Once——" A dirty nail crept up to scratch the unshaven jaw while the rolling eyes debated McKechnie's mood. "This guy asked for Healy. A real nice dresser. Big fellow, gray-haired. Whatever his racket is, he's got it rolling."

"Did he give a name?"

"To me?" The clerk looked injured. "You think I announce visitors to these crumbs, or something? He just walked in, said did Healy live here, I said yes and told him the room, he went on up."

"For how long?"

The clerk shrugged. "I went out for some aspirin."

Translate aspirin to mean liquor, McKechnie thought. "When did this happen?"

"Couple of days ago."

"*Just* when," McKechnie insisted.

The clerk inspected his uncared-for fingertips. "Yesterday."

"Anyone else rouse your interest like this fellow in the good suit?"

The clerk shook his head. "Healy ain't been here very long."

They went out into the warm, bright, shabby street. A couple of kids with sticks in their hands were poking a dead cat in the gutter. An orange peddler with two buckets of fruit stood on the opposite sidewalk, sizing up house fronts. On some steps down the street sat three women, none of them young or well shaped, who suffered the delusion

that they looked nice in skimpy playsuits. One had red hair done in curlers, and she squawked suddenly to the kids to leave the cat alone.

"What now?" said the older of the two city men, lighting a cigarette.

"Let's go see Abbotsford," McKechnie suggested.

They were agreeable. McKechnie found a pay phone in a drugstore on the next corner, called the office, got Abbotsford's address and phone number from the office man. A woman with a sharp uneven voice answered his second call, admitted to being Mrs. Abbotsford, and said that her husband was at work with Poppy State Food Products Company on Commercial Way.

The two city detectives had waited at the front of the store and were examining some new paper-backs, Westerns, on the rack there. McKechnie walked out to them and said, "Well, we're on our way back to East Los Angeles. Abbotsford works there."

"You didn't know this before?"

"Jenkins may have. Abbotsford's home address was the one given in his report. I copied it for my own."

They drove back past the freight yards to Commercial Way, turned into the parking lot by the big Poppy State warehouse. The lower-floor hall ended in a wide alcove where sat the receptionist's desk. The young big-breasted girl behind the desk apparently couldn't recognize cops as such at first glance. She looked over their clothes and didn't seem impressed. "Whom shall I say is calling?"

The older city man showed his badge, gave their names, and the little brunette flashed her teeth in suddenly galvanized warmth. "Go right up, please. Mr. Abbotsford will be happy to help you." She sounded as though Mr. Abbotsford's chief occupation was helping the police.

Abbotsford met them at his door. He shook hands with all three of them, brought in an extra chair from an adjoining office, offered cigars. McKechnie had seen him Friday, the day of Cathcart's accident; but now he examined him with close attention. He thought that Abbotsford's manner of easy friendliness covered a trace of strain. There were tight patches under Abbotsford's eyes. The smooth gray hair had been recently combed—so recently that the comb marks were wet and

sharp. The expensive tie had been reknotted, not exactly as it had been knotted earlier that day. McKechnie's impression was that Abbotsford had done some hasty tidying of himself—say at about the moment they'd been halfway up those stairs.

Warned by the brunette downstairs, McKechnie decided.

Abbotsford showed no hesitation in talking about Cathcart or the accident. He sat back of the desk, his fingers woven together below his chin, his elbows on the arms of his swivel chair, and looked—or tried to look—rather indifferently relaxed. "I was driving past the freight yards when something caught my eye, some kind of movement that struck me as out of place, surreptitious."

"You saw someone in the yards?" McKechnie asked.

Abbotsford's long face showed a trace of amusement. "Please don't try to pin me down. Actually, I don't know. Here at Poppy State we've suffered our share of freight depredations; and almost without thinking about it, I jerked the car to the curb and ran in through the gate. When I got inside I began to feel like a fool. There was no one in sight, nothing to account for the impression that something unlawful was going on."

"Any cars moving?" McKechnie wondered, as if idly.

"I—I believe that there was a string of cars in motion. Moving very slowly, however."

"How long before Cathcart's accident did this happen?" asked one of the city men.

Abbotsford shrugged. "A few minutes. Not longer than five minutes, I believe. As I say, I stood there looking around, wondering what had attracted my attention in the first place. Then as I was about to turn away I saw a human figure fall from one of the moving cars. It was Cathcart, as it turned out."

"Isn't this version a little different from what you told me Friday?" McKechnie's voice was cool and drawling; he didn't want Abbotsford to sense his interest.

"Well, it may be," Abbotsford admitted. "You see, as we stood there by the injured man, I heard the other witness telling the patrolman that he and I had just come in through the gate. I didn't want to argue,

to put the fellow in the wrong. He was a seedy type, and the patrolman, I think, was considering running him in on suspicion."

"It always pays to tell the facts as you know them," said the older of the city detectives.

"Yes, I know in theory it does. It was just that then I—well, it was an awkward spot and I kept still. Besides, I couldn't see that the detail of when I entered made much difference. The old man had an unfortunate accident——" His glance sharpened, ran across their faces. "It *was* an accident, wasn't it?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," said the city man, the younger one.

Abbotsford turned his gaze to McKechnie. "I guess you're trying to protect the railroad in this. Though I didn't know your people would accept responsibility in the case of trespassers——" He left the words hanging, a half question.

McKechnie decided to jog him a little. "We seem to have something more here than an ordinary hobo falling to his death."

Abbotsford's smile was quick but mechanical. "You make it sound mysterious. Do you mean that the old man had some business in the yards, that he belonged there, that you're assuming responsibility for what happened to him?"

"It wasn't up to us to decide," McKechnie evaded.

Abbotsford unlocked his hands and spread his fingers on the edge of the desk. His voice seemed suddenly husky. "An insurance angle? Is that it?"

"No, not quite."

A flintlike sharpness settled in Abbotsford's eyes, but before he could go on, one of the city detectives asked him to describe what he had seen of Cathcart's fall from the boxcar.

"What more can I say?" Abbotsford demanded. "He fell out, that's all. On his head, I thought. He didn't move much after he struck the ground. The train didn't stop at once. The car from which Cathcart fell was carried about fifty feet beyond him."

"Do you think there might have been someone else in that car?" McKechnie asked.

"I have no opinion whatsoever," Abbotsford snapped.

"Did you note the whereabouts of Jenkins, our patrolman?"

"Not at first."

"Who was the first among you to reach Cathcart?"

"I suppose I was. I ran across some empty tracks. I seem to recall that the man in uniform—Jenkins?—came from the direction in which the train was moving."

The two city detectives exchanged a glance and Abbotsford was quick to catch it.

"I won't swear to that. It may have been that he ran up from the other direction. My memory isn't exactly clear."

"I wish it were," McKechnie said. "Details are important here."

Abbotsford's glance skipped across their faces. "I should think your patrolman, Jenkins, would have the final word, that his version of the accident would be your yardstick."

The silence among the three officers seemed to frighten him.

"What's—I mean, has this man Healy changed his story? Is that what you're getting at?"

The older of the city men said easily, "We're not getting at anything, sir. We need information. We like to have different viewpoints. If they agree, so much the better. If they don't agree, we have to look a little harder for the truth."

Abbotsford put a fist on the edge of his desk. "Well, these are your facts, then. Healy and I were witnesses. Jenkins questioned us and we told him our stories. Cathcart is dead——"

McKechnie said, "Where did you hear that?"

Abbotsford seemed to catch himself, to spend a couple of minutes in recollection. Then he shrugged. "I must have read it in the papers." He swung back in his chair. "Please, gentlemen—I have a job to do here. I'm glad to co-operate. But what can I add? How can I help you unless you're frank with me?"

Apparently the older of the city men decided to be a little frank right then. He said, "We think Cathcart's death was a homicide. Not all of his injuries can be accounted for by his falling from a boxcar. That's what we hoped to get from you—without tipping off first what

we wanted and perhaps causing you to remember something that really hadn't happened—we wanted a detail which could account for everything the X rays showed."

Abbotsford's face was like a mask. "I wish I could help you. What were these mysterious injuries? And then, more pertinently perhaps, what sort of man was Cathcart? You say that the case isn't that of an ordinary hobo falling from a car, and I'm beginning to believe you. I'm not a fool, so I can guess that there is some angle here which makes Cathcart important. Though it seems improbable, judging by his appearance, that he could have been a man of wealth and heavily insured. Or that he could have left relatives powerful enough to put pressure on the Police Department. Or even"—Abbotsford suddenly spread his well-kept hands in surrender—"any one of a million possibilities. My question is, where does it leave me? Am I under some sort of suspicion?"

"Not at all, sir," said the senior city detective.

Both of the city detectives joined in smoothing Abbotsford's ruffled feelings. McKechnie noted that Abbotsford listened to their speeches with uncommon concentration, as though expecting some slip. The city detectives prepared to depart, as though fearful of annoying a solid citizen any further—an act, McKechnie knew, designed to reassure Abbotsford and leave him in a mood to stay put.

Abbotsford stood looking after them from the open door of his office. "If anything further occurs to me, I'll let you know at once."

"Thank you, sir," said the city man.

"And, McKechnie——"

McKechnie paused on the top stair. He thought he had caught in Abbotsford's tone a sudden urge to confide, to unload. "Yes, sir?"

"Just—just that the same goes for you too," Abbotsford concluded lamely.

The sweater-clad girl at the desk gave them a big smile as they went past. On the sidewalk the older city detective said to McKechnie, "Well, what do you think?"

"He was damned jumpy about something," McKechnie offered.

The younger city man said slowly, "Could he be the man who called on Healy at the Toler House? He fits the description."

McKechnie nodded. "Another thing. At first Abbotsford spoke of Healy as just some shabby fellow he'd barely noticed, had felt a little sorry for, a bum. In the excitement of those last few minutes he was calling him by name. I got the feeling he knew Healy."

"Let's run a make on Abbotsford," the younger city man suggested.

"Run one on Healy, too, will you?" McKechnie asked.

They went back to the car and turned west into the thick downtown traffic. The L.A. City Hall stood tall but vague in its nimbus of fog. Heat and fumes beat in through the windows of the car. In the rear seat McKechnie was deep in thought. He was remembering Healy's unexpected pitch of last night, his offering the information that Abbotsford had appeared from somewhere inside the yards at the time of Cathcart's accident. It had held promise of being a significant item until Abbotsford had told his story this morning. Now Abbotsford had explained logically how he had happened to be inside at the time the old man had fallen from the moving car.

Just neat enough to be fishy, McKechnie thought.

If Abbotsford were the gray-haired, well-dressed visitor mentioned by the clerk at Toler House, the thing smelled of collusion. Purpose unknown. There seemed no necessary reason for the point to be brought into prominence, for Abbotsford so readily to explain it away.

McKechnie parted from the city cops at the curb, took the elevator to the eighth floor, and got on the phone to Price at the FBI offices. He was hoping to learn what the FBI had on Cathcart from the Arizona angle. He explained to Price what he had done that morning, the trip with the city detectives, Toler House, Abbotsford's obvious confusion.

"They're going to run a make on the witnesses."

Price surprised him by saying, "That may not be necessary. Cathcart may have got his skull fracture in Arizona. He and his partner had a fight. This partner was someone he'd known in the old days, ran into again in Phoenix, took with him into the desert. They scratched around and located a claim, all right, a rich one. The partner wanted to sell out and start for the bright lights and Cathcart wanted to stay

and mine it himself. They had a battle, shovels and pick handles apparently, and Cathcart may have gone into town badly beaten up."

"His daughter was worried about his clothes. She said he took better things with him."

"He left them at the claim with his injured partner. The partner's in the hospital in Phoenix, incidentally."

"And Cathcart's dead. What about his money?"

"She was mistaken in thinking that he carried a large sum," Price explained. "His cash was there with his clothes, in the tent on the claim. Look, we're waiting now for the P.M. on Cathcart, then we'll know how old that fracture was and we'll know if he got it here or there."

"No harm in running the makes on those two, though."

"No, go ahead. My bet, however, is that Cathcart got his head injury, the bad fracture, in the desert. Sometimes such cases stay on their feet, keep going, for a surprising length of time. The injury would account for his forgetting his cash and belongings, wandering back to L.A. on a freight."

"And then losing his balance and spinning down from the empty car."

"Yes, all of it."

"How did Miss Cathcart take this?"

"She's a stubborn young woman," Price said with an air of patience. "She still says he was thrown out of that boxcar and murdered."

McKechnie smiled slightly. He decided that his next move would be to interview Miss Cathcart at home.

CHAPTER TEN

Collins had spent less than fifteen minutes at the East L.A. yards. Using the yard check of last Friday, he had determined that the reefer in which Ramos had been found yesterday had on Friday afternoon sat almost opposite the rip track where Miss Cannelbury's bags were hidden. Leaving the yards, Collins headed for General Hospital.

Isidro Ramos occupied a bed at the end of a ward. A screen had been set up to separate him from the others, an indication of his serious condition. It didn't surprise Collins. As they walked through the ward between the rows of beds, the nurse talked to Collins, explaining that Ramos was ill of a fever, probably malaria, in addition to advanced dehydration and undernourishment.

Ramos lay flat on the pillow. He'd been scrubbed and his hair had been combed, medication put on his torn fingers, a bandage behind his ear. The blank, withdrawn look of fear was the same. He seemed frozen and waiting. Collins bent over him, touched his arm reassuringly. In Spanish he asked Ramos how he was feeling.

Ramos seemed to grope for speech. The dry, cracked lips moved, but no sound emerged.

Collins asked for a chair and sat down. By and by Ramos's head turned slightly, so that he could see Collins. "You are the one who found me?"

"That's right." Collins smiled, trying to pierce the watchful fright, to make Ramos understand that he was a friend. "Tell me about the jewelry."

The black eyes flickered. "They are going to send me back to Los Mochis."

"Sorry. Not my department. I can't help you," Collins replied in Spanish. "You'll go back to Los Mochis anyway, when you're ready to travel, whether you tell me anything or not. So why not talk about the jewels? Who stuck you in that reefer? How did it happen later that a yellow flag was tied to the brake handle?"

The fright returned to Ramos's eyes.

"Somebody cared enough about you to see that you were rescued before you died of thirst and starvation," Collins pointed out. "Who was it?"

"I do not know, señor." Ramos turned his head to look at the ceiling. His weak, reedy voice was no louder than a whisper.

Collins lit a cigarette and held it out to the man on the bed. Ramos took it greedily. Probably this was a violation of doctor's orders, Collins thought; but the brief glance he had from Ramos was filled with sudden gratitude. Ramos smoked for a minute, then said hoarsely, "I am not in your country according to the law."

"Well, I guessed that."

A ghost of a smile twitched at Ramos's lips. "I walked all the way from Los Mochis. It took me more than three weeks. At Mexicali I asked permission to cross the border to work, but permission was not granted. One night, with others, I found a break in the fence west of Mexicali and went through. I walked by night, slept by day. The weather began to be very hot. Then for two months I had work on a farm where they grew melons. I was paid well and I ate good food, but I was afraid to try to send money home because I didn't know the regulations."

This had been high adventure to Ramos, Collins sensed. His voice had taken on color and energy as he recalled the danger, the effort, of making his way in a strange country.

"Finally the word came, the men who examine papers were on their way. The owner of the farm where melons grew put many of us in a truck and sent us into the hills westward and left us there. I was among those who came on into California."

"How did you end up in our freight yards?"

"I was searching for the means to go north. In the San Joaquin Valley are many acres of grapes and cotton." The brown eyes staring at the ceiling seemed fixed on a vista of ripe crops and good living. "One other who was from Los Mochis, whom I had known in years past, sent me to the place where many freight cars were congregated."

Collins was inspecting his shine with disfavor. Every time his day began with a trip to the freight yards, his shoes suffered. "Did he tell you to get out of sight quick?"

"Yes, he did that. He also got from his mother a bottle of wine and some bread and sausage, because he said that the trip might be long and tiring."

"Go on."

All at once the brown fingers began to quiver. Ramos dropped the cigarette; it rolled to the floor. His throat worked.

"Don't be afraid," Collins said soothingly.

"There is not much to tell," Ramos whispered.

"Well, I'd like to hear it."

"Into the car in which I was hidden came some men."

Collins lit a cigarette for himself, a new one for Ramos. "Did they bring a couple of suitcases with them?"

"They carried something which I did not try to see," Ramos said with frightened cunning. "They invited me to leave the car, and I did so. I found an empty car with thick walls and a sturdy door."

"Listen to my story," Collins said sharply. "One of them threatened you. With a gun or a knife. They told you what would happen to you if you ever told anybody what you had seen. Then you were escorted to that reefer, sapped behind the ear, the door shut on you."

The frightened brown fingers plucked and trembled.

"You were in that reefer for a long time, afraid to cry out, and finally you realized that you might die there. You decided that these strange *gringos* had a power of life and death; indeed, and that you had better obey them—if you were ever rescued—and keep your mouth shut about them."

Now Ramos stole a look at Collins which the detective was unable

to classify. Under the fear was a question. Ramos whispered finally, "Are you of the police?"

"The railroad police."

The question in the brown eyes went away; appeared replaced by defeat. "It may be as you say, señor. I am unable to remember."

Collins went on talking, asking questions; but Ramos merely twitched his head occasionally in negation. After a while he shut his eyes, as if closing himself away from even the sight of Collins. The brown hands with the broken nails lay still, curved beside his bony thighs. His breathing was hollow and resigned.

Collins had no method of persuasion; he could promise Ramos nothing. The Immigration Service would see that he was deported back to Mexico. Thousands imported themselves and were returned home each year, a flood in which Ramos would be indistinguishable. Collins, sitting by the bed, debated whether to have Ramos transferred to a detention ward, sent from there to the county jail as a material witness. In the end he decided against it. Ramos would only be frightened further by such treatment; and it was fear that kept what he knew locked up inside him now.

"I'll come to see you again tomorrow," Collins promised in leaving.

"*Gracias*," whispered Ramos without opening his eyes.

Collins used a public telephone before leaving the building. He called the office to see if there had been an answer to his wire of last night.

The office man read him the reply from Chicago.

CHECK RESERVATIONS THIS POINT SHOWS COMPARTMENT C CAR IN QUESTION OCCUPIED BY A MRS. CHARLES LIPPERT AND A MISS JANE E. CANNELBURY. CONTACTED PORTER ELBERT JACKSON HERE. HE STATES REMEMBERS ONE WOMAN DETRAINED AMARILLO APPARENTLY ACCOUNT HEART ATTACK. BELIEVES THREE PIECES LUGGAGE REMOVED WITH ILL PASSENGER. WILL CONTACT PULLMAN CONDUCTOR FOSS ON RETURN FROM RUN TO MEMPHIS AND OBTAIN STATEMENT AND ADVISE.

GRAMSON

The office man added, "This Miss Cannelbury was in here this morn-

ing and talked to McKechnie. She left a list of jewelry and an estimate of its value."

"How much?"

"Sixty thousand."

Collins whistled. "Did Ryerson see her?"

"No, she went right out again. The list is here when you're ready to take it over to the pawnshop detail."

"I wish Ryerson had talked to her," Collins said slowly. "I wanted to know what he thought of her."

"I think I know what McKechnie thought of her," the office man offered. "When she walked out he was looking as if he'd just been visited by a ghost. What's wrong with the little lady?"

"I wish I knew." Collins paused to consider his next move. "Send a wire to Amarillo, will you? Tell Sunderlin to dig up everything he can about this Mrs. Charles Lippert. Include the date, car number, and so on. Get an interview if possible."

"Practically on its way," said the office man cheerfully.

The room was cool and dim, but there was no rest in it. It seemed full of whispering echoes and stirring air, as though with the passing of invisible visitors. Jane raised herself uneasily from the bed and padded into the bathroom, where she bathed her forehead at the basin, ran water into a glass and drank it. She examined her blurred face in the mirror, squinting to compensate for the absence of the glasses, inspecting the make-up and the soft straight hair, tilting her chin and lolling her head on her shoulder with studied coyness. Under the rouge she was pale and taut.

She returned to the other room, looked at her wrist watch by the light from under the window shades. The expression of tension increased.

After a period of indecision she dressed again in the gray pongee gown, the large shoes, took her handbag, and went out. She felt a craving for distraction, for movement. There was so little money left now that she decided against taking a cab and instead got into a bus when it stopped at a nearby corner. She rode aimlessly for more than

a half hour until a new idea seized her. Then by bus and streetcar she found her way through the industrial hinterlands of the city to the fenced boundary of the freight yards.

The insignia riveted to the steel fence matched that of the line whose train she had ridden into the city. She leaned beside it, looking into the yards. Heat waves rose off the pavement beside her, but she was not aware of them, nor of the noises of the shabby neighborhood, the shrill cursing of children, the squawks of their mothers, the hawking of peddlers. She saw only the dusty yards.

Her thoughts were compounded of rage and frustration. It seemed illogical, cruel, to her that no gift of second sight had sent her here once she had discovered the theft. Why hadn't someone explained to her, in those first desperate moments of loss, where the bags must have gone—back into the train—and how at that very instant their logical destination must have been these very freight yards? She beat a clenched fist against the frame of the gate beside her, then glanced at it in surprise. She had not been aware there was a gate until that moment.

Then her glance flicked past the gate and she noticed for the first time, with a slight shock, the man who stood perhaps ten feet or so away, watching her. For a second or so an instinctive fear seized her and she thought of the police with a flare of fright; but a second look reassured her. The man was unprepossessing, short and stout with wet doglike brown eyes, a moon face, a slouching posture. He wore a plaid jacket far from new. His slacks were without a crease and his shoes could no longer be improved much with a shine. When her gaze met his he smiled; something greasy, she thought, about the way his lips moved. She glanced away quickly.

Still he stood as if waiting.

She now noticed the heat, the dust blowing from the yards, the noisy and shabby neighborhood. She was still possessed with a desire to go in, to explore, to search for some clue to the whereabouts of the diamonds; but she was also self-conscious and aware that she looked out of place. She shot another quick look at the man waiting beyond the gate.

He smiled again. "Warm, ain't it?"

"Yes," she found herself whispering in answer.

"You a tourist?"

"Yes." She edged back a step or two, to remove herself from the fence. "I—I was just looking at the trains."

"They aren't trains yet. Just freight cars." He took a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, used the offer of a cigarette to get closer to her. "They get 'em in there from all over, full of every kind of merchandise you can imagine and some you couldn't. Kind of interesting, just thinking about it."

She had refused the cigarette. She found his close presence offensive. He smelled of sweat and stale tobacco. Still, he seemed to know a bit and might be useful. "I suppose they keep people—strangers, that is—out of there entirely?"

"They try to."

"But—but some *do* get in?"

"Quite a few." The brown eyes appeared merry with inner amusement. "You wasn't thinking of hopping a freight, were you, lady? You'd meet up with some rough characters in those boxcars."

She shared his brief laughter. "No, I hadn't thought of riding a freight train."

His gaze traveled down over her clothes. "If you do, take my advice. Get a pair of pants."

"I'll remember that." She was arch and gracious, humoring him.

"I saw you looking in as if you expected to see somebody."

"Well, I—I do have a sort of personal reason to be interested."

His hand rose to take his cigarette, and above the curve of his fingers his eyes sharpened on her. "Can't you tell me about it?"

"Just a—a severe loss." The thought of the lovely jewels, speaking of their loss like this to a stranger, brought sudden tears to Jane's eyes. She turned her head, brushed at the tears with her fingers. The stranger's face had grown slack with surprise. "Please excuse my—my emotion. I'm still upset."

"You lost something in those freight yards?" he asked.

"I can't talk about it," she cried hoarsely.

"Sure, sure. I understand." His glance was sharper than ever.

"The only way you could understand," Jane said, "is to have suffered the same kind of loss yourself. And you haven't."

"Miss, I've had such bad luck in my time I don't think there's any accident you could mention hasn't happened to me." His tone was wheedling and conciliatory.

"*This* didn't happen to you!" She wished he would shut up. She wanted time to control the tears, and she resented his prying.

He touched her hand with faintly sticky fingers. "Well, forgive me. I was just wanting to help you in some way. I'm a roughshod type, I guess. It was just that—well, I'm around here a lot, keeping an eye on things, and I thought maybe there was something I could say or do——"

"Were you here last Friday?" she blurted.

It took a moment for the question to register, and when it did, he seemed stunned. There was a definite withdrawal and coolness. He retreated past the gate. "Perhaps. I guess I was."

"What did you see in there?" She motioned agitatedly toward the yards.

He shrugged, his attitude wary. "Same as now. Switchers working."

Her searching eyes had found something new. Across a maze of tracks she could see one on which a row of cars seemed in a state of half repair. "Over there!" she cried. "Weren't there people running? Wasn't there an indication of some kind of—of devilment?" She turned so quickly that the skirt of the gray dress ballooned around her knees. She moved toward the stranger with a sort of leap. "If you can help me, there isn't anything—there isn't any reward I wouldn't pay!"

"It sounds pretty serious!" the man mumbled.

"Sixty thousand dollars is no joke!"

He laughed at her.

She turned away, the bitter tears springing again into her eyes. It was all so much like a nightmare. No one believed or cared.

She sensed that he was staring at her, examining every detail of her appearance. In anger she flung around and demanded, "Who are you?

What's your name? What right have you to question and torment me? I was only looking."

He was suddenly polite, almost apologetic. "I didn't intend to scare you, miss. My name's Healy. I'm a trucker."

"You have a job in connection with this railroad?"

"Oh——" He motioned vaguely. "I'm here and there, all over, watching for shipments."

She shook her head. "But of course you weren't here Friday."

"Yes, I was." He seemed to have made up his mind about it. "I was here and maybe I saw something you could use. It would—uh—it would depend, miss, frankly, on what you would be willing to pay. In a case like this, in a case of *murder*——" His brown eyes seemed bugged out enormously; they swam in a foggy mist left on her glasses by tears and perspiration. His tone was so soft she barely made out the words. Her heart was thumping furiously, though. He was possessed of some dreadful secret; he would impart it for a price, and she could recover the jewels.

What did he mean, though, by *murder*?

"Was there a quarrel?" she whispered.

"We can't talk here." He looked nervously about. "We'll be seen. If you're willing, we could go to my room. It's near here. And don't be afraid I'd try anything funny——" The sympathy and respect in his gaze were real, and a surge of hope shook her. "You just lost your dad. I know how that is. You can trust old Healy."

She fell into step beside him. She wanted to tell him that he had a detail wrong—whoever it was who was dead in the affair wasn't a relative of hers. He squeezed her hand, cautioning her to silence. Then she thought it would be better to wait before correcting any idea of his. First she must draw him out and learn exactly what he knew about the theft of the luggage.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NORA CATHCART was on the porch of the old-fashioned four-flat when McKechnie pulled his car to the curb. She'd just taken some mail from a box nailed to the banister. She paused on the top step, looking down at him as he got out. The pale brown hair hung loose and she hadn't put on any make-up. Her dress was faded and beltless, pink gingham which had seen a good many washings. To McKechnie she seemed younger, less smooth and less experienced, than his impression of yesterday. As he came up the stairs she put a hand on the railing and leaned there. "Hello, Mr. McKechnie."

He went on into the shade of the porch. "Hello, Miss Cathcart."

She waited, the violet-blue eyes fixed on his face, her manner calm but distant.

"I want to offer my sympathy. I'm sorry your father died."

Her gaze dropped. "Thank you."

"I want you to know that we're doing everything we can to find out the truth about his death."

"I'm glad to know that."

"Were you with your father when he died?"

She shook her head. "It happened suddenly. He had seemed better and the doctors must have thought he was going to be all right. He was given a sedative to help him rest, and I went home. I hadn't been here more than ten minutes when the call came. He was gone—like that."

"I asked because I had hoped he might have said something about the accident."

"He couldn't even seem to remember there'd been an accident," she

said slowly. "I should have guessed he was badly hurt, from his mental condition."

McKechnie saw that in some way she blamed herself. "How could you know when the doctors didn't? Do you have your father's things here, what he had with him when he was hurt?"

"Yes. They're inside." She hesitated briefly. "Last night a Mr. Price came, from the FBI. He looked at Dad's clothes, the odds and ends from his pockets, the few papers, and didn't find anything important."

"You don't have to show me anything if you'd rather not," McKechnie said stiffly.

"I don't mind," she answered indifferently. "I just wanted you to know what had already happened." She walked to one of the four doors facing the porch, glanced back at him. "It's upstairs. Come on."

She led the way up a carpeted flight to an entry hall, then on into a room overlooking the street. There was nothing fancy about the furnishings, but the room had an air of comfort, of homelike repose. Nora Cathcart put down the few letters and circulars she had taken from the mailbox, tossing them to a table in front of the windows, then turned to look at McKechnie. "You didn't believe me when I said my father was carrying quite a bit of money, and you were right. The motive for his murder couldn't have been what I thought it was."

McKechnie stood awkwardly in the middle of the floor, holding his hat. "What was it, then?"

"I don't know." She sat down on the arm of the couch, indicated a chair for McKechnie. "I still believe he was murdered."

"There seems some evidence that he boarded the train in bad shape," McKechnie said carefully.

"Yes, I know what you mean." Her eyes strayed back to the pile of mail. "Wait a minute. One of those letters has a Phoenix postmark." She hurried back to the table, sorted through the small heap, lifted a square white envelope, ripped open its end. Her glance skipped down the single sheet she had removed. Then pallor flooded her face and her eyes grew sick.

"What's in that?" McKechnie said.

She folded the sheet of paper, twisted it between her fingers. "A note from Dad's partner, about the quarrel they had."

"What does he say?"

She shook her head mutely. She was fighting for control, not trusting herself to speak. The letter had given her a shock. All at once McKechnie walked over, caught her hand, pulled the sheet of paper from between her fingers. The note was written in pencil in a cramped, illiterate hand.

Dear Nora

When your daddy comes home you tell him I am going to sue him for what he done. I aim to take his share of the mine. Its only fair, he came at me when I was in my sleeping bag and beat me with a iron bar. Ten thousand dollars would be cheap for my injries. That bad temper of his is going to get him in jail yet. I ought to of had him arrested here but we was old friends once in Mexico so I didn't go to the cops.

Tell him I'm agoing to file suit soon as I get out of bed. And no fooling.

Yours truly,
Rob't. Reider

McKechnie tossed the paper to the table. "What about it?"

She looked at him as if from some depth of misery. "It—it could be true. Dad had a quick temper. Since Mother died he'd been touchy, cranky. Little things, minor annoyances, seemed to upset him out of all proportion to their importance. He wasn't young any more, of course; and his life, the early part of it at least, had been hard and dangerous. I thought he was in fairly good mental and physical condition, but looking back now, it seems I should have known an excursion as wearing as that trip into the desert would be bound to end in disaster."

"Your father had the right to go where he pleased. Are you willing to accept Reider's version of what happened?"

She looked blankly at the letter in McKechnie's hand. "I guess so."

"If this account is true it sheds an important light on your father's departure from Phoenix."

Her lips shook. "He must have been aghast at himself, sick with shame. He was ordinarily a kind, generous person. All that heat, the exertion——"

"No, no," McKechnie interrupted. "I mean, listen to what Reider is telling you. Your dad came at him while he was in his sleeping bag. It sounds as though your dad may have got in all his licks without much retaliation from Reider."

The blue-violet eyes widened. "I see what you mean. All of Dad's injuries must have occurred in the freight yards."

"We'll know definitely after the P.M., anyway. What are you going to do about Reider's claims for damages?"

She hesitated, frowning as if with a touch of anger. "Shouldn't I wait and find out just how badly Dad hurt him?"

"It would be the sensible thing to do." McKechnie tossed the letter to the table. She meant to hold off, to measure Reider's permanent scars against cold cash; and the thought was calculating, miserly. He looked at her, wondering at the streak of mercenary greed she showed so plainly now and then. "You might write and offer to pay his hospital bills, though. It might take a load off his mind."

Something in his tone caught her attention and she lifted her gaze quickly. "Yes, I'll do that." For a moment she seemed about to add to this; McKechnie sensed that she searched for words, finally that some block prevented her saying what she wished. "Whatever comes from the claim should be enough," she added at last. She didn't explain further. "I'll get Dad's clothes and the things he carried in his pockets."

She hurried from the room, came back with a little stack of folded clothing, a clutter of small things heaped on top. She put the stuff on the table beside the letter from Reider, then went to sit on the couch. She didn't avert her face, but McKechnie judged that the sight of the clothes and his examination of them were painful to her.

An odor of dust stirred from the clothing as he moved it. He lifted the overalls, which were crusted with grease and dirt. The pockets were empty of even crumbs of tobacco.

She noticed his interest in the pockets and offered, "Mr. Price asked

if my dad smoked or chewed tobacco. He gave up tobacco about six years ago."

"Doctor's orders?" McKechnie wondered.

"No. It was on religious grounds."

The shirt was little better than rags. On the sleeve above the elbow, and just inside the collar, were small bloodstains. The underwear seemed to have been washed more recently than the rest and was fairly clean. The stuff from Cathcart's pockets consisted of a pocketknife, a snap purse with some silver—three fifty-cent pieces, a quarter, and four dimes—a rock specimen about as big as a walnut, a piece of a comb, a meal ticket issued by a café in Phoenix and completely punched out, a black shoelace, an old-fashioned oversize gold watch.

McKechnie said, "What do you think about the shoelace? It's new, and when they're new they come in pairs."

"The other shoelace is in one of his shoes," she explained. "I meant to tell you, Mr. Price took them."

"Here's something a little odd. While your father was in Phoenix, eating in a café, he'd have worn other clothes. I don't see how the meal ticket ended in his overall pocket."

She said slowly, "He may have dressed in his prospecting clothes before leaving town. The date on the ticket is that of the day he arrived in Phoenix. I think he ate a last meal in town before leaving with Reider for the desert."

"How did he get out there, come back?"

"Reider had a pickup truck and some burros. I don't know for sure, but I think Dad drove the truck when he left the claim."

"Leaving Reider alone?"

She shook her head. "I can't imagine his doing that."

"How did Reider get back to town?"

"Perhaps—perhaps Dad brought him."

"Did Price mention how the FBI came into it?"

"They were on federal land. The government is interested in all uranium prospecting. Lately there have been some cases of claim-jumping, followed by violence—even murder. You can't let stuff like that get out of hand. The government men are going to step in."

He left the small heap of Cathcart's belongings, went over to sit beside the girl. "Do you think your dad's death had anything to do with his affairs in Arizona?"

She looked directly at him. "There's only one possible way—if some other friend of Reider's followed him, seeking revenge. And it seems a most improbable idea."

"Then the attack on him had some connection with what was going on in the freight yards."

She nodded slowly. "Yes—if we could know what that was."

"I have one lead. May I use your telephone?"

She took him into the dining room, showed him the phone on a small stand in the bay formed by three windows. McKechnie sat down, dialed his office. When the office man came on the wire, he asked, "Has a character named Healy been in to dictate a statement?"

"Not yet."

McKechnie looked in the telephone book for the number of the Toler House. The clerk's nasal voice had a yawn under it. "Toler House."

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Healy if he's in."

"Just a minute." The clerk laid down the instrument with a thump and McKechnie could hear his padding steps in the hall, on the stair. After some minutes the clerk returned. "He don't answer the door. I think he's got comp'ny. Want to leave a message?"

"No, thanks." McKechnie hung up, returned to the other room. "Let me have that meal ticket, will you? I'll return it."

She went to the table, picked the ticket from among the other small stuff. "You needn't return it. I have many mementos of Dad. Better ones than this." She thrust the ticket out toward him.

In the car McKechnie turned east. The neighborhood gradually changed, the old homes and flats giving way to shops, then to warehouses with lofts above them, finally to manufacturing plants. He came finally to the shabby cul-de-sac where the Toler House faced other buildings which had once been spruce residences. He parked at the curb, ran up the steps.

Healy had come from Phoenix—apparently, from the discrepancy in

his registration at the Toler House, much more recently than he had admitted. He'd been suspiciously near the yards at the time of Cathcart's accident. His statement concerning Abbotsford's whereabouts when Cathcart had fallen had all the earmarks of an attempt to switch suspicion from himself.

The clerk looked languidly in McKechnie's direction, then jerked his head toward the stairs. McKechnie started up. The rotted-onion odor had been mildly flavored with disinfectant, and as McKechnie reached the top of the stairs he saw a Negro porter mopping the hall. He passed the porter, reached Healy's door, rapped sharply. There was no movement in the room, no answer.

McKechnie took hold of the knob, turned it. The door swung inward. The room was small, the light from the window facing an air-well gray and dusty. The bed, its white counterpane and Healy's figure, stood out sharply in the gloom. McKechnie walked in, stopped at the foot of the bed. Healy was there as the clerk had supposed, and again as supposed, he'd had company.

Company had come and killed him.

Healy's body was flattened as if a giant hand had pushed him into the bed, and his face had smoothed to the innocence of a baby's. These evidences of the softening, the loosening of death were in grisly contrast to the ice-pick-like tool driven into his left temple. There was little blood, only a small pool beside Healy's ear. His blankly innocent gaze was fixed on the ceiling. McKechnie turned and walked out.

The porter glanced up as McKechnie stopped beside him. "How long have you been here in the hall?"

"'Bout ten minutes, more or less."

"Did you see anyone enter or leave Healy's room?"

"No, sir."

"Keep an eye on that door, will you, till I get back?"

"I sure will."

McKechnie flashed his identification to add emphasis to the request. The porter propped the mop handle against the wall and went to stand by Healy's door. McKechnie ran downstairs. The clerk was putting something out of sight under the counter, wiping his mouth with

the back of his other hand. The odor of muscatel floated in the alcove.

"Who came to see Healy today?"

The clerk shrugged. "I didn't notice. You the guy who called a few minutes ago?" When McKechnie nodded, the clerk went on, "When I went up and rapped on Healy's door I heard some kind of movement in there. A step or two, real soft. You know what I mean, like they was tiptoeing. I just figured the guy wanted privacy."

"You thought he had a woman in there. Why?"

"Well——" The clerk fiddled with the old pen in its wire holder by the inkwell. "It's this way. I was in my room back there"—he indicated a door a few feet past the end of the counter—"and I heard somebody cross the lobby. Real quiet-like. A board squeaked, though. This was about an hour ago, I guess. So I put down what I was doing——"

"Spelled *b-o-t-t-l-e*?"

The clerk grinned wolfishly. "Yeah. Let's be frank. I put down my bottle and went to have a look. Some of these customers like to slip out owing the rent. It's my job to catch them doing it. What I saw in the lobby was Healy near the stairs, and up on the top landing, just getting out of sight, a woman's feet. Healy winked at me. I shut my door. I'm not nosy and I'm no vice squad. What do you expect?"

"Tell me about those feet," McKechnie said.

The clerk's eyes bugged in mock dismay. "You want a full description of a dame from her shoes? Look, mister——"

"*You* look," McKechnie said harshly. "Your customer Healy is up there with an ice pick through his skull. You'd better start remembering fast."

The clerk gradually turned gray-green and moist before McKechnie's gaze and finally slumped out of sight behind the counter.

McKechnie ran around the counter, knelt, got the flabby wrist between his fingers. The clerk's pulse was like the fluttering of a hummingbird. McKechnie reached for the phone on the counter, dialed L.A. police headquarters, put in a hurry call for an ambulance. Then he asked the police operator to locate the two detectives who had called with him earlier at the Toler House, and when he reached them he explained the facts of Healy's murder.

Then he called Ryerson.

"I think Healy's girl friend from the bar was here. She got him off the hook last night when I caught him trespassing in the yards. I keep remembering how scared Healy was when I made him walk with me into Shiney's. Something about that place made him shake in his shoes."

"Yeah?" Ryerson asked. "What's the connection?"

"It could be the stolen whiskey. When I'm through here I'm going back to Shiney's. I want the strip numbers off those missing cases."

"Here, talk to Pete." Ryerson transferred him to the office man, who read him the numbers from the report sent in by the consignee in Malpais Valley. McKechnie wrote them down on a back page of the Toler House register, then ripped the page from the book. He knelt again beside the clerk, whose skin had grown dark with congested blood and whose breath had the stuttering uncertainty of a bent ripsaw. He straightened the clerk's body, unbuttoned the waistband of his beltless pants. There was nothing else he could do to help him breathe, to live. McKechnie ran back up the stairs. The porter stood like a sentinel beside Healy's door.

"Where's the back entrance?"

The porter wagged his head. "Hit's bolted and padlocked. You can't have these characters slipping out of a rear door, sir."

"And the fire escape?"

"That back hall window opens on a ladder, but just between you and me, hit's bolted too."

"Damned lucky you've never had a fire."

"Yes, *sir!*"

"So the only way in or out is by the lobby?"

The porter nodded energetically. "It sure is." He licked his lips. "What's wrong with the gentleman inside here?"

"He's dead." McKechnie walked down the hall to its end. The cobwebbed window was securely bolted into its frame. Through the dim pane he could see a cat, a twin to the dead one in the gutter, trying to nose the lid off a garbage can in the alley below. He was the one moving and living thing amid the litter.

Narrow, musty-smelling back stairs led down to the rear door, which McKechnie found fastened with a hasp and padlock. Dust lay along the top edge of the hasp. No one had entered or gone out this way. Healy's murderer had walked in boldly through the lobby.

McKechnie stood listening for any sound; there was none. The old house had the watchful stillness of a cowering animal.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE CLERK was removed to the ambulance without regaining consciousness. The young doctor who arrived with the ambulance didn't seem too optimistic about his chances. Here was a heart which had withstood the kickback of liquor for many years. Healy's murder had merely triggered a collapse long overdue. When the ambulance had gone the homicide detectives gathered the porter and the available tenants in the lobby, interviewed them there one by one. McKechnie listened in, watched hopefully for a familiar face, found none. These were all typical dwellers of hotels like the Toler House. All of the dozen-odd were male, none was young, none showed any signs of prosperity or of interest in their clothes or persons. Some were tall, some short, some were cadaverously thin and a couple were sloppily fat, but over them like a uniform lay the gray dusk of futile days, and in their empty eyes could be read the surrender terms of a battle ended long ago.

Not one admitted knowing Healy. No one had even seen Healy or his visitor that day. One who lived at the rear of the lower floor thought he had heard the lock on the rear door rattle about a half hour before, as though someone had tried to come in that way; and a uniformed

cop was sent around to wait in the alley, to protect any possible fingerprints on the knob there. McKechnie mentally shook his head. Healy's murderer was bold but shrewd; he would not be caught by the prints on a door. Nor could he be one of the tenants here. None of these winos had the ambition to commit a crime.

Healy had been mixed up in something concerning the yards. Someone else mixed up in it had shut his mouth. McKechnie knew this with every instinct bred into him as a cop. Healy, with his wet begging eyes, his juvenile bravado thinly covering a quivering soul, had all too obviously been a weak member in danger of cracking at the first pressure. With bitter hindsight McKechnie knew that a show of harshness last night outside Shiney's Tavern would have brought out the facts about whatever had set Healy sweating and shaking in the office.

One of the city detectives came down into the lobby and beckoned to McKechnie. McKechnie followed him upstairs into Healy's room. The gray light washed in through the window, open now, and the men working by the bed threw dim shadows on the walls. "Over here," said the city man, pointing into the top drawer of Healy's dresser.

Laid out on a towel in the drawer was a row of tools. Most of them had been made from strap steel, the handles contrived from wrapped wire and black friction tape. McKechnie inspected the layout with interest. "He was learning to be a burglar?"

"Of a special type." The detective handed McKechnie a book. It was a well-thumbed copy of a Railroad Freight Protection Code.

"He took pride in his work. Studied hard." McKechnie glanced from the book to the carefully padded drawer.

"There were clothes laid in on top," the detective explained. "I think the idea of the towel was to keep things from rattling if anyone got curious and jerked the drawer open. Like a chambermaid looking for gin. Incidentally, the tool in his head came from here."

"That's the most interesting of all."

"It opens up some possibilities," the city man agreed. "Someone knew Healy pretty well. Or he was trying to impress a friend by explaining the fine points of opening boxcars." The detective laid his fingertips in the depression in the toweling where the ice-pick-like tool

had lain. "What went into his head, as near as I can figure, is a screw driver filed to a point."

McKechnie put the book on the dresser. "Where did he make them?"

"Here." The detective put a toe in the handle of the bottom drawer, edged the drawer open. At one end, in a cardboard box, lay some files and a small portable emery wheel. "You think right away of the noise he must have made. But my experiences with flea traps like this one lead me to believe that you could bring your grandmother into your room and, without muffling her with so much as a piece of Scotch tape, give her the death of a thousand cuts, and nobody would even rap on the wall."

"I know. It's every man for himself." McKechnie squatted and explored the litter in the bottom drawer. There were some postcards from a woman in Milwaukee who signed herself Babe. There were Chinese laundry tickets. There were two recent programs from Hollywood Park, which McKechnie flipped through, looking at the names of the horses. Healy had kept track of his bets and he had been a careful better. In each race he had bet three horses to show, and at the end of the program he itemized a small profit. "He had a system and he stuck to it," McKechnie commented. "Some of these horses were doing a lot better two or three years ago, so I guess Healy got to betting them then and just stuck with them. It proves he wasn't fickle. I don't think he was fickle with his work, either. I wonder if he's got a record in Phoenix."

"Is that where he came from?"

"It's where he said he came from. Wait a minute." From a spate of race tickets McKechnie extracted a card which was different. It was a duplicate of the card Nora Cathcart had given him, the meal ticket issued by the café in Phoenix. "Here's something worth checking."

"A meal ticket? From Phoenix, all right."

"Cathcart, the old man who died in the fall from a boxcar, boarded a freight in Phoenix."

The city detective looked alertly at McKechnie.

"This ticket of Healy's is a month old. It was issued after Cathcart

must have gone out into the desert to prospect. The point is"—McKechnie took Cathcart's punched-out meal ticket from his coat pocket—"Cathcart ate at the same place when he was in town."

A small thin smile crossed the detective's face like the brief passing of a light. He took the tickets from McKechnie. "I'll see what we can get from Phoenix."

"You might try Milwaukee, too, on an off-chance."

McKechnie turned from the dresser and in passing the bed glanced at the dead man briefly. Healy had been full of secret woes, secret fears, under the smart-aleck surface. And now all of his troubles, their truth or falsity, had gone with him, wherever he was. The trembling soul could no longer be cowed, nor the narrow brain picked. Healy was safe from everybody.

His life might be guessed at, a series of shabby adventures. The totting up was being taken care of elsewhere.

McKechnie paused at the door, looked back. "Did you run a make on Healy?"

The detective shook his head. "Nothing in our files."

The police photographer was packing his camera. A fingerprint man, dusting the door lintel with a camel's-hair brush, whistled under his breath. The room held an air of finality, conclusion. McKechnie went downstairs, nodded to the detective finishing with the questions in the lobby, walked outdoors. He glanced at his wrist watch. It was past lunch time, but he didn't feel hungry. He felt a great hurry to get over to Shiney's and see who might be glad there, or sad, or afraid.

It was a short drive over to the East L.A. yards, past the yards to the tavern. McKechnie parked down the block, got out, stood on the sidewalk. Shiney's had the somnolence common to drinking places early in the afternoon. No one passed in or out. A single car was parked in the lot. The juke box was silent.

McKechnie took a few steps in the direction of Shiney's and then stopped. He was getting a hunch that this particular move was a mistake. Even if Healy were involved in the theft of the whiskey, even if his fright of last night had meant that he dreaded leading McKechnie to the buyer of the stolen goods, the missing cases wouldn't be

found here. Not now. For one thing, the stolen whiskey was high-class merchandise, above both the taste and the price preferred by Shiney's customers. Secondly, no one but an idiot would keep stolen liquor this close to the source.

McKechnie swung around and returned to his car. He sat behind the wheel for a couple of minutes, thinking it over. Then he drove away to a nearby corner where there was a Mexican grocery store with a telephone booth. He called Price at FBI headquarters.

Price listened to his explanations. "I can't get away right now," he answered. There was a pause, and McKechnie sensed that Price was mentally rearranging what he had to do during the afternoon. "Tell you what, meet me there at about three."

"Sure," McKechnie said.

When he left the telephone booth, the sight of the food in the store reminded him of lunch. He decided that since Shiney's was the closest place to eat he might as well go back there.

The only people in Shiney's were the bartender and a couple of men in denim coveralls. McKechnie knew the customers; they were men from the yards. They knew him too. After the first glance at him their mouths drew tight and conversation between them and the bartender ceased. The influence of Rule G crowded into the bar like a quieting fog. McKechnie took a stool near the entrance. "What are you serving for lunch?"

The bartender waddled out into the open room and snatched a menu off a table. Walking back with a towel under his arm, he opened the menu and frowned at its contents. "Beef stew. Tacos. Fried shrimp."

"Take my advice," said one of the men from the yards softly. "Don't try them shrimp."

The bartender came toward McKechnie with the menu. "Good, frozen shrimp, imported from Mexico."

"By Morgan's grandfather," said the switchman softly.

"Give me a couple of tacos and a cup of coffee," said McKechnie. He found the tacos soggy, the coffee watered; but he ate quickly. The two men in coveralls paid for their beers and slipped out, their manner

implying that McKechnie should forget seeing them since they were trying so hard to be invisible. McKechnie said to the bartender, "I ran your customers off."

"Beer? What's beer?" the fat man wondered, rubbing the bar. "Nobody gets drunk on beer."

"You don't fight Rule G and stay in the railroad business." McKechnie paid for his meal and went out.

Morgan's place in the valley was so new it looked as if it had been put up last night, just in time to greet the dawn. The front was composed of great slabs of opaque glass and redwood beams, with tropical plants, palms, and ivy arranged carefully in the parkway. High in the air, a giant blue antelope, outlined in neon, galloped under an orange moon. The moon wore a face in which one eye perpetually winked. Neon letters over the wide front entrance read, *The Blue Antelope. Welcome.* All of the neon was in operation, defying the brightness of the sun, so McKechnie judged that the place was open for business.

The Blue Antelope faced south, so that from its doorway—should anyone pause to look—across the humming traffic of Ventura Boulevard you saw the high brown flanks of the Hollywood Hills, the skyline drive, the big houses here and there, set in their lavish gardens. Ventura Boulevard had long been built into one long string of modern shops and gaudy cafés. Behind the Blue Antelope, to the north, lay the San Fernando Valley. The great bowl of the valley was now warming with the dry ovenlike heat of afternoon. McKechnie wiped sweat from his face as he stepped from his car in the lot.

Price had left his car at the curb down the block. He stood waiting for McKechnie at the entrance to the lot. He was a lean, slightly stooped man in his early thirties, with sandy complexion and chilly, introspective gray eyes. He always made McKechnie think of a doctor.

"Hot enough for you?"

McKechnie nodded. "You look cool enough."

"I don't feel that way. The traffic through Cahuenga Pass always gives me a temperature."

McKechnie glanced at the clean brown hills in the distance. "We're out far enough to be away from the smog."

"Give it time. The day's young yet." Price paused before the door to Morgan's new establishment. "Well, the proprietor seems to be doing well. Let's see if he invests in stolen liquor."

Every once in a while, working on hunches as he was now, McKechnie was assailed with a feeling that the affair was going to collapse in his face. He felt suddenly that the idea of coming here had been foolish. Looking at Price in the shadow of the crisscrossed beams above the entry, he found the federal man's eyes on him in quiet scrutiny; and McKechnie wondered if Price sensed his uncertainty. McKechnie said, "He'd be a fool to risk it." Price's sandy eyebrows went up a little. "But," added McKechnie, "a fast buck is strong bait for a sucker."

Price nodded. McKechnie pushed open the door and they went in. The small lobby was luxuriously carpeted, lined with planter boxes full of tropical greenery. To the right was a hat-check stall, closed now with a bamboo blind. Ahead lay the big dining room. There were scattered diners, couples mostly, at the tables. Price touched McKechnie's arm. To the left was a dark doorway, beyond it the blue-lit dimness of the bar.

"No resemblance to Shiney's," McKechnie said.

"He made his money in Shiney's," Price pointed out. They walked into the bar. A music box was playing quietly, sophisticated music full of cellos. Some half dozen customers were clotted at the far end of the bar in front of the television set. McKechnie and Price waited at the end of the bar near the door until the bartender came up to them.

"We'd like to see Mr. Morgan," said McKechnie.

The bartender was slim, dark, knowing. He examined them carefully. Something registered. He smiled and said, "Just a minute," and went to a phone at the rear of the room. When he came back he said, "Mr. Morgan will be right out."

Morgan came in from the direction of the dining room. He was bald, weighed about two hundred and fifty, and obviously wore a corset. McKechnie, looking at the gray flannel suit, wished that Collins could be here to see it. Only someone crazy over clothes as Collins was could

appreciate the tailoring of Mr. Morgan's clothes. The graceful double-breasted coat almost hid even the signs of the corset. "Yes, gentlemen. What can I do for you?"

"My name is McKechnie." He mentioned his railroad. "Special agent's office. This is Mr. Price of the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

They both flashed identification, and then Morgan shook hands with them. "I'm happy to meet you gentlemen. I'd offer you a drink, but I know you'd have to refuse. But consider the place is yours."

"Thanks," McKechnie answered.

Price put in smoothly, "Mr. Morgan, we'd like to know if you have recently bought any odd lots of liquor from someone other than your regular wholesaler."

Morgan smiled slightly, shrugged. "Possibly. I take bargains if they're offered."

Listening to Morgan's voice against the music and the mutter of the television set, McKechnie knew that there had been no mistake made in coming here. It was a hearty, rich, hospitable voice with enough bouncer left in it—from Shiney's—to give a rough edge of humor. But under the welcome McKechnie's ear caught a touch of dread. Morgan had expected them.

McKechnie said, "One of our boxcars was broken into last week and part of a shipment of whiskey was removed. We have some reason to believe the liquor might have been palmed off on you."

Morgan reacted too quickly; he was astonished and then indignant and then doubtful, all in a matter of moments. "The hell you say!" He blinked several times and twiddled his fingers on the dark wood of the bar. "What evidence . . . I mean, what made you think so?"

"We captured a thief."

Price permitted his lips to twitch.

"A thief who says *I* bought his liquor?"

McKechnie was watchful. "We have other evidence besides his word. I'd like permission to check your stores."

Morgan's smile came and went, as if he were doing facial exercises. He glanced from Price to McKechnie, then back again. "What would the FBI be doing, working on a piddling thing like this? It sounds

funny as hell." If he heard Price's clipped reply, "Interstate shipment, Mr. Morgan," he ignored it. His face grew redder, as if he were working up a temper. All at once he thrust himself toward them, his jaw jutting, his eyes tough and menacing. "I don't like this. It doesn't smell right. Is it some kind of frame-up? *Is it?* If you're trying a shakedown——" He ground the words around in his teeth before letting go of them. "I don't scare easy; I'm no patsy. I didn't get where I am, letting chiselers rook me. Just consider that fact, gentlemen, before you go down into my storeroom. If this is a stunt, you'd better think it over." He sucked in a deep, noisy breath. "I'm giving you this chance to back down."

There was so much fright under the gusty bravado that Price's glance was one of near pity. "Mr. Morgan, the Federal Bureau of Investigation does not lend itself to shakedowns. Nor does Mr. McKechnie's railroad. We are here on legitimate business. May we see your stores?"

All at once McKechnie was sure, and a hard fire of exultation built up in him. Morgan was too rattled, the attempt to bluff Price and himself had been too poorly done, for there not to be a reason lying tucked away in Morgan's cellar. McKechnie took out the sheet bearing the strip numbers.

"We aren't accusing you of the theft, Mr. Morgan."

"You'd better not!" Morgan hesitated, fiddled with a stool, turning it on its swivel; and McKechnie sensed that he was groping for something to say, an excuse, a way out. "Even if the stuff is down there——"

"Sure, Mr. Morgan."

They waited. Morgan's fat face had deep creases running through it, and these creases had taken on a dusty hue.

All at once he shrugged. "This way, then." He led them back through the dining room, the big kitchens, to the cellar entry.

In the cellar, comparing strip numbers, they located four of the missing cases, the broken crates of three others. Morgan admitted to destroying the two missing crates.

McKechnie put away his list. "Suppose you tell us about the person who sold you the whiskey."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE CELLAR was cool, but Morgan had begun to perspire. The fluorescent lights in the ceiling lit up the frost of moisture on his bald head. "Two fellows. One was a fat little guy, popeyed, poorly dressed. The other fellow who came with him when they made delivery Friday was thin and dark. Scars on his face. Didn't have anything to say."

"What time Friday?" McKechnie asked.

"Around five sometime."

"What are their names?" said Price.

"The fat little guy said his name was Hemmingway. I never heard any mention of the second man's name. I don't know what part he played in the deal, either. The little fat guy said he knew my bartender at Shiney's."

"Did you call your bartender?"

Morgan shook his head. "No, I didn't." Suddenly, in spite of his fat, Morgan looked haggard and bitter. "I might have known—— Well, it's too late to think about that now. I guess when you settle this thing you'll remember that I co-operated fully with you gentlemen." Morgan glanced quickly from McKechnie to Price. "If it's a federal beef . . . Well, just get this first. This guy Hemmingway put up a pretty good story. He said he had an uncle in San Pedro who had been running a liquor store in partners with another man and they'd had a falling out. The partner took over the store. Hemmingway's uncle figured he got cheated on the deal a little, so he kept some cases of good liquor he happened to have stored at home. Now he wanted to raise some cash on it."

"You call that a good story?" McKechnie asked.

"We don't think his name was Hemmingway," Price added. "What did he want for the liquor?"

Morgan's face looked gray. "T-twenty dollars a case."

McKechnie and Price exchanged a glance. McKechnie was expressionless, but Price assumed his slight, dry, medical man's smile. "That was quite a bargain."

"I guess I put my foot in it," Morgan said bitterly.

"We do appreciate your help, Mr. Morgan," McKechnie offered. "How was this deal set up? Who contacted you?"

"On Friday morning the little fat guy came in the bar as soon as it opened and asked for me. He told me the story about his uncle. He said he could deliver the goods that same afternoon. I agreed and made a down payment and he left."

McKechnie was tempted to look at Price again, but Morgan was getting so nervous and fearful that he kept his eyes front. He knew what the truth of the story must be. Healy had brought a case along and Morgan had paid for it and agreed to take whatever else they had at the same price.

"When he came back—at about five, as I've said—he was with this other man, the dark one. They had a Dodge pickup, kind of beat up, and I sent them around to the service entrance and watched while they unloaded the stuff. Then I paid them, according to the agreement. The dark man was driving. The truck's license began with 13Z—something."

McKechnie nodded. Morgan had been protecting himself. There wouldn't be many local beat-up Dodge pickup trucks with such licenses. "Who accepted the money?"

"The fellow who called himself Hemmingway."

Price said, "You understand, Mr. Morgan, we have to take this whiskey with us."

"Sure, I know that."

McKechnie asked, "Would you be willing to look at a suspect right now?"

"I'll co-operate in any way I can." Morgan knew they had him over

a barrel. Under the rage he must have felt toward them over being caught was the fear of a charge of receiving stolen property. "Wait'll I call a couple of my boys. They'll load these cases in your car for you. Then I'll go anywhere you say."

They went from the morgue to the East L.A. yards. Price carried the whiskey in the back of his car. Morgan rode with McKechnie.

They parked the cars in the graveled lot and walked to the yard office, went upstairs to the small room used by the patrolmen. Morgan took off his coat before sitting down in the chair McKechnie offered. He hung the coat on the back of the chair, where its elaborate padding became obvious. Morgan's silk shirt stuck to his flesh; it was wet. Even his suspenders showed stains of dampness. Since he had identified Healy on a slab at the morgue, the bar owner had been quiet and had worn an expression that indicated a queasy stomach.

McKechnie went downstairs and out into the yards. The heat was smothering and full of smells. He saw Jenkins in the distance.

Jenkins waited with his thumbs tucked into the belt of his uniform as McKechnie cut across empty tracks to reach him.

"I'm looking for Branham."

Jenkins nodded. "I saw him a little while ago near the rip track."

"Get him upstairs, will you?"

Jenkins hesitated. "Something serious?"

"I don't know yet."

When Jenkins and Branham came into the small office a little later and Branham's glance fell on Morgan, it was the bar owner who looked fearful. Branham's tough, scarred countenance didn't change, except that his lip drew up a trifle, exposing the squirrel-like front teeth.

"That's the man, the dark one I told you about," said Morgan huskily.

McKechnie said, "Branham, have you seen this man before?"

"Nah." Branham shook his head slowly. He examined Morgan as if the fat bar owner were some strange thing in a cage. "Never."

Jenkins stood before the door, which he had closed behind him. His manner was attentive but stony.

McKechnie said, "Let's save time on this thing. You and Healy stole some whiskey from a car on the hold track sometime last Thursday night. On Friday morning you pointed out the car to Clay. You thought this would make you look good. All it did was to call attention to your record."

"You mean I should keep my mouth shut," Branham answered with a grin.

"I mean with the car standing there you couldn't get the thought of the theft out of your mind. It annoyed you, made you nervous, spoiled your pleasure over a successful job. You had an unfinished feeling about it. So you hunted up Clay and told him you'd noticed something interesting. He was already out looking for the car; it had been missed when the Malpais Valley drag went out."

Branham was looking at Price. "Who's he?"

McKechnie went on, "You can save the act. We have Healy. He says the idea of the theft was yours and that he got only a small cut of the money."

"Healy? Healy?" Branham looked wonderingly around the office, as if expecting some stranger to pop out of the walls. For an instant his gaze settled on Jenkins, and McKechnie got an impression of some silent communication between them. "Somebody's got me mixed up with two other people," Branham said.

"You know Healy," Jenkins said. "I've seen the two of you talking through the fence."

"That's a crime?" Branham answered, for the first time showing signs of being nettled.

Morgan said, "You and Healy came to the Blue Antelope and sold me nine cases of whiskey. I paid you for it. I'll swear it on a stack of Bibles."

"And then," McKechnie added, watching the switchman, "there's the truck."

Nothing seemed to be making an impression on Branham now. He

was still shooting murderous glances at Jenkins. "I hate a rat," he said slowly. "All my life I've hated the guts of rats."

"If Jenkins saw you talking through the fence to a known trespasser like Healy it was his job to do something about it," McKechnie corrected.

"I *did* something about it. I warned him this morning to lay off or I'd report him," Jenkins answered.

McKechnie recalled the brief scene which he had witnessed when he had come that morning with the two city detectives to talk to Jenkins about the accident to Cathcart. Jenkins and Branham had been together. When Branham had walked away, McKechnie had sensed anger between the two.

Price said, "Well, we've got enough. Let's go."

"Wait a minute," Branham commanded. "You're running me in on the word of some cluck here, somebody I never seen before. Get Healy down here. If he says I pulled a job with him, I'll knock his teeth in. It's a damned lie. It's a frame-up."

"Healy's all washed up," McKechnie said. "He won't help you."

"Show me his signed statement, then."

Price shook his head. "There's nothing you can do, Branham, except to save us a little time in court."

"I don't believe Healy told you a damned thing," Branham said.

"Why don't you believe it?" McKechnie asked.

"He couldn't do it."

"Couldn't? What prevented him?"

"Just—just the kind of crud he is, that's all."

"Anything more?"

"What do you mean?" Branham, edgy now, began to glance sharply and openly at Jenkins. "What's he getting at? What's happened?"

Jenkins had withdrawn into the stony, impersonal attitude McKechnie had noted a few moments before. He didn't reply to Branham's questions. He seemed prepared to withstand some sort of buffeting. It was possible that he expected Branham to take advantage of their acquaintance in some manner, to ask his help against the other officers.

Branham hesitated. At this moment McKechnie said to Jenkins, "Go get Clay, will you?" When Jenkins had gone, shutting the door, McKechnie looked grimly at Branham. "He won't help you. He doesn't dare. It would be worth his job." He saw that Branham knew what he meant. You couldn't contact Jenkins, even briefly, without sensing the machinelike ambition that geared his life. Branham's bitter eyes skipped across McKechnie's face, settled on Price. "This is Price of the FBI," McKechnie explained. "You laid yourself open to a federal rap when you opened an interstate shipment. You're a sitting duck."

Branham began to curse under his breath.

"You're also a fool," McKechnie went on, "if you let Healy give you the business. Mr. Morgan will testify that it was Healy who made the original contact and handled the money. That might look good for your side if you co-operated with us."

It was just a matter of time now, McKechnie knew. He walked over to the window and looked out at the yards. The long lines of cars stood dusty under the heat. The steel tracks gave off glimmering brilliance. Beyond the steel fence, in the passenger-coach yards, a silver streamlined train was pulling into the wash rack.

Branham said huskily, "Okay, then—what do you want to know?"

"Start with Healy," Price suggested.

"The next time I see Healy," Branham promised, "I'm going to wring his damned neck."

Branham had known Healy years ago, during World War II, in Milwaukee. Both had been classified 4F and both were working in the freight yards as handlers. Their acquaintanceship, though not intense, had continued for more than two years. After losing track of Healy at the war's end, Branham had not seen him again until Wednesday of last week. On that evening he had run into Healy at Shiney's Tavern. Healy had stated that he had just come in from Phoenix and was looking for a room. That night, for old time's sake, Branham had permitted him to share his bed at the house Branham kept for himself and his mother. The next day, Thursday, Healy had located the room at Toler House.

Before moving out Healy had quizzed Branham about local freight movements and asked particularly about the chances for following a liquor shipment from the yards to some out-of-the-way spur track. He boasted of past successes in raiding liquor shipments and dazzled Branham with promises of easy money.

Branham had gone to work on Thursday with his mind still filled with Healy's conversation. Late in the afternoon he had noticed the carful of liquor on the hold track.

When he had gone off the job he had walked directly to the Toler House, to Healy's room. Healy had at first been cautious about touching a shipment in the yards. Branham didn't know what had changed his mind. They began to make plans. Branham knew of a truck, belonging to his mother's brother, which he could borrow. Healy said he was sure he could sell the liquor at Shiney's.

In the borrowed truck they had driven to the yards at about midnight. They'd left the truck behind a store where a small parking lot adjoined the fence, had gone in and located the load of liquor. At one spot they'd had a narrow escape, almost being discovered by a patrolman. At this point Branham had urged Healy to give up the expedition, but Healy had insisted on going on.

Healy's tools had been used to open the car and Healy had been the first one inside. His methods had been practiced and efficient. They had worked hurriedly; Branham, according to his account, in momentary terror of being caught. Their goal had been fifteen cases, but the passing of time, the nervous strain and physical exhaustion had caused them to stop at ten. Healy had closed the car.

The whiskey had been stored in Branham's garage. They had opened one case, divided the contents. Acting under Healy's orders, Branham had burned the wooden case in his incinerator and soaked all labels and revenue stamps off the bottles of the opened case. It had been the first he had heard of strip numbers.

He had gone to work Friday with a hangover. During the morning he had reported the car on the hold track with its seals broken. His motive, he insisted, had simply been to save Clay some footwork.

When he had left the yards that afternoon, Healy had been waiting

for him, to inform him that the sale had been arranged. They had borrowed the truck again, taken the whiskey out to the Blue Antelope, and on leaving Morgan's establishment they had shared Morgan's money between them.

"What was Healy doing in the yards last night?" McKechnie demanded.

"I don't know. Maybe he figured he knew the ropes well enough, he didn't need me," Branham said sourly.

"Didn't you tell him something about a new car on the hold track?"

"He says I did, he's a liar."

"This was going to be a real nice business for the two of you," McKechnie pointed out. "A real juicy racket."

"The one job was enough for me," Branham insisted.

Jenkins brought Clay in at that moment. McKechnie told Clay he was sorry to have put him to the trouble of coming in, since they didn't need his help after all. He wondered if Jenkins could guess that the errand to bring Clay had been an excuse to get him out of the room.

So long as Jenkins remained in the office, Branham had seemed sustained by an expectation of help from him. Perhaps Branham felt that, since he and Jenkins were together here day after day in the yards, their association entitled him to some sort of assistance. Or there could be other, unknown factors involved.

As they prepared to leave, Clay and Jenkins went out ahead, with Morgan following. Downstairs at the outer door Morgan paused and began to press upon the FBI man his promises of help and co-operation. Price nodded, tried to push past the bar owner. Branham was several feet away, just in front of McKechnie, who had been the last of the group to leave the office.

As Morgan retreated to the space beyond the door, temporarily opening a way through, Branham lowered his head, hunched his shoulders, and charged. He went through the door with a heavy rush and hit the gravel beyond and stumbled there, falling off balance. He caught himself on one knee, jerked erect, threw a look behind him. Jenkins had drawn his gun.

"Hold it!" McKechnie cried.

Branham scurried and dodged, kicking up dust with his heavy shoes, his body crouched low. There was nothing near that offered shelter. He ran toward the nearest tracks, then swerved toward some empty boxcars off to the left. Jenkins drew a careful bead; his finger tightened on the trigger. McKechnie moved quickly behind him. The gun crashed and there was a spurt of earth beyond Branham's running figure. Jenkins lowered his gun. His mouth twitched; he looked at McKechnie from a white face. "You kicked me," he said slowly.

McKechnie jerked the gun from Jenkins's hand. "Branham!"

Branham's bent form ducked and zigzagged. McKechnie fired. The running man tripped, toppled headlong, rolled over. McKechnie ran toward him. "Get up and stand still." Branham rose uncertainly, then put his hands into the air. When he settled his weight on his left foot, the foot wobbled.

Branham looked down dazedly. The heel had been torn from his shoe by McKechnie's shot. The bare nails, the clean yellow leather shone in the sun. Branham sucked in a deep breath and tried to laugh.

McKechnie put handcuffs on him. "You were damned lucky just then."

Branham laughed a little more, an odd kind of laughter. He seemed to be experimenting with his vocal cords and his breathing apparatus.

McKechnie gave Jenkins his gun. No word passed between them. McKechnie did not explain why he had kicked Jenkins on the ankle. He knew that Jenkins had been about to shoot Branham through the head; he knew it from a long use of guns, and from knowing men who carried guns, and because of a kind of excitement he had sensed in Jenkins, the instinct to kill. When the shot had gone wild because of McKechnie's kick, Jenkins had been like a man who has missed his first tiger.

McKechnie didn't want Branham's head blown apart. He wanted it in one piece so that Branham could answer questions.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NORA CATHCART was unaware that she had fallen asleep on the couch until she was roused by the ringing of the phone. She sat up, confused, her mind fuzzy and unawake and her flesh clammy, and looked vaguely around at the room. It was almost six by the clock on the mantel. The heat was fading and moth-gray shadows lay under the furniture.

The phone rang again. For a moment she waited, expecting to hear her father in the dining room, and then through the fuzziness, like a needle, came the memory of his death, and she stood up. The long nap under the open windows had left her body stiff. She crossed the living room, entered the dining room, passed the big old-fashioned table, came to the phone on its small stand in the bay. "Hello."

There was a space of silence and then a man's voice asked, "Is this Miss Nora Cathcart?"

She tried to fight off the lethargy left from sleep. "Yes. Speaking."

"Your father died in General Hospital yesterday?"

"Yes." She felt like an automaton, stupid and unalive. "Who is this, please?"

"I have some advice for you."

It roused her a little. She looked in surprise at the receiver, as if for some clue to the caller.

"Keep your mouth shut to the police."

"What do you mean?" She clutched the phone.

"I don't like to threaten you," said the man amiably, "but I shan't have any qualms when the time comes for action. I think I would start

by cutting out your tongue. That's a very ancient punishment for tattling."

A shudder ran through her. The silence of the room, the stale warmth left by the summer day closed in oppressively. On the dining table, spread out against the dark wood, were the pages of the letter she had tried to write to Reider. She pulled a chair away, fell into it. "But I don't know——"

"It's unfortunate that you passed me on the stairs. A stupid coincidence. If you keep quiet, I won't have to do anything about you. If you don't keep quiet, as I say, I shall start by cutting out your tongue and I shall go on to mutilate you thoroughly before you die."

The phone went dead with a click.

For several minutes Nora Cathcart sat there with the phone in her hand. She had the fear that if she replaced it in its cradle it would ring again. The voice would return to promise further horrors. She licked her lips, brushed mechanically at a wing of hair which had fallen against her throat. The silence in the flat seemed to her like that which follows a clap of thunder.

Instinctively she knew that the phone call concerned somehow the business which had occupied these last few days. Her father's accident. The talks with McKechnie, the visit by the FBI man. But nowhere, at no time, had she passed a man on any stairs. The threats were—they were insane!

She put the phone back in its cradle and sat hunched and shivering.

McKechnie was alone in the outer office on the eighth floor. Everyone else, including Ryerson and the office man, had walked out at five o'clock. He had typed for an hour, hunt-and-peck, on the report concerning the whiskey theft. He wanted to get the summary done while all of the details were fresh in his mind.

It had ended quickly and cleanly—except for Healy's death—and he felt grim pride in the straight, logical narrative. Summing up, the whiskey had been stolen from the car on the hold track last Thursday night. Two men had called attention to themselves in connection with the theft—Branham in reporting the opened car, Healy by showing

up during the stake-out. Both men had proved to be involved in the theft, and there was no evidence linking any other.

Branham was in the county jail. The whiskey and broken cases were with the property clerk of the U.S. attorney's office. Price and McKechnie had spent forty-five minutes with a deputy attorney, giving information. Booking Branham, registering the evidence, talking with the deputy attorney in the Federal Building had all taken toll of the afternoon. But the thing had come to a neat conclusion.

Healy's death was still a mystery. McKechnie had talked to the city detectives who were working on the homicide. He'd told them that he was sure Branham would eventually admit killing his partner in an argument.

Branham was a weasel type, impelled by fear. Healy, in spite of the soft wet eyes, the childish bravado, had had enough guts to want to continue the racket. The conflict between the two had erupted in violence.

One last tag end—when he left here tonight, McKechnie thought, he'd drop by Shiney's for a final word with Healy's waitress friend. She must have been Healy's last visitor before the arrival of the murderer.

The phone rang in Ryerson's office. McKechnie glanced that way. The night sergeant was standing by the hatstand, reaching for his hat. He'd come in at five, was obviously leaving now for his usual checkup in the yards. McKechnie saw him drop his hat on Ryerson's desk and reach for the phone.

McKechnie pulled the final sheet of typescript out of the machine.

"Hey, Mac!"

McKechnie stood up. His shoulders ached from the unaccustomed work over the machine. He looked unfavorably at the night sergeant standing in the doorway of Ryerson's glassed-in sanctum. If Brace asked him to go out on something now . . .

The night sergeant said, "Grab one of those extensions, will you? A lady wants to talk to you."

McKechnie reached for a phone. "McKechnie speaking."

"This is Nora Cathcart."

"Yes, Miss Cathcart."

"I'd like to see you right away, if it's possible."

There was something new in her voice. McKechnie couldn't place it. "I'm leaving the office now. Ordinarily I wouldn't be here——"

"I know," she put in. "I'm so glad I found you."

She really was glad. McKechnie couldn't miss the terrific gratitude under the commonplace words. "I was going to say, if you haven't had dinner and you wouldn't mind eating with me——"

"Please. I don't want any food. I don't want to spoil your evening, either. Could I—could I have a cup of coffee while you ate? Would you listen to me then?"

"Of course." McKechnie couldn't think of anything to add. She had turned down his offer of dinner, not because she didn't care to eat with him. It was something else. When she'd said, *I don't want any food,* she'd sounded sick. Well, she was a stubborn woman. Probably her efforts to crack the puzzle of her father's accident had begun to affect her nerves. "Will you meet me at Seventh and Spring in a little while?"

"Yes, right away," she cried, and hung up.

McKechnie shuffled the pages of his report together, made a few inked corrections, stowed them into the top drawer of his desk, got his hat from the rack by the door, and went out to the elevators. He let his car remain in the garage downstairs, walked west to Spring Street. The sky above the city canyons held a greenish glow. Toward the west, over the park, there were banners of crimson. Most of the offices had emptied more than an hour before. It was too early for the theater crowds. McKechnie passed only scattered pedestrians.

She got off a bus and walked toward him. She had on a black sleeveless dress, some thin cotton material that stood out stiffly over a slim black undergarment, black pumps, a narrow necklace made of rhinestones. The brown hair was pinned back with rhinestone clips. In the twilight, the smooth throat and arms were like coffee-colored marble. For an instant McKechnie felt a touch of irritation. She looked dressed up. She looked as if she were trying to impress him with her appearance, with her smoothness, her sophisticated style. Then she was close enough for him to read her face and he knew that she had no idea

how she looked. Whatever she'd put on in the bedroom of the flat, she'd chosen blindly.

She came close and after a moment's hesitation she held out her hand. Her fingers were cool; he thought they shook a little. "This is after hours for you, isn't it? I'm so grateful——"

"Don't mention it."

She lifted her face. He sensed something in her drawn tight as a bowstring. "Where do you like to have your dinner?"

"Do you know Lofton's?"

"I think I heard my father mention it. It's a very old place, isn't it?"

He nodded. "The food is good."

She stepped to the inside of the pavement; McKechnie swung in beside her. They walked up Spring Street, where the neon and the street lights shone against the dusk. Only the cross-street intersections were bustling. This was the financial district; the money-men had gone home. There were several blocks in which they encountered no other walkers.

At the door of Lofton's she paused. "I could have told you what has happened, on the way here. I didn't have to complicate your dinner. It's—it's just that I can't seem to find the words." She bit her lips. The blue-violet eyes seemed far away and troubled. "The thing is, someone called me on the phone. Nothing like that ever happened to me before. I can't think how to deal with it."

He pushed open the door. "Come inside."

At the usual table at the rear of the room Shipley looked up and then said something to Collins. Collins lowered his newspaper. It was then that McKechnie remembered the bets of last night. He'd been so busy, so engrossed all day that he'd even forgotten to buy the sports final. Collins looked at him without any expression at all, and all at once McKechnie was sure that his horse had won and Collins's hadn't. He nodded toward them cheerfully, guided Nora Cathcart to the opposite side of the room.

Shipley, not being in the least inhibited, got up and walked over. "Hi." When McKechnie introduced him to the girl, Shipley stared at her with interest. Then he said, "I brought him some money. He

won a bet today." The girl nodded uncertainly, and Shipley took out two fives and three ones and laid them beside McKechnie's plate. "Consider me an honest man," he proclaimed. "I could have said I forgot."

"How did you make out?" McKechnie asked.

"I'm not grumbling," Shipley said evasively.

"What happened to that nag of Collins's?"

"Placed."

"Tough luck."

"It didn't pay anything."

He excused himself and rejoined Collins. McKechnie sat down again. The girl's eyes were fixed on the other table. She said, "If I hadn't come, you would have eaten with your friends."

"Either one of them would gladly cut my throat for a chance to sit here with you," McKechnie answered. He was a little surprised, himself, at the urge to reassure this girl. She was scared. She was scared down deep, petrified.

The waiter came over warily, as if McKechnie showed signs of some strange aberration. He examined the girl from under heavy-lidded eyes. "May I suggest the saddle of pork?" he said with a sidelong stare at McKechnie. "It's very good tonight."

She smiled at him a little, shook her head. "I'll just have coffee, please."

"Why don't you eat something?" McKechnie asked. "Take the roast beef. You can't go wrong on it."

The waiter's face turned masklike.

"If I do order . . ." She hesitated, then glanced up at the dour man in black suit and stiff white shirt. "Just a dessert, perhaps."

"Our specialty is the almond torte," he said slowly with a hopeful note.

She nodded. "Yes. It sounds wonderful."

"It is very good." The waiter steeled himself to listen to McKechnie.

But now McKechnie felt capricious. For months and months he and Shipley and Collins had outraged the gourmet instincts of this old man with their routine of roast beef and french-fried potatoes.

Long ago he had quit trying to influence their stunted tastes. He obviously regarded them as barbarians. McKechnie suspected the waiter of wanting to bang them, more than once, thoroughly with his tray.

"You know—that pork you mentioned——"

"Sir?" cried the waiter.

One heart-attack victim was enough. McKechnie paused. Then, "Well, it sounded good for a change," McKechnie ended weakly.

"It is delicious," said the waiter, as if about to lose his voice.

McKechnie nodded. "I'll take it."

The waiter crept away unbelieving.

McKechnie looked at the girl across the table. She was something fresh and new among the fusty regulars of the old café. Curling tendrils of soft brown hair had escaped the clips, clung to her damp temples. The line of the tanned throat was clean as a child's. He said, "Tell me about the phone call. Who called you?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't give a name? Man or woman?"

"I—I'm sure that it was a man."

"What did he say?"

She moistened her lips. Her eyes came back from far away and looked directly into McKechnie's. "He said he would cut my tongue out."

Something twisted inside McKechnie; a knot of anger drew tight. "He threatened you? About what?"

"Talking to the police." She put her hands on the rim of the table, needing something to hold, leaned nearer. "I believe him. I believe he will do exactly what he said he would do. Mutilate me until I die. Only, I don't know why. I didn't pass anyone on any stairs."

"That's what he said you'd done?"

She nodded. "The call didn't make sense. But the hatred, the intention to hurt—they're real."

"Did he say when you were supposed to have seen him?"

"No. He said our meeting on the stairs was an unlucky coincidence. He warned me not to speak about it."

McKechnie frowned. "*What* stairs?"

She met his gaze helplessly. "I haven't any idea."

McKechnie sat silent for a while and then said, "It was a crank."

She didn't reply at once. There was a sort of dimming, a lessening of confidence and of expectation; the bitterness of refusal. McKechnie thought, the call had been real, then; it hadn't been a trick of hers to stir him up. "How would he know," she said, "if he were just a crank, as you say—how would he know about the investigation? There hasn't been anything in the papers except the death notice."

"You're right. I went off the track. It has to be someone we've contacted about your father's death." He was thinking about Cathcart, the elderly man, discontented since his wife's death last fall. Cathcart, wanting something to do, had gone to Arizona, taken up with an old crony, gone out to prospect, found something good, quarreled with his partner, returned to Los Angeles on a freight train, to die in the yards.

Where lay the seed of his death? In that directionless narrative, it seemed, nowhere. The death just had to be an accident.

"Excuse me for a minute." McKechnie got up, went to the phone booth near the entrance, called Los Angeles Police Headquarters. He was lucky enough to catch one of the detectives who had been with him that morning, inquiring into Cathcart's death. The post-mortem had been concluded. The wound at the base of Cathcart's skull had almost certainly occurred at the time of his accident in the yards. The examining doctor was positive that Cathcart couldn't have traveled from Phoenix after such an injury.

"Is that what you wanted?" the city man asked.

"Yes, that's it."

"We're going back to the yards again tomorrow. We'll need the number of the car Cathcart fell from. Perhaps a yard clerk can help us pin down the location a little better. I thought Jenkins seemed pretty vague."

"The cars were moving," McKechnie remembered. "I'm not sure that the yard check can do you much good. Personally, as I recalled Cathcart's position, it was somewhere nearer the fence. Give me a ring in the morning when you're ready to leave and I'll meet you out there."

"Will do," the city detective promised.

"Cathcart's daughter received a threatening telephone call," McKechnie added. "A man's voice, promising to cut her tongue out. She's supposed to have passed him somewhere on some stairs. She says she didn't."

"She taking it seriously?"

"She says he meant what he told her he intended to do to her."

"Cathcart wasn't killed near any stairs," the other man said slowly. "It just doesn't connect."

"No, it doesn't seem to."

"Tell her to phone us at once if she gets any more funny calls."

"I'll do that."

"See you tomorrow."

"Good night." McKechnie stood in the booth, unaware of its warmth and stuffiness. Every time he heard or spoke the word *stairs* he was reminded of something which had no possible connection with Cathcart's death in the freight yards. His mind seemed to leap illogically from the threatening phone call to this other thing——

To the stairs that led up to Healy's room from the lobby of the Toler House.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As MCKECHNIE started back to the table, he saw that Collins stood by it, talking to Nora Cathcart. She was smiling a little, her face lifted, as though something Collins had said had temporarily taken her mind off her worries.

Collins glanced at McKechnie. "I decided somebody had better warn her. You trust a Black Irish cop, you're dead."

Nora shook her head. "No, actually he spoke very well of you. And anyway, as I tried to explain, I'm here with you on business."

Collins nodded cynically. "Keep an eye on him."

"Really," she said, getting a little serious, "it is just business."

The waiter came up, walking uneasily, balancing the tray. He set the tray on the edge of the table, took off Nora's dessert and cup of coffee, then began to spread McKechnie's meal on the other side of the table. Collins stared at the plate in astonishment. "Sit down," he said to McKechnie. "I've got to see this."

McKechnie slid into his chair. The pork looked delicious, oozing juice, a little cone of bread dressing beside it, along with mashed potatoes and string beans. "You know," he said to Collins, "it occurred to me tonight that they cook a terrific lot of stuff here I've never seen. I decided to experiment."

Collins said, "Miss Cathcart, don't believe it. He's trying to make you think you're improving him. An old gag."

"I don't think he needs improving," Nora said with a small glance at McKechnie.

"A hopeless case," Collins growled. "She likes him!"

Under the irritation and embarrassment he felt at Collins's ragging, McKechnie was aware of something new. A warm feeling. It was related to Nora, across the table, the girl with the smooth brown arms, proud carriage, and a face which wasn't exactly pretty until you'd looked at it for a while. "Why don't you run along," he said to Collins, "and visit a sick friend or someone?"

"I'm on my way to a sick friend," Collins said. "You don't have to rush me. The poor devil can't leave General Hospital. He'll be there when I'm ready to see him."

"He's lonesome now," McKechnie asserted.

"He's getting bathed now," Collins said, "or toothbrushed, or his toenails whittled. You know, they never leave you alone in those places. It's a fiendishly clever patient gets a moment to himself."

Nora giggled. He's showing me up, McKechnie thought. The dour

Black Irish. Never crack a smile. He remembered some of the remarks his grandmother used to make about his grandfather. Old Gaiter-Mouth, she'd called her husband. McKechnie had never heard the origin of the name. But he felt gaiter-mouthed just now, with Collins grinning down at Nora Cathcart.

"Well, I can tell when I'm not wanted," Collins said finally. He shook hands with Nora and rapped McKechnie on the shoulder. "Too bad you couldn't have a stake-out tonight, boy."

"Too bad your horse didn't do better," McKechnie commiserated.

Collins shook his head aggrievedly and stalked out.

The street was quiet. Collins walked along the pavement, looking in store windows. He came to a corner, turned into a cross-town street, found himself before a window in which some shirts and slacks were displayed. He stopped there, looking the clothes over critically. He noticed some gray flannel slacks, mentally matched them with a blue nylon sport shirt and some Argyle socks. All at once he found himself thinking about Jane Cannelbury.

He had called at her hotel that afternoon to ask further questions about her traveling companion, Mrs. Lippert, but Miss Cannelbury had not been in. The hotel clerk had regarded Collins with such odd attention that Collins suspected Jane's queerness had made an impression on others than himself.

Miss Cannelbury had told him in their original interview that her friend had left the train at El Paso. A bit of information, mentioned in passing, to which he had paid scant attention. Gramson's wire from Chicago had stated that a Mrs. Lippert had left the train, left Jane's compartment, in Amarillo, apparently suffering from a heart attack. The minor discrepancy in Jane's narrative had come back to haunt Collins.

It seemed as if she might not want him to locate Mrs. Lippert, to confirm her statements about the jewelry. She could scarcely have forgotten the name of the city, if her friend had been left there in a hospital.

Collins shifted his thoughts back to the clothes in the window. He decided that tomorrow sometime he'd try to drop in and have a closer

look at the gray flannel slacks. They looked pretty good for the price.

In the garage beneath the building which housed the railroad offices Collins got into his car, checked out with the attendant, drove toward General Hospital. Passing a corner, his eye was caught by the façade of a Mexican grocery. He parked and walked back. The place was open. A Mexican woman with a thin dark face, big eyes, and a henna rinse on her black hair came forward. Two kids trailed her. She greeted Collins in Spanish, and he answered her expertly. He bought a couple of Spanish-language newspapers, some sweets, four packs of cigarettes.

As she rang up change, he looked at her, remembering his mother. The dark eyes, remotely patient, always seemed the same.

"*Gracias, señor.*" She handed him his change with a soft, quick glance.

"*Por nada, señora.*"

He felt the kinship, and they almost always sensed it, though his appearance drew their curiosity. His sister was different. He doubted if Teresa remembered one word of the Spanish their mother had taught them. Teresa's build and coloring, her tall fairness set her apart from their mother's people. She was all Scotch-Irish like their father.

He gave the two kids each a coin and went back to his car, drove on to the huge hive, the brick metropolis sheltering the sick. It was a little early for regular visiting hours. He showed his credentials at the main desk, took the elevator to Ramos's ward.

The ward was lit, cheerful, bustling. The last dinner trays were being rolled out in their steel carts and preparations for the evening were in progress. Ramos lay with his hands folded, his eyes shut. A nurse was inspecting the bandage behind his ear.

She nodded to Collins. "He's doing fine." She walked away, carrying her white enamel dressings tray, her heels making a rubbery noise on the heavy linoleum. Collins took a chair from the wall, sat down, put his hat on the floor. Ramos heard the rattle of the paper sack; he opened his eyes.

"How do you feel?" Collins asked in Spanish.

Ramos smiled uneasily. "Better. Much better."

Collins took the newspapers out of the paper sack and tossed them onto the counterpane. Ramos moved one hand warily, lifted a corner of the page. "Do you read?" Collins asked.

"*Sí, sí.* You should not have troubled yourself, señor."

"It is customary when one is sick to receive small gifts of no value," Collins said carelessly. He dumped out the packages of sweets and the cigarettes beside the papers.

Ramos looked at the cigarettes and the candy, and fright grew in his eyes.

"I can't stay long," Collins said, lighting a cigarette of his own. "I merely happened to be passing." He knew he didn't fool the man on the bed. Ramos's attitude was that of a crouched rabbit. "Do they permit you to smoke?"

Hesitantly Ramos said no one had prohibited it.

"Here, then." Collins tore open one of the gift packs, extracted a cigarette, put it into Ramos's mouth, lit it. Ramos began to puff gratefully. Collins asked him if he had been comfortable during the long day.

"Yes, very comfortable."

"How are the nurses?"

Some of Ramos's fear thawed; he began to tell Collins about one of the nursing aides. "Her family came from Los Mochis. She's heard them speak of many whom I know there."

"Like meeting an old friend."

"In a way, yes." Ramos hesitated delicately over his next remark. "You are of Spanish descent?"

"My mother was born in Mexico City. My father met her there. He was a trainer of race horses. The man who employed him had sent him to Mexico to buy some new stock for his stable."

Ramos's expression was sympathetic. "She still lives, your mother?"

"No. She's been dead many years. My father also. It is as well; one would not have been happy without the other."

"That is a good kind of marriage," Ramos said thoughtfully.

"Rare nowadays, perhaps."

"Not so rare in my country," Ramos said. "The women have not so

much liberty, though that may not be all of the reason. Our women are not anxious. Do you know what I mean? They are not afraid to grow old, I think."

Two different worlds, Collins thought, remembering his mother's stories of her girlhood.

"Of course," Ramos went on as if thinking deeply, "in Mexico, except among the city people and the wealthy, we have not the automobiles nor the cosmetics."

"Give them time," Collins said with cynicism.

"Will they divorce then, you think?"

"You forget the Church," Collins reminded.

"Can the Church fight what the automobiles and the cosmetics will do?"

"She'll put up a damned good scrap," said Collins, forgetting to be reverent.

They smoked for a little while in silence. Collins remembered his mother's stories of her duenna, the long lessons in embroidery and music, the insistence on obedience. She hadn't raised Teresa to the pattern. Perhaps she had found the freedom in her new home a welcome change.

"I have a family in Los Mochis," Ramos said after a time with a sidelong glance at Collins.

"Married?"

Ramos nodded. "My sons are twelve and seven. They are very good at their schoolwork. Someday they will be men. Smart men."

"And you don't want them to have to work in the fields?"

"No, señor." Ramos put down his cigarette, looked directly into Collins's eyes. "I want my sons to have a good education. I want them to finish school. That was why I walked at night, slept by day, worked on the melon farm. For my sons. It was why I came to the place where the freight cars were congregated. If I could have sent money home——"

"Where is your money now?"

"My friend from Los Mochis, the one who took me to the freight cars, who gave me the wine and the bread and sausage——" Ramos

broke off what he was saying. "Señor, if I could ask a favor of you——"

Collins nodded.

"I would like to see him before I am sent back. Just in case he has not had the opportunity yet to send the money to my family."

Collins fished out a stray card, a pencil. "Who is he?"

"There is a little store not far from the place where the fence surrounds the railroad cars. If you were to leave a message there for him . . ."

"What's his name?"

Ramos drew back against the pillow. "Will he get into trouble because he helped me?"

Collins shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Juan Quiroa."

Collins scribbled the name on the card. "I'll see if I can find someone who knows him." To himself he thought that Ramos didn't quite trust his friend; Ramos was afraid that Juan Quiroa would forget to send his wages to Los Mochis. The boys who were seven and twelve would meet their father hopefully, and he would be returning empty-handed. Because of postal regulations and a man named Juan Quiroa and the hasty methods of immigration officials. Then there would be the necessity for another three-week walk north and another excursion through the fence at Mexicali.

Probably Ramos would sneak back anyway. Thousands of them made the trip over and over, scratching a little cash together each time across the border.

Ramos was lucky, though, to be returning at all to his sons. If it hadn't been for the yellow flag tied to the reefer——

Collins rose. "I may see you again or I may not. If not, *adiós*."

Ramos looked up at him for a moment in silence. Collins thought that he would speak of the events leading up to his imprisonment in the reefer. The urge to make some return for Collins's kindness seemed about to overcome his terrible fear. But finally, "I will be gone soon," Ramos said listlessly.

"Chin up," Collins said, and walked out.

In Lofton's, McKechnie paid the bill and escorted the girl to the door. The waiter looked after them. The tip was generous as usual, but he didn't pick it up at once. He felt puzzled and, in some vague way, cheated. One of his barbarians, on whom he had spent so much vituperative scorn, was threatening to develop into a discriminating diner. McKechnie had even neglected to order his usual apple pie with pistachio-nut ice cream, had tried the torte on the girl's recommendation. It was upsetting.

In the street McKechnie said, "Will you come with me on an errand? It won't take long."

She glanced at him curiously.

"I don't know whether it has anything to do with your phone call or not. Maybe I'm nuts."

She held back slightly. "I didn't intend to take up your whole evening. I just wanted someone to tell me what to do."

"Let's try this, anyway," he said. "We'll need a car. Mine's still parked in the company garage."

She nodded, swung into step. They turned east. Presently the garish brightness of skid row surrounded them. Burlesque houses crowded hock shops, and the hock shops tried to out-neon the penny arcades and shooting galleries. Barkers hollered and snapped canes on the pavement before all-night movies. A sex show exhibited a female torso, plaster of Paris, with red lines drawn here and there and a scare banner hung above the pedestal promising to reveal inside for the sum of fifty cents the astonishing and never-published secrets of the Black Dahlia murder case. Bars, from which the canned music roared in a hoarse scream, were a dime a dozen.

McKechnie glanced down at her. "Nice neighborhood."

"Funny place for keeping track of trains."

"I think the railroads built their offices down here when Wilshire was still a cow pasture."

A faint breeze stirred her hair. The hard lights brought up the glitter of the rhinestones, shone in the perfection of her tanned skin. A bum saw her and wandered out to put the bite on McKechnie, and sud-

denly saw the build on him and smelled cop, and faded into the shadows.

"It's not far now."

"I don't mind walking. I wouldn't come here alone, but it's fun with you." Her glance flickered over him. "I see why the little man scampered away."

"He was thirsty."

"Would he have asked for a quarter for some beer?"

"He doesn't drink beer."

"He looked kind of inebriated to me, though."

"He was. Not on beer."

"Would he be a wino?"

McKechnie shrugged. "It's hard to say." He saw her curiosity and went on, "Some of them go for pretty weird concoctions. They strain canned heat through a rag. They also put gasoline in milk. You never know."

"Well, the milk has vitamins." Her tone tried to be light, but he saw the regret with which she regarded the shambling figures at the fringe of the pavement.

"Their brains are fried," McKechnie said. "Half the time they don't know what they're doing. They wander into the yards and lie down on the tracks for a nap and never know what hits them. They fall off freights and there isn't enough to pick up with a vacuum cleaner. Of all the kinds of bums——"

"You thought my father was a bum," she said softly. "Didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"He hadn't drunk for years. Nor smoked. My mother was always very religious. Six years ago she finally converted Dad. He changed completely."

"I didn't think whether he'd been drinking one way or another."

"But you thought he was a hobo."

"Finding him where I did, naturally."

"I hate the way my father died," she said. "He didn't deserve that. He'd led a decent life, he'd worked hard."

"What church did he join?"

"It's an obscure sect with headquarters in Glendale."

"Why didn't he turn to religion after your mother died instead of taking off for the desert?"

They had come to the front of the office building. She stopped, faced McKechnie. There was sudden tension in her shoulders, as if she stood to defend herself against attack. "The particular group in which Mother got Dad interested is very money-conscious. Mother and Dad poured thousands of dollars into the church treasury—I guess everyone did, the ones who believed. I used to worry so. We were pinched at home and there weren't any savings. As a final gesture, after Mother's death, Dad sold his business and turned the money over to the Foundation—the Foundation of Divine Peace—as an offering in her memory. That was the end. There wasn't any more. He found them rather cool then."

McKechnie started to speak, but she shook her head.

"I was seventeen when Father joined the sect. I was almost through school—high school. My father had always talked of sending me to college, but when the money had to be offered to the Foundation, there weren't any funds and I went to work. I'm not angry because I missed college, Mr. McKechnie. What enrages me is that the Foundation gave my father so little help and comfort when his money was gone. So that he hurried away, to Arizona, desperate to find something with which to win back the favor of those people. So that in his torment he cruelly attacked an old friend. And so that he came back here broken and hopeless, to die in your freight yards. That's what makes me mad."

She turned and walked through the wide doors to the building lobby, and McKechnie had to run after her and bring her back to the garage entrance.

He knew one thing, anyway. He knew why she was careful about throwing money around.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was still the shank of the evening in Shiney's. The juke box slept in merciful silence and only the clatter of dishes and silver from the dinner trade interrupted the quiet. The bartender excused himself from a couple of customers down the bar and walked forward when he noticed McKechnie. He gave Nora Cathcart a brief, intent glance and then said to McKechnie, "You looking for something, bud?" His manner was belligerent.

"I'd like to talk to Mabel," said McKechnie.

"She's had it," the bartender growled. "First the cops, and then Morgan phoned and gave her the sack. She sent Healy out there with the hot whiskey. I didn't. Healy said I did, he was a liar."

"He isn't going to argue with you."

"She believed what he said about the whiskey."

"It's possible. Is she here?"

"Not working." The bartender looked toward the back of the room. "In that rear booth. It won't take much more, she'll flip."

"I'm not going to persecute her." McKechnie guided Nora Cathcart through the scattered tables. The light was dimmer back here. The little lamp on the wall over the last booth had been turned off. In the shadows sat Mabel. She had on her uniform, a brown coat thrown across her shoulders. The table held an ash tray, two wadded packs of cigarettes, a shot glass full of whiskey, and a tumbler of water. She looked up, recognizing McKechnie.

"Hello, flatfoot."

"Do you mind if we sit down?"

"It's a free country, copper."

Her face was puffy with crying. McKechnie put Nora in against the wall, slid in beside her. The two girls exchanged a look.

"Who's she?" Mabel demanded.

"Nora Cathcart. Nora, this is Mabel." McKechnie felt as if he were introducing two strange she-cats. "Healy saw an accident in the freight yards. Miss Cathcart's father was killed in a fall there. Did he ever talk to you about it?"

"I don't remember," Mabel snapped.

McKechnie reached into his pocket. To Nora he said, "How about a beer?" She nodded. He beckoned a waitress over. "Two beers, and another of whatever Mabel's having."

"I've got a last name too," Mabel spat. "I'm Mrs. Shelby."

Nora said, "I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Shelby."

"Like hell you are. What're you doing here with a flatfoot?"

"I'm sorry you lost your job," McKechnie put in. "Morgan had no right to take it out on you. It was his mistake. He was willing to cut corners because he was getting such a hell of a bargain. He was getting the whiskey far below half price."

"The bastard," Mabel sniffled.

"Tell me about your acquaintance with Healy," McKechnie urged. "Didn't you have any hunch the little guy wasn't on the level?"

She began to cry into a handkerchief. After a while she said, "He wasn't nothing but a crumb, but I liked him. My old man's hell on wheels, drunk alla time, dyin' to beat me up. It was nice once in a while to go out with Biff Healy and get treated like a human being."

It hadn't occurred to McKechnie that Healy could have been anything of a ladies' man, but he saw now that under certain conditions Healy would have had some attractions. If a woman were disturbed enough, cowed enough, Healy's little-boy mixture of sly humor and half-apologetic bravado could seem appealing.

"If you liked him you'll want to see his murderer punished."

"Oh, for the lova—— That line makes me sick." Mabel distorted her mouth to show how sick it made her. The drinks came and she tossed down the shot McKechnie had bought. The other one still sat before

her. "That line's what those city dicks handed me. My civic dooties. And don't I want them to find whoever bumped off poor old Biff? And I say yes—what else?—only I don't know from nothing. I didn't go there today; I wasn't nowhere near the Toler House."

"Wait a minute——"

"No, you listen to me. The cops said the clerk told you I was there, that I went up to Healy's room a little while before he died, an hour maybe. But I got *proof*. He made that all up. Today I got me a new permanent. See?" She bent forward, displaying the stiff curls and scrolls in the light-colored hair. "From eleven o'clock on today, till I came here to work, I was in a beauty parlor. Barbara's DeLuxe. On Seventh, just past Figueroa. I'll bet those two operators who worked on me set those cops straight."

McKechnie's sensation was that of standing barefoot on sand and of feeling the sand running away beneath his toes. He'd taken for granted that Healy's visitor had been this girl.

"*You* check it too," Mabel insisted.

McKechnie was looking at his beer.

"I wish I might have talked to Healy before he died," Nora Cathcart said. "He saw my father fall; he heard him scream."

McKechnie shook his head. "He didn't think the screaming was done by your father. He thought, somehow, it was done by a Mexican."

"But why?"

"I don't know." In his thoughts McKechnie was sorting loose ends. The clerk had been positive that Healy had taken a woman to his room. McKechnie found himself looking thoughtfully at Nora Cathcart.

"I know one thing for sure," Mabel was saying. "Biff Healy was lonesome. You couldn't be with him more than a minute without seeing how lonesome he was. I think maybe he'd been married. It's the way he struck me, anyhow—he'd been married and he missed having somebody."

McKechnie was figuring on the time element. He had called the Toler House from Nora Cathcart's apartment; the clerk had said that Healy seemed to have company. The clerk had thought that the woman Healy had taken upstairs an hour before must still be with him.

Possible, McKechnie thought, if she were the murderer. But say as a guess that the woman had gone, that the murderer had replaced her in Healy's room. Could Nora Cathcart have been back home in time for him to find her on her steps, in a house dress, minus make-up?

No, he thought. Throw it out.

Why should she lie about it if she had gone to Healy?

It was all a mistake. It was mixed up. It was nuts.

The threatening phone call couldn't have anything to do with Healy's murder. Branham had killed Healy. Branham had been in jail at six o'clock, when Nora's phone had rung.

"I don't think he knew any woman in town but me," Mabel added.

McKechnie stared at her. "And you didn't go to the Toler House today."

"I sure didn't."

She wouldn't offer the alibi if it wasn't any good. He'd check it, of course; but he knew now what he'd find out.

"He never told you anything about his business?"

"He said he drove trucks when he worked," Mabel said firmly.

"Thanks for talking to us, anyway," McKechnie said. He saw Nora give Mabel a last hopeful glance. Mabel answered it with a direct look.

"If I knew anything that would help you, I'd tell it," she said to Nora.

The juke box began to play as they walked away from Shiney's.

"It took me a little while to figure out what you expected to find in there," Nora said. "You thought this girl Mabel had gone to Healy's room about the time he was killed and that someone had mistaken her for me."

"Well, it didn't work out."

"Now you wonder if it really was me."

"It couldn't have been. You were home."

"There are some stairs in that place, aren't there?"

"The only ones I know in this mess," McKechnie growled.

"Can we go there?"

"Now?"

She paused by the car. "I've spoiled something for you, haven't I?"

"I don't know what you mean."

The blue-violet eyes searched his face. The lamp on the corner showed him her mood, anxious, half angry. "You had something all tied up and it's coming loose."

"Let's go." Even to himself he wouldn't admit that Healy's murder wasn't a package with the whiskey theft. If he let the thing unravel on him it would fall apart. It was time to be firm, to hang onto the conviction that Branham had murdered Healy. "You wouldn't want to go to that crummy joint."

"Yes, I do. I want to see those stairs."

"They're just—just a set of steps."

"I know that. I want to look at them."

He jerked the car door open for her, and anger flashed between them. She got in, plumping herself into the seat. He snapped the motor to life, pulled from the curb with a screech of the tires.

At the corner he slowed and she said clearly, "Your attitude from the beginning has been that my father's death was a monkey wrench. It interfered with routine and it disturbed your tidy conclusions——"

He took a hand off the wheel to grab her wrist. "Look, lay off me——"

"I want you to stop this car. I'm getting out. I'm going to *walk* to the Toler House!"

"You're behaving like a brat."

"You're acting like a c-cop!"

He swung into the curb, stopped. The street was empty. In the next block a machine shop shed a fluorescent glow through its windows. To their right was the steel-link fence, the dim distances of the East L.A. yards. The headlight of a Diesel switcher hung low like a moon. She put a hand on the door catch and McKechnie said, "Wait a minute. This is the truth. Healy was involved in a whiskey theft from the yards; his partner in the deal is in jail. I think the partner killed him. So help me, if Healy wasn't murdered over the whiskey deal, I don't know why in hell he was killed."

She sat quiet; after a moment she looked over her shoulder at McKechnie. "Can't you let yourself think of a few other possibilities?"

He shook his head. "Healy's murder isn't my job. It belongs to Homicide, to L.A.P.D."

"How far can they get without the help of the railroad police?"

"We'll tell them anything they want to know."

"They won't know what to want——"

"Believe me, Nora, they're old hands at murder."

She looked down at her fingers on the door catch, and he watched her profile against the dark. The Diesel worked nearer, its motor humming. Some boxcars locked with a metallic clash. "Suppose Healy's death is connected with my dad's?"

"That's making a hell of a jump to a conclusion."

"No, it isn't. Remember my phone call. Someone thinks I passed him on some stairs, that I saw him, that I can identify him. There's no sense to all this in regard to Dad's death. But consider that Healy was a witness to that death, and he's been murdered, and there *are* stairs where he lived. He had a woman visitor. Add it up. You yourself thought——"

"What I thought was a mistake," McKechnie said harshly.

"Let me see those stairs."

McKechnie thought: My God, she'll be telling me my job next. Or maybe she is, now. He put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb, sent the car speeding across town. All of the time he was thinking: There hadn't been any motive, any logic, to Cathcart's death, and now Healy's also was slipping into the senseless category.

Nora asked him about Mabel, about Mabel's friendship with Healy, and McKechnie nodded his head or answered in monosyllables. Finally she grew quiet, sensing his desire to think.

He parked near the Toler House and they walked up the front steps to the shabby lobby. Two L.A.P.D. men were staked out in the lobby, waiting for stray tenants who might know something of Healy's friends. McKechnie had seen them at police headquarters, but they failed to recognize him. One of them rose and came forward, flashing an identification. McKechnie pulled out his own I.D. card and explained that he had stopped by to see what was doing.

He introduced Nora Cathcart to the two city men, let them presume that she was simply his date of the evening.

"The only thing new we've got is a description of the woman Healy had here," said the city man who had first greeted them. "A widow who lives down the block came in about a half hour ago. She'd been downtown shopping and seeing a show and had just got home, just heard of Healy's murder. She says that about noon, as she was leaving, she saw a man she's sure was Healy coming into the Toler House with a tall blond girl in a gray dress. The girl topped Healy by a couple of inches. She walked as if her feet hurt. This woman who was watching, this Mrs. Ames, remembers the incident because she was tempted to go after them and warn the girl of the sort of place she was getting into. It seems some of the old settlers here resent the flea traps."

"Do you have her house number?"

"Twenty-two forty."

Nora Cathcart was over by the staircase, looking up into the gloom of the second-floor hall. Behind the counter a substitute clerk sat reading a comic book. He was a skinny man of about seventy, bald, with the biggest bags under his eyes McKechnie had ever seen on anybody.

Nora came back to McKechnie. He said, "Let's go see Mrs. Ames."

She nodded. "Let's see if I resemble the girl with the aching feet."

They went back out into the gloomy street. Someone had a door open, and the racket from a TV set spilled out into the night. Number 2240 sat back from the sidewalk and had a small garden, indistinct now, on either side of the path to the steps. McKechnie found an old-fashioned bell winder. Inside they heard a tinny clang. A dog barked and a woman's voice scolded.

Mrs. Ames stood about four feet eleven. Her snow-white hair was pulled back tight above her ears. She was plump, so that her face wasn't badly wrinkled; but under the pink skin the tissues had shifted. Most of her fat lay along her jaw line. For some reason she made McKechnie think of Bugs Bunny. Behind her in the narrow hallway was an elderly poodle, and she chided the dog again for barking, before noticing McKechnie and the girl. "Yes, sir?"

He took out his identification. "I'd like to ask a few questions about the girl you saw going into the Toler House."

"Oh, that." She plucked at a brooch on her dress. "Well, of course. Would you care to step inside?"

Nora Cathcart went in, with McKechnie following. The old poodle smelled of the hem of Nora's skirt and of McKechnie's pants leg.

"In the parlor, please."

McKechnie could hardly believe the parlor. He'd forgotten such things as bead portieres, gilded cattails, and stained-glass lampshades. The chairs had carved mahogany arms and red velvet upholstery. Sitting down gingerly, he watched the old lady fussing over the poodle. "She's been alone so long today, she's very nervous." She rubbed the poodle behind the ears to relax the nervous tension. "She's almost fifteen years old."

"That's very old for a dog," Nora said.

"I know." Mrs. Ames sat down opposite them. "Now—how can I help you? I believe I told everything to those other gentlemen, the officers at the Toler House."

"How did you know the dead man must be Healy? I mean, how did you connect him with the man you'd seen going into the Toler House with a woman?"

She pursed her lips. Her black eyes were brilliant under the thin parchment-colored lids. "You know, that's a strange thing. At around noon as I was leaving here I noticed this man and this girl going into that house. It's a dreadful place. The neighborhood isn't what it used to be, of course, but the Toler House is a disgrace even for this part of town. The tenants aren't just poor or unemployed—they're trashy."

"I saw them, most of them," McKechnie agreed.

"I try to be broad-minded. After all, I'm an old woman. Old women are supposed to be notorious disapprovers. I try to avoid the pattern. I don't let myself dwell on the street the way it looked forty years ago when I came here as a bride. There were lots of palm trees and red geraniums. The lawns looked nice."

"I understand," McKechnie said.

"You might, a little," she decided. "Anyway, I noticed this little fat man with the bulgy eyes taking this nice girl into the Toler House. I know she was a nice girl. I hated to see her going in there. I thought

to myself: There'll be trouble over it, I ought to go and warn her. Isn't it odd, though? When I got home there'd been a murder."

He saw that she considered herself somewhat psychic.

"Tomorrow I'm going to the morgue and make sure," she went on. "They've asked if I will, and I said I would. But I'm positive right now, it was the murdered man who led the girl in the gray dress up those stairs."

McKechnie leaned forward a little. "Look at Miss Cathcart here. Does she remind you in any way of the girl you saw with Healy?"

The question surprised her. She was startled for a moment and then looked at Nora apprehensively.

"No, she isn't the girl," McKechnie said. "But does she look like her?"

Mrs. Ames studied Nora carefully in silence, then asked, "Do you mind walking around the room a bit, my dear?"

Nora got up and crossed the room, returned to her chair. There was a touch of self-consciousness in her manner and she walked carefully to avoid bumping into the gilded cattails in their vase on the hearth, or the whatnot full of china bric-a-brac.

Mrs. Ames shook her head. "She isn't at all like that other girl. Not a bit. That other girl had the most peculiar walk. It wasn't just that she favored her feet, sort of dragged them. I don't think she saw well."

Under his concentration on the old lady's words, his relief that no open resemblance existed between Nora and Healy's visitor, McKechnie was aware of another, a strange, sensation. He felt as if he were hearing about a ghost. The description of the other girl called up a specter in his mind. Nothing he could place. It glimmered and was gone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JANE CANNELBURY left the sidewalk and skirted the hotel entrance, keeping to the dense shadows cast by the rose bower and the towering hibiscus. There was sudden sweat on her temples, her throat, running down into her clothes. The heavy heels clumped no matter how cautiously she stepped. Her eyes ached from the long hours spent in the movie house.

She followed the narrow paved way back to the service entry, a tiny courtyard where a light shone above a door. She had noticed the maid yesterday in the hall which opened opposite the elevator. The outer door had been propped open for some reason and she had seen daylight and realized that there was a second entry to the lobby.

She tried to turn the knob noiselessly. The door swung inward and she saw the hall inside as she remembered it, lighted, floored with dark linoleum, and beyond, in plain view, the elevator. She stepped silently inside. If the clerk at the desk were occupied with some task, it should be an easy matter to slip into the elevator without attracting his notice.

She stole down the hall and stepped out quickly upon the carpeted floor of the lobby. There was no one at the desk, and for a moment she exulted, her pulses racing. She gripped the handbag, started for the elevator. It was then she saw the clerk. He was standing just inside the entry to the left, talking to another man, a guest, probably; they both turned on hearing her, and though the clerk's face was expressionless she felt his gaze as a deluge of ice water.

"Good evening, Miss Cannelbury."

"Good evening." The tone was strangled, garbled; she wished in that moment that she could drop through the floor—or drop dead; it little mattered which.

She went into the elevator and fumbled with the buttons on the control panel. Her handbag slipped from her grip; she had to stoop to pick it up. She was aware that sweat was staining the armpits of the gray pongee dress. The clerk came over and said, "You have to close the door, miss, before the mechanism will work." His voice held a chilly patience. Pity, too, perhaps. Perhaps he was sorry for the frightened, awkward girl.

She closed the door and punched the buttons again and the elevator rose slowly with an oily whistle.

There was a white envelope tucked beneath her door. She unlocked the door and switched on the lights before picking it up. Her name was typed on the outside. Inside was a note signed by the manager, requesting her to stop in at his office at her earliest convenience. Panic rushed through her; her heart pounded; she thought that she would faint. She shut the door and rushed for the bed and fell on it.

There were laws about defrauding hotels. They put you in jail.

She lay shivering, trying not to retch, and meanwhile she tried to think back; she hunted for the dream again, the illusion which had led her into this. She had imagined, on the train, that she would sit in a hotel lobby wearing the diamonds and that people would notice her and that very nice people, rich people, would speak to her and become her friends. The picture had been all wrong, of course, even disregarding the loss of the jewelry. She didn't have any way of knowing what they did in the big hotels, but in this one no one sat around in the lobby. The clerk spoke to you as you went in and out, and if you wanted something no doubt he was there to get it for you; but if you sat down for very long, diamonds or no diamonds, he'd start looking at you curiously. He was just that kind of clerk and it was just that sort of lobby. Nobody spent any time there at all.

She knew right away that she had gotten into the wrong kind of hotel. She'd asked the cabdriver to recommend something nice, and this was it. She'd been sure then—or at least telling herself she was sure

—that the jewels would be recovered right away. There just wasn't any place they could have disappeared to permanently off that baggage trolley. It was just a mix-up. Things would turn out all right. And meanwhile she had the middle-sized bag, the one that *hadn't* been stolen, of Ida's.

The clerk had looked at the suitcase, judging its value; and there hadn't been anything said about money. Not until now. There was no mistaking the intent behind the manager's note. To live up to the prosperity implied by that bag, she should have made a deposit long ago.

Her thoughts floundered through the wreckage of her plans.

The cabdriver had put her here in the wrong sort of hotel, of course, but probably even in the big ones people weren't as casual as she had imagined. She suspected that to get into their cabarets you needed an escort. There were pools, though. Some hotels had them. In an agony of regret she considered this alternative to the lobby. People would congregate about the pools and there would be laughter and companionship——

All at once the picture of herself in a swim suit with all those diamonds on flashed through her mind and she glimpsed, a little, the ludicrousness of what she had hoped.

She cried wretchedly into the pillows, twisting the manager's note in her fingers. The oversize shoes fell off her feet to the floor. The heavy gray dress wadded itself above her knees.

"I've got to have *money!*" she cried into the pillow.

Finally she sat up, her glasses twisted, and looked across the room at the phone. Then she shook her head, dismissing some idea, and went over to the closet, took the larger of the two alligator cases out, brought it to the bed, unlocked it and tossed up the lid, and for the hundredth time tried to find something salable among the contents. Ida hadn't put much into this case. The gray dress, the expensive shoes, a light wool coat. The wedding veil. Jane lifted the filmy veil, touching it softly, tears stinging her eyes again.

Nothing she could sell . . . The two alligator bags would bring some-

thing in a pawnshop, of course. She had no illusions about getting them out past the clerk in the lobby.

She went across the room to the phone and sat down by it.

"Aunt Dolly?"

The woman on the other end of the wire sounded even frailer than before. Her voice was little more than a scratchy whisper. "Jane? Jane, is it you?"

"Auntie . . . Oh, Auntie, I'm in terrible trouble!"

The woman waited, as if gathering her strength, then whispered, "Charles is going to the police. He called me a few hours ago. He's putting in a missing-persons report. You know——"

"She got *sick!*"

"Where, Jane?"

"On the train. They took her off. Some little town in Texas, I think. Look, Aunt Dolly, you tell Charles that for a th-thousand dollars I'll give him Ida's address."

"What kind of thing is this?"

"I need money terribly!"

"You can't keep her whereabouts a secret. Charles is checking up right now. Why don't you come home? If you haven't done something—— If she's just sick, come home!"

"No—no!"

"Jane," the fading voice urged, "I've protected you so many times. Just this once, can't you admit what you've done? Can't you take your medicine like a grown-up woman?"

"She's just sick!" Jane screamed into the phone.

"Why didn't you stay with her and send a wire to Charles?"

"I—I got scared."

The old woman in Santa Monica sighed. "When you hang up I'm going to call Charles in San Diego. He'll get to the bottom of this."

"Aunt Dolly——"

"I haven't any money, Jane. You know what a little way the pension goes." Her breathing was hoarse and tired now, as though she were about to collapse. In Jane's mind she saw the shabby couch and her aunt stretched out on it, holding the phone awkwardly, the pallid

exhaustion etched in her face. She was old—she had been much older than Jane's mother, her sister—and now almost blind. Jane's heart twisted with fright and regret.

"What shall I do?"

"Come home."

They'll come get me! Jane didn't say it aloud, but the words joined the tumult in her mind. She stuffed the phone into its cradle as if silencing some danger. Out in the hall there was sound—other tenants came out of their room, the lock snapped, a woman laughed softly. Going to dinner, Jane thought numbly. She imagined the woman in evening dress and furs, the man handsome and courtly; and her own terrible predicament seemed to shut on her like a vise.

She cast about. She thought of Healy, the odd but kindly little man who had wanted to console her for the loss of an imaginary father. She'd told him about the jewels finally, and he'd stared at her as if he thought her mad. The room had been awful. She rubbed the wings of hair back from her cheeks, rocking in misery on the chair. At last Healy had said he'd see what he could do and she had left. Under the strangeness she had sensed Healy's wistful kindness. If she had asked him for money, perhaps——

I couldn't. I couldn't. I can't beg. I'll have to get it some other way.

She beat her fists against her temples.

The hotel manager wouldn't wait much longer. He was already suspicious of her. Soon he would come in person, demanding payment. Couldn't I just leave everything here and walk out? Disappear?

She tried to build a coherent plan of escape; but behind the effort was the continuing thought that a few dollars would get her out of this place with Ida's belongings—except for the jewelry—intact, ready to be turned over to Charles. If she could raise enough somewhere for the hotel bill she might brazen it out, go to Santa Monica, meet Charles there at her aunt's little house, plead panic in leaving Ida in Texas, hand over the luggage.

The story she had planned to tell in case she was questioned on the train, or on arrival in Los Angeles, would still hold water. In the excitement of seeing Ida off in the ambulance she had overlooked the

case containing the jewelry, had let it remain in the compartment, had allowed it to be collected along with her own shabby bag——

She could say she just had no idea what had happened to the diamonds.

No, that wouldn't do. It wouldn't work because of Collins. Charles was no fool. He'd check right away with the railroad, with the baggage people, and it would end up with Collins again.

The struggle to concoct something to explain the long delay in reporting the loss of the gems to Charles made her head ache, made her eyes swim dizzily. She staggered into the bathroom and was sick in the basin.

When she came back she sat on the edge of the bed. She felt weak and lethargic, penned in, helpless.

If I ran away, where could I go?

The question was academic. Escape took money. She had two dollars and seventy-eight cents left in the handbag. Where would she sleep? How could she eat? She knew no way of earning money. Since her aunt had adopted her as a tiny child, the woman had sheltered her with a fierce vigilance. Her aunt's fear had been that, away from home, Jane would yield to what she called her "tendencies." The trip to Chicago, to accompany Ida Lippert to California, had been an experiment.

The results of that experiment, arrest on charges of theft, of defrauding a hotel, of giving false information about a felony—they were closing in on her. Time was short. And without money——

Money. Money!

She fell back into the pillows and stared swimmy-eyed at the ceiling. There was no use to plan, to hope. A purposeless rage crackled through her mind, an anger seeking a target. Collins hadn't done what he might, she decided; and her rage centered on him. If he had gotten on the job when he should have, right after the theft, and had recovered the jewels, her plan could have succeeded. She could have used the jewels for a few days, just long enough to become acquainted with a few people who mattered. The dream trembled there, it seemed,

on the verge of realization; and the bitterness of lost hopes made a bitter stinging at the back of her throat.

She saw herself in the dream wearing the gray dress, aglitter with gems, sitting next to a gray-haired woman of immense authority, who was leaning towards her and saying, "My husband and I think you are the dearest girl. We want you to meet our son."

It might have been as simple as that. Her nails dug into her palms.

Now it will never be anything but drabness.

Collins hadn't done his job. Her contacts with him flickered through her memory, to come up short over the detail of finding the scrap of card. She'd wanted to pounce on that man named Abbotsford, to frighten him, to coerce the truth out of him; but Collins wouldn't do it.

Why don't I do it? Now?

She sat up hastily, grabbed the purse, recounted the change in it. Even riding busses and trolleys took a little cash.

The clerk looked up as she hurried past, but she avoided his glance. He knew about the note under the door, of course. He expected her to ask the way to the manager's office. Or he expected her to hand him some money. She kept her eyes resolutely on the big open door, the lamps at the entry, the night outside.

"Miss Cannelbury——"

She paused in the doorway, swung around, forced a smile. "I'm in such a rush right now. I'll see you when I come in."

He smiled back faintly. "All right."

You can't come back, she told herself. Not without money for the bill. Not without at least a hundred dollars. The card on the back of the door says that the room is eleven dollars a day. You've been there six days. You have to offer tips, too.

Fear drove her. She ran to the corner where the bus stopped.

In the bus, when it came, the driver was curt and bored in giving directions. His rudeness, the stuffy warmth compounded of exhaust fumes and the day's leftover heat, the blank tiredness of the few passengers totted up for Jane, concretely, the sort of life she faced if she gave up her dream. In that instant a new determination was forged

in her: to keep the diamonds if she ever got her hands on them again. Wear some, sell some. Get into a bigger hotel and force the dream to come true. As she slipped into a seat at the rear of the bus, the gray-haired woman of the dream began to speak to her again. She was so busy listening that she almost missed getting off at the transfer point.

It took a long time to get to Huntington Park by bus. Then she had to walk for some blocks along quiet, dark, tree-lined streets. The houses began to get bigger. When she came to the block where Abbotsford must live, she paused at the fringe of the glow cast by the light overhead and looked curiously at the street. These homes weren't new; they'd been here for years. Most of them were of white stucco with Spanish-tile trim, two-storied, set well back from the sidewalk, nestled in big lawns with patches of flowers indistinct in the light of the street lamps. The line of homes was like a bulwark, an interrupted wall. She sensed the solidity, the respectability, of the neighborhood.

When she went forward there was a touch of caution in her manner. She carried in her handbag the scrap of paper found under the brad of the pink case. She had had a notion to confront Abbotsford with it. She touched the bag now, patting it unconsciously; there flickered in her thoughts the memory of her aunt taking the worn pink case down from a high shelf in the closet, dusting it with the edge of her apron, deciding it would do for the trip to Chicago and back. It had sufficed; it had served as something more than a receptacle for underwear and cold cream and a toothbrush. It had been a badge of her poverty.

She found the Abbotsford number. The house was much like its neighbors. There were lights on inside, a light burning above the entry. The porch had a small roof, and two white-painted wooden settles faced each other on either side of the door. Jane avoided walking on the paved path. She went along the edge of the lawn that bordered the driveway.

There was a lot of noise inside the house. A radio or television set had been turned up, and above this she could hear a woman yelling.

She crept close, found the shelter of some shrubbery, waited there to listen. From the loudspeaker poured forth the notes of a singer, a

man's voice in an operatic aria, and above this the woman's words were too loud, too angry, and too confused for her to follow.

She risked getting closer to the wall of the house, lifted herself on the curbing of a flower bed, peered inside. The window had been raised from the bottom. Through the screen and a curtain of sheer net she made out a large, formally furnished dining room. Light shone in a chandelier, and at the other end of the table two chairs were pushed awry before a clutter of china and crystal. The doors stood open, but there was no one in the room.

The woman's angry voice stopped abruptly; the singing went on.

All at once a woman entered through one of the doors. She was a tall blonde, probably in her late thirties. She wore a strapless evening gown of violet chiffon; over her arm she carried a fur stole. She went to the mahogany buffet cabinet against the wall, opened a door, removed a bottle. She turned to the table, uncorked the bottle, poured amber liquid into a glass, recorked the bottle, and left it on the table. She raised the glass to her lips.

A big man with gray hair entered through the door she had just used. He walked to the table and spoke to the blond woman in a low tone. She stood looking into his face, a hard stare, and then threw the drink at him. He took a napkin off the table and mopped quickly at his clothes. He was not dressed to match the woman, but wore a business suit, Jane noted.

"You've spoiled the last evening for me!" the woman cried, reaching for the whiskey bottle, which he quickly placed at the other side of the table.

"Melanie——"

"When I accept an invitation, when I buy a dress——"

"Keep your voice down!"

"Don't you wish I would!" She made swatting motions which he avoided, and continued to berate him for refusing to attend a party, but Jane no longer paid any attention to the woman. She was staring at Abbotsford. Her lips were parted and a vast astonishment was spreading in her face.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE NIGHT outside Mrs. Ames's house smelled of the dusty geraniums, damp grass, cigar smoke. The man smoking the cigar went past walking a dog. He gave McKechnie and Nora Cathcart a peering glance as he passed in the gloom. Down the block the Toler House had a single light in the lobby.

"I'd better be going home," Nora said. "I think I'll get back to work tomorrow. I'll need my sleep."

"Where's your job?"

"I'm a typist for Colossus Finance. They're loan sharks."

They walked together toward the car. He said, "Do me a favor. Stay with somebody tonight. Stay with friends."

She looked sidewise at him. "I hate to admit it. There isn't anyone."

"Must be somebody."

"No. I've lost track of my school friends. And Dad and Mother had only the religious circle for so long."

"What about relatives?"

"I have a cousin out in the valley. I don't want to bother her."

They were at the car. McKechnie paused with his hand on the door. "If I find a place for you, will you stay there?"

Everything came to a dead stop. She just looked at him.

"I was thinking of the Clays," he added hurriedly. "Not what you thought I thought."

"I'm not suspicious of you," she said. "I never was—that way. I thought you were trying to disregard Dad's death, and that made me mad. I never did figure you for a wolf."

He couldn't decide whether she meant it for a compliment or not. He drove to Nora's flat and she packed an overnight case while he telephoned the Clays. Mrs. Clay said of course Nora was perfectly welcome and there was a bed in the den.

When they got to the Clays', the kids were asleep and Clay and Mrs. Clay were playing pinochle. Nothing would do, Mrs. Clay had to bring out some beer, some crackers and cheese and pretzels. She urged Nora to eat, as if the girl had been shut up starving somewhere.

McKechnie explained about Nora's telephone call, and Mrs. Clay quizzed Nora on all the details. "Didn't you recognize the voice?"

"I'm sure I'd never heard it before," Nora said.

"And you haven't met anybody, any man at all, on some stairs someplace?"

"I can't recall a single instance. I haven't been working, I've been trying to gather up the loose ends, settle Dad's affairs. The only thing——" She glanced at McKechnie. He nodded. She told Mrs. Clay about the Toler House, about Healy being a witness to her father's death and now in his own turn dead. "We went there tonight and I saw the stairs in the Toler House. I don't know what good it did." She lifted her chin. "I wanted to see them. If I've been mistaken for someone in that place, I want to know a little bit about it."

Mrs. Clay ate a pretzel and frowned. "Who was there who looked like you?"

"A girl was there. She didn't resemble Nora," McKechnie said.

"I presume," said Nora, looking at Mrs. Clay, "that Mr. McKechnie has a first name too. If I knew it I'd use it."

"David McKechnie," said Mrs. Clay. "I saw his name on a list once, something Bill brought home." She looked at her husband for a minute, her thin, dark face brightening. "Isn't that right, Bill?"

Clay nodded. He was perspiring. McKechnie had the idea that Clay had been sitting here in his undershirt and that after the call from Nora's place he had hurriedly donned a shirt.

"David," Nora repeated. "David McKechnie."

McKechnie was embarrassed. He felt as if the Clays and Nora were ganging up on him. "Nobody ever called me David."

"Of course they didn't," Nora agreed. "I'll bet you were Little Dave to your family, perhaps until you came home from your first fight."

"Second fight," he corrected. "The first one didn't amount to much."

"After that you were Dave," she said.

"After that I was *Hey, You* to my dad and *Oh, Son* to my mother." The memory of those years in the little towns in the oil fields swept through his mind. "I don't remember what my friends called me. We were always so busy running."

The second wire from Gramson was waiting for Collins in the morning.

RE YOUR INQUIRY PASSENGER MRS CHARLES LIPPERT DETRAINING AMARILLO ACCOUNT SICK. PULLMAN CONDUCTOR FOSS STATES RECALLS THIS PASSENGER APPARENTLY HAD HEART ATTACK REMOVED BY AMBULANCE THAT POINT. STATES THREE PIECES LUGGAGE PUT OFF WITH PASSENGER LIPPERT, OTHER PASSENGER OCCUPYING COMPARTMENT CONTINUED TRIP.

Collins had started for Ryerson's sanctum when the office man came out and told him to pick up an extension. Amarillo was on the line.

The investigator in Amarillo introduced himself as A. D. Martin. "I've found the woman named Lippert. She's in the hospital here. She had a stroke."

"I think it was supposed to be a heart attack," Collins said.

"Well, that's what they thought it was until they got her into the hospital. Some friend of hers on the train apparently gave them a bum steer. This Mrs. Lippert had a stroke and is still in a coma, and the hospital and the police have been trying to locate her relatives."

"She caught the train in Chicago."

"Yes, she has papers with her giving a Chicago address, but the apartment there is listed as having been occupied by a Miss Ida Waller."

A detail snapped into Collins's memory: the white satin pumps in the alligator case, the few grains of rice. "I think she might have got married recently, maybe just before leaving Chicago. Tell the Amarillo

police to check with the marriage license bureau in Chicago. Maybe they'll turn up something."

"Will do. They want me to find out what you know."

"We're not inquiring about Mrs. Lippert. The passenger who shared her compartment came on into L.A. and had some baggage stolen. Including some sixty thousand in diamonds, she says. We want a check on what she had with her and figured the passenger who shared her compartment should know."

"I'm afraid you won't get much from Mrs. Lippert."

"Is she pretty bad?"

"They seem to think so. Uh—give me the name and address of the friend you mentioned."

Collins supplied Jane's name, the name and number of the hotel on Wilshire. "She's a mixed-up type. Young. Twenty or so. By the way, what do you have on Mrs. Lippert—appearance, age, financial status, and so on?" Collins had leaned back in his chair and was idly watching the room. Several investigators were at the rack of pigeonholes, looking over what had come in for them. A couple were working at desks. At this moment, through the door from the hall entered a heavy-set florid man in a Navy officer's uniform. He stood near the door in frowning impatience until one of the group at the mail rack looked over at him. There was a brief exchange. The Navy man nodded and marched off for Ryerson's inner office.

The man in Amarillo was rattling papers. "I've got the APB here someplace. Let's see. Age, approximately forty. About five foot six, weight a hundred and thirty, brown eyes, brown hair. No distinguishing marks or scars. Wore a green silk suit. One of the nurses told me, off the cuff, that Mrs. Lippert had a wad of dough pinned in her brassière. Plus a considerable sum in traveler's checks in her handbag."

"What about luggage?"

"I'll have to ask."

The Navy officer bolted out of Ryerson's office with Ryerson trailing. He looked around; the Chief jerked his head in Collins's direction.

Collins said into the phone, "Hold on a minute, will you?"

The Navy officer stopped at the desk. He didn't look cheerful or

happy; he looked mad. He said, "My name is Charles Lippert and I'm looking for my wife."

Collins handed him the phone. "Talk to Amarillo."

Lippert barked out his name. The man in Amarillo said something in reply. Lippert said, "I've had no word from my wife for more than a week." He listened. He began to get redder in the face, glanced around as if for a chair. Collins stood up and gave him his.

Ryerson and Collins stepped away from the desk. Ryerson said, "This Jane Cannelbury—did she impress you as being queer in any way?"

"Something out of line. I couldn't figure what."

Lippert said into the phone, "My wife was carrying a large sum in cash, plus some valuable jewelry. Are these things at the hospital?"

Collins thought of Jane in that moment. The tissue of lies and pretense was falling apart. He knew now the reason for her fears, her frantic behavior. He recognized the ill-fitting gray dress, the awkward shoes, for what they were. He remembered that when he and his sister had been children she had had such fun "dressing up." Jane had been "dressing up." Only the diamonds had been lacking to complete some picture she kept of herself. In that moment he heartily pitied the strange, confused girl.

He went to another desk, lifted the phone, asked for an outside line, finally reached the clerk of the hotel on Wilshire, asked if Miss Cannelbury was in.

"Who is calling, please?"

"I don't want to talk to her. I want to know if she's there."

"Your name, please?"

"My name is Collins. I'm a railroad detective and I've been trying to locate some missing luggage for Miss Cannelbury."

The clerk's tone was glacial. "Miss Cannelbury is not in at present."

"She went out early?"

"She has not been in during the night."

Collins caught the undertone of angry disapproval. "Did you lock her out for non-payment of rent?"

"No, sir, we did not."

Collins thought, She's skipped.

Lippert was rising. He gave the phone to Collins as Collins came over. Collins spoke into the receiver. "Did you get what you want?"

"On the nose," said Martin in Amarillo. "You guys really give service. This is going to make the hospital happy."

The hospital, Collins thought, but not the patient. The patient was in a coma. She knew nothing of Jane's further journey, of the theft of the diamonds, of torn calling cards, of a Mexican named Isidro Ramos in a reefer with a yellow flag. As far as she knew, Jane had stayed with her like a faithful friend.

Lippert was speaking now of Jane. His voice was harsh, gravelly. "I'm going to see that the little freak gets everything that's coming to her. She'll never treat anyone else as she's treated Ida." He saw Collins's eyes on him and said, "You met her. Where is she?"

"I'm afraid she's gone." Collins explained his call to the hotel. "I guess she didn't have much money with her."

Lippert made an angry gesture. "What she had was Ida's."

"And the diamonds?"

Lippert seemed ready to explode with fury. "Jane's never had two dimes to rub together in her life. She lives with an aunt. The old lady's on a pension. Jane didn't finish school, never held a job. She's a nut."

"Why was she traveling with your wife?"

"Ida was ill and needed someone in case of emergency. Jane's aunt is a distant cousin. When we decided to get married—I'd met Ida out here two years ago—she hit on the idea of inviting Jane to come to Chicago for the wedding and to stay with her on the train. She always had a lot of sympathy for the little freak."

"I mean, I was wondering why you weren't with your wife," Collins said.

"I had to report at once to San Diego Naval Base. Ida wasn't well. She wanted to take it easy, come by train. You understand—well, maybe I haven't explained it—Ida and I were married a little more than a week ago. I left by plane as soon as the wedding was over—practically. We had about twelve hours together."

Ryerson said, "In what way was she sick?"

"She had a bad kidney condition and high blood pressure. She'd been under doctors' care; nothing seemed to do much good. We were—well, we'd hesitated about marrying——" Lippert broke off. "It doesn't have anything to do with Jane, with her caper."

"It might," said Ryerson cautiously.

Lippert leaned toward Ryerson across the desk. "You get this straight, mister. You've been working on the theft of those diamonds—as you told me in there—from the point of view that they belonged to Jane Cannelbury and that they were stolen in the Union Depot. But the real theft—and you remember this—took place *on your train* in Amarillo."

Ryerson didn't answer. He let out a breath slowly. Collins knew that he must be holding onto his temper with difficulty.

Lippert slapped a hand down on the desk; perhaps he expected Ryerson to jump. "You'll hear from the insurance company. They'll know how to deal with you." He waited to let the threat sink in. "Tell your brass not to try to evade responsibility on this one. I'll kick their teeth in."

Ryerson was biting his lips.

"When I get back from Amarillo," Lippert finished, "I expect you to have Jane Cannelbury in jail. If I have anything to say about it, she'll stay there permanently." With a final hard stare he turned for the door and stomped off.

The temptation to boot him on his way glimmered in Ryerson's eyes.

"Orders, sir?" Collins gibed.

"That——"

"Yes, he's exactly that," Collins agreed. "I wonder what Ida ever saw in him. Of course, poor girl, she was sick. It must have affected her judgment."

Ryerson had calmed down a little. "You notice he didn't order us to find the diamonds."

"No, I think he has his eye on that insurance check."

Ryerson smiled a trifle. "Get the district claims agent up here. He'd

better get in on this. Come on. Use my phone." Ryerson went back into his private cubbyhole. While Collins located the claims agent, the Chief concluded some dictation which Lippert's arrival had interrupted. When Collins put down the phone Ryerson paused long enough to say to him, "Call L.A.P.D. and give them the facts on the Cannelbury girl. They can start looking for her too."

Collins glanced at Ryerson curiously. "How will it end? Will the claims agent cough up sixty thousand for diamonds?"

Ryerson's expression became one of wolfish amusement. "There'll be a lot of palaver and dickering. Some kind of settlement will be fixed up. But—sixty thousand? Nuh, uh. No railroad ever forked over that kind of dough." He shook his head. "But don't worry. The heat will be on. We'll be expected to produce the jewelry. As Lippert said, it happened on a train."

"Choo choo to you," said Collins, dialing police headquarters.

In the outer office McKechnie had stopped by the rack of pigeonholes. There was a note asking him to call police headquarters and to inquire for a detective named Sunstrom, one of the men who had gone with him the day before to the East L.A. yards and to Abbotsford's office. McKechnie put his hat on the hatstand, walked to his desk, got Sunstrom on the wire.

"I heard about Healy. Too bad we couldn't have talked to him," said the city man in preliminary.

"Yeah. I understand he didn't have a record."

"Not here. What I wanted to tell you is that we've pulled a package on Abbotsford. It doesn't sound like much, but you might want to hear it."

"Sure." McKechnie felt his interest quickening.

"He has a record, three arrests. Nothing recent. The last one happened eight years ago. He was living where he is now, in Huntington Park, and some old biddy in the neighborhood saw him remove a package from a parked delivery truck. She recognized Abbotsford and spoke to the driver when he came back to the truck. The driver reported the theft to his office, and the office filed a complaint. At the time of arrest Abbotsford seemed confused. He stated that he couldn't

remember taking the package and then later amended this to say that his wife had been expecting a valuable gift to be delivered and that he had thought that the package, which he noticed in passing the truck, had had her name on it. The package was recovered unopened from a buffet in the dining room. The name on it did resemble Abbotsford's."

"Case dismissed," McKechnie said.

"Yeah. The delivery firm wouldn't prosecute."

"What were the other cases?"

"Way, way back—when Abbotsford was in college. He was involved with a gang of kids who were relieving their boredom by rolling drunks —this was his first arrest—and then later by stealing gym equipment from the school. In both affairs he was let off with a warning."

McKechnie was thinking it didn't sound like much. Lots of college kids got into scrapes, got out of them, went on to become solid citizens. The mix-up about the package in the delivery truck might have been an honest mistake.

"The dean of men at the school went to bat for him," Sunstrom said. "He said Abbotsford had been working too hard, he was worried about his grades. The pilfering was a reaction to strain."

"Who said that?"

"The dean of men. A guy named Shaw." Sunstrom added the name of the college.

"Thanks a lot."

"Thought you'd want to know what we know."

"I wish I did." McKechnie put the phone in its cradle and headed for Ryerson's office.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ryerson spoke to Pete, the office man. "Well, that's all for now." Pete gathered up his Stenotype machine and other tools and went out. Ryerson began to put the top of his desk in order, a sure sign that he was mad. Across the desk Collins gave McKechnie a knowing look.

McKechnie said, "I've got something new on Abbotsford, the witness to Cathcart's accident."

Ryerson sat perfectly still for a moment, then leaned back in his chair. "Go on."

"Abbotsford has a record. It's not much, but I think it might mean something."

"It might," Ryerson agreed on a sarcastic note.

McKechnie noticed that Collins was sitting straighter in the chair. "I figure Abbotsford must be pushing fifty by now, so the first case goes a long way back. When he was in college he was mixed up with a gang who amused themselves by rolling drunks and later by stealing athletic equipment. An official of the school went to bat for Abbotsford and he was let off with a warning. I don't know what happened to the others. Eight years ago—he'd have been close to forty, anyway—he stole a package from a delivery truck. He got out of it. He said he'd just made a mistake, he thought the package was being delivered to his house. The delivery firm wouldn't prosecute. What I remembered was his story of being in the yards when Cathcart died. Maybe he was afraid to tell the truth because of his record."

Ryerson hooked his hands together on his desk blotter. He looked from McKechnie to Collins, slowly, a hard, smug look spreading in his

face. "I know you two jokers eat dinner together. What do you talk about?"

"Horses and women," Collins put in. "This is the first I've heard of Abbotsford, so help me."

"You went to see him about Miss Cannelbury's diamonds," Ryerson hinted.

"I meant, I didn't know he was mixed up in anything else."

"It might not be something else. It might be the same trick," Ryerson said. He straightened the desk blotter, put a pen in its holder, shuffled some papers together. "Tell me more about this cookie. I'm beginning to like Mr. Abbotsford."

McKechnie said, "Well, for one thing, the clerk at the Toler House described a man like Abbotsford, said he'd visited Healy there."

"And now Healy is dead," Ryerson added dryly.

Collins said, "I saw Abbotsford at his office. He seems to have a good job with a big company, Poppy State. He looks prosperous. His clothes have a lot of class. They cost money and they're well tailored."

"Nothing off the rack," said Ryerson.

Collins fell for the bait. "Oh lord, no. He spent three hundred for the suit. The material was imported. It wasn't English. I think it might have been Italian. The shirt set him back about twenty dollars. I think he had it made up. Bought the silk."

"Imported it from Japan, perhaps." McKechnie was enjoying the joke.

"No," said Ryerson, "I'm sure he just had the moths fly over and make it here."

Collins smiled, showing his teeth. In that moment he looked entirely Mexican.

Ryerson turned to McKechnie. "A scrap of business card was stuck to one of those bags you brought in from East L.A. yards. It was a part of Mr. Abbotsford's card. Now maybe somebody planted it, knowing Abbotsford's record. Or maybe Mr. Abbotsford got careless."

"When I talked to Healy outside Shiney's—after I'd picked him up during the stake-out—he made some remark about Abbotsford, about

Abbotsford having shown one of his cards at the time Cathcart was hurt."

"He was carrying a supply on Friday, then." Ryerson stared through the glass pane into the outer office. "Look, boys, go out and talk this over, bring each other up to date. I see a big bad claims agent headed in here to raise hell about my rotten police department. I'd just as soon listen to him alone."

The claims agent was a small neat man in his sixties who wore a perennially foxy expression. He expected people to try to rob the railroad with falsehood and trickery, and enjoyed catching them at it. He nodded pleasantly to McKechnie and Collins at the door.

McKechnie said, "Ryerson said to go out. Let's go far enough to get something to eat. I missed breakfast. I had to pick up a friend." He thought of Nora, whom he'd driven home from the Clays'. She hadn't as yet put on any make-up or pinned back her hair. She'd looked warm and soft, like a kitten, he thought. He wondered where he'd ever got the idea she was cold and self-centered.

"I can stand a cup of coffee."

They got their hats and went downstairs to a grill. In the booth McKechnie ordered oatmeal, scrambled eggs, coffee, and toast. "Where do you want to start on this thing?"

"With the suitcases. There were some diamonds in the alligator bag. Must have made a pretty good haul. You see, what I've run into is this: there have been a series of these thefts, baggage disappearing off the trolleys in Union Depot. It's always our line that's hit, and so far it's been either of two trains. Both streamliners, both out of Chicago via Amarillo. When those bags turned up in the car on the rip track, I saw light. I knew how they were working it."

"There would have to be a porter or a redcap in on it."

"Sure. He's putting the bags into the train. When the cars get into the coach cleaning yards, somebody knows where to look, takes the bags out, and passes them through the gate into the freight yards. There are always plenty of empties sitting around where these characters can get out of sight quick and look over what they've snatched."

McKechnie began on his cereal. "There might be two, three or more, then."

"I think so. It could be Abbotsford's part to get the stuff out of the yards. I've got another lead on this particular job, but I don't think it's going to pan out." He explained to McKechnie how he had discovered Ramos in the refrigerator car and his subsequent efforts to get the Mexican to talk. "He knows who put him in the reefer. If I could ever get him over the fear they put into him, he'd talk. Probably Immigration will ship him back home first."

From his hospital bed Isidro Ramos caught the eye of the aide whose parents had come from Los Mochis. He beckoned to her. In Spanish he asked if she knew where he could get an envelope and a piece of paper.

"Sure, sure." She patted his shoulder. "I'll get them for you." She went out with a twinkling of skirts and came back presently with a sheet of tablet paper and a stamped envelope. She gave him her pen. "You're going to write to your wife, tell her you're coming home soon?"

He shook his head. "I do not know the name of the man to whom I must write."

"How will he get your letter?"

Ramos gave the matter some thought; then he smiled suddenly. With patient care he lettered the envelope: *Señor Joya, Railroad Policeman, Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.* The man who had rescued him from the refrigerator car would see and understand.

Ramos had no clear idea of the place where Collins must work when he wasn't out in the yards, but he imagined a small office with perhaps half a dozen men doing what Collins did, and he thought that the letter should find its way to their headquarters. He had begun to compose the letter when the girl came back. She picked up the envelope. Her black brows drew together in a frown.

"This isn't any good," she said in Spanish. "They won't know where to take the letter. The people in the post office won't know what to do with it."

Ramos looked at her blankly. "But it is on there; he works for the railroad."

"Which railroad?"

Ramos inclined his head, as if not hearing correctly.

"There are several railroads coming into Los Angeles," she explained. "There is Union Pacific, Southern Pacific, Santa Fe——"

"This man is of the police who guard the freight cars," he said quickly.

"You are *cholo*. You don't understand. Each company must have many men who guard trains. My uncle works with the section crews and he knows. You must find out where this Señor Joya——"

"That is just a name I made up for him."

She shook her head. "Now it is impossible. Who is this man? Is he the one who caught you?"

"He saved me," Ramos said slowly. "I was locked in a car with thick walls and I was dying when he opened the door."

"You don't know his real name?"

"No."

"What do you know of him, then, besides that he works for a railroad and guards the freight cars?"

"He is half Mexican," Ramos said. "His mother was born in Mexico City. His father was a trainer of race horses. He speaks Spanish. He brought me some newspapers and cigarettes."

"Fine, fine," she jeered, not unkindly. "Now you want to thank him and you don't even know his name."

"No, it's this; I have to tell him something." Ramos sat up on his bed with an air of distress. "I want to write him a small letter, something he will receive after I am gone. It is important that he is to have it after I leave tomorrow."

"*After* you leave?" She was curious; she patted the coverlet automatically about Ramos's thin figure while she stared at him. "You have done something bad in the boxcars?"

"No, I saw something." He trembled with agitation. The envelope and paper fell to the floor and the girl had to recover them for him. "I saw a bad thing happen."

"Don't be so scared. You think I might tell someone? I wouldn't do that."

"This man, this railroad policeman, ought to know what I saw."

"Yes, maybe. You don't want him to come and ask questions about it?"

Ramos shook his head. "No. I don't want the others, the wicked ones, to know."

"Write the letter and I will take it to my uncle and he will know what to do. He knows all about railroads."

Some of Ramos's distress subsided. He looked at her thoughtfully, then nodded, then began to write again.

Ryerson was smoking a cigar when McKechnie and Collins returned to the office. He looked relaxed and pleased with himself, and the two investigators sensed that the claims agent had come off second best in a verbal tussle. He nodded to them across the desk. "Well, what have you figured out?"

"We want to crowd Abbotsford a little and see what happens," McKechnie said.

"If he's innocent, it won't hurt him," Collins put in.

Ryerson leaned back in his chair. "You're going to have to walk real quiet-like."

"I said crowd, not accuse him," McKechnie reminded. "We won't give him any legitimate cause for complaint—providing he's clean. If he isn't clean it's going to sound bad to him."

"If he tries to bluff you, have him call me," Ryerson decided.

"Yes, we'll do that. This is the way we want to work it." McKechnie began to outline the plan which they had evolved earlier in the café.

About twenty minutes later McKechnie drove into the Poppy State parking lot, with Collins following in a second car. McKechnie parked, waited for Collins. They walked into the huge building together. The pert receptionist was not at her desk. Apparently they'd arrived during a coffee break. "This is okay," Collins said. "Let's go up." At the top of the stairs Collins rapped smartly on Abbotsford's door, stepped back. McKechnie stood where the light would strike him.

Abbotsford jerked open the door. "Yes? Oh . . ." There was an icy lack of welcome in his tone. "I'm sorry, I haven't a lot of time right now."

"This is just going to take a minute," McKechnie told him.

Abbotsford adjusted his tie and inspected the shine on his shoes. "May I come in?"

"Hmm? Oh, sure, come on in and we'll get it over with." Abbotsford moved back toward his desk. McKechnie entered; Collins paused at the door. Abbotsford's eyes jumped, a quick look that held no recognition. He sat down with an air of impatience, motioning brusquely toward a couple of chairs against the wall. McKechnie pulled one of the chairs forward and sat in it, but Collins remained in the doorway. Abbotsford's glance went back to him, studying him irritably; and all at once it was obvious that he recognized Collins. He froze, and sudden color came into his face, and then he tried to cover it by shuffling some memos on his desk, shoving some paper clips into a little box, and dropping the box in a drawer.

"What's the matter with your friend?" he asked McKechnie. "Can't he sit down too?"

"I guess he can if he wants to," McKechnie said.

"He's standing there as if I might bolt," Abbotsford said, his voice cold and scathing. "A ridiculous thought, I might add."

"I suppose so." McKechnie looked evenly at Abbotsford. "If you have a minute to spare, I'd like to go over your story of Cathcart's accident again, sir."

"Go over it? Go over it?" Abbotsford got out of his chair and went to the blinds and adjusted them against the morning sunlight. "What do you expect to do? Catch me in some lie? You're about as subtle as a television commercial."

"I'm just asking your co-operation."

Abbotsford returned to his desk. He looked at Collins and smiled a trifle. "Please sit down. I'm not going to run away. You don't scare me that much."

Collins shrugged, came into the room, sat down against the wall. He made it plain that his presence there was as an observer, that he had no

part in McKechnie's line of questioning. Abbotsford took it in with a dry look.

"The old man's death has been classified definitely as a homicide," McKechnie said. "Since it occurred in our freight yards, we're keeping a hand in the investigation. Along with the FBI."

Abbotsford's glance flickered. "Then the old man *was* important."

McKechnie nodded. "They're interested in him."

"My nerves are pretty steady this morning, gentlemen. You can tell me that the FBI will be around pretty soon. I won't collapse." He smiled again, his eyes bitter, his expression a mask of cold control. McKechnie thought: He's got something else on his mind. "Shall I review my story of Cathcart's accident in detail, or will you ask questions?"

"I'd like to ask questions, sir."

"And your partner—is he going to ask questions too?"

"No, sir." McKechnie leaned forward a little. "When Cathcart fell, did he attempt to protect himself in any way? Did he throw out his arms as he hit dirt? Or attempt to roll? What do you remember about it?"

"Nothing," Abbotsford said flatly. "As I told the police officers who came here with you yesterday, I was turning away as Cathcart fell out of the boxcar. All I caught, for a moment, was a glimpse."

"A man who has already been injured as Cathcart apparently had been won't make any move to break his fall. He's unconscious, he falls like a sack of grain."

"It's possible that Cathcart fell like a sack of grain," Abbotsford said. "Or he may have thrown out his arms or made some other protective move. I just don't know. Your insistence doesn't help me remember."

"Sorry," said McKechnie. "Now, you said yesterday that Cathcart didn't move *much* after he struck the ground. Just what did he do?"

Abbotsford appeared to frown over some memory. "It's hard to—to re-create details from so brief an incident of last week."

"I know, sir." McKechnie was trying to figure out if Abbotsford was actually trying to remember or whether this was an act.

"I recall thinking, as I ran toward him—well, he isn't dead. And that conclusion must have been based on some sign of life from the old man. I think it may have been his hands. But it's all vague now."

In that moment McKechnie was tempted to believe; the deliberate words, the dry, slightly sarcastic tone carried a feeling of truth. "He moved his hands?"

"Trying to lift himself, perhaps."

"He was not unconscious then?"

Abbotsford shook his head. "I don't know. If he weren't unconscious, your theory that he must have fallen like a grain sack doesn't stand up, does it?"

"The shock of hitting dirt may have roused him."

"Yes. It's possible." Abbotsford's eyes were vacant now. He seemed almost indifferent. "You don't want my theories, though, do you? You want me to make some mistake, something you can use to pry secrets out of me——" He laughed briefly. "I think you've taken enough of my time, don't you?"

"Mr. Abbotsford——" McKechnie hesitated, let the pause draw out. "What I'm trying to say is, we're not out to pin anything on you." He saw Abbotsford's cynical smile. "We've run into something that makes us think you might be reluctant to involve yourself in a criminal investigation. Perhaps due to a sense of self-protection, a wish to avoid the memory of unpleasant times in the past——" He saw that Abbotsford knew exactly what he was talking about. All trace of humor left the big man behind the desk. He looked as cold as stone. "We want to make sure you aren't too afraid, or embarrassed, to tell the truth."

"I'm telling the truth and I'm not a damned bit embarrassed," said Abbotsford, rising. "Good-by, gentlemen."

CHAPTER TWENTY

They paused on the ramp to the entrance. To their left was a loading platform; a big Diesel rig was pulling out. When the noise had subsided, Collins said, "What do you think?"

"He didn't seem as rattled as he did yesterday."

"You mean, he's scareder of the L.A. police?"

"He had something on his mind today," McKechnie answered. "There was a sort of distraction to his manner. When he recognized you, I thought he was going to make some kind of slip. But he didn't."

"Maybe what's on his mind is a family affair and you'll find out what it is when you go to see his wife."

"I can try."

Collins nodded. "I'll keep out of sight for a little while. Then I'll walk out to the parking lot. I'll let him see me." Collins glanced upward and to the right. "He's got a nice view from those windows."

"He has the freight yards out there like a map."

"I noticed that the first time I came."

"I'll see you," said McKechnie, walking away.

He took the truck route, Alameda Avenue, south to Firestone, turned on Firestone and worked east. He found Abbotsford's house, noticed the prosperous and settled air of the neighborhood. Abbotsford had lived here for some years—it had been eight years since the package had been removed from the delivery truck.

A silly and senseless theft, if it had been deliberate; and then he remembered what Sunstrom had quoted, the excuse made for Abbotsford years ago by the dean of men at his college. The pilfering had been

a reaction to strain. Driving past Abbotsford's home and sizing it up in passing, McKechnie smiled a little to himself. In his job he'd heard every possible excuse for thievery. A reaction to strain was as good as any.

In the eight years since the incident over the stolen package, it appeared that Abbotsford had lived blamelessly. Blamelessly or carefully. McKechnie parked down the block, got out of the car, walked back to Abbotsford's house. He went up two low brick steps to the front entry, where a couple of white-painted seats faced each other on either side of the door. As he stepped close to the door and put out his hand toward the bell, he heard a sound from inside the house, from the room upstairs and just above the entry, he thought. It was a very slight noise, but something about it was unmistakably deliberate. It wasn't a shade blowing, or anything like that. McKechnie thought it was a footstep.

Mrs. Abbotsford was home, then. He rehearsed what he meant to say, the questions about Abbotsford's business cards, where they were kept, and if some might have been left in suits sent to the cleaner's. It was a maneuver, a part of the plan, a part of the squeeze play against Abbotsford. McKechnie lifted his hand again and pushed the bell button, and a bell rang far away inside the house.

No one answered the summons. There were no other noises from the upper room. After a couple of minutes McKechnie rang again. When this produced no results, he walked around to the back of the house.

The rear yard was neatly kept, well laid out. The trees were big, what you might expect from a place twenty or more years old, and the turf was thick and spongy. McKechnie went to the rear door and punched a bell button there. The buzzer sounded in the kitchen. But it failed to bring Mrs. Abbotsford, too.

The cement drive widened here at the back of the lot. The big garage had three doors; one was lifted, showing an empty section. McKechnie walked down to the other end of the garage and looked through the glass pane of a house-type door. Inside was a combination laundry and storeroom. A big automatic washer and a dryer stood to-

gether beside the regulation laundry trays. In the rear of the room was a crowded jumble of old furniture. McKechnie noted a blue couch, a couple of chairs, a rolled-up bundle of rugs, a big mirror with a broken frame, a kitchen range buried under a heap of packing boxes. It was all dusty and looked disused.

He went back to the front entry of the house and tried the bell again. Someone was inside, keeping quiet, hoping he'd go away. McKechnie was feeling stubborn; and if Mrs. Abbotsford was afraid to answer the door, he wanted to know why.

He sat down in one of the settles and lit a cigarette.

When the doorbell pealed, Jane leaped away from the dresser in a paroxysm of fright. She stumbled against the bed, saving herself from falling only by clinging to the mass of bedding under the satin coverlet. The top drawer of the dresser hung open, lingerie spilling from it. She propped herself against a bedpost, stood there transfixed with guilt. The tumbled silks and laces glowed in the light from the windows, a multi-tinted evidence of her intrusion; she looked at them wretchedly and shivered.

She was still stiff and tired from the night spent in the storeroom. It had been cold toward morning. There had been nothing with which to cover herself.

Time ticked by; the bell rang again. The pounding of her heart quieted a little. No one was coming in. The person downstairs was just an ordinary caller, perhaps even some kind of salesman or peddler. There was nothing to be afraid of. She tried to argue herself out of her fright.

When the bell had rung she had thought at once of Mrs. Abbotsford. The woman had stormed out last night, still wearing the party gown, had dumped several suitcases on the porch for the driver to carry to the taxi which had come for her. It had looked to Jane like a very permanent kind of leave-taking. Abbotsford had followed his wife to the door, arguing meanwhile that she was making a fool of herself and that she'd regret her silly actions. From her hiding place in the shrubbery Jane had overheard their conversation.

"What do you think you're getting out of life, anyway?" Mrs. Abbotsford had demanded in a loud scathing voice. "You never have any fun, don't need any. You're too lazy to go to parties. You'd like to live like a hermit. You want me to live like a she-hermit. I'm not going to do it, dammit!"

"Mel, I've tried to give you what you wanted. Nice things. Haven't I?"

"I like nice things I can wear in public."

Her tone was cruel. Between them, then, Jane had sensed a taut, significant pause, a moment in which they must have exchanged a look full of meaning.

Abbotsford's voice had grown chillier. "You've always seemed to like what I brought you."

"Your methods have begun to make me nervous." She'd laughed tipsily.

Jane had inched forward, prying a way between the shrubbery and the house wall, until she could see the light from the open entry. Her skin had tingled, her throat gone dry. The shadows of the two people in the doorway had made a scarecrow pattern out upon the walk.

Even now, frozen in dismay beside Mrs. Abbotsford's satin bed, she was swept by the excitement of that moment, the sense of vindication, of discovery. It had seemed but an instant: the words had jangled through her mind and the plan had emerged full-blown, the plan to hide out overnight somewhere near and to get into the house as soon as it was empty.

In spite of the discomfort, the cold, her nervous fears, it had been terrifically easy. The couch had proved adequate for a bed. No one had looked in on her, had discovered her. Dawn had been gray and chilly, the worst time of all, but after Abbotsford had finally gone she had found the back door unlocked and even some hot coffee in the electric percolator on the breakfast table.

Now there was this interruption, this distraction.

"All I want," Jane whispered to the invisible caller below, "is just a chance to be happy. Go away and let me find them." The words died in the perfumed vacuum of Mrs. Abbotsford's bedroom. She

heard the footsteps then, leaving the porch; she crept quickly to the window and caught a glimpse of a man going out to the driveway, turning toward the rear of the house.

In that moment she almost died of terror.

She hadn't locked the rear door after she had entered by it. She had reasoned that Abbotsford had left it open in case his wife came back, and if he returned unexpectedly to check, he'd notice the locked door at once. Also, it represented some safety for Jane; if Abbotsford or his wife started in at the front, she might be able to dash out and hide again in the laundry.

Now this man, the caller, would come in!

The certainty of being caught tore through her. A soundless scream throttled her; her nails dug into her palms. The light from the windows burst behind her eyes in pinwheels of fire. The thumping of her terrified heart seemed to shake her to her toes.

She waited, all one aching flame of fright—and then nothing happened. Nothing at all.

Some of the fear went away and the sick taste faded from her mouth. She found that she could unclench her hands. A tide of weakness ran through her and she thought for a moment she would fall, but when this was past she felt much as usual. She tiptoed softly to the dresser, stuffed the lingerie down out of sight, shut the drawer. In that moment it occurred to her to wonder why Mrs. Abbotsford hadn't taken all of her personal belongings.

She didn't puzzle long over it. She went out to the hall and without making a sound crept halfway down the stairs to the lower floor. The buzzer rang in the kitchen. She stiffened, hanging against the banister there in the shadows; but the shattering fear didn't come back. She sensed that if the visitor was the sort who had to ring doorbells he wouldn't just walk in.

"It must be a bill collector," she whispered, nodding to herself.

At the little house in Santa Monica, the tiny house on the rear of the lot, bill collectors were practically a fixture. Her aunt's pension always went so quickly. There were always tag ends that didn't get paid, the milk bill, the bakery wagon, the druggist on the corner who gave them

credit. There had been times, like this one, when she had hidden and kept quiet while someone went from front to back, punching the doorbells. Jane suddenly giggled with her hand over her mouth.

In the silence that followed the noise of the kitchen buzzer she caught faintly the footsteps on the cement driveway, walking around —no, going out to the garage. He was going to see if any cars were inside. Jane tittered to herself again. Above the top of the wooden partition of the laundry room, Jane had seen one car in the cold gray light —Abbotsford's big sedan, which he had later driven to work.

The steps came back, circled the house again. Jane followed them with sharp attention, facing the invisible walker as he passed.

On silent feet she went back to the room above the entry.

Her senses were screwed into the last notch of perception. She felt electrified, full of little humming wires. Her ears were like a cat's. She caught the creak of the settle as McKechnie sat down in it. She even heard the scratch of his match, identified it. He's smoking, he's sitting down there waiting and smoking, she told herself.

She slipped off her shoes, put them soundlessly on the bed. Then she examined all the obvious places for the diamonds—under the bed, behind the chest of drawers and the dressing table, behind the framed pictures of fluffy French dancers on the walls. Somehow she had been positive that the jewels would be in Mrs. Abbotsford's room. Mr. Abbotsford had stolen them as a gift for his wife, must have presented them to her. His methods of acquiring nice things had begun to make Mrs. Abbotsford nervous, so presumably she wouldn't want the stolen diamonds with her.

They had to be here, then. She crept around the border of the high-pile rug, feeling for lumps in the binding.

Well, there was still the closet. It wasn't a place you thought of to store jewels ordinarily, but then these weren't ordinary jewels. Maybe Mrs. Abbotsford had them put away, stuck up on a high shelf, to fool anyone who might come searching. Jane went to one side of the wide double panels, opened one a little at a time, afraid the footing would squeak in its metal groove. There was a slight sound at the end, like

dust being grated, but she was sure that the bill collector on the porch couldn't have heard it.

The closet was full of clothes. She couldn't see where Mrs. Abbotsford had removed anything. There were five or six suits, a couple of sport coats, some daytime dresses, and back in the shadows of the unopened section, inside plastic bags, she caught a multicolored pastel glow. Up above, on the shelf, were a lot of handbags and hatboxes, plus some smaller boxes. She reached on tiptoe to touch a hatbox, to tip it out of the shelf, but then her eyes went back to the bouffant plastic cases and she withdrew her hand. She stood there torn by indecision. One part of her wanted to hurry with the search and the other part wanted to examine the contents of those plastic wrappings.

Working a little more hurriedly now, she moved both panels to the right. Downstairs on the porch McKechnie heard the scratch of sound.

He stood up. He had decided to get out of sight for a while, to come back in a half hour or so.

Jane didn't hear his departure. The plastic was rustling under her touch; her attention was glued to the stuff she could see dimly, the taffeta and satin, the rainbow of color. She unzipped a plastic case, and a puff of scent came out, rose sachet like the smell of a garden. She reached in, her fingers fumbling the dress off its hanger. She was disappointed, though, when she had the dress out and looked at it fully. It was just a plain peach taffeta with some chiffon at the neck. She held it up in front of her and looked down at it. There was a little stain, a spot made by some sort of liquid, near the waist. She made a little distasteful grimace and stuffed the dress back into its case, not bothering to connect it to the hanger.

She opened the second bag. Again there was the odor of roses; and then something more, the smell of newness. She drew the dress out; there were tags still hanging to it. She read the price on one of them and her face went blank. It had cost a great deal and Mrs. Abbotsford hadn't even worn it yet.

It was beautiful, too. It was the most beautiful dress that Jane had ever seen. There was a pale green, rippling velvet sheath with an overskirt of net and lace. The lace was black, and the way it curled against

the green net, the sparkle of it on the rippling velvet, made Jane tremble with delight. She propped it against herself, her fingers tingling to the touch of the velvet.

She turned, found her image in the great oval mirror of the dressing table; and all at once, like a moth from a cocoon, she emerged fully and radiantly into the reality of the dream. This was she—Jane—and she was dressed as she had always hoped, and she was stepping forward to meet someone, some new friend, in a cloud of roses.

It had never been realer than now.

Jane put out a hand in greeting to the mirror, and the dress slipped down on that side, exposing the drab gray pongee. She jerked it back up, held the velvet with her chin, stood before the mirror, pirouetted. The net swished out, the black lace a tracery in jet. Her stockinged toes were hidden in the swirling skirt. The odor of rose sachet pervaded the whole room, a flowery incense. On and on she whirled in a soundless dance, keeping within sight of the mirror, keeping the green velvet over her reflected body.

All at once she stopped. A pink spot grew in each cheek. "I'm going to put it on!"

Why not? Who'd know about it?

She ripped off the tags, opened the zipper. Then she laid the dress on the bed while she unbuttoned gray buttons, pulled the gray pongee off over her head and dropped it to the floor. She picked up the velvet gown again and let the velvet hug her flesh for a moment, and all the little humming wires inside vibrated with excitement and desire.

She dropped the velvet dress over her right arm, reached for the opening at the bottom of the sheath with her left hand, got the hem separated, was looking at the paler underside of the velvet, was lifting the opening toward her face, when she heard a car in the driveway outside.

The sound didn't register for a second or so. The dream was so real and so compelling, the dress was so near, her flesh was so warm from the touch of the velvet, that it was hard to wake up, to come back.

Then she drew clear of the fog a little. The dress slid down her arms to her hands and she lifted it, bundled to her bosom, an instinctive

motion of defense. She waited. She licked her lips. A car door slammed.

On light, stockinged feet she sped out into the hall, down a couple of stairs, leaned there on the railing. The fear hadn't come back yet; she seemed insulated from that clawing fright of a little while ago; it was more like dreaming. It was like a very bad dream. She pressed a hip against the railing and breathed lightly through her mouth, and then felt a touch of chill on her back, as if someone had breathed on her. She looked back, but no one was there.

She could hear footsteps outside, though. Someone was walking firmly and slowly up the driveway from the garage, headed for the front of the house.

If this were Mr. Abbotsford, wouldn't he have come in by that open back door?

It's another stranger, she told herself.

But strangers don't rattle keys in front-door locks!

The thought burst in her head, the conviction that the open door through which she had entered was just a mistake. Mr. Abbotsford hadn't meant to leave it unlocked. He'd been thinking about his wife and he'd forgotten. Now he was coming in!

He was coming in at the front door!

She saw the rectangle of light in the lower hall, saw the glow spread along the wall, and turned to run. The banister caught her turning hip and she fell off balance a trifle; it was nothing. It would have been nothing if the velvet dress hadn't been so soft, so new and slippery. She clutched and clung, grabbed for the fabric; and just as she would have expected in a very bad dream, the dress got entirely away.

It slid down the banister railing, all mocking green glitter and stiff black lace, something reluctant about it in a way, something thoughtful and hesitant. It looked as if it were occupied by an extremely flat, pliable lady who regretted what she was doing to Jane. "Stop!" Jane screamed in her thrumming brain.

The door was closed softly downstairs and the green velvet dress came to rest on the newel post, and a moment later Mr. Abbotsford was staring up at Jane.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Abbotsford went into his bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror above the basin. His movements were tentative and mechanical and his face held a curious blankness. He looked as a man might who has suffered a heavy blow and who has risen to walk a few steps before finally falling down. He was speckled freely with fine droplets of blood. There were gouge marks across the left side of his face where Jane had raked him. He examined the purpling welts in the mirror and wondered vaguely why she couldn't have died—have been decent enough to die—without a scene. The unprintable spying bitch . . . He concocted further names for her while he ran water into the basin.

When the basin was full he stared down at it as if wondering how it happened to hold water. Then he regarded his hands, the knuckles cut, blood thick on his fingers, blood congealing down in the narrow crotches between his fingers and around his signet ring. He took off the ring and dropped it into the water. He watched it as it sank, leaving a ruddy stain. A grimace contorted his face, twisted his mouth wide and awry, pinched his nose, drew down the corners of his eyes.

He was trying not to cry.

Crying was an old habit of his. And had had its uses, he reminded himself. He remembered the scene in the dean's office, his choking tears, and the dean's sympathetic decision that he'd been overworking on his studies. Twice that had worked. And then, years later, he'd faced the security officer of the delivery firm and had broken down and wept because the charge of stealing from the truck could ruin

him. In each case, after a moment of startled embarrassment, the response had been pity and forgiveness.

A moment later, it seemed, he found himself out in the hall, staring at the door of Melanie's room. After a long hesitation he went over to the door and looked in. Jane lay where he had left her, on her back, sprawled bonelessly. He went in with delicate steps, clearing his throat. She's still dead, he told himself. Yes, obviously; where did I get the notion she might be stirring? She looks awful. She looks so much worse than her father did, and yet he fell out of a boxcar and the only thing that happened to her was just . . . There's *so much* blood. He rubbed his hand, feeling for the heavy ring, then remembered vaguely leaving it on the edge of the basin.

He leaned above her. She'd been young, not bad-looking. You couldn't tell it now, he thought. The ring had torn her so. Her face was all chopped up and there were dark blotches on her throat and shoulders. The slip was in rags. His eyes moved over the strange gray dress wadded on the floor beside her, and he remembered the green velvet on the newel post downstairs; and the puzzle grew big in his mind. What strange tricks had she been up to?

She'd taken off her own dress and had been putting on one of Melanie's, the new one.

Had she meant to disguise herself?

What sort of trap had she laid?

In sudden suspicion he went to the window and looked out, but saw only the empty street.

He took cigarettes and a lighter from his pocket, noticing then that the pocket had been torn in the struggle with the girl. He lit a cigarette, put the lighter on Melanie's dressing table. He took off the coat and tossed it on the bed. Then he went to the head of the bed, reached under the coverlet, tugged a blanket loose, threw it over Jane, walked out of the room and downstairs.

In the dining room he took a bottle of brandy from the buffet cabinet and poured himself a drink.

Melanie's remedy.

Her voice rang through his mind, tipsy but somehow lovable, a

throaty and teasing contralto, and the familiar words she used to taunt him: "You'd be better off drinking, darling." He lifted the glass in a westerly direction, toward the beach, and whispered: "I *am* drinking, Mel. I've come to it."

Out in Pacific Palisades, Mel would just be sitting down to breakfast with her sister who sang in a Sunset Strip night club.

"You were right. Look at me. I *am* drinking."

Collins swung his car into the curb just beyond McKechnie's. He got out, and McKechnie met him on the pavement. "Did he come in?"

"Yeah. Several minutes ago."

"I lost him. My God, the chances he took in traffic." Collins squinted against the sunlight. "He left Poppy State right after we did. I'd walked up toward the loading ramp, just had time to light a cigarette, when here he came. I thought he might notice me, but I agree with you: he's got something on his mind. He passed me as if I were one of the loading crews."

"There's somebody in the house with him."

"Who?"

"Wouldn't answer the doorbell."

"Mrs. Abbotsford, keeping under cover," Collins decided.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"How does it look to you now?"

McKechnie smiled slightly. "It looks promising. Damned promising."

"Of course if he's the one we're looking for," Collins said, "he could be putting the jewels down the garbage disposal about now."

McKechnie nodded. "We'll call on him shortly."

A man came out of one of the houses nearby and began to fool with a bed of pansies, picking at the soil with a short-handled tool, meanwhile looking now and then suspiciously at Collins and McKechnie. He was a short potbellied man with a fringe of gray curly hair circling a bald spot. He had on a sport shirt and some khaki shorts.

"I'm going over to chew the fat," McKechnie said. He crossed the lawn in the direction of the flowers, meanwhile taking out his identifi-

cation. The fat man was on his knees; he propped himself straighter with the tool and looked up. McKechnie gave him a quick flash of the I.D. card. "Sir, I'd like to ask a few questions if you're willing to talk. I won't take much of your time."

The fat man got to his feet. "You're a policeman?"

"Sheriff's office."

"Sure, sure. What do you want to know?"

"That house over there——"

"Abbotsford," said the fat man quickly. "He's a big wholesaler. Food wholesaler. Has a nice wife. No children."

"How long have they lived here?"

"I don't know. Longer than we have. We've been here since the fall of '48. I like them, they're nice people. You know, I was wondering about you fellows. I thought you might be burglars. Uh . . . what've you got on Abbotsford?"

"We're inquiring about the robbery of a freight shipment," McKechnie said.

"Oh, his company, huh?"

"Well, technically, no. We're not just sure where it leads yet. Do you have a telephone?"

"Oh, sure, officer. Right inside, right in the entry."

"I don't want to use it now," McKechnie explained. "I wanted to know if there was one near that I could use in a hurry." He smiled at the owl-eyed fat man. "If I need to."

"Why, certainly, officer." Suddenly he stuck out his hand. "My name's Raymond. John Raymond. Maybe you know my nephew. He's in the traffic department. Not the sheriff's office, though. He's with the Los Angeles Police Department. Theodore Raymond. They call him Ted."

McKechnie shook his hand. "Sorry, I don't know many of the fellows in traffic."

"Well, if you happen to meet him, just say you know his uncle John."

"Yes, I'll do that."

"What are you trying to get on Abbotsford?"

McKechnie shook his head. "No, we're just checking." He went

back to the car. Collins was smoking, standing with a foot on the rear bumper. McKechnie said, "The neighbors think that Abbotsford is a big food wholesaler. The man I just talked to likes him. His name's Raymond, by the way, and we can use his phone if we want to."

Collins nodded. "I think I'll go ring Abbotsford's doorbell."

"Go ahead."

Collins went down the sidewalk to a point opposite Abbotsford's house, then cut across the street, went up the walk to the front entry. He rang the bell. For some time there was no sound from within the house. Then Abbotsford spoke, his voice muffled by the closed door. "Who is it?"

"Collins, sir. If it's possible I'd like to talk to Mrs. Abbotsford."

"Are you one of those railroad dicks?"

"Yes, sir."

"What possible business could you have with my wife?"

"It's a question of that card, Mr. Abbotsford. The one we found stuck to the bottom of the stolen luggage. I'd like to know if there are cards like it here at your house and whether any of them could have gone to the cleaner's in one of your suits, or anything like that."

"Get away from my door."

"You don't have to be afraid that I'd be rude to Mrs. Abbotsford. I'd like to ask a couple of questions, that's all."

"My wife isn't here. Beat it, will you?"

Collins turned around and went back the way he had come. To McKechnie he shrugged. "He didn't open the door."

"Just so he knows we're out here." McKechnie nodded.

In the house Abbotsford stood for some minutes, listening, distrusting his own senses. It had sounded as if the detective had walked away in the direction of the street; but of course they were sly and clever, trained in deceit, and it was possible that at this moment Collins was sneaking around out in back, searching for a way to get in at him. Abbotsford hurried for the kitchen when this notion occurred to him. He tested the back door, was surprised to find it unlocked, then realized that of course it must have been the means of the girl's getting into the house. He locked the door and drew down the curtain over

the pane. As he turned back into the kitchen his glance swept the alcove, the breakfast nook. The little room was walled with glass, and outdoors the trees overhung it, so that it was filled now with a green light. He saw his own breakfast dishes, the plate and cup, the electric percolator and toaster—and a purse. A woman's leather handbag.

He stood still and looked at the strange purse and then shifted his stare briefly in the direction of that upper room where the girl lay dead. This thing belonged to her, of course. He walked into the breakfast nook and on a sudden impulse lifted the percolator. It was empty. Again the angry suspicion lashed his mind. She'd come in so brazenly; she'd done the damnedest things. Drinking his coffee; putting on Melanie's new frock. What the devil had been in her mind?

He yanked the purse toward him as if it must yield the secret of her crazy behavior, flipped up the catch, spilled the contents by turning the bag upside down and shaking it over the table. A torrent of junk poured forth. He caught glimpses of several powder puffs, a box of loose powder, loose pennies and nickels, a dime, stubby pencils of several colors, a bottle of stomach medicine. Two handkerchiefs. Bus schedules refolded and marked. He was sorting now, pushing aside the anonymous stuff, looking for something of importance.

Three lipsticks of the dime-store variety. A pen. A couple of letters addressed to somebody named Jane Cannelbury. A wallet of red plastic.

He kicked a chair from the table and sat down with the wallet. Inside the money compartment he found a single dollar bill. The transparent slots held no driver's license, no identification material. Tucked into the change purse was a woman's picture, part of a snapshot. The woman had white hair and a tired, patient, half-apprehensive expression.

He tossed the wallet aside and picked up the letters.

The first envelope held a short note in a woman's small handwriting:

Dear Jane:

I'm so thrilled that I can scarcely write this letter. I'll tell you the news at once. I'm going to be married!

His name is Charles Lippert and he's a Navy officer. He's a couple of years younger than I, not enough to matter. We're going to be married here in Chicago next week. Charles is going to have to hurry off to San Diego, he's due to report there, and I'm going to follow by train.

And Jane, dear, this is where you come in! Recently I've been troubled by high blood pressure and dizzy spells—nothing terribly serious, but worrisome! So annoying, in fact, that I've decided to ask someone to travel with me. Charles suggested hiring a registered nurse, but instead I thought of you.

Wouldn't a little trip right now be a treat for you? I think it might. Tell Aunt Dolly I believe it to be time you were trusted out of the city limits of Santa Monica. Tell her that we'll look after each other!

Wire me collect at once, dear.

All my love to you both,

Ida

He threw the letter down, took up the other envelope. As he lifted it his eyes scanned the name and address written on its face. *Miss Jane Cannelbury*. He frowned. For a moment his fingers hesitated on the torn flap. Then he removed the sheet which was enclosed.

This was no letter like the other, but a list. The writing was bigger, untidier. The first line started off: *one diamond bracelet, sort of linked, a double row of stones, value*—— Following this at the end of the line, several groups of numerals had been written and then scratched out. Abbotsford's eyes fled down the page. Item after item, all of it jewelry, diamonds, all of it followed by scratchy figures representing sums of money. At the bottom, in the center of the page, was written, *sixty thousand dollars*. The words had been encircled by a heavy black line.

He turned the sheet over. At the top in pencil was the single word: COPY.

Abbotsford let the sheet of paper fall to the table. The blank look spread over his features and his hands moved aimlessly. Out of doors a slight wind brushed the trees, and their foliage made a dappled glitter on the windows. The glitter was reflected in the chrome percolator

and in the sides of the toaster, and Abbotsford watched it unseeingly.

In the kitchen a clock ticked, the ordinarily unobtrusive sound loud in the silence. Abbotsford found himself listening to the ticks, not counting them exactly but letting the sense of them pile up in his mind; it was a release from trying to solve the other thing, the incomprehensible puzzle.

But finally his mind rebelled; the ticks faded out of consciousness. Why should the old man's daughter carry a list of the jewelry?

Abbotsford picked up the envelopes again, re-read the name. He spoke it to himself, trying to rouse an echo in his memory. Who was this Jane Cannelbury? Why should her letters be here in Nora Cathcart's purse?

Was it more of the pattern? A part of some disguise? Was the Cathcart girl working in some way with the police to trap him?

This thought sent him springing from the table, through the kitchen and hall to the living room, where he peered at the street from behind the draperies. There was no sign of Collins and McKechnie, but he was not fooled; probably they were hidden just past his range of vision. He bit his lips, leaned on the wall. What was the word *they* used? Stake-out? Yes, they were staked out on him, waiting like a pair of hunters for the quarry.

He went into the dining room and found the drink he had left there. He finished that one, started another. Time passed slowly.

When it's dark—I'll leave when it gets dark.

Collins looked at his watch and said, "I'm getting hungry."

"Go on. I'll keep an eye on our pigeon."

McKechnie got out of the car from the driver's seat. "I think I'll try the doorbell."

"Sure, keep him on his toes." Collins had been sitting in the rear seat of McKechnie's car, reading a paper. Now he walked to his own car and drove off. On a main boulevard he found a drive-in, one of a chain with a fair reputation. He parked, and a girl ran out with a menu. She wore an abbreviated costume resembling that of a drum majorette, red satin with gold braid, with a tiny red pillbox on her bleached hair. "Yes, sir!" She thrust a menu in at him.

He handed it back to her. "I want a roast pork sandwich, carrot salad, apple pie with cheese. Coffee."

She stared, round-eyed. "All of our sandwiches are barbecued, sir."

"Then tell them to scrape that red goop off the pork."

"Yes, sir." She went away.

A paper boy came by with a sports edition, and Collins bought one and turned to the racing entries. He wished he could be at Hollywood Park today. Some old friends were running. He noted one in particular, a nine-year-old gelding; the handicapper had summed up, *in tough but willing.*

Collins liked that horse. He decided to try to get a bet out of McKechnie.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Abbotsford stirred in his chair, aware that he felt stiff, that he'd been sitting motionless for a long time, that his head ached. The liquor wasn't doing any good. He had wanted to put a fine edge on his nerve, but now he felt foggy. He got to his feet and went out into the hall, back to the kitchen. He drew a glass of water at the tap, turned with it in his hand, started it toward his lips. The green light moved like something sly and searching on the windows in the breakfast alcove, and on a sudden incontrollable impulse he threw the glass, water too, at the twinkling shadows.

The glass struck the crossbar of one of the windows and rebounded to the floor. The shadows winked on, unchanged.

He walked into the alcove and recovered the glass. As he turned he paused and looked down at the litter on the table. With a single sweep

of his hand he sent purse and contents clattering to the floor. Then he went back to the sink and pounded the glass on the tile drainboard until it broke in his hand. He looked for cuts, but there were none.

"Mel . . . Mel," he whispered, "you could at least phone me!" He waited for a moment, listening, but no phone rang. He took another glass from the cupboard, drew more water, drank. He put this glass down carefully beside the broken pieces of the other.

He studied the ticking clock on the wall over the range, tried to concentrate on what time it was. Almost two? How long since the doorbell had rung the second time?

Long, long ago, something said in his mind.

Twice they'd come to the door. Or perhaps one had come again, Collins, disguising his voice somehow. At the second visit I didn't say anything, he told himself; I stood and listened, but I didn't speak. A voice answered him in his mind: You *think* you didn't speak. It was hard to remember exactly. Things kept tumbling through his head. Most of all there was the tormenting puzzle about the girl. Why had she come here, drinking coffee, changing her clothes, peering at him over the stairs?

The scene crossed his thoughts like a flash of light, the memory of the way she had looked when he had sprung at her. Turning, slipping, flying, stumbling, her hair silky and tangling in his fingers, her face white, her mouth open before his first blow struck it. She hadn't screamed, though.

Now, that's it, he thought. That's what makes it all so screwy. She didn't yell for help. Not once.

She had just tried to run, and when that couldn't be, she had fought silently. Abbotsford walked an uneven circle on the kitchen floor.

He turned as a slight sound caught his ear. A soft, funny thud. As if someone had pounded once, futilely, against a wall of the house.

What are they trying now? What sort of trick to scare me?

He started for the front of the house and then hesitated. Now, wait, he cautioned himself. See first what they intend to do. After all, what have they got? Nothing. Not a shred of evidence.

The sound repeated itself, a *thump* too soft to be a fist against the

door. Abbotsford waited for some moments. There was now a dragging, a rustling.

He thought, I'd better fade out at the back.

He waited, though, hearing nothing but the silence.

His face twisted; he was trying not to cry under the cruel pressure on his nerves. Dammit, he told himself, if I could just have Mel here, someone to comfort me, someone to watch them for me . . .

From the hall came a sound like a sigh.

I'd better see who it is, he thought.

Jane stood on the next to the lowest step, the blanket dragging from one arm. The light was somewhat shadowy there, but even so, the shock of her appearance pounded through Abbotsford like the blow of a sledge hammer. As he watched, she weaved a little, put out a hand to brace herself on the banister, put down a toe to search for the next step.

She *can't* be alive!

No, not like that——

She said in a light, frail voice: "Where am I?"

Abbotsford hung against the wall. They were like two sick people who meet without warning in a hospital corridor. Jane looked like a fugitive from unfinished surgery. Abbotsford was crying and retching. The clock ticked in the kitchen, summoning time to pass.

Jane was the more composed of the two. She spoke again to the figure she saw dimly against the wall. "Will you help me, please? I've lost my glasses."

Abbotsford collapsed all at once, sliding to the floor.

"What's the matter with you?" Jane asked, peering.

He sat that way for some minutes. Jane clung to the banister and waited. At last Abbotsford gained control of himself, stood up, hesitated by the door to the kitchen. Every screaming nerve urged him to bolt, to bolt and leave her here. Those two in the shrubbery could find her after he was gone, help her if she wasn't past help——

He began to edge through the kitchen entry, then paused. She held the answer to the puzzle. She could talk, apparently. What he had done to her hadn't injured her vocal cords. You'd think it would,

though, he thought; I really believed I'd choked her to death. He began to cross the space between the end of the hall and the beginning of the stairs.

He stopped, not too close, and said carefully, "How do you feel?"

The gargoyle's head of torn flesh replied, "I ache all over."

"Can you remember what happened?"

She seemed to listen, not to his voice but to the ticking in the kitchen. "I don't know. What did happen? Was I hurt?"

"We were scuffling and something fell over on you." His mind scurried, searching for something to have fallen on her. "The—the dressing table. The mirror shattered."

She appeared to accept it without interest or question.

Abbotsford couldn't endure looking at her any longer. He looked at the pattern of light on the floor of the hall. "Don't you want to lie down, or sit down, somewhere?"

"I need my glasses."

"I guess they're still upstairs."

"Will you get them for me?"

He passed her, pressing the wall, and went up to the bedroom which Melanie had filled with such soft and fragrant and glittering stuff. He found the glasses kicked under the bed. Both lenses were broken. He picked out the broken bits of glass.

He paused at the window for another look at the street. As before, it seemed innocent, empty.

Jane was sitting on the lower step, her head against the green velvet which still hung on the newel post. He went all the way down, turned, offered her the frames of the glasses; then, when she made no move to reach for them, he leaned toward her and put them into place.

"Thank you," she said.

For the first time within his memory, pity wrenched him. It was a sensation more unendurable than his loneliness for Melanie. He moved back a little. "I wish I could help you."

"Would you bring me a drink of water?" she asked wistfully.

He started for the kitchen, then suddenly remembered the pain-killing pills, the last of a prescription, in the medicine cabinet of his

bathroom upstairs. He went up, not to Melanie's room this time; came back with two tablets; brought a glass of water from the kitchen.

"Take these."

She accepted them off his palm gratefully, washed them down, thanked him again.

He was brimming with pity and regret. He set the glass on the newel post. "What's your name?"

"Jane."

"Jane *who*?"

"Jane Cannelbury. Jane Elizabeth Cannelbury."

"Why did you come here?"

She lifted her head to peer at the nearest wall. "Where am I?"

There was danger in reminding her. Obviously she didn't recognize the house or him, whether from lack of vision or from her injuries, or from both; and if the truth were brought back to her she might do anything. Go berserk. Race into the street as she was, for instance. He bent forward and pulled the blanket up around her, tucked it into her fingers so that she could hold it. "Are you warm?"

She was frowning. "I'm trying to think of where I am."

Abbotsford felt his pity waning. She *was* a danger. I wish I'd just choked her, but I wish I'd choked her *dead*, he thought.

It suddenly occurred to him that her death, her removal, was just as urgent as ever.

He stood by the newel post, vague thoughts and half plans floating through the alcoholic haze in his mind. I've got to get her out of here, he decided.

Kill her first?

Not the best way, he decided. Too many awkward possibilities. As she was, she could walk. She was dazed; she seemed docile. There was no fear, no urge to battle, in her manner. He let his eyes drift over her, speculating as to what he could do. Suddenly he bent, took her hand. "Let's go upstairs," he said.

She sat on the edge of Abbotsford's bed and let him sponge her face quickly and gently with a washcloth. He brought powder and lipstick from Melanie's room, applied make-up thickly. He combed her hair.

The gray dress covered the tattered slip. He found her shoes.

"Now, Jane, stand up!"

She stood up, teetering. "I'm so tired. I've got to sleep."

"You can sleep in the car. Listen, Jane. We're going downstairs; we're going to walk outside to the car. Do you understand?"

She nodded, puppet-like. "To the car. May I sleep then?"

"You'll sleep in the car," he commanded.

She clung to his arm, a light, fluttering touch. At the stairs he had to grab her to keep her from falling. She walked in the manner of an automaton. She kept her face turned to the front, her eyes level and unwinking. In the kitchen she waited while he ran into the breakfast alcove and knelt and jammed the stuff back into her handbag.

"Here's your purse, Jane."

"Thank you." She let it dangle from her fingers. It struck her legs every step she took. He paused at the door, took the handbag from her; he was sure she'd drop it when they hurried across the drive.

The car was sitting where he had left it, nose pointed to the garage door. Thirty—forty feet away, perhaps. He squinted at the blaze of sunlight on the white cement pavement. The space seemed enormous, oh God. "Wait here a minute," he said to Jane. He gave her the purse again and ran back for the brandy, took a hurried drink as she turned slowly to look at him.

"What is it?"

Again pity stung him. He held the bottle to her lips. "Drink it. Don't stop to taste, just get it down."

She strangled, fell against the door with her hands clawing at her mouth. She tried to cry out and only managed a sound like a kitten's. Abbotsford stood stunned, cursing to himself. All at once it seemed to him that she was looking at him differently, that knowledge and fright had begun to flame in her eyes.

He gripped her arm, pulled her nearer. "What's the matter? What're you staring at?"

"Nothing!"

The word gave it all away. She knew him now and she was afraid.

He lifted his fist and she cringed away, her free hand sheltering her face. "We're going to the car. Hear?"

She made the mewing noise again. It was husky, thin as a subdued siren, the final result of the throttling. "All right. I'll go."

"I'm going to take you to the freight yards and put you on a train."

Brilliant idea! Where had it come from? He drank more of the brandy. Then he opened the door cautiously. The tall trees in the back yard moved under the touch of the wind. Some poppies in a bed made a golden torch against the green. There was no sound anywhere except the pounding one of their hurrying steps. He opened the car door, pushed her in roughly, ran around to crawl into the driver's seat. He inched forward, tilting the rear-view mirror so that he could see the driveway. All at once he saw himself.

His face was speckled with blood; the long welts stood out against the skin of his cheek like purple worms. He had forgotten to put on a jacket. His keys were in the jacket upstairs on Melanie's bed.

He inched from the seat of the car. "Listen to me. I'm going to be gone for a moment. Just for a moment! You're to stay here!"

She nodded wildly, crouched back on the seat, her puffed face quivering.

"What a fool I am," Abbotsford raged at himself. "Of course you'll start running the instant my back's turned!"

"No, I won't!"

"Damn you, come on!" He dragged her from the car, across the wide driveway, into the house, then on up the stairs, where she weaved and stumbled, where he thought for a few minutes he'd have to carry her. In his bedroom he shoved her upon the bed, ran into Melanie's room for the stained jacket, brought it back. Then he went into his bathroom, forcing himself to be cool and thorough. He wet the end of a towel and patted the speckles from his face and throat. Then in the bedroom he took another jacket from his closet, transferred his keys, wallet, and small change into it.

All of the time something was beating inside his skull like the ticking of the clock in the kitchen.

He stood over her. The brandy was wearing off; tiredness was sawing

at his nerves. Why don't I just kill her here, kill her and run? No——

In the freight yards I can toss her under a train. No one will know then that I beat her, much less killed her. It will all be blamed on the train, on the laxity of the patrolmen, or some switchman or other——

"That's true," he said aloud. "All quite true."

The second trip was slower. The girl seemed weaker. Her walk was erratic; she was apt to wander in the wrong direction. She stumbled where there was nothing to stumble over. In the driveway, she fell. He dragged her the rest of the way, tugged her into the car while sweat dripped from his face. When he ran around the car to get into the driver's seat, his feet were leaden. He saw the brandy bottle on the seat beside Jane's gray skirt.

He lifted it out, put it to his lips. The smell of the brandy was hot and medicinal, the touch of the liquid like fire in his throat, so that he gagged over it. He turned his head, his eyes swimming, and in that moment he saw Collins walking up the driveway toward him.

The crash of the brandy bottle seemed a lingering explosion whose echoes rebounded between the trees and the house. Abbotsford looked dazedly at his feet, at the spreading stain on the cement. The next instant he had turned. His hand was on the car door; automatically he was propelling himself inside, fumbling in his jacket pocket for the keys. He sensed Jane staring with terrified eyes through the empty frames which hung a little crooked.

"You sit still, baby," he said to her. The keys jangled; he dropped them; he recovered them. He put the right key into the switch. All of the time the ticking in his head went on louder and louder.

He could hear Collins running above the purr of the motor.

He forced himself to wait.

Collins came first to the side of the car where Jane sat. He looked in through the half-open window, saying, "If I could have a minute with you, Mrs. Abbotsford——"

Abbotsford looked at him coldly. "Later, please. We haven't any time to spare."

Collins was looking in a stunned way at the girl. "Hey, wait——"

"Get away from the car!"

"This isn't your wife! It's Miss Cannelbury! What've you done to her?" Collins left the door and hurried around the front of the car. Abbotsford waited until he had almost cleared the left front fender; then he jammed the car into gear and stepped on the accelerator. The car leaped forward.

Collins jumped in the same instant the car did; not quite quickly enough. The fender caught him, spun him backward off the pavement into the shrubbery. He yelled as he went down, and at the sound Abbotsford's lips drew back thinly over his teeth.

Jane made the noise like a mewing siren, and Abbotsford looked at her and laughed. When he jammed the car into reverse and took off, she almost went through the windshield.

Abbotsford had turned in his seat to watch the driveway. All at once McKechnie stood there at the edge of the paving, and an exulting fury filled Abbotsford—he'd get both of them!

McKechnie was too quick, however. As the car barreled toward him he walked about five steps and paused behind a tree. He was there when Abbotsford whirled past. Their eyes met in the briefest of instants.

In that flick of time Abbotsford felt naked. He knew that McKechnie had seen, and now knew, all that he needed. As he whirled the car in the street and headed north, he was trying not to cry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

McKechnie, leaning on the wheel, drew a long breath. "I can't keep up with him. He's a maniac. He's going to kill himself and the girl, someone else, too, perhaps."

Beside him in the car Collins was pressing a handkerchief to a long gash on his throat. A thorny branch had ripped into his skin when Abbotsford had knocked him into the shrubbery. "Let him go," Collins said. "I've got a hunch where he's headed."

"He wouldn't be fool enough to head for his office."

"He's headed for a place he knows as well as his office."

"The yards?" McKechnie said incredulously.

"He has friends there, remember? He'll expect them to help him now."

McKechnie jammed to a stop on a red signal. Ahead of them Abbotsford's car was just turning into Alameda Avenue, the truck route through L.A.

"If he doesn't go to the yards," McKechnie said, "we've lost him."

"It's not just a hunch. This cookie has a pattern. When we scared him at the office he scooted for home. He ran into Jane Cannelbury there and beat her up. From the looks of the girl, he could have spent all that time inside trying to revive her."

"What's she doing at his house?"

The car leaped forward, crossed a half dozen side streets, spun into the heavy traffic of Alameda. There was no sign of Abbotsford. "Looking for the diamonds. Now he's beat her up, where can he take her to hide her, to get rid of her—quick? With his mind, he'll think of sticking her into a freight."

McKechnie made a sudden, impatient exclamation. "My God, why didn't I think of it before? She's the one he passed on the stairs at Toler House. She fits the description given by the old lady, the girl Healy was taking to his room. It has to be Jane Cannelbury."

Collins shook his head. "I don't see how Abbotsford could confuse her with Cathcart's daughter."

McKechnie was weaving through traffic, the wheel spinning between his hands. There was sweat on his temples, in a patch between his brows. A row of trucks suddenly loomed ahead like the behinds of elephants. "A mix-up. I don't see how it could have happened, either. I'll bet it depended on some screwy accident."

Collins's dark eyes had grown still in his bruised face. "He hadn't any right to beat her up."

"Maybe he tried to kill her." McKechnie gave Collins a brief glance. He thought to himself that Collins, usually pretty impersonal in his attitude about the job, showed surprising heat.

The car jolted on a curb, bounced back into the roadway. Collins grabbed the door handle to brace himself. "She isn't all there. She's like a little kid."

"She started a hell of a lot of trouble when she lifted that suitcase," McKechnie replied grimly.

They were held up, their nerves crackling with impatience, while a row of flatcars cut across Alameda to enter the spur track of a lumber company. But from there on they had the breaks; they caught green lights all the way out past the Union Depot and on into the industrial district surrounding the yards. Finally McKechnie swung the car into Commercial Way, jammed on the brakes. Abbotsford's sedan sat at the curb with its doors swinging.

McKechnie hit the pavement running, with Collins bouncing out the other door to fall in beside him. They raced through the gate. The figures of Abbotsford and the girl were far ahead, bobbing across tracks. McKechnie shouted. At the sound Abbotsford swung into a new tangent, dragging the girl toward a long cut of cars which had just begun to move. The Diesel engineer must have been watching, must have seen that they were coming his way, for there was a sharp hoot from the whistle.

One of Jane's shoes flew off, spun through the air. McKechnie heard the sound it made, the *clop, clop,* as it bounced on the hard earth. He was driving himself hard now, trying to cut Abbotsford off before he could reach the moving cars. Beside him he could hear Collins panting.

Collins gasped: "Those aren't empties. He doesn't intend to put her into one of them. He's going to kill her!"

"Sure." McKechnie's reply was short, jolted from his straining lungs. But it had struck him just as it had Collins—Abbotsford meant to murder the girl under the moving cars, to shut her mouth. She had

met him on the stairs at Toler House, of course. She could testify that he had been going to Healy's room just before Healy's death. But why kill her, McKechnie wondered, in front of us? What crazy motive drove him? He'd be silencing a witness at the expense of a new murder, with witnesses.

The girl was like a big, loose-jointed doll which Abbotsford was able to jerk this way and that. She stumbled toward the moving cars, one hand out helplessly, as if to ward off danger, the other arm held tightly in Abbotsford's grip. The gray gown flapped against her knees. Both shoes were gone. Her screams were muffled and reedy.

Abbotsford was shouting too. He was yelling at the engineer to put on speed.

The cars ground to a sudden, jolting stop just as Abbotsford sent Jane running into them with one last, enormous lunge. One of her arms slid through, across the track. The wheels stopped not five inches from her head.

Abbotsford turned with animal-like swiftness to face the two who were bearing down on him. His head moved; he flicked a glance toward a newcomer, Jenkins, who was running toward him from the end of the train.

Jenkins had his gun out, though it hung loosely and wasn't pointed toward Abbotsford. Jenkins was moving fast, but there was something watchful, tentative, in his manner, as if he hadn't quite sized up the situation, hadn't yet decided fully on a course of action. Facing him, Abbotsford seemed suddenly to glow with assurance and triumph. Abbotsford made an imperious, summoning motion, as if to call Jenkins to his side. Jenkins, running softly, glanced from Abbotsford to McKechnie and Collins. This all occurred in the tick of one moment, Abbotsford's movement and Jenkins's glance at his two superiors. The next instant Jenkins brought his gun up. Abbotsford must have been looking straight into its barrel. He shuddered and then screamed.

"Take the bastard!" McKechnie yelled to Collins. "And then cover me!"

Collins flung forward in a long leap. In the same instant McKechnie turned in a rush toward Jenkins. He struck the uniformed cop, and the

rush carried them both to the ground. Gravel tore McKechnie's palms and knees, and he was suffocated in dust. Under him Jenkins was for an instant flaccid and then gathered himself like a big cat, all coiled power and vicious eagerness to hurt. Jenkins writhed, twisted almost free. He lifted his right hand, and the gun gleamed in the sun. He brought the barrel down in a chopping blow at McKechnie's temple.

McKechnie struck Jenkins's wrist with the side of his hand in the fraction of a second before the gun connected with his head. The gun barrel tapped his skull; then the gun was spinning off across the dirt. Jenkins grunted an obscene word. McKechnie's second blow, this one with a balled fist, caught the corner of his jaw and jerked his head back.

McKechnie's lungs were choked with dust, with stinging lack of breath from the long run from the gate. But he found himself growling words, nevertheless. "I can smell a wrong cop as far as I can see one. And brother, you stink!" And in the same instant he found himself wondering if it could be possible that he was pounding Jenkins because Jenkins was so good-looking, had made such a point of being ambitious, and because nobody had ever called him Black Irish or had cause to.

Jenkins turned his head briefly, and McKechnie's fist almost broke his nose. Tears came into Jenkins's eyes, but his outspread fingers went on searching for the gun. McKechnie pounded his reaching arm, but it didn't withdraw and the gun was only inches away. There wouldn't be any chop at his temple this time, McKechnie knew; there'd be a bullet.

"Hold it, Jenkins!" Collins's voice was cutting, distinct. Jenkins seemed almost too mad to listen; he threw a brief look toward Collins, though, and saw Collins's gun on him. "Get up and don't try anything funny," Collins said. McKechnie felt the tension go out of Jenkins, though the impression of coiled strength remained.

They got to their feet. There were a few minutes of confusion, of locating everybody. Abbotsford was sitting on the dirt with his legs spread, a funny look on his face; and McKechnie decided that Collins

had had to slug him. The girl was being picked up off the track by a switchman and a member of the train crew. She hung between them, the gray dress dragging, covering her legs, her head lolled back. After a minute one of the men bent and inched her across his shoulders and stood up. Her hands moved against his back like a pair of pendulums. "Where do you want her?"

"In the office upstairs," said McKechnie.

"She's passed out."

"I can see that. Put her on a couple of chairs, get her head down."

"She looks like she needs an ambulance."

"She'll have one."

Jenkins, who had been standing stiffly, made a sudden move as if to walk away. Collins still had his gun in his hand; he motioned with it, shook his head. "You too, pal. Upstairs with the others."

A rush of dark color came into Jenkins's face. "You must be crazy. Just because that jerk there"—he flung a glance at Abbotsford—"because he acts as if he knows me——"

McKechnie had been brushing dirt off his trousers. He looked up to laugh. He thought he'd never seen such a poisonous expression as that in Jenkins's eyes. "You wouldn't disown an old friend?"

Jenkins ran through a few descriptive phrases, summing up his opinion of Abbotsford. Collins and McKechnie listened, unmoved. It was hot and they were sweating. McKechnie could feel his clothes sticking to him, feel the twitch of tendons in his shoulders. The vituperative rush from Jenkins's mouth was as inconsequential as a cricket chirping. When Jenkins ran down, seemed to have settled a verbal score for the time being, they herded him along with Abbotsford to the office on the second floor of the yard office.

Now Abbotsford's liquor seemed on the verge of overwhelming him. All coherence left him. He fell a couple of times on the stairs, tried to get lost in the upper hall, and once in the small office set aside for the railroad police, he flopped on a chair and almost slid out of it to the floor. He began then to look around wildly, as if unaware where he could be. His gaze passed over the unconscious girl on the chairs; his mouth twitched. Once he cried brokenly, "Mel! Mel, where are you?"

Jenkins walked to the windows immediately, turned his back on the room, expressing his removal from and his lack of interest in what was to follow. Collins got on the telephone, first to the special agent's office downtown, then to Central L.A.P.D.

McKechnie drew a chair over, sat down facing Abbotsford. He studied the big man curiously. The evidences of careful grooming had disappeared. In Abbotsford's face was a loosening, a twitching lostness, that would have suited the worst rummy McKechnie had ever run out of the yards.

He touched Abbotsford's trembling hand briefly. "Mr. Abbotsford."

The vacant eyes roved over him.

"Can you understand what I'm saying?"

"What you're saying?" Abbotsford echoed, apparently trying to grasp what was going on. "I don't know. Are you speaking to me?"

"Yes, sir."

Abbotsford rubbed a hand down across his face. "I've had too much to drink. You understand, drinking isn't a problem with me. My wife is alcoholic. We've had a great deal of trouble over that."

"Are you sober enough to understand what I'm telling you?"

Abbotsford's eyes fixed on McKechnie suddenly. "Yes, you're saying that I'm drunk."

"No, I'm not." In that moment McKechnie wanted to quit. Abbotsford was sick, or he was an extremely clever actor. They were going to wander all over the map. There wouldn't be any coherent story, any confession. Then McKechnie noticed the air of tension in Jenkins. Jenkins had his hands clenched behind him, clenched tight; his fingers were working. McKechnie said to Abbotsford, "Tell me in your own way why you came into the yards."

"Am I in the yards, sir?"

"Yes, you are."

"And I'm drunk?"

"I don't know that, no, sir."

"Well, I am drunk," Abbotsford said with firmness. He looked around at the room. "Is my wife here? Is she listening to me?"

"Your wife isn't here."

"I'm glad she isn't." Abbotsford nodded over and over, slowly. "I wouldn't want her to hear what I have to say. She's a sensitive girl. She was well brought up. I've ruined her life. She took to drinking too much—my fault. I've spared her this, though. Haven't I?"

"You've spared her something," McKechnie said. He was watching Jenkins's hands, the fingers like talons, the strong wrists that moved slightly inside the khaki cuffs as Jenkins clenched and unclenched his hands.

Abbotsford lifted his head, his expression almost dreamy. "At different times Mel has tried to interest me in drinking. I'd be better off, she said. It's a release, like other things. She thought if I drank I wouldn't have—well—quirks. A quirk that was dangerous. I suspect that Mel is really an alcoholic and that she ought to have treatment for it. Maybe not."

He stopped talking. Jane had lifted herself on one elbow. The glasses were gone, the broken frames lost in the yards on that last mad run with Abbotsford. McKechnie stood up and took off his coat, rolled it, went over to put it under Jane's head. "You'd better lie still for a while."

She lay back without speaking. McKechnie went back to Abbotsford. "How did you get started in the baggage-stealing business?"

Abbotsford ignored the question, perhaps didn't even hear it. "We've had these arguments—my wife and I have had these arguments over drinking for a long time. She gets violent, wants to do silly things, go to parties, go out to night clubs."

McKechnie accepted a cigarette from a pack Collins held toward him. They lit up and began to smoke. The phone rang and Collins picked it up again.

Abbotsford said, "Now I've proved something, officer. To myself, that is. I've proved drinking isn't for me. I got thoroughly plastered; I've been busy in the house all day getting plastered, and so at the end what do I do? I turned from stealing—a minor vice, you might say—to murder."

McKechnie said, "You'd already murdered Healy."

Abbotsford's face split in a wide, surprised smile. "Oh, Healy's death

was accidental. Entirely a thing of the moment. I went to his room and found him excitable, unmanageable, shouting some gibberish that we'd robbed the old man in the yards of sixty thousand dollars. I grew desperate. Healy had a dresser drawer open and there were some tools in it, and on sheer impulse I picked one up and jumped at him to scare him. He moved his head without warning and the tool entered his skull. That's the truth. You couldn't call it murder."

"Perhaps not." McKechnie spoke warily, careful not to break the conversation up into argument. "There was Cathcart, the old man, though, last Friday. What would you call that?"

"It may have been murder. I didn't attend to Cathcart."

Abbotsford went on smiling in silence. Jenkins's back grew rigid; his shoulders swelled. Collins brought Jane a paper cup full of water from the cooler in the hall, held her head up so she could drink.

"Can't you tell me about Cathcart?" McKechnie asked.

Abbotsford seemed lost in lofty amusement; it was some moments before he replied. "You're quite in the dark, aren't you? The question is, should I enlighten you? Should I unburden myself?" He pursed his lips, blinking dreamily; McKechnie noticed that his eyes gradually filled with tears.

Abbotsford took out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. "My old trouble. Emotional. When I think of all that I have endured, the futile measures I've taken to relieve my tension, I want to weep. Stealing has always been a chore, a tiresome therapy—the way you'd rub an aching muscle——" He blew his nose and lapsed again into silence.

"About Cathcart——"

"I think Jenkins pistol-whipped him," Abbotsford said quietly. "I didn't see it done. I was busy with the jewelry. We'd just got rid of the Mexican and we were nervous. I mean, I was nervous. I've never seen Jenkins show any nervousness or any other emotion. He's cool and efficient. Very efficient. Wait and see. He'll go far."

Jenkins made his break then. He sprang through the narrow space between McKechnie and Abbotsford, knocking Abbotsford to the floor in passing. Collins lunged at him and Jenkins straight-armed him back into Jane and the chairs. There was a loud sound of breaking

wood, screams from the girl. A piece of a broken chair popped out across the floor and Jenkins stumbled into it. He kicked it aside in the same moment that McKechnie's gun barrel came down on the back of his head.

He folded slowly, the magnificent body letting go, the great muscles flattening, and the two investigators watched him drop. Abbotsford was sitting spread-legged as he had in the yards. Jane was sobbing.

Collins stared at Jenkins. He nodded then. "Just like the old man. Just like Cathcart." He looked at the gun in McKechnie's hand.

"Not quite as hard," McKechnie answered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ryerson puffed on his cigar and stared at the diamonds spread out on his desk. "The hell you say! Wrapped up in a tablecloth!"

"In a drawer of the dining-room buffet," McKechnie repeated.

Ryerson picked up a necklace. Light shot through it stone by stone, a glitter like that of a million icicles. "What does his wife say?"

"Says she had no idea they were even in the house," Collins answered. "I think she's lying. I don't think we'll pin anything on her. Abbotsford refuses to implicate her." He had pulled down his sleeve and was examining a cuff link. Somewhere along the way he'd acquired a scratch on the dull finish, solid gold.

"You've got him all salted away," Ryerson meditated happily.

"Up to his neck," said McKechnie. "He still says Healy's death was an accident. But Healy was asking for a little something to keep still. It figures that Abbotsford had to kill him because he was dangerous. Healy had seen something in the yards Friday—not the jewelry or the

luggage—but something that gave him a hint Abbotsford wasn't on the up-and-up and might be implicated in Cathcart's death. What Healy hinted to me that night outside Shiney's Tavern must have been in the nature of insurance. He was shedding a little light, just in case something unfortunate happened."

Ryerson nodded and went on smoking.

"I hate it about Jenkins," Collins put in all at once. "I hate to think of a cop going bad."

Ryerson's expression became grim. "When they're rotten I want to know it. The sooner the better. I don't want them on my police force." He swung angrily in his chair. Then he glanced at McKechnie. "What gave you the hunch about Jenkins?"

"The way Branham acted when we went after him for the whiskey theft. Branham seemed to expect Jenkins to stand up for him against us. I figured he might have been paying for something he wasn't getting. Then, too, there's another angle. For a while I couldn't believe that Jenkins would turn in the luggage if he was in on the theft. But I remembered Branham again. Branham pretended to spot the car with the broken seal from which he'd stolen the whiskey. It was on his mind, of course, for one thing—but again, he was covering up in a fashion. Jenkins figured it the same way Branham had, that if he turned up the stolen luggage we sure as hell wouldn't consider any possibility he was in on the theft. He didn't realize he'd be giving away the whole method by which Abbotsford had planned to get the luggage safely out of Union Station. Of course that card Jenkins tore up must have broken Abbotsford's heart." McKechnie paused to light a cigarette for himself. "You wait until we dig through this thing, we're going to find out that Jenkins was at the bottom of all the crap that's been going on out at East L.A. yards. He's had his hand out, getting a cut. He loves that feeling of power, and being a cop gave him a chance to exercise it. We checked on some stuff Abbotsford admitted and we brought in a chair-car porter—he was spotting likely luggage and getting it back into the train—and a man in one of the coach cleaning crews. Jenkins brought them into it. They'd never heard of Abbotsford."

Ryerson spread his hamlike hands on the desk, chewed the cigar. "You're telling me Jenkins and not Abbotsford cooked it up?"

"No. Abbotsford cooked it up. He'd been a thief for years. He'd been lucky. He was pretty well set, up to today, had an executive's job with Poppy State, had a wife and home. There was just one drawback. The yards were spread out under his windows and he couldn't leave them alone."

Ryerson grunted, took his cigar out, and looked at it as if something had gone wrong with the flavor.

McKechnie said, "He must have gradually grown familiar with every routine—he saw the work crews come and go, he spotted the routes used by the patrolmen, and probably he noticed something which gave him the idea Jenkins could be approached. It takes a thief to spot a thief—that quick. Abbotsford became obsessed with the craving for the old excitement and danger of stealing. Then he got the inspiration about stealing the luggage in Union Depot, and how it might be worked back to the yards and so to him. A trail he thought we couldn't track."

"I hope they cook his goose, but good," said Collins.

McKechnie thought, Collins is angry because Abbotsford beat the helpless, confused girl. He thought then of Jane as he had last seen her, being put into the police ambulance. The hem of the gray dress had hung from beneath the blanket. Somewhere in the dust of the yards were the oversize shoes, the frame of the glasses. The high hopes and gaudy dreams she must have had on stealing the diamonds had come to this—being put shoeless and half blind into a black vehicle under the eyes of the cops.

Collins was smoking, his face impassive. "I just hope Abbotsford gets something of what he dished out, that's all." He looked at the window which let in the dusty light of the well. "I've never felt sorrier for anybody."

Ryerson nodded. "His wife."

"I mean Jane Cannelbury."

Ryerson rubbed his jaw. "You've called the FBI?"

"Everything's tied up." McKechnie rose from his chair. "Let's start work on the report."

It was past six when McKechnie finally left the office, went downstairs for his car, inched out of the garage and into the traffic. He went north, into the older districts, and came finally to the four-flat where Nora lived. She didn't answer her bell. He went down the steps, heading back to the car, when he saw her hurrying from the corner bus stop. She was bareheaded, had on a plain gray suit, black low-heeled shoes. She looked tired, and the make-up had worn off, so that her nose was shiny and her lips uncolored. When she noticed McKechnie a suddenly self-conscious expression crossed her face. She brushed at her hair as if wondering about her appearance.

He took off his hat and waited. The old palms along the walk cast a shadowy twilight here, and above them the sky was steel-colored, the day fading. He said, "I've brought news."

She gave him a quick, uncertain glance. "Come in, then. I'll make coffee. I worked today. I'm beat."

He followed her into the deeper twilight of the porch. A downstairs door was open at the left of hers, and inside the room thus exposed he saw a couple of kids staring at the screen of a television set. A woman was knitting by a window. It looked peaceful and homelike and ordinary.

The room upstairs was full of gray light from the west. The palms were full of birds and he heard their rippling chatter, the noise they made getting ready for night. He saw that Nora had stopped by the table and was looking at him. "They've caught someone? Is that it?"

"We got a man named Abbotsford."

"One of the witnesses?"

"Yes."

"I never did go to see him."

"Better that way." He sat down. He heard her in the kitchen running water into the coffeepot. When she came back she'd shed the jacket, wore a white cotton blouse with the gray skirt. She came close, pulled a chair beside his.

"This was just a job for you, wasn't it?"

He tried to figure out what she meant behind the question. "I guess at first that's what it was." He wanted to say, "It turned into something else because I met you," but he couldn't; he could just hope that she guessed it.

"Tell me about Dad."

He explained about Abbotsford and what he could guess of the man's motives and background, the things that must have gnawed him, the long history of theft. "Now this is the tough part," McKechnie admitted. "Abbotsford was the cookie behind all this, but he didn't actually murder your father. One of our cops did that."

All the color went out of her face. Her violet eyes got big. She put her hands together in her lap, twined them tightly. Her knees shook. "Well, I can sue the railroad after all."

He shrugged; he knew the coldness showed in the look he gave her.

"You don't like me, do you?" she asked.

"I don't like that side of you," he admitted.

"I'm not going to sue the railroad. It wouldn't bring Dad back. I'm giving Dad's half of the mine to his partner."

"Don't overdo this thing!"

She shook her head; she was quite serious. "I've worried about money for so long. Why didn't I worry about Mother and Dad? Why didn't I worry about their happiness, their health? You see, I've been wrong right along."

"You had cause."

"Not any longer."

The dark thickened, settled deeper into the room. She looked small in the big old-fashioned chair. He thought of her being alone here in the big flat and he sensed that even her brand of courage wouldn't keep her from feeling lost. He said, "We'll have the coffee here. Then how about dinner somewhere?"

She smiled, and the look in her eyes was suddenly warm and full of liking. "The same place you took me last night?"

"Sure. We'll have frogs' legs this time."

"And the torte."

"Yes, we'll surprise that old boy again."

She spread her hands. "I'd love to!"

The coffee bubbled in the kitchen, spreading the rich aroma through the rooms, but for a moment she couldn't tear herself away—she was looking at McKechnie and he was gazing back at her and there was a great sense of discovery between them.

The breakfast carts were rolling in the hospital corridors, the day was bright, nurses hurried to prepare their patients for the meal. Collins went into the room which was darkened and bent above the figure on the bed, spoke to the white mask made of tape and gauze.

"Miss Cannelbury?"

One of her hands fluttered; there was a choked sound from behind the mask. "Who is it?"

"Collins, miss."

"Mr. Collins from the railroad?"

"Yes. I've come to tell you that there won't be any charges against you. Mrs. Lippert is satisfied to have the jewelry back."

"Is she—all right?"

"She's conscious; she ordered her husband to cancel the complaint."

"Oh." The bed shook.

"You mustn't cry. You'll twist your face and undo what the surgeons have fixed for you," Collins chided. "You must lie still and get well."

"My aunt Dolly was here!"

"That's good."

"I can't remember what happened in that house——"

"Don't try, then."

"Listen, Mr. Collins, I promise, the way I promised Aunt Dolly, I won't ever try to leave Santa Monica again."

Collins couldn't answer that. It was probably true that her only safe ground was home. I hope to God, he thought, that she never has to enter an institution. She was one of those who would never quite grow up, and she had the thoughtless irresponsibility of a child, but he hated to think of her as caged. "Just take it easy. You'll be all right now. Good-by."

"Good-by, Mr. Collins."

He left the room and headed for the elevators. Going down, he remembered Ramos and the unfinished business of the yellow flag. He stayed in the elevator and went back up to Ramos's floor.

There was a new man in Ramos's bed, a stout white-haired man with his leg in a cast. Collins looked around, found that one of the nurses' aides was watching him. She was a pretty girl with black hair, dark eyes, a quick smile. She came over to him. "You want Ramos?"

"Has he been transferred to some other ward?"

"He's gone," she said. "The immigration people came for him."

"I see." Collins had expected a final interview, during which he could have given Ramos the means to communicate with him should the mood ever seize him.

"Are you from the railroad?"

"That's right."

"He was trying to write you a letter. He spent a long time on it, but in the end he tore it up. He asked me to burn the pieces and I did. I put them in the hospital incinerator."

"I guess it wasn't very important. Thanks, anyway."

Still she held him. "He had seen a bad thing happen in the freight cars."

Collins snapped to attention. "That *is* important. Excuse me, I'd better get to a phone." The bus carrying Ramos south would have to be intercepted at the border. Ramos's stay in the country of bountiful riches was about to be prolonged. He'd be happy, hopeful.

But Ramos wouldn't know who had put up the yellow flag. He'd been inside the reefer, almost dead, when the yellow flag had been tied to the brake handle high on the roof. Collins thought about it as he hurried to the nearest phone, shut the door, put in a coin, and dialed the office.

He'd never know for sure; he was convinced of this. But of the people with knowledge of Ramos's predicament who might have kept track of the reefer—of these people, Collins would have chosen Healy to be the one who had put up the yellow flag.

From what McKechnie had said of him, Healy alone was simple

enough, possibly merciful enough, to want to save the Mexican from a horrible death. It wouldn't have been Abbotsford, obsessed with a kleptomaniac dream; nor yet Jenkins of the built-in solid-rock ego.

Healy wasn't my pigeon, Collins thought; I never knew him. But I'll leave it that way: he put up the yellow flag on the reefer in the Brett Street yards.

And so in Collins's mind he wrote finish to the affair of the yellow flag.