JAMES HADLEY

CHASE

THE WARY TRANSGRESSOR

CHAPTER ONE

THEY came out of the coach like treacle out of a tin: twenty-two of them; mostly fat, middle-aged women with a sprinkling of elderly men. They stood in a group, gaping up at the Duomo with its one hundred and thirty-five pinnacles, and its two thousand, two hundred and forty-five statues, looking about as intelligent as a flock of sheep.

You could tell at a glance who were British and who were Americans in that bunch. The British tourists were supercilious, since they had something equally as old and as big in their own country, while the Americans were knocked right back on their heels, unashamedly fumbling with feverish haste for their cameras.

"This is my party; my Gethsemane," Umberto said out of the corner of his mouth. "What a bunch of cows! Even before they'-ve stuck their fat backsides into the coach again they'll have forgotten every word I have said. By tomorrow they won't even remember what the Duomo looks like."

"I sympathize with you," I said. "A man of your talents shouldn't wasiv "his time on such cattle. To prove what a good friend I am, I will take them for you."

"You?" Umberto said contemptuously. "What do you know about the Duomo? Oblige me by going away. Gratify me by breaking a leg."

He adjusted his peaked cap which bore the legend: *Authorized Guide,* straightened his threadbare tie, and then swaggered over to the group of tourists,# a false smile on his hatchet face, his left hand concealing the large grease stain on his jacket.

Another coach edged into the parking .ot, and another crowd of tourists got out.

"And this is my party," Filippo said, nipping out his cigarette and carefully stowing the butt in his hat. He grinned at me. "What a collection of brainless monsters! What a splendid half-hour of boredom I intend to inflict on them! If that fool Umberto doesn't hurry up I shall have to compete against his raucous twaddle."

I caught hold of his arm.

"Now, wait. You don't look well this morning. You and I, Filippo, have always been good friends. Why not rest in the shade, and let me conduct these morons over the Duomo for you? I will gladly save you the trouble for a small sum of five hundred lire, and all the tips I get will naturally **bo** yours."

"Go away, you thief," Filippo said, snatching his arm away. "Oblige me by cutting your throat. A cut throat is a certain cure for envy."

"Why do you imagine I envy you?" I asked, scowling at him. "Look at yourself. Your shirt is dirty, and you have a hole in your coat. You are no better than a tramp. Do you seriously think you are the cause for envy?"

"It is better to have a dirty shirt than no shirt at all," Filippo said, grinning, "and it is more decent to have a hole in one's coat than in one's trousers. Look at yourself before you criticize others."

I watched him take charge of his party, and then, a little furtively, I inspected my shirt cuffs. They were clean, but a little frayed. My shoes worried me more than my clothes. This morning I had made a pair of new soles for them from a piece of stout cardboard I had stolen from my landlady. But I knew the first wet day would force me off the streets and would cut off my meagre source of income. If I wasn't to borrow again, 1 would have to buy a new pair of shoes before very long.

Had I been an Italian instead of an American I should have had no difficulty in becoming an official guide. But being an American I was unable to get the necessary permit.

The difference between an official guide and an unofficial one is considerable. The system works in this way: tourist agencies have their own courier to accompany a coach-load of tourists. The courier's job is to take the tourists to various towns, handle the hotel bills, arrange about the meals and make himself generally useful, but he isn't txpected to know the historical details of the various churches or places of interest. He arranges for official guides at each town to meet the coach and to take charge of his party. He pays the guides for their work, and arranges with them to meet the next coach that will be arriving the following week. In this way an official guide has a regular job, and can rely on regular money.

An unofficial guide, like myself, has to be content with sightseers travelling, on their own, who are generally short of money owing to the currency restrictions, and more often than not have to be coerced into hiring a guide. To make the handicap even greater, an unofficial guide may not wear an armlet nor a guide's cap, and is therefore always viewed with suspicion when he offers his services.

But being a guide, even in an unofficial capacity, is a convenient method of earning a living and, in my case, the only method, since I was living in Milan without a police permit.

This particular morning hadn't so far been a profitable one. For the past two hours I had been waiting patiently for a client. I was becoming a little anxious as I had no money, and in half an hour it would be my lunch-time. I was hungry, and I began to

wonder if I should hunt up Torrchi, who is one of the best pick-pockets operating in the Duomo, and borrow a hundred lire from him before he went home to his lunch. I could always rely on Torrchi for a small loan, but as I already owed him two hundred lire I was reluctant to borrow again from him.

As I was trying to make up my mind whether to go without lunch or hunt up Torrchi, a girl came towards me out of the hot sunlight, moving lightly and with easy grace.

She was in her late twenties, compactly built, and dressed in a fawn pleated linen skirt and an emerald green silk blouse, open at the neck. Her short wavy hair was the colour of old copper, her eyes were big and wide-set, and her mouth a glistening rectangle of vivid scarlet.

She wasn't beautiful in the accepted sense of the word, but she attracted attention with the force of a lone neon sign blazing in an unlit street.

She paused within a few feet of me, and opened her handbag. From it she took a copy of the *Guide Bleu* of Italy and began, with frowning concentration, to turn its pages.

Two other unofficial guides were already moving towards her before I dragged my eyes from her long slim legs in the sheerest silk stockings, and started into action myself.

I reached her in two strides. The other guides fell back, muttering and glaring at me.

"Excuse me, signora," I said, giving her an elaborate bow. "Perhaps you would care for a guide? There are many things of great interest not covered by the *Guide Bleu* I should be most happy to show you." >

She glanced up and her eyes met mine. She had that look in them that jolted me right down to my heels, and then I became aware that under her emerald green blouse was a shape to set a man crazy.

She was smiling now. She had big even teeth as white as the pith of an orange, and I saw her eyes were the colour of violets, and her eyelashes were long and black.

"What qualifications have you to compete with the *Blue Guide?'* she asked.

"I am a leading authority on Gothic architecture, and an expert on Italian cathedrals in general, signora," I told her. "For the past year I have shown no less than one thousand, one hundred and twenty-three people over the Duomo without a complaint."

She closed the guide-book.

"Goodness! As many as that? Are you an official guide?"

"You have only to see an official guide to be glad I am not. There is one standing in the doorway now: the gentleman with the blue veins in his nose and the beautiful china teeth."

She giggled as she looked at Giuseppe, one of my best friends, even if he isn't an oil painting and gets drunk every night.

"I see what you mean." She touched the curls at the back of her neck. "Yes, I don't think it would be very amusing to hire him. But perhaps you are very expensive?"

"I am the best and cheapest guide in Milan, signora."

She pointed her chin at me.

"I will give you a thousand lire, but no more."

"For a thousand lire, signora, I will also show you da Vinci's "Last Supper", which is in the Cenacolo Vinciano, a taxi ride from here, and I will even pay for the taxi."

"I've already seen it," she returned. "Are you an American?"

"A fellow countryman, shall we say?"

She looked sharply at me.

"I thought my Italian accent was impeccable."

"So it is, but you have an American appearance."

She laughed.

"Is that it? Well, as you are my guide, shall we go into the cathedral?"

"Willingly, signora."

We walked side by side into the vast, dimly lit interior of the Duomo where Umberto was delivering his lecture with much waving of hands in a vain attempt to hold the attention of his group of tourists.

When hi: caught sight of me with the girl at my side, his automatic flow' of words faltered, and he had to thump his forehead to remember what he was saying.

"The Duomo is exceptionally crowded today," I said, as I led the girl past Filippo and his bunch of rubbernecks. Filippo stared hungrily at the girl, and then scowled at me. "I suggest we go and see the body of San Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, who died in 1586, and who, up to a year ago, was quite presentable to look at. Now, unfortunately, the flesh has fallen from his face, and he isn't quite the handsonie fellow he used to be. But at least it 'is interesting to see him exactly as he was laid to rest three hundred and sixty-odd years ago. After we have seen him you will fjpd the crowds have thinned out."

"I didn't know he was buried here. I've often seen that enormous statue of him overlooking the Lago Maggiore. Why did they make it so immense?"

"His friends were afraid he would be forgotten. They thought a seventy-five-foot statue would impress his memory on the minds of the people. You know the Lago Maggiore then, signora?"

"I have a villa there."

"It is a beautiful place. You are very fortunate."

We paused at the head of the steps leading to the subterranean chapel where the Archbishop lies in state.

"May I make a request to save embarrassment?" I asked.

She looked up at me. We were alone in the semi-darkness, close to each other, and I had to check a strong impulse to take her in

my arms. This impulse both annoyed and startled me, as I am usually safe when alone with a woman.

"What is it?"

"The Brother who will show you the Archbishop's resting-place will expect a trifle for his trouble. Unfortunately, I am without money at the moment. I would be grateful if you would give him a hundred lire. I will deduct it from my fee when we get outside."

"You mean you haven't any money at all?" she asked.

"Just a temporary embarrassment."

She opened her handbag and gave me two hundred lire.

"You can't make much as a guide."

"That doesn't mean I'm not a good guide. It merely proves I have my share of bad luck."

"I think you are a very good guide," she said, smiling at me.

"If you will excuse me——"

I jumped forward and grabbed Torrchi as he tried to slip past me. Holding him firmly by the arm, I led him over to the girl.

"Permit me, signora, to introduce you to signor Torrchi, the most renowned pickpocket working in the Duomo. Torrchi, be so good as to return to the signora the articles you have just stolen from her."

Torrchi, a fat little man with a round, jolly face, beamed at me as he began to go through his pockets.

"It was for the practice only; nothing more, signor David," he assured me, handing the girl a diamond clip, her wristwatch, her cigarette-case and a lace handkerchief she had been carrying, tucked into the pocket of her blouse. "You know I never molest your clients. Everything was to be returned."

"Go away, you scoundrel!" I said. "If you ever try that trick on me again I'll tear out your thieving heart!"

"Such language in the Duomo!" Torrchi said, genuinely shocked. "Remember, you are in the house of God."

I raised my fist threateningly and he retreated hastily into the darkness.

"I'm sorry about that," I said.

The girl returned her things to her handbag.

"It was very clever of him. How on earth did he do it?"

I laughed.

"That was child's play. His great masterpiece was to remove the suspender-belt belonging to a young woman he met in the street. It wasn't until her stockings descended that she realized what was missing. He has the belt hanging over his bed to this very day."

"For goodness' sake!"

"Torrchi is a great artist, but he isn't the only one. The Duomo is always full of expert pickpockets. They make an excellent living from the tourists. Fortunately, I know most of them, and usually they leave my clients alone. I'm afraid the diamond clip was a little too tempting."

"I shouldn't have worn it." She turned to look doubtfully at the dimly lit steps. "May I hold your arm? These steps look dangerous."

"I was going to suggest it."

She leaned a little on my arm as we began to descend. Half-way down, she made a false step. If I hadn't been holding on to her she would have fallen. I pulled her against me to steady her.

"It's these damned high heels," she said breathlessly.

"That's what it is. The steps are really quite safe."

I felt her breast against my arm. I looked down at her. Her face was six inches from mine. In the dim light her eyes seemed to shine like a cat's,

I bent my head and kissed her on the mouth. I felt her body sag a little against mine. We stayed like that for a moment, then without moving her feet she leaned away from me.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she said, looking up at me.

"No," I said, and my arm circled the small of her back, pulling her hard against me.

I kissed her again, and she kissed back.

"No, please . . ."

I released her. I was breathing hard and unsteadily.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really am sorry. I don't know what got into me."

She touched her lips with her finger-tips as she looked up at me.

"Don't say you're sorry. There's nothing to be sorry about. I think I liked it. Let's get away from this gloomy place, shall we?"

The hot, violent sunshine, the noise of the traffic and the dense crowd were almost overpowering after the quiet and dimness of the Duomo.

We stood for a moment blinking in the sunlight, the waves of sound beating upon us, and yet feeling isolated in the teeming mass of people who surged around us,

"I've put a thousand-lira note in your pocket," the girl said. "I think with a little practice I could become as expert as signer Torrchi."

"But I haven't earned it!" I protested. "I can't accept it."

"Please shut up about it. I hate scenes about money, so please shut up about it."

"At least let me take you up on the roof. There's a lift just round the corner. The statues are worth seeing at close quarters."

"And please shut up about the Duomo. Let's go somewhere and eat. I want to talk to you."

While she was speaking she opened her handbag and took out a pair of dark green sun-glasses. When she put them on, they completely hid her eyes, and I realized with a slight sense of shock that her eyes were the only living thing in her face which was now as expressionless and as cold as a death mask,

"But what can you want to talk to me about?" I asked blankly.

"Are you usually so stupid? Don't you want to talk to me? Where shall we go?"

My mind floundered. I couldn't believe she was serious.

"Well, there's Maximum, or if you want to be very grand there's Alia Bella Napoli."

"I want a *trattoria:* a working man's place where the food is good."

"Are you quite sure you want to go to a place like that?"

"Yes: take me to the place where you usually eat."

I took her to Piero's that is down an alley off Corso Vittorio Emanuele, fifty yards from the Duomo.

Piero came from behind the cash desk to serve us. He was a little man with a pot belly and a wizened face which he tried to hide behind a bushy black beard. As he came up to the table he gave the girl a long, searching look, and then surprise and admiration came into his eyes.

"Signora; signore," he said. "What may I have the very great pleasure to bring you?"

She had taken off her sun-glasses, and in the red shaded light of the table lamp her eyes looked like rubies.

"Order something, please," she said to me. "What is best here?"

"The risotto is very good. It is the classical speciality of Milan, and there is none better than Piero's."

"Then risotto," she said, smiling at Piero."

. "Followed by Cotolette alia Milanese."

She nodded.

"And a bottle of Sassella?"

"Yes."

When Piero had gone into the kitchen, she opened her handbag and offered me her cigarette-case. I took a cigarette, the first I had had for two days. I lit hers and then mine. I wasn't sure if I was dreaming this. I was like a man holding a soap bubble, afraid to move or breathe in case it burst.

"I expect you're thinking terrible things about me," she said, looking straight at me.

"No, but I can't believe my good fortune."

She smiled.

"All the same you imagine I must be slightly neurotic, behaving like this."

"I think nothing of the kind. I think you acted on an impulse and you are now wondering if you'll regret it."

"That's exactly what happened. I can't make up my mind if I should run away or brazen it out."

"Brazen it out," I said. "We should all give way to impulses much more often. The world would be a much more exciting place if we behaved in a less civilized manner."

"You really think so?"

"I'm positive of it."

"All right; then I will brazen it out. Now that's settled, tell me your name."

She was examining me closely, and I felt her eyes were missing nothing. I was glad I had put on a clean shirt and had shaved. Some mornings I don't bother to shave.

"David Chisholm. What is yours?"

"Laura Fancino."

"But I thought you said you were an American. Fancino is a famous Italian name."

"I am an American. My husband is Italian."

I looked at her sharply.

"Is an Italian or *was* an Italian?"

"Does it matter?"

"I think it does."

"Then the answer is neither."

Piero came over and put two glasses of *Campari* and a bottle of mineral water on the table.

"The risotto will be ready in five minutes, signora. A drink with my compliments while you wait."

I put my hand on his paunch and gave him a little push.

"Go away, Piero; you are in the way."

< He walked back to the cash-desk, smiling.

"What do you mean—neither?" I asked. "Is he alive or dead?"

"A little of both. He had an accident. He can't move nor speak, but he remains alive. He's been like that for four years."

"I'm sorry. That's bad."

"Yes, isn't it?" She poured a little mineral water into her glass. "Bad for me too."

"I wouldn't have kissed you had I known," I said uneasily. "I'm sorry about that too."

"Why did you do it?" She wasn't looking at me. Her slim fingers turned the glass slowly by its stem.

"I wanted to. You have a pull like a magnet."

She went on turning the glass. Silence hung over us for a long minute, then she said, "So have you."

My heart began thumping against my side.

"You told me to be brazen," she went on. "I liked you the moment I saw you. Is that brazen enough for you?"

I laughed.

"It's not bad. I'll tell you something. When I first saw you I felt as if I'd stepped on an electric cable."

Piero came with the risotto at this moment. He opened the wine. We didn't say anything until he had gone back to the cash-desk.

"I can't understand why a man like you should be a guide," she said.

"There's no other work I can do. I am what is called **an** unregistered alien: that's a secret, of course."

"You mean you haven't a police permit to live in Italy?"

"That's right."

"But you could get one?"

"I can't unless I can prove I have prospects of work, and I can't prove I have prospects of work unless I can produce a police permit. It is a typical Italian vicious circle."

"Why are you living in Italy?"

"I like the place, and I'm trying to write a book about the cathedrals of Italy."

"You're the last person on earth who should be writing a book about cathedrals."

"Do you think so? Before the war, when I lived in New York, I was an architect. Not a very good one, but I managed to scrape up a living. I joined up, and finally got out here. I got mixed up in the invasion of Italy. My unit was one of the first to reach Rome. I got bitten by the splendour of Italy, and decided I'd write a book about its cathedrals. I had already done some study on the subject. As soon as I was out of the Army I settled in Milan. I hadn't any money. I couldn't be bothered with the police formalities so I took on the job of a guide to the Duomo. That's my life-story in a nutshell."

"Wouldn't it have been better to have got a police permit?"

"Maybe; I just didn't bother."

Piero brought the *cotoletti,* a dish of veal cutlets, egged and breadcrumbed, fried in butter and served on the bone.

When he had gone, she said, "Haven't you really any money?"

"I have now."

"But before . .. when you said .. ."

"I work on a pretty narrow margin, but it doesn't worry me. But look, let's not talk about me any more. Suppose you tell me about yourself?"

She lifted her shoulders.

"There's not much to tell. I worked for one of the Under-secretaries of State during the war. He came out here to help set up the Control Commission. I came with him. I met Bruno—that's my husband—and he asked me to marry him. He was very rich; you can't imagine how rich. I was sick and tired of working in an office; he seemed very much in love with me. So I married him. A year after, he had a car accident. He broke his back and injured his spinal cord. He had other horrible injuries. They said he couldn't possibly live, but they didn't know Bruno. There's nothing he can't do, once he makes up his mind. He made up his mind to live, and he has lived for four years, if you can call it living. He can't move; he has no use in his limbs, and he can't speak. But he just goes on living."

"There's no hope for him then?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know how long he'll go on existing. The doctors say he might die tomorrow or he might go on for a year."

The bitterness in her voice gave me a creepy feeling.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Yes." She smiled suddenly. "So you see my life's a little complicated at the moment."

"What are you doing in Milan?" I asked, feeling the bitter tension was still there in spite of her smile, and wanting to get away from it.

"I have a hairdressing appointment at two. The atmosphere at home was so depressing I decided to come in early and look at the Duomo. I'm glad I did." Her eyes moved over my face like a caress.

I thought of her husband unable to move and unable to speak. I wondered how I would have felt if I were in his place. His mind could never be at ease. He must be wondering all the time what she was doing whenever she was out of his sight.

"He trusts me," she said. "He never thinks I'm human enough to give way to my feelings. He believes in loyalty and duty and self-control."

I was startled she had seen so easily what had gone through my mind.

"That puts you in a spot."

"Up to now it has," she said slowly, not looking at me, "but I'm beginning to think I've been a fool. Four years is a long time; the best years of my life perhaps. I don't know how much longer it is going on for. It's not as if he would ever find out."

I felt my blood move through my veins like a stranger through an empty house. The next move was mine. She only wanted someone to convince her, and that wouldn't be difficult. If I didn't convince her, someone else would before very long.

But my mind couldn't get away from the image she had drawn of her husband. I kept putting myself in his place.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," I said. "Some people are very sensitive to atmosphere. He might cotton on very quickly. You would probably give yourself away. It wouldn't be very pleasant for him, would it?"

She was idling with her glass, and suddenly her hand lay motionless on the table. She sat there for perhaps four or five seconds without looking at me or without moving, then she said: "It's nice of you to think of him. Most men wouldn't."

"I'm not thinking so much of him as I am of you. I've had some experience of behaving badly. It creeps up on you in the night."

She smiled then: a cold little smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"Now I'm beginning to think you should go on writing that

book, David," she said. "You sound almost like a holy man; certainly a man who could write about cathedrals."

I felt my face turn red.

"I guess I asked for that. But I can't help it: that's the way I feel. If he could stand on his own feet and fend for himself it would be different. I've always been a sucker about shooting sitting birds."

"I like you for it, David." The light had gone out in her eyes now. She was talking to me across a gulf a hundred miles wide. "I suppose it would be shooting a sitting bird. I wish I had such sporting instincts. If I ever shot a bird, I'd prefer an easy shot to a difficult one." She glanced at her watch. "Just look at the time, I must run. I won't offer to pay for the meal. You wouldn't like that, would you?" She got to her feet. "Please stay where you are. I'd rather go alone."

Well, I had asked for it, and I had got it.

"Am I going to see you again?" I said, looking up at her.

She laughed, and her eyes were genuinely amused.

"Why should we meet again? I don't think I should be interested to hear about your cathedrals, and you wouldn't be interested to hear about my troubles."

She was standing against the light, and I could see the outline of her shape under the blouse. My good intentions began to drain out of me. I suddenly realized what I was losing.

"Wait a minute . . ."

"Good-bye David; thank you for the lovely lunch, and go on writing your book. I'm sure it'll be a success."

She walked down the aisle between the tables. Piero bowed to her and she said something to him, pausing in the doorway. The sunlight framed her into a silhouette. I could see the shadowy outline of her long slim legs and rounded thighs through. the linen skirt.

She went into the street without looking back.

I just sat there, feeling empty and angry, staring at the spot where she had stood, talking to Piero, thinking what a damned fool I was, and yet knowing I had done the right thing.

Piero came down the aisle and stood by the table.

"Was everything satisfactory, signor David?"

"It was fine. Give me the bill."

"The signora is very beautiful."

"Give me the bill!"

He went away and came back with the bill. He had lost his sunny smile.

I gave him the thousand lira note.

"Keep the change, Piero."

"But it is too much!" Piero said, startled. "You need the money. The bill is only——"

"Keep the change and go to hell!"

He went quietly back to the cash-desk and sat down, looking at me with hurt, shocked eyes,

I leaned forward to stub out my cigarette.

Then I saw it.

She had left her diamond clip by the ash-tray, half hidden by her napkin.

I knew she hadn't forgotten to take it with her. Somehow she must have sneaked it out of her handbag when she was leaving. She had left it there deliberately for me to find.

Torrchi had a small flat in a side street oS the Piazza Loreto.

It was in the Piazza that the Partisans had dumped Mussolini's body for public display. Torrchi had always been a strong anti-Mussolini man, and he had made great efforts to find this flat so that every morning, when he set off to the Duomo, he could spit on the exact spot where Mussolini's body had been outraged by a shrieking, infuriated mob.

Torrchi's flat was on the top floor of a dirty, dilapidated building that still had shrapnel scars on its walls, and on either side of it there still remained great mounds of rubble and bricks from the bombing.

I climbed the four flights of stairs, stepping over the children who played on the landings, and nodding to the men and women I met on the way up who lounged in the open doorways.

Torrchi returned home every afternoon for the siesta, and I knew I would find him in. He was a man of very regular habits; setting out for the Duomo every morning at nine-thirty, returning for lunch at twelve, and going to the Duomo again at four o'clock until seven. Except for two weeks' holiday each year when he visited his parents in Naples, he never altered this routine.

I rapped on the front door and, while I waited, wiped my face and hands with my handkerchief. It was very hot on the top floor, and I could feel the heat of the sun burning through the flimsy roof.

Torrchi opened the door himself. He was wearing a dirty white singlet and a pair of black trousers. He was bare-footed, and beads of sweat lay on his round face as if he had just dipped his face in water.

"Signor David!" he exclaimed, his face lighting up. "Come in. It is months since you have called on me."

"It must be," I said, and followed him into the big, untidy sitting-room.

Lying on the couch by the window, wearing only a pair of pink panties, was Simona, Torrchi's mistress. She was a small, dark, voluptuous creature with big black eyes and short curly hair that always reminded me of a cap made of astrakhan.

She gave me an indifferent stare, and then shifted her eyes to the window. A cigarette hung from her full lips, and grey ash had

fallen on her small pointed breasts. Before she had joined up with Torrchi she had been an artist's model. Her nakedness caused her no embarrassment.

"Take no notice of Simona," Torrchi said. "She is in a bad mood this afternoon. When it is less hot, I shall give her a sound beating, and then she will be sweet-natured again."

Simona said three obscene words without turning her head.

Torrchi stifled a giggle.

"Pay no attention to her, signor David, she is a mere animal. Sit down. I have some whisky I have been saving for just this occasion."

I sat down at the table and watched Torrchi bring a bottle and two glasses, which he set before me.

"I wish to apologize for the little incident this morning," he said, pouring two big whiskies. "The temptation was too great. You know this is the first time I have ever interfered with one of your clients."

"I know it," I said. "But why did you take the diamond clip? You couldn't have got rid of it."

Torrchi rolled some of the whisky around in his mouth, swallowed it and sighed, nodding his head.

"Good Scotch whisky," he said. "A friend of mine gave me a case. Very good, very smooth. Try it."

"You couldn't have got rid of the clip," I repeated. "Why did you take it?"

"I could have got rid of it. I have a friend now who deals in diamonds. He pays very well."

"What would he have given you for it?"

Torrchi shrugged.

"I don't know. It was dark in the Duomo this morning. I had no chance to examine it."

I took the diamond clip from my pocket and put it on the table.

"Examine it now."

Torrchi sat very still, his round fat face expressionless, his eyes on the clip.

Simona pushed herself off the couch and came over to the table. She stood behind Torrchi, scratching her thigh, and looking over his shoulder at the clip.

"Give me my glass," Torrchi said.

She went to the drawer, took out a watchmaker's glass and gave it to him. He screwed it into his eye and picked up the clip.

There was a long silence while he examined it. Then he gave the glass and clip to Simona.

She took even longer to examine it. Then she put the glass and clip on the table and went back to the couch. With the lazy movement of a cat, she stretched out on the couch and lit another cigarette,

"Do you wish to sell it, signor David?" Torrchi asked.

"What is it worth?"

"I would give you two hundred thousand lire for it."

Simona half started up, her lips coming off her white teeth in a snarl.

"Fool! It isn't worth a hundred thousand! Have you gone crazy?" she demanded shrilly.

Torrchi smiled at her.

"Signor David is my good friend. I wouldn't cheat a friend. The true price is two hundred thousand."

"Stupid ox!" Simona said furiously. "Who would pay you that for it? Give him ninety-five thousand! Do you have to ruin yourself for your friends?"

"It is her bad tempter, signor David," Torrchi said. "She is really very fond of you. Take no notice of her. I will buy it for two hundred thousand."

That meant the clip was worth at least three hundred, possibly four hundred, thousand.

With an unsteady hand I picked it up and turned it slowly in my fingers.

"She gave it to you, signor David?" Torrchi asked, watching me closely.

"No. She left it on the table and forgot about it."

"No woman would do such a thing. She gave it to you. I can have the money here by four o'clock."

"Would it buy a passport, Torrchi?" I asked.

He made a little grimace.

"I think not. Passports cost more than two hundred thousand, signor David."

"Yes." I finished the whisky, pushed back my chair and stood up.

"Can you lend me five hundred lire, Torrchi?"

"You aren't selling it then?"

"I don't think so. I want to think about it."

"I will give you two hundred and thirty thousand. That is my best offer."

"I'll think about it. Right now I want five hundred lire."

Torrchi took out a thick roll of notes.

"Have more. Have five thousand. Here, take it."

"Five hundred will be enough."

He shrugged his fat shoulders and pushed a five-hundred lira note across the table.

"If you get a better offer for the clip, please let me know," he said. "Let me have the first refusal."

"I will," I said, putting the note and the clip in my pocket.

"Mad, crazy, stupid son of a monkey!" Simona screamed suddenly. "You will ruin us!"

Torrchi saw me to the door.

"It is because she wants me to buy her a new hat," he said under his breath. "She has twenty-six hats already. What does she want with yet another one?"

"I wouldn't know," I said, shaking his hand. "I don't pretend to understand women."

He gave me a sly wink.

"But you get what you want, huh?"

"Not always," I said, and went down the four flights of stairs and into the hot street.

Four flies walked aimlessly across the ceiling, and then came swooping down to buzz irritatingly around my bed before climbing to the ceiling again.

I lay on the bed and watched them.

My room was on the ground floor of a big apartment house at the back of the Terra alia Scala. Sometimes when it was very hot and all the ventilators of the Scala were open I could hear the singing and the music. It depended too on the direction of the wind. Quite often I heard a whole opera for nothing.

The room wasn't much. The only thing in its favour was that it was clean, and only because I kept it so myself. The furniture was very shabby and poor, and the wallpaper set my teeth on edge when I happened to look at it.

There was a bed, an armchair, a washstand, a strip of carpet, and a very bad reproduction of Botticelli's *Primavera* on the wall opposite the bed.

There was a table in the window recess, and on it was piled my notebooks and the leather-bound manuscript I had been working on for four years. Under the table were my reference books: a lot of books worth quite a piece of money.

I had bought myself a packet of cigarettes, a loaf, a salami sausage and a bottle of *vino rosso* with the money I had borrowed from Torrchi. I had eaten, and now I was smoking, a glass of wine within reach of my hand.

The time was twenty-seven minutes past eight. After I had left Torrchi I had walked the streets, moving aimlessly, my thoughts busy.

By seven o'clock I had come to no decision, so I returned to my room.

The decision really wasn't a difficult one. I had to make up my mind whether to keep the diamond clip or return it.

It was just my luck it wasn't worth more. If it had been worth the price of a passport I would have been badly tempted to let Torrchi have it. But although it wasn't worth the price of getting out of Italy, it could equip me with a new outfit, and give me enough to live on economically for six months without doing any work.

When I had told Laura Fancino that I hadn't bothered to apply for a police permit to remain in Italy, I had been lying. I hadn't applied because I was wanted by both the Italian police and the American Army Police for something that had happened during the last stages of the war, some six years ago.

So the two hundred and thirty thousand lire that Torrchi **had** offered me was a temptation. It wouldn't buy a passport, but it would gave given me a little more peace of mind and comfort.

I wasn't worrying about that so much as I worried about why she had left the clip. Had she been sorry for me and, believing me dishonest, had left the clip for me to sell so I could make use of the proceeds? Or had she left the clip on the table, certain I would return it and give her another opportunity of seeing me again?

I lay smoking and staring up at the ceiling while I tried to make up my mind what I should do. Finally, I succeeded in making one decision: I wouldn't sell the clip and use the proceeds. Up to now I had managed to keep going without either stealing or taking money from a woman, and I felt it was a matter of pride not to do so now.

Did I want to see her again?

As I lay there in the hot, stuffy little room, I conjured up a picture of her as I had last seen her, standing in the doorway, against the sunlight, and I knew I not only wanted to see her again, but I had to see her again.

I couldn't help it if her husband was crippled and dying. I had been crazy to have talked so smugly about shooting sitting birds. He had had a year of her, and he was no use to her any more, nor was she any use to him. It wasn't as if I were taking anything from him. He just wasn't in the picture any more.

I swung my legs off the bed and stood up.

The simplest way to settle this thing was to let her decide. She had given me the opportunity of taking her, and I had refused it. Now it was my turn to give her the opportunity of taking me, and if she turned me down I'd wipe her out of my mind. But I was going to give her the opportunity.

I went down the passage to the telephone booth. It took me a little time to find her number. I found it at last under Bruno Fancino's name.

She answered immediately as if she had been sitting by the telephone, waiting for me to ring.

"Who is it?" she asked, speaking softly as if she were afraid of being overheard.

I tried to imagine the room in which she was sitting. I wondered how far away from her her husband was lying.

"This is David," I said, also speaking quietly.

"Oh! How clever of you to find my number."

"I have your diamond clip."

"My—what?"

"Your diamond clip."

"But how can you? It's in my handbag."

I opened the booth door a trifle. It was very hot in the booth, and I was having difficulty in breathing.

"You left it on the table. I found it just after you had gone."

"How dreadful of me! I haven't even missed it."

"What shall I do?" I asked. "I could post it to you or I could bring it to you. Just whatever you say."

There was a long pause. I could hear her breathing.

"Hello?" I said. "Are you still there?"

"Of course. I was thinking. Will you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"Will you put the receiver against your heart for a moment?"

"That's one thing I won't do," I said, not wanting her to know how violently my heart was hammering against my ribs, and yet knowing she knew it already.

"Would that be called shooting a sitting bird?"

"It would, and talking about sitting birds, I've changed my attitude towards them. In the future, I'm going to be like you—I'm going to shoot them sitting or flying."

"Is that sporting?"

"I don't give a damn."

"Then I think the clip is too valuable to risk sending through the post, don't you?"

"It is your clip and your risk. You must decide," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

"I don't think it had better go through the post."

"Then I will bring it to you."

"Oh, no. I don't want you to do that. Where do you live, If>avid?"

"I have a room on the ground floor of 23 Via Carnini. It is immediately behind the Scala."

"I will come and get the clip tomorrow, David; about seven."

"It's not much of a place," I said, huskily, "but you must please yourself."

"Tomorrow evening at seven," she said. "Good night, David."

"Good night," I said.

CHAPTER TWO

AROUND four-thirty on Friday afternoon I completed a tour of the Duomo with two elderly Americans. They were nice people, and they were sincere in their thanks. They gave me three

thousand lire, which was too much for the time I had given them.

When they had driven away in their car, Torrchi came out of the shadows and gave me a little nudge with his elbow.

"I am glad to see business is brisk, signor David," he said, smiling happily. "These last two days have been very fortunate for you."

"I know it," I said, and handed him a five-hundred lira note. "Thank you for the loan. It brought me luck."

"Have you made up your mind about the clip?" he asked, slipping the note in his pocket. "I could have the money here in an hour."

"I'm not selling it. It doesn't belong to me. I shall return it."

Torrchi pursed his lips.

"As you well know, I love you like a brother, signor David," he said; "you will forgive me, therefore, if I say there is no woman on earth who is worth two hundred and thirty thousand lire. I don't care who she is, she just isn't worth that amount of money."

"I don't see why you should talk about women and the clip in the same breath."

"Excuse me, but I think you do. I saw what happened between the signora and yourself when you imagined you were alone together in the Duomo. That was natural and understandable. A woman as beautiful as she is is made for love. But if you sold me the clip, you could use the money to great advantage. And if you returned the clip to her, you will merely gain her gratitude, and possibly something more, but the loss of the money compared with what she can offer you is a very poor bargain. Please be sensible about this, signor David."

"Go away," I said, laughing at him, "I'm not giving you the clip."

"Now wait, don't let's be hasty,". Torrchi said anxiously. "This is what I will do. I will give you two hundred and fifty thousand lire, and you can also have Simona. That is a very great bargain indeed. Simona is very accomplished. She is a great exponent of the art of love. It is true her temper is a little uncertain, but you must expect fire if you want passion. Beat her regularly, and she will please you very much. Isn't this a great bargain that I offer you?"

"It is a wonderful bargain, but I am not selling the clip. If it belonged to me I wouldn't hesitate, but it doesn't belong to me, and that ends the matter."

Torrchi looked sorrowfully at-me.

"I fear the signora has made a vary great impression on you. That is bad. No man should become infatuated with a woman."

"That ends the matter, Torrchi."

"I think you will live to regret your decision," he said, shrug-

ging his fat shoulders. "A man who puts a woman before money invites disaster. I shall pray for you."

"Oh, go to hell!" I said, losing patience. I was suddenly angry because he was putting into words what my mind had been telling me ever since I had called her on the telephone.

"I shall make Simona pray for you too," Torrchi said with quiet dignity, and walked away across the Piazza, his head bowed and a dejected stoop to his shoulders.

A pot of copper-coloured begonias stood on my table in the window. The Botticelli reproduction had been stowed away under the bed. I had borrowed a gay blue-and-red table-cloth from Filippo, a blue silk bedspread from umberto, and a very good Persian rug from Giuseppe.

I scarcely recognized the room. Admittedly the wallpaper was still hideous, but the sordidness of the room had been toned down, and it was now something I need not be ashamed o£

I had bought two bottles of Sassella, and had persuaded Piero to make me a dozen sandwiches with assorted fillings. He had also thoughtfully supplied two glasses and two plates and at the last moment had insisted on giving me a half-bottle of cognac which he said would complete the meal, and therefore I must have it.

I had had my suit pressed and sponged, and I had bought a pair of second-hand shoes by pawning my wrist-watch. There was nothing else I had to do except wait. By peering out of the window and craning my neck I could see the church clock at the end of the street. It showed five minutes to seven o'clock.

I lit a cigarette, and for the sixth time I rearranged the bottles on the table and went over to smooth a crease in the bedspread.

My mouth was dry; my heart was beating rapidly, and I was a little breathless. For three days now she had been haunting my mind, and now she was within reach my feelings almost suffocated me.

I forced myself to sit in the armchair while I smoked the cigarette. I smoked it so fiercely that it burned my tongue, and I stubbed it out angrily before it was finished.

As I got up to get another cigarette I heard a knock on the front door. For a brief second I stood very still, my hands clenched, holding my breath, then I opened my door and went quickly down the passage to the front door.

Laura Fancino was standing on the pavement, looking up at me. She was wearing a severe blue linen frock, a big straw hat that partially hid her face and the dark green sun-glasses. She stood looking at me, her face expressionless, her eyes invisible, and her hands clasped over her handbag, which she held in front of her.

"Hello, David," she said. "Aren't I punctual?"

"Yes; wonderfully punctual," I said, my voice husky. "Won't you come in?"

I stood aside, and she passed me.

"It's just here," I said, and pushed my bedroom door open. "It's not much, I'm afraid."

She walked into the room and stood, looking round, then she took off her sun-glasses and turned to smile at me.

"You've beeen making it look nice, haven't you?"

"My friends have been generous." I closed the door. It was only then that I realized how very small the room was. "Did you have trouble finding me?"

"Oh, no. At one time I used to go to the Scala every week."

She took off her hat and put it on top of my chest-of-drawers together with her handbag. Then she moved over to the mirror above the fireplace and loosened her hair by lifting it a little with her white, slim fingers.

I stood looking at her unable to believe she was actually here.

"When the wind is in the right direction I can lie here and listen to the music," I said.

She turned, smiling.

"Of course, cathedrals and music go together, don't they? How- is the book coming on?"

"I haven't done anything to it recently. Sometimes I don't touch it for weeks."

I knew I was being dreadfully stiff and formal, but I couldn'" help myself. Having her here, so close to me, made me suddenly nervous and embarrassed.

"Is that the manuscript?" She moved to the table. "May I" look at it?"

"If you want to."

She opened the manuscript at random and studied a page of closely written words.

"What good handwriting you have," she said. "It's so neat, and there's so much of it."

"It isn't even half done."

"No wonder it is taking you so long."

There was a long pause. The silence pressed in on me. I had a sudden feeling that this meeting wasn't going to be a success. She made me so nervous that I began to wish she hadn't come.

"Perhaps you would like a sandwich," I said, knowing how hopelessly boorish I sounded. "I don't know if you are hungry."

She closed the manuscript and turned. The look in her eyes sent my blood hammering in my temples.

"Hungry?" she said. "Yes, I'm hungry, David. I've been hungry for the past four years."

The church clock was striking nine when she made a sudden movement and pulled away from me.

"I must go, David," she said. "I must be back by eleven."

"Stay a little longer. Couldn't you telephone?"

"No. I said I would be back by eleven."

She was standing at the foot of the bed now. I could just see her in the dim light as she began to dress. Her movements were very quick.

As I made to get up she said: "Don't move, darling. Please stay where you are. There really is no room for the two of us."

"How will you get back?" I asked.

"I left my car at the park up the road. I can get back in an hour and a half if I hurry."

"You'll be careful?"

She laughed.

"Am I so precious to you now, David?"

I felt my throat thicken.

"Yes; more precious than anyone who has ever come into my life."

"I'm glad. Are you sorry this has happened?"

"No; are you?"

"A little. There are always complications and heart-aches when one finds a new love."

"Yes, but there are compensations."

She smoothed down her dress over her hips, then turned and put on her hat and picked up her handbag.

"Stay there, David, I can find my way out."

"This is crazy," I said, and laughed. "You haven't eaten anything, and I had it all ready."

She came and sat on the bed.

"But I'm not hungry now, darling," she said, and leaned over me, her hands passing over my bare chest. "Good-bye, David."

For a long moment her mouth covered mine, then she pushed me back gently and stood up.

"When will you come again?" I asked, holding her hand.

"Do you want me to come again?"

"Of course, as often as you can."

"I don't know. Perhaps next week. I'll come when I can get away."

"Now, wait," I said, sitting up. "You can't go like this. You must be more definite, Laura. What about Monday?"

"It's the nurse's day off on Monday."

"Then Tuesday?"

"I read to him on Tuesday."

"Then—when?"

"I don't know. It wasn't easy to come today. You see, David, I've been living like a hermit for four years. I can't suddenly leave the villa without some very good excuse. I can't possibly stay out as late as this very often."

"But, damn it! What's going to happen to me? We've got to

meet soon. Can't you come in the afternoon? It's quiet here between two and five. Come next Wednesday."

"I'll try, David, but I can't promise. Have you forgotten what you said?"

"What did I say?"

"You told me not to be so sure he wouldn't find out. I remember every word you said. 'Some people are very sensitive to atmosphere,' you told me. 'He might cotton on very quickly. You would probably give yourself away. It wouldn't be very pleasant for him, would it?' "

"Why do you remind me of that?" I said sharply. "Do you want to underline my rottenness?"

"Don't be stupid, David. There's nothing rotten about two' people falling in love. I am just trying to show you we must be very careful if we are to avoid hurting him. Can't you see that?"

"Then I shall have to wait until you can come?"

"There is nothing else to do. Will you try to remember that all the time we are not seeing each other I shall be thinking of you?" She touched my face with her hand. "Perhaps these two short hours have meant much more to me than to you." She opened her handbag and took out a slip of paper. "What is your telephone number?"

I gave it to her.

"I'll ring you when I can come. And listen, David, please don't ring me. It's not safe. There is an extension in his room and the nurse is very inquisitive. She might listen in. Will you promise me you won't ring?"

"I won't ring. But you will try and make it soon?"

"Of course. And now I must fly. Good-bye, darling."

"Wait! You're forgetting the clip." I swung off the bed and went to a drawer in the table and got it. "It would have been damned funny if you had forgotten it again."

She took it from me and dropped it into her handbag.

"Kiss me, David."

I caught her in my arms and crushed my mouth down on hers. I held her like that for a long moment, then she broke free, gasping a little.

"Oh, darling, you're a wonderful lover," she said. "How I wish I could stay a little longer! Think of me, David," and she slipped from my grasp, opened the bedroom door and ran down the passage.

Then began the days of waiting.

I didn't expect to hear from her until Monday, so Saturday and Sunday passed off fairly well. I worked both days, and I was lucky to land a party of ten on Sunday who hired me for the day to take them in two cars to the high spots of Milan. I picked up five thousand lire that day.

When I woke on Monday I told myself this was the day she would ring me. She would tell me she would be able to come either on Thursday or Friday, and I would have something to look forward to all the week.

Then I realized she hadn't said when she would ring. Suppose she rang when I was out? My landlady was an old soak, and would never remember a message; she might not even answer the telephone.

This was an unexpected setback, and alarmed me. After thinking about it, I decided she wouldn't ring until after ten o'clock. I could go out and get some food and then wait in until she did ring. I had five thousand lire in hand so I didn't have to go to work. In fact, I rather looked forward to remaining in my room waiting for her to ring: each minute would be a minute of intense excitement.

I got up, shaved, dressed and went out. I bought some bread, cheese and sausage, a bottle of *vino rosso* and two newspapers. By the time I got back to my room it was just after nine.

I read the newspapers, and then picked up one of my notebooks and tried to concentrate on planning a new chapter in my book, but my mind kept straying to Laura, and I soon threw the notebook aside.

It was now eleven-thirty. Any moment now, I told myself, she will ring.

But she didn't.

Minutes dragged into hours. Three times the telephone rang; each time it was for someone else living in the house. By three o'clock I was fit to walk up a wall.

I stayed in that sordid little room from early morning to late at night, and when I finally, fell asleep in my chair at twenty minutes to one o'clock she still hadn't telephoned.

She didn't telephone on Tuesday nor on Wednesday. I remained in my room the whole time, waiting.

By this time I was hating Bruno Fancino as I had never hated anyone in my life. I was now glad he was helpless and speechless. I called him all the obscene names I could think of. I hoped he would die; I even prayed for his death.

On Thursday morning I was still sitting in the armchair, waiting. For the past two days I hadn't bothered to shave, and I had had very little sleep. I was in a murderous mood, and my nerves were like naked threads of pain; the slightest sound tortured them.

Around midday, when the sun was at its hottest, the telephone began to ring.

I tore open my door and ran blindly down the passage to the booth.

"Hello?" I shouted, grinding the receiver against my ear. "Who is that?"

A man's voice said, "Could I please speak to signora Puceilli?"

I slammed the receiver back on its cradle and stood snarling at the instrument that was driving me out of my mind. When the bell rang again, I snatched up the receiver and cursed the man at the other end like a raving madman. Then I flung the receiver from me and stormed back to my room.

Giuseppe was standing by the window, his wine-soaked face frightened.

"What do you want?" I shouted at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Quiedy, David," he said. "What has happened? Are you ill?"

"Get out!" I said. "Get the hell out of here!"

"Gently, my poor boy," he said. "What can have happened to you to make you look like this? Sit down and tell me. I haven't seen you for days. I never thought I'd find you in this state."

"I don't want to talk to you," I said. "Get out!"

"But I can't leave you like this. Surely there is something I can do? Is it money you want?"

"I want nothing from you. Will you get out!"

He clicked his horribly white, ill-fitting teeth, and the veins in his raddled nose went a deeper purple.

"Perhaps it is a woman?" he said. "Now, please, listen to me, David; no woman is worth——"

I went over to him and caught hold of his coat front.

"What do you know about women, you drunken, lousy old ruin? Don't talk to me about women! Get out before I throw you out!"

I swung him so violently towards the door that he nearly fell.

"But I'm your friend, David," he wailed, clutching hold of the door to save himself falling. "I want to help you."

I shoved him out of the room and slammed the door in his face. Then I picked up a bottle of wine and threw it with all my strength into the fireplace. The bottle smashed, and glass flew about the room like shrapnel, and the red wine stained the wall like a smear of blood.

That was Thursday.

There was no word from her on Friday. I waited until six o'clock, and then I went down the passage to the telephone. I called her number.

I stood in the stifling booth, listening to the burr-burr-burr on the line, my heart slamming against my ribs. Then the line clicked into life, and a woman's voice said. "This is signor Fancino's residence. Nurse Fleming speaking."

I stood there, my ears strained to catch any sound that might fell me that Laura was in the room, but I heard nothing except the nurse's gentle breathing and the faint rustle of her starched apron.

"Who is that, please?" she asked, her voice sharpening.

Very slowly and reluctantly I hung up.

I walked down the passage to my room. I felt as if I had been in a fight, and had taken the worst hiding of my life. I knew then that she meant more to me than anything else on earth. She was in my blood like a virus, and this waiting for her had cracked whatever spirit I had left. For years now I had been living rough, kidding myself I was going to pull out of it some day, do something worth while, and now I knew I was never going to pull out. I saw my future burst in my face like a soap bubble: all because a woman with copper-coloured hair and a shape to drive a man nuts hadn't lifted a telephone receiver and called my number.

As I stood outside my door, my fingers around the door-handle, I decided to do what all the weak-kneed, spineless, gutless wastrels always do when they get a knock that drops them on their backs. I decided to go out and get good and drunk, and then go with some street woman.

I pushed open the door and walked into the sordid little room.

Laura was sitting on the arm of the armchair, her hands folded in her lap, her beautiful slim ankles crossed, the skirt of hec severe blue linen frock primly pulled down over her knees.

The telephone down the passage began to ring: an insistent, strident clamour that a moment ago would have sent me rushing to answer it. But I scarcely heard it. It had suddenly ceased to be a tantalizing tyrant which could stop my heartbeat and turn me into a breathless, mindless imbecile. Now it was nothing but an extraneous noise as anonymous as a stranger in the street.

I leaned against the door, looking at her.

"I'm sorry, David," she said. "There was nothing I could do about it. I wanted so much to ring you, but the telephone is so jealously guarded. I knew you would be waiting to hear from me. I knew you were suffering as I was suffering. This afternoon I could stand it no longer. I said I was going for a drive along the Lago. When I reached Milan I 'phoned the nurse and told her I had had a breakdown, and I was stranded."

I wasn't sure if I had hear aright.

"You mean you're not going back there tonight?"

"No, David. I'm going to stay here with you."

I walked unsteadily to the bed and sat down.

"If you could have seen me just now in the passage," I said, rubbing my face with my hands. "I was set to go out and get drunk. In another five minutes you'd have missed me, and now you tell me you can stay the night. It's like riding a switchback."

"I didn't mean to make you suffer like this, David," she said. "Did you imagine I had forgotten you?"

"Oh, no. I didn't think that. It was just I was expecting you to call on Monday, and I waited. I kept waiting, and as the hours

went by I worked myself up. I was ready to walk up the wall just now: ready to blow my top."

"I'm here now, David."

"Yes, that's right. I can't quite believe it. I feel as if I've had a punch in the guts." I looked at the mess in the fireplace, the stain on the wall. The room looked gruesome and sordid now the rug, the bedspread and the table-cloth had gone. The only relic of the previous meeting was the copper-coloured begonias in the pot on the table. "I don't like to ask you to stay here, Laura. You can see what a hole it is."

"Do you think I mind? With you I could be happy in a cave. Don't be silly, David. Nothing matters except I have a few hours with you."

I got up and went over to the mirror. I looked pretty terrible with a two days' growth of beard, and my eyes sunk deep in my head for want of sleep.

"I'm going to shave," I said.

"Shall I be in the way? Would you like me to wait for you outside? I could go for a walk——"

"Do you think I'm going to let you out of my sight even for five minutes?" I said. "I've got to shave. I can't take you in my arms with my face like this."

I poured water out of the jug into the basin and began to lather my face. My hands were very unsteady.

While I shaved, she sat, silent, watching me. Then after I had sponged my face she said, "We must do something, David. This could happen again. It will happen again."

"No. It's not going to happen again. You must leave him, Laura. He's no use to you. Can't you see that? He can't expect you to stay with him. You must free yourself of .him."

"I've been thinking about that. If I left him, David, would you like me to come here to you?"

I turned slowly and looked at her. My eyes took in the sheer silk of her expensive stockings, the severe cut of her frock, the slim, white, well-manicured hands, the gold bracelet around her wrist, the diamond clip worth three hundred thousand lire, the shiny, glossy hair on which a hairdresser had spent much time and attention. I saw her against the background of the dirty, yellowing wallpaper, the cramped little bed and the threadbare carpet.

"Here?" I said. "Why, no, you couldn't come here."

"Where else could I go, David? I haven't any money except what he gives me. Do you think I could work with you? I might make a very good guide. Do they have women guides?"

"Please don't joke about this," I said, feeling blood rising to »- my face.

"But I'm not, darling. I'm trying to solve a problem. Perhaps you could get a better job. Perhaps you could finish your book. I

could do something, David. I don't want you to think I'm useless. Do you think I could become a waitress?"

"Stop it!" I said angrily. "Stop talking like that! I can't get a better job. If I finished the book it wouldn't make any money, and it would take me months even if I worked on it every hour of the day. How can you imagine you could work as a waitress?"

"But we must do something, David."

I poured the water away.

"Haven't you any money of your own?" I asked, not looking at her.

"I'm afraid I haven't. I could sell my jewelry, of course. We could live on that for a little while. It might carry us over until you made a little more money."

I moved over to her.

"What the hell are we talking like this for?" I asked. "Both of us know we couldn't live like that. I'd rather not have you at all than bring you down to my level. You'd grow to hate me in a little while, Laura. It'd be all right so long as your money held out, but when it had gone, and the squeeze started, and you couldn't buy any more new clothes, and you hadn't any jewelry to make yourself look as you are looking now, you'd begin to hate me."

She put her hand on mine.

"No, I wouldn't. I told you: I could be happy with you in a cave."

"Shall we be serious for a moment?" I said. "There's only one way out of this."

She looked up sharply, her eyes suddenly tense, and her slim hands closed into fists.

"And what is that?"

"I must try to find a job near the Lago. I will talk to Giuseppe. He knows all the tricks. I might get something at the *vaporetto* station. Then we could meet more easily. You wouldn't have to do the long journey here. You could slip away for an hour or so without being missed."

The tension went out of her eyes, and her hands relaxed.

"Would you like that, David?" she asked, and opened her handbag for a cigarette. "Would that satisfy you?"

"It would be better than what has been happening these last three days. At least, I could catch a glimpse of you from time to time, and we could meet late at night. Would it be difficult for you to leave the villa after everyone has gone to bed?"

"No, that would be possible," she said in a tired, flat voice.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," I said, looking at her. "Don't you think much of the idea?"

"I think it would be very dangerous. You don't know the Lago as I do. There are so many prying eyes. We could never hope to keep our meetings secret, David. I have to be very careful. Bruno

would divorce me if he found out I was being unfaithM to him. When he is dead I come into a lot of money. If I make a false step now I would probably lose it all."

"I see." I sat down on the bed and ran my fingers through my hair. "I hadn't thought of that. I hadn't thought you would be rich in your own right when he is dead. That widens the gulf between us, doesn't it?"

"It narrows it, David."

"Do you imagine I'd live on your money?"

"No, I'm sure you wouldn't. But it isn't my money. It's Bruno's. I can imagine you would accept a loan to set up in some business and pay me back when you have made a success."

"You've been thinking about this quite a lot, haven't you?" I said. "But if he has lived for four years, what makes you think he's not going to live another four years? Or perhaps you think we could wait four years or even more?"

"You see, *caro,* we are very nearly quarrelling now," she said gravely. "Even before my magic for you has lost its edge."

"Your magic would never lose its edge," I said. "I'm sorry, Laura; only I just don't want to go through these past days again. Do you know what I was going to do just now—before I came in and found you?"

"Yes, I know. Men do that sort of thing when they are hurt. Don't think you are the only one." She flicked ash into the fire-place. "You promised me you wouldn't 'phone."

"I know. I'm sorry about that too. I was half out of my mind."

"You might take even greater risks if you came to the Lago. If I couldn't get away, you might come to the villa. Can't you see, David, it wouldn't work?"

"Then what are we going to do?"

She studied me in a long moment of silence.

"There is a way, David," she said.

Then I knew instinctively that she had worked it all out, but hadn't been ready to tell me until I had exhausted my own ideas, and had proved to myself there could be no other solution except hers.

"What is it?"

"The doctor likes Bruno to spend the day in a special wheel-chair," she said, looking down at her hands folded in her lap. "At night he is moved from the chair to his bed. Nurse Fleming can't carry him so we have a man to do it. He also looks after the car and the motor-boat. He gets paid seven thousand lire a week, and all found."

"Why tell me this?" I asked sharply. "What is it to me?"

"He is leaving at the end of the week."

I went hot and then cold.

"You mean you want me to take his place?"

Still she didn't look at me.

"It is the only safe solution, David."

"I see." I struggled to keep my voice under control, "I would like to get this straight. You are suggesting I should be your husband's nurse, is that it? Each morning I carry him from his bed to a chair, and each night I seduce his wife. For that I am to be paid seven thousand lire. Well, yes, on the face of it, it's a wonderfully attractive offer."

She looked up then, her eyes glittering.

"Is that all you have to say, David?"

"Oh, no, there is a lot more I can say. I can't imagine anything more unpleasant than to go into a room every morning and meet the eyes of a man who can't move nor speak after I have been with his wife during the night. That should be an experience worthy of even my rotten standards of living. Not only shall I be stealing his wife, but I shall be enjoying his food and his board, and shall be paid for doing it with his money. It is an over-' poweringly attractive offer."

She gave a little nod of her head, then got up, went over to the chest-of-drawers and picked up her hat and handbag.

"Wait a minute, Laura," I said, getting to my feet. "You're not going yet. We can talk this thing out."

"No, I'm going. I'll go to a hotel. Good-bye, David."

I was standing now with my back to the door.

"Can't you see how impossible such an idea is?" I said.

"Oh, yes, I can see that. Will you let me pass, please?"

"You're going to stay here. We're going to talk this thing out."

"David! Please let me pass!"

"Stop being dramatic! You're damn' well going to stay here, and we're going to find another way round this. Now sit down and let me think."

Her face had turned pale. She faced me with fists clenched and her eyes hurt and angry.

"There's nothing to think about," she said. "I've given you the only solution. If you're too proud, too stupidly narrow-minded and too damned masculine to take me that way, then that settles it. I'm not going to stay here another moment. I was an utter fool to have let you make love to me. You set me on fire for you, and then you haven't the moral courage to see it through." Her voice went up a note. "Do all your thinking when I've gone! I'm not going to discuss it any more! Now let me go!"

I grabbed hold of her shoulders and shook her.

"It's you who haven't done the thinking," I said violently, "or you wouldn't try to talk me into such a disgraceful situation! Think about it now! Are you going to let me make love to you in his house, almost within his sight? Could you do that?"

Her handbag slipped out of her hand, and her arms went around my neck, pulling my head down, so her face was against mine.

"I love you so, David, I'd let you make love to me in his room. Don't you understand, *caro,* he means nothing to me; nothing at all? He has never meant anything to me. I married him for what I could get out of him, and I've suffered for it ever since. I have no pity for him as he had no pity for me when he was strong and patronizing: and you don't know how patronizing he has been to me. I'm not being unfaithful to him because he has never had my loyalty. Do what I ask, David. If you don't I'll never see you again. I shall go bad, as you were going to go bad when you thought I wasn't going to telephone." Her voice broke. "I can't endure any more days like the days we have just been through. You've got to do it, David, or finish it now."

I pushed her away so I could see her white, tense face.

"Kiss me, David."

When my mouth touched hers, resistance went out of me.

I woke with a start, and half sat up as I felt a hand gently shake my arm.

"Wake up, David," Laura said, bending over me. "I have heated some coffee. In a few moments I niust go."

"Why, you're dressed! What's the time?"

"Just after six. You were sleeping so peacefully I hadn't the heart to wake you. It's going to be a lovely day." She brought a cup of coffee over to me. "It is already a lovely day, isn't it, David?"

"I hope so," I said, suddenly remembering what I had promised her before I went to sleep. "I hope we're not going to regret this, Laura."

"There is nothing else we can do." She sat on the bed, looking as neat and as lovely as she always did. "I must go in a moment, but before I go, we must get this straightened out. You will come to the villa on Sunday evening. I shall be in Stresa that evening. I will meet you there and take you across the Lago. There is a train from Milan at six. This morning you must go to Nervini in Via Boccaccio. I have an account with them. Tell them you are going to work for signor Fancino, and you want to be properly kitted out. They will know what you will need."

"Kitted out?" I said sharply, nearly upsetting my coffee. "What do you mean?"

"Now please, darling, don't be difficult." She put her hand soothingly on my arm. "Naturally you can't come to the villa in the clothes you wear. You must have the proper things."

"What things?" I asked, putting my coffee-cup on the floor.

"Why, a white coat, a uniform when you drive the car, overalls . . . you know the kind of thing."

I felt my throat thicken and blood rush into my face.

"A uniform? Oh, I see."

"Now, darling .. ."

"It's all right. I didn't cotton on to the idea. I was being dumb. So I'm to be some kind of lackey, is that it?"

She spread out her hands helplessly.

"All right, darling, then let's forget about it. If you can't do this for me when I'm risking so much, then we won't go on with it."

"It's all right," I said, trying to smile. "It's just that I didn't understand. But it's all right now. Why, damn it, it's a step up being a rich man's lackey after being an unofficial guide at the Duomo. It's promotion."

She looked steadily at me.

"It's up to you, David. If you're going to be bitter about it, then don't do it. I just can't plan any more."

"Don't get worked up," I said. "Now I understand the set-up, I'll do it. Apart from wearing a white coat and a uniform, what are my other duties?"

"You attend to Bruno in the morning and evening. You look after the car, and you will drive me to Milan or Laveno when I go shopping. You look after the boat. If anyone comes—and very few do—you wait at table and serve drinks. Most of the day is your own. You have two good rooms over the boathouse down by the Lago. You will be very quiet there, and no one will bother you. Whenever I can get away I will come to you. It will be easy and safe at night. Those are your duties, David, and if you don't want to do them, please say so, and we can forget about it."

I looked at her for a long moment of time. I had never known a woman quite like her. Just by sitting still with her hands folded in her lap, looking at me with her big violet eyes that were as alive and as hot as burning coal, she could set me on fire.

"For you I guess I'd do anything," I said.

CHAPTER THREE

I WALKED from the station down the steep cobbled street that led to the water front. Although it was after seven o'clock, the sun was still very hot, and the street was crowded with open carriages, taking newly arrived visitors to the hotels.

I found Laura waiting for me. She was sitting on the harbour wall, in the stwde, her dark glasses hiding her eyes, her face as anonymous as a sheet of blank paper.

Two peasant women, hatless and in black, standing near Laura, looked curiously at me as I crossed the street to where she was sifting. Every now and then they shot inquisitive glances at her.

When she saw me, she slid off the wall and moved down the

steps to the water's edge. She didn't smile nor wave her hand nor even look pleased to see me.

I followed her down the steps to where a twenty-foot motor-boat, a mass of glittering brass and polished mahogany, was moored.

She got into the boat and sat on the cushioned seat near the steering-wheel.

The two women in black were still watching us. They had moved nearer now and leaned over the rail that guarded the harbour to stare down at us.

I put my two new suitcases into the boat and stepped down beside Laura.

"Can you handle the boat?" she asked impersonally.

"Yes," I said, and cast off the mooring rope. With the boathook I poled the boat out of the small, crowded harbour until we were in the open water.

"It starts exactly like a car," Laura said, then under her breath she whispered, "It's lovely to see you, darling. Those old bitches were trying to hear what we were saying."

I pressed the starter button and the engine sprang into life. Then I engaged gear, spun the wheel and let in the hand-clutch.

"Everyone spies on everyone else here," she went on, leaning back against the cushions. "You'll realize why I said it would be too dangerous for you to work anywhere but at the villa when you've been here as long as I have."

I was feeling uneasy and irritable. I was angry she hadn't given me a bettgr welcome, and now she had justified herself I was angry with myself for being angry.

"Where do we go?" I asked curtly.

"Right across the Lago. You can see the villa from here: the white one half-way up the hill."

I had only once visited the Lago Maggiore since I settled in Italy, but I had been fascinated and captivated by its beauty and magic charm. Now, as I looked around, I felt the old fascination taking hold of me again, and my sour mood went away.

To my left I could see the *Isold Bella* and its classic gardens built by a 17th-century Borromeo. Sheltering behind it was the *Pescatori,* another Borromean island. Still further to the left were the white villas of Pallanza about which Hemingway wrote in his *Farewell to Arms.*

Ahead of me across the Lago was a row of tree-covered hills; at the foot of them was Arolo, a tiny village of red-roofed houses and one small *Albergo.*

The villa Laura had pointed out to me was isolated, halfway up **a** hill that ran straight down to the water's edge. It was a fine-looking house with a terrace garden ablaze with flowers, dark green shutters, closed against the sun, and a long verandah shaded by sunblinds.

"What's wrong, David?" Laura asked suddenly.

I turned to smile at her.

"Someone was walking over my grave," I said. "Sorry, and forget it. I'm all right now. This is a pretty fine boat."

"It's all right. Everything that belongs to Bruno is pretty fine: the best money can buy. That's something we're not short of: money."

"Now someone's walking over your grave. Should I stop the boat and kiss you?"

She laughed.

"You mustn't do that. Someone's bound to be watching us through glasses from one of those villas. That's all they have to do here. Did you get all you want from Nervini?"

"Far more than I need, but they insisted on selling me the stuff."

"You'll need it, David. Can you believe this is happening to us? I couldn't sleep last night for thinking of you."

"I couldn't sleep either," I said, but I didn't tell her it was because I kept thinking of her husband. "Tell me about the villa: who's living there besides you and—and him?"

"There's Maria, the cook. Be careful of her, David. She has been with Bruno for years: long before I met him. She doesn't approve of me, and she's always watching me. So be careful what you say to her. Don't let her have any suspicions, will you?"

"Does she sleep at the villa?"

"Oh, no; if she did, it wouldn't be possible for you to come here. No, she has a cottage in the village. She comes at seven in the morning and leaves just after nine."

"Who else is there?"

"Nurse Fleming. She imagines Bruno is going to leave her something in his will, and she acts as if he's her own personal property. She's also inquisitive, and she would make trouble between Bruno and myself if she has the chance. You'll have to be careful of her too. She has a room next door to Bruno's, and the door's never quite closed. It's her day off today. She doesn't return until Tuesday morning, so I have to do day and night duty on Mondays. Maria is sitting with him until I get back."

I didn't much like the sound of any of this, but I didn't say so.

"Is that the lot?"

"There's Guilip, the gardener. He's old and deaf, and you needn't bother about him. He never comes to the house anyway. Oh,, and there's Dr, Perelli. He comes to see Bruno twice a week. He is also Bruno's executor; they are old friends, and he doesn't approve of me. His is one of those narrow-minded, dreadful people who believe all beautiful women are born immoral. It'll be safer if you can keep out of his way, David. If he saw you he might jump to conclusions."

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I fumbled for a cigarette, lit it and tossed the match into the water.

"Sounds as if I'm walking into a snake-pit."

"I've had to live in it for five years. It'll be all right if we are careful; and we must be careful, darling. There's one thing I must tell you. Please understand about this, David. I shall have to treat you like a servant during the day. You can never tell when one or all of them are watching us. Will you try not to mind? When you are alone in your rooms and I can get to you, then it will be very different, but please don't be hurt if I can't always act to you as I want to. You won't, will you?"

i hadn't expected that, and it came as a shock.

"That's all right," I said, not at all sure that it was all right. "If we have to be that careful, you play it the safe way."

"Will it be worth it to you?" she asked anxiously.

"Of course it will," I said, but again I wasn't so sure that it would.

"I'll make it up to you," she said, looking at me with her hot, intent eyes. "I'll make it worth while, darling."

She had only to say that and look like that to make it all right. I had her in me like a sickness, and there was nothing I could do about it. I knew I was crazy to go through with this. I could get outside myself and see how I was being ravaged by this girl. I could see myself twisting and squirming like an insect pierced by a pin, but I was too far gone to help myself.

"The harbour's behind those willow trees," she said suddenly. "Look, you can see the boathouse now. Those are your rooms above it."

Set in the rock was a small two-storey building with a big bay window overlooking the Lago, and below it a wide, swing-up door to the entrance of the boathouse. On each side of the building were weeping willow trees that shaded a swimming-pool cut out of the rock. A long flight of steep stone steps led from the harbour, up the face of the hill to the garden of the villa.

"That is the way I shall come to you," she said, pointing to the steps.

"They could be dangerous in the dark."

She laughed.

"Not to me David. I know every inch of them. When I can't bear the atmosphere of the house a second longer, I always come down to the boathouse. I furnished it myself. I'm sure you'll love it."

I cut the engine and let the boat drift under the willows and into the harbour.

"I'll leave you to find your way to your rooms, David," she said, jumping onto the harbour wall. "I daren't stay here to show you. When you have changed, will you come up to the villa? You just follow the steps, up the path to the verandah. Maria will give

you supper. Then, if you'll come to me, I'll take you to Bruno."

"I'll do that," I said, getting out of the boat.

She gave me a key.

"That's the key to your apartment. And, David, this is very important. Never leave the place unlocked. No one but me and an old woman from the village ever goes there. No one has ever seen inside, and they mustn't or they'll wonder why I have let you have it. Do you think you can look after it yourself?"

"I looked after my other room," I said, smiling. "Of course I can."

"The old woman comes once a week to clean it thoroughly. I can trust her not to talk. I'll let you know when she will be coming, and you must keep out of the way."

"Why all the mystery?"

She laughed.

"Wait until you see it."

She put her hand on my arm, raising her face. I pulled her to me. Her mouth was hot and dry against mine as if she had a fever. Her fingers dug into my shoulders as she leaned heavily against me.

We stood like that, hidden by the willows, with the quiet water lapping against the harbour wall, for several seconds, then she broke free and went quickly up the harbour steps and out of sight.

When I had finished putting the boat away and locking up the boathouse, I carried my two suitcases up the narrow stairs that led to the living quarters above the boathouse.

I unlocked the door, pushed it wide open, and then came to an abrupt standstill.

I stood looking blankly into a large room with a big bay window overlooking the Lago, and which was so lavishly furnished I immediately thought I had got into the wrong apartment.

A quick check assured me there was nowhere else for me to go, and I slowly closed the door and set down my bags.

The room, which was close on thirty feet by twenty, had a mosaic floor on which were three good-sized Bukhara rugs. The walls were covered with a gay white-and red patterned silk tapestry. In the big window recess there was an eight-foot-square divan bed covered with a white silk coverlet with a red binding. Four big lounging chairs and a big settee scarcely dented the space in the room, and a radiogram and cabinet of records were lost against one of the walls.

There was a fitted cocktail bar, fully equipped, built into one of the corners of the room, and when I examined it I found it revolved at the touch of a finger to bring a bookcase full of books into view and the bar out of sight.

Opposite to where I stood was another door, and I crossed the room and opened it. It proved to be a small dressing-room fitted with two full-length mirrors and two fitted wardrobes that lit up when you opened the doors. Beyond this room, through another door, was the bathroom with a sunken bath and shower, and walled entirely by mirrors set in a frame of black marble.

I went back to the big room, walked over to the bar and poured myself a big shot of whisky. I felt I needed it. I could understand now why I was to keep the door locked.

Maria was a fat, elderly woman with a pleasant face and kindly eyes. She was putting on a shawl, preparing to go home, when I walked into the kitchen.

"Good evening," I said. "I'm David Chisholm. Signora Fancino told me you had supper for me."

I was immediately aware of her searching, worried scrutiny. For about three or four seconds, she studied me, and I could feel suspicion and fear growing in her as her eyes took in every detail of my face.

"You have come to look after signor Bruno?" she asked.

"I wouldn't say that. I am only going to lift him."

"The signora didn't say you were an American."

"Should she have done?" I said, and moved over to the table that was set for a meal. "Do I sit here?"

"Your supper is in the oven," she said, and finished adjusting her shawl. "Has the signora arranged where you are to sleep?"

It was a casual question, but I knew at once it was important to her to know where I was going to sleep.

"I'm to live in the rooms over the boathouse," I said, not looking at her.

"The boathouse? Then the other man has gone?"

I got a dish of veal and spaghetti out of the oven. As I carried it to the table, I said, "That is why I am here."

She nodded to herself, picked up a bundle wrapped in a shawl, and moved heavily to the door.

"You will be very careful how you lift signor Bruno?" she said, staring hard at me. "The other man was no good." She made an angry grimace. "Always he was thinking of other things."

I found her direct, searching look embarrassing.

"I'll be careful," I said.

She nodded and opened the door. I could see she was reluctant to leave me there, and to get rid of her I said, "Well, good night."

"You didn't bring your wife with you?" she asked, her hand on the door-knob.

"I'm not married."

"It is better for a man like you to be married," she said.

"I must see if I can do something about it," I said, and smiled at her. "Good night."

She didn't return my smile.

"The other man wasn't married either."

"What other man?"

"Bellini. He came three months ago. A great, ugly brute of a man. All day long he sat about smoking cigars. He was very rough when he lifted signor Bruno. Dr. Perelli said he had to go."

"I mustn't keep you. You'll be wanting to get home," I said. "Good night."

She stood hesitating, then she went out of the kitchen, closing the door behind her.

I sat still, listening to her heavy plodding footfalls as she went down the path to the road. When they finally died away I drew in a long, slow breath. I found I was sweating slightly, and my nerves were as tight as violin strings.

I had an instinctive feeling the old woman was more than suspicious: she knew why I was here.

I found Laura on the verandah, waiting for me. She was leaning against one of the marble pillars that supported the ornate roof of the verandah, looking out over the Lago. She turned her head when she heard my step.

"Has she gone?"

"Yes," I said.

She swung around to face me, smiling up at me.

"Then we're alone—except for Bruno. I shall have to sit with him now, David, but tomorrow night I'll come to the boathouse. What do you think of it?"

"It's wonderful, but don't you think it's dangerous to let me use it? If anyone saw me there, wouldn't they guess what I meant to you?"

"So long as no one gets inside, it doesn't matter," she said. "I'm glad you like it, David. I furnished it myself. We'll be happy for a few hours there, won't we?"

"A little better than a cave."

She laughed.

"I meant what I said about the cave. Only I prefer the boathouse. What did you think of Maria?"

"I think she knows about us already."

She looked sharply at me.

"Why do you say that?"

"Just a hunch, and perhaps by what she said. Did Bellini stay at the boathouse?"

"Why, of course not!" She stiffened, staring at me. "What makes you ask that? Bellini was just a hired help. He had a room in the village."

The restricting band of suspicion that had taken hold of me began to relax.

"Something Maria said. She made it sound as if Bellini had lived in the boathouse."

Laura put her hand on my arm.

"You mustn't pay any attention to what she says, David. The boathouse belongs to me. That is why I have given it to you. Of course Bellini didn't live there: he never even went inside it."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. I believe he went back to Milan. Why are you so interested in him?"

"I don't think I am. The old woman made me a little curious; that's all."

She slid her hand down my arm until it covered my hand.

"She is always trying to make mischief. Don't listen to her, David. And now you must meet Bruno. Be careful of him. There's nothing his eyes miss. Pay no attention to me when you are with him: always be on your guard."

"I'm not looking forward to this, Laura."

"Of course you're not, but let's get it over." She touched my face with her slim fingers. "Please remember, David, he means nothing to me, and I don't think I mean anything to him."

She began to move along the verandah and I reluctandy followed her.

She turned the corner of the verandah, and we came upon a long wheeled chair, standing under a shaded light, and facing the Lago. I could see the outline of a thin body under the coverlet, but a big vase of flowers on a table hid his face from me.

She motioned me to remain where I was, and went over to the chair.

"Bruno, the new man's here," she said. "His name's David Chisholm. He is an American who lives in Milan as he is studying Italian architecture. The Donetti Agency have recommended him, and he has splendid references." She turned and beckoned to me.

I walked stiff-legged to the wheel-chair, and stood where the light could fall on me. I felt slightly sick, and my hands were clammy. I don't know how I managed to meet the eyes that looked up at me from a thin, white face.

Bruno Fancino was about forty-five. He had a mass of hair, the colour of a dove's back. His thin long face was handsome and aristocratic, and so white and still it could have been chiselled from marble. But his eyes were alive: more alive than any eyes I had ever seen: big, black eyes that told me this was a man of outstanding abilities whose character was shrewd, kindly and humorous, but who could be ruthlessly determined if he had to be.

It was uncanny to stand looking down at him, knowing he couldn't speak nor move, and that he was as helpless as a dead man. I felt his eyes probing me with a friendly interest that made me ashamed and embarrassed, and to cover my growing confusion I bowed stiffly and moved once more into the shadows.

"Shall I wheel the chair inside, signora?" I asked.

Laura was quick to see that I might give myself away if Fancino were allowed to continue his scrutiny, and she came between us.

"We'd better get you inside now, Bruno. It's long past your time."

As she turned away from him, I saw him look at her, and I experienced a shock.

Into his eyes came smouldering anger, contempt and what could have been hatred. The look went as quickly as it had come. I might even have imagined it, but I didn't think so.

I went to the head of the chair.

Laura turned to me.

"Would you push the chair inside now? Be careful you don't jolt it."

I manoeuvred the chair from the verandah into a vast bedroom, lit softly by concealed lights that reflected on a white ceiling.

There was a huge bed in the centre of the room. Rich Persian rugs covered the mosaic floor. The walls were hung with tapestries that even my inexperienced eyes could see were the work of some great master. Everything in the room was of good taste and must have cost a small fortune.

I wheeled the chair alongside the bed.

Laura stood at the foot of the bed, watching. She made no move to help me nor to make any suggestions as to the best way of moving him.

Nervously, and conscious that both were watching me, I turned back the bedclothes. Then I took off the thin coverlet that covered the long, emaciated body. He was wearing grey silk pyjamas, and I saw his long, narrow feet were almost like those of a skeleton's.

I put one arm under his shoulders and the other under his knees and lifted him. I expected him to be heavy, but he was so light I very nearly overbalanced. Awkwardly I laid him on the bed, pulled the bedclothes over him and stood back. I was breathing hard, and I could feel sweat on my face.

"Thank you, David," Laura said quietly. "You may go now. I shan't need you until eight o'clock tomorrow. Please be punctual."

I bowed to Fancino, and then to her, and walked out onto the verandah.

I heard Laura say, "He was a little clumsy, but he'll get used to lifting you. I'll put on the radiogram. You might like some Chopin or perhaps you'd like me to read to you?"

I wondered how he was able to tell her which he preferred. I thought how horrible it must be for him to be imprisoned in a dead body; to be at the mercy of people's kindness, never to know when they might grow tired of administering to him, sure in his mind that they would all be relieved when he was dead.

As I reached the head of the harbour steps, I heard the first

brittle notes ot Chopin's Etude in E Flat. I stood for a moment listening, then continued on my way down to the boathouse.

Nurse Fleming was arranging her headdress before a mirroi when I pushed open the door and looked into the room next to Bruno's. She was a tall, bony woman with fierce brown eyes, a long, thin, reddish nose and a thin-lipped, determined mouth. She was on the wrong side of forty, but in spite of her spinsterish, unfriendly appearance, I could see she was extremely capable; a woman to have in an emergency, who would never get flustered no matter what happened.

She glanced at me sharply as I knocked and waited just inside the doorway.

"Are you the new man?" she asked in bad Italian, and I recognized the thin reedy voice I had heard on the telephone.

"Yes, signora," I said in English.

"Don't call me that; call me 'nurse'. I shall be ready for you in five minutes. Please wait on the verandah. What is your name?"

I told her.

"Very well, Chisholm," she said. "I suppose it is too much tr expect you are trained in any way for this work?"

"I'm afraid I'm not," I said, seeing she was determined to disapprove of me.

She made an impatient movement.

"I have asked Mrs. Fancino time after time to enagage a trained man. Dr. Perelli could get someone without any trouble, but she will engage these men herself. Well, I hope you are going to be better than that dreadful man Bellini. It is only fair to tell you that if you jolt signor Fancino, I shall have to report you to Dr. Perelli."

"I shan't jolt him," I said. "And since we are both getting paid to look after him, I don't see why I should take criticism from you. If signora Fancino is satisfied, you should be too."

I walked out onto the verandah, knowing I shouldn't have spoken like that to her, but she had got under my skin. As I stood looking down at the terraced garden, I saw Laura going down the path, wearing a pair of white tfunks and halter, and swinging a bathing-cap in her hand.

I watched her, marvelling at the beauty of her body, and hoping sne would look round and see me, but she didn't. She went down the harbour steps and disappeared from sight.

After a few minutes I saw her swimming in the Lago.

"'I'm ready now," Nurse Fleming said.

She had come up silently and was at my side before I knew she was there. I guessed she had seen me watching Laura, and I gave her a quick, searching glance. Her alert cold eyes met mine, and mine were the first to give ground.

"Follow me," she said, and walked along the verandah to Bruno's room

Bruno was lying exactly as I had left him the previous night. His eyes met mine and I gave him a stiff little bow. It was extraordinary how expressive his eyes were. They greeted me as plainly as if he had spoken. I had an uneasy feeling as I looked at him that he was beginning to like me. At least, his eyes were friendly and interested, but when he glanced from me to Nurse Fleming I saw by the change of expression in them how completely indifferent he was to her.

Under her instructions, I lifted him from the bed to the chair, being very careful not to jolt him. Even Nurse Fleming seemed satisfied, for I saw her give a surprised nod of approval.

"That will be all, Chisholm," she said. "I can manage nicely now."

Again I bowed to Bruno. His eyes seemed to be saying that I was a lucky fellow not to be left in the hands of this shrew. I may have imagined that was the thought that went through his mind, but I had a strong impression that was what he was trying to say.

I went out and walked quickly down the path, down the harbour steps to the boathouse. Keeping out of sight behind the willows, I looked to see if Laura was in sight. I caught a glimpse of her white bathing-cap. She was about a half a mile from where I stood, and was swimming towards me.

I waited for her.

As she pulled herself up onto the harbour wall, I said, "Good morning, signora."

She didn't look round, but I saw her back stiffen.

"You shouldn't be here, David. It's dangerous. There's an old devil who lives on the *Pescatori* who always watches me through a telescope. He's probably watching me now. Please go away."

This angered me.

"To hell with him!" I said. "Anyway, he can't see me. Look, Laura——"

"All the same, David, please go away, and be careful you're not seen as you move."

"Is there anything you want me to do besides going away?" I asked tartly.

"You had better keep the boat clean, David. Dr. Perelli sometimes uses it, and we don't want to give him any excuses to complain. If you would do that, the rest of the day is your own. And, darling, I'm coming to see you tonight."

"Yes," I said.

She looked sharply at me.

"You're not falling under the sway of Bruno's charms, are you?" she asked, moving her long, slim legs in the water.

"I don't think so."

"He has charm, David. Even now, he makes friends more easily than I do. Would you want to be his friend?"

"Scarcely," I said curtly. "Well, I guess I'd better get on with the boat."

I walked over to the boathouse, unlocked the door and went inside.

As I began to collect the cleaning materials from a locker, I saw Laura get to her feet, take off her bathing-cap and shake her copper-coloured hair free. She looked very beautiful as she stood in the hot sunlight, the halter-and trunks moulded to her body, her head thrown back and her hands on her breasts.

I felt my mouth turn dry, and I had to restrain myself from going to her. Then I suddenly remembered the man on the *Pescatori* with his telescope. Perhaps she was posing for him, and not for me.

Angrily, I turned away and began working on the brass rail, surrounding the boat. When I looked up again, she had gone.

Laura was right. Bruno had charm. Horribly handicapped as he was, unable to move nor speak, the muscles of his face paralysed, yet his eyes were able to talk and to make friends.

That night, when I went to lift him from his chair to his bed, I found him alone. I stood hesitating, looking down at him, not sure if I should go away or wait for Nurse Fleming to come. As I was about to go, his eyes stopped me as surely as if he had told me to remain.

He looked at me with friendly interest and I could see his eyes were asking questions. I began to tell him what I had been doing during the day.

I told him how I had cleaned the boat, and how the magneto timing had needed attention. I explained what I had done, and his eyes showed their approval,

"One of these days, signor," I said, "perhaps you would like me to carry you down to the boat and take you for a little trip. If I went very slowly there would be no jolting. It would make a change for you instead of being chained to this verandah."

His eyes told me he would like that very much, then he rolled them mockingly and looked towards Nurse Fleming, who had just rustled in, as if to tell me that there was no hope of that so long as she was in charge of him.

I wheeled in the chair and carried him to the bed. The operation went even more smoothly this time, and again I saw Nurse Fleming's nod of approval.

Laura came in then, and I bowed to Bruno and went down to the boathouse.

I changed into a singlet and flannels, then sat down in front of the open window, and lit a cigarette.

Yes, Bruno had charm. It wasn't often I suffered from the

pangs of an uneasy conscience, but as I sat there I realized just how badly I was behaving. It didn't help to tell myself that if I hadn't been Laura's lover, someone else would have come along; that it was inevitable. If Bruno had been an unpleasant character I might have been able to accept the situation without a qualm, but since I found I liked him I began to wonder if I shouldn't pack my bags and get out.

But the temptation to remain in this luxurious apartment was very strong. The thought that Laura would be here in just under four hours to spend the night with me was also irresistible.

I began to think about Laura. Was she really in love with me? I wondered. With her looks and money she could have had the pick of hundreds of men: men with money. Why then had she chosen me?

Thinking with an uneasy conscience about our first meeting, it now seemed incredible to me that a woman in her position should have thrown herself at a complete stranger, shabby and without money, as she had done. Was she one of those women who couldn't live without a man—any man? Since Maria had hinted that Bellini had lived in the boathouse I had been uneasy about Laura. Although she had assured me Bellini hadn't lived there, I began to wonder if she had been lying. The more I thought about her, the more suspicious I became. Had Bellini been her lover? Had there been someone before Bellini? She had been here over four years, and Bellini had only lasted three months.

I tried to analyse my own feelings for her. So long as she wasn't near me I found I could think of her objectively. What did I know about her, apart from her physical attraction? There was something uncannily odd about her. She wasn't unlike Bruno in that respect: only her eyes seemed to be alive. When they were hidden behind her sun-glasses.she could have been a dead woman: as if she had trained herself not to give away her true feelings, and not to let anyone ever know what was going on in her mind.

What was going on in her mind? I wondered.

I sat brooding about her and Bruno while the hands of my watch crept on. I didn't get anywhere, but the more I thought about my relations with her, the more uneasy I became.

She found me sitting before the window. I didn't hear her come in, and she gave me a start when she touched my arm.

"What are you thinking about, David?" she asked.

I got hurriedly to my feet.

"How quietly you came in."

We looked at each other.

She was wearing a light woollen sweater and a pair of dark linen slacks. Her copper-coloured hair was caught back by a thin green ribbon. She looked very young and lovely, and her eyes were glittering and alive.

She cast her magic over me as a gladiator casts his net. I could

feel myself caught up and trapped as she moved towards me. My uneasiness, my suspicions and my guilty conscience were swamped as her hands touched mine.

"Glad to have me here?" she asked, looking up at me.

The temptation was too strong for me.

"Yes, I'm glad to have you here," I said, and pulled her to me.

The light of the brilliant moon came through the open window, across the mosaic floor and onto the bed.

I stirred, opened my eyes and raised my head.

Laura lay at my side. I could hear her uneven breathing, and I half sat up to look at her.

She was asleep, but her body twitched and her hands opened and closed convulsively. She gave a soft little moan; the sound that had wakened me. She was dreaming, and the dream seemed to be frightening her.

I touched her shoulder.

"What is it?" I said. "Wake up, Laura: you're dreaming."

She started so violently that she nearly fell off the bed, and as she sat up I put my arm round her and pulled her to me.

"It's all right; you were dreaming."

"Yes."

She lay against me and I could feel her heart hammering against my hand.

"You must have been having a nightmare," I said, smiling down at her. "Did you think the devil had got you?"

She gave a little shiver and pulled away from me.

"What's the time?"

"Just after three," I said, peering at the clock on the night-table. "Plenty of time. Turn over and go to sleep."

"No. I want to talk to you. Get me a cigarette, darling."

I rolled off the bed, groped for the cigarette-box and came back. We both lit cigarettes. In the little flame of the match I caught a glimpse of her slim white body, stretched out beside me. It was gone as the match went out. Only her feet and slim ankles lay in the moonlight.

"What were you dreaming about?"

"It doesn't matter. David, what do you think of Bruno?"

"What is there to think?" I said shortly. I didn't feel like talking about Bruno at this moment. "A fine spirit trapped in a dead body. That's all one can say about him."

"Then yqu like him, David?"

"I don't know about that. I admire his guts."

"You think he has a fine spirit?"

"He must have to endure the life he's leading."

"It's not his fine spirit that keeps him alive. It's an obstinate determination to keep me chained to him as long as he possibly can."

I didn't say anything.

"Do you think he'll go on much longer?" she asked after a long pause.

"I don't know."

"Sometimes I think he'll go on and on for years."

"Better not think about it," I said uneasily. "What were you dreaming about, Laura?"

"Bruno. I'm always dreaming about him." She stretched her arms above her head. "It would be wonderful to be free of him. Think what it would mean! We wouldn't have to live this hole-in-the-corner existence. We might even get married."

"We might."

I wondered what it would be like to be married to her. I had no idea what she was like behind that mask of hers. I wondered too, it she were free to marry, if I would want to marry her.

"Does money mean anything to you, David?" she asked abruptly.

"Of course it does. I've always wanted money, but so far I've never come within sight of it. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering what you'd be prepared to do for a lot of money."

"Prepared to do? What do you mean?"

She turned on her side, and her hand moved slowly down my arm while she tried to see my face in the dim light.

"Would you take risks? I believe everyone has his price, don't you? I know I'd be prepared to do anything if the money was big enough."

I had a sudden instinctive feeling that I was moving out on to dangerous ground; like a blind man who becomes aware that he is at the edge of a river bank, and one more step will take him into the water.

"I wouldn't like to say I'd do anything," I said, trying to speak lightly. "But I suppose it would depend on the amount involved."

"Yes." Her fingers moved across my chest. "Suppose it was three hundred million lire."

I drew in a sharp breath. I hadn't been thinking in those terms. Three hundred million lire was worth about two hundred thousand pounds.

"Is there such a sum?"

"Bruno's estate is worth about that: probably a little more. Then there's this villa. You see, David, if I were free and the money was mine, and if you wanted to marry me, I'd give you half of it: a hundred and fifty million. I don't suppose we could take it out of the country, but you could start a business in Milan or Rome. If you wanted to, you could pay me back when you had made a success of it, or better still, I could be your partner. I'd like that, David. It would give me an interest in life."

"I had no idea you are going to be as rich as all that," I said,

blankly[1]. "Are you sure all this money will be left to you when he dies?"

"Yes, I've seen the will. There is even more to come, but some of it goes to his daughter. I inherit two-thirds and she a third of his total fortune."

"I didn't know he had a daughter."

"His first wife died three or four years before I met him. His daughter's about nineteen. She's in England at the moment, completing her education."

"Is she coming back here?"

"Perhaps; I don't know. Three hundred million, David! Isn't it an exciting prospect?"

"I don't see how we can build castles, Laura. He may go on for years." *

"I know." The red tip of her cigarette bobbed up and down in the darkness. "It seems dreadful he should have to go on living. After all, he can't get any fun out of life."

I didn't say anything.

"I dreamed he was dead," she said, after a long pause.

"Well, he's not," I said curtly. "Let's forget about it, Laura."

"Do you realize his life is really hanging on a thread?" she went on as if she hadn't heard me. "If, one day when you were lifting him, he slipped and fell to the floor, he would die."

"He's not likely to slip when I'm handling him," I said.

"Accidents do happen." Again her cool fingers passed over my bare chest. "Three hundred million is a lot of money, David: half for you, half for me."

"What are you suggesting, Laura?" I asked sharply.

"Don't you think it would be an act of mercy to let him slip?"

I couldn't believe she was serious. She couldn't be! She was so quiet and cool, and her voice was normal, her hand played with mine, and yet she was suggesting I should murder her husband.

"You mean it would be an act of mercy if he accidentally fell?" I said. "Why talk about it? It's not likely to happen."

"But, darling, must you be so dense? You could let him slip as you lifted him, couldn't you?"

I was now having trouble in breathing. It was time, I decided, to sock it into her as hard as I could.

"It would be murder, Laura."

Her fingers played a swift little scale along my arm.

"Don't be silly, David, of course it wouldn't. If you must call it something, call it a mercy killing. If a horse breaks its leg, you shoot it, don't you?"

"I'd like to see the judge's face when you told him that."

"Judge? What's a judge got to do with it?"

"Plenty. It would be murder, Laura. Can't you see that?"

"What does it matter what it is?" she asked a little impatiently. "Who would know? Most men wouldn't hesitate. Three hundred

million would buy a lot of things, and besides, darling, I keep telling you, it would be so much better for Bruno."

"Would it buy my life if I were caught?" I asked. "Would it save you from being made an accessory before the fact? I'm damned sure three hundred million wouldn't foot that bill!"

"Don't get so worked up. I keep telling you—no one would know. It would be an accident."

"Oh, yes, they would!" I leaned over and snapped on the light. I looked at her. She blinked up at me, a little smile on her full, scarlet lips, her hands covering her breasts, her copper-coloured hair spread out on the pillow.

"Must you put on the light?" she asked plaintively.

"Listen to me!" I said harshly. "The motive sticks out a mile! That's all the police ever need—a good motive! They would only have to see this room to know we're lovers. Don't kid yourself that Maria and Nurse Fleming would keep their mouths shut. They'd tell them I used this place. We wouldn't stand a chance!"

"David! You're shouting at me." She shielded her eyes from the light. "Please put out the light."

"No! I don't know if you realize what you've been saying—I hope you haven't—but if you're serious, you and I are going to part company. Now, tell me: are you serious?"

"Why, David, you're quite upset. Serious—about what?"

"You suggested I should murder Bruno. Did you mean that?"

"Must you put it so crudely?" She frowned up at me. "He's nearly dead now. You can't call it murder, darling. If you let him slip …"

I got off the bed and grabbed up my dressing-gown.

"So you do mean it?"

"Of course I don't. I'm a little tempted perhaps." She sat up, staring at me, her arms folded over her breasts. "It is tempting, isn't it, darling? I want my freedom so badly now I've met you, and then there's all that money, but I suppose I'm not really serious. Of course if you tried very hard to persuade me, and you said you would let him slip, I don't think I would try to stop you.""

"I'm not going to persuade you! And you'd better get those ideas out of your mind. Don't imagine you would get away with it, because you damn' well wouldn't!"

"Please don't get angry, David, I wouldn't have said what I did if I thought you'd get so upset."

"It'd be murder! Can't you get that into your head? Bruno has as much right to live as you have!"

She shook her head.

"I don't agree, darling, but I won't argue with you about it. I was talking without thinking."

"If someone overheard you . . ."

"Yes, I suppose it would have sounded bad. But no one did

overhear me. It must have been that dream. I dreamed Bruno died. It was so easy in the dream. I won't talk about it any more. I'll be patient."

"You'd better be!"

I walked over to the window and stared across the moonlit Lago.

"You'd better go to sleep," I said. "It's still early."

"I don't think I'll be able to sleep now. I think I'll go back to the villa. If we did drop off, we might oversleep. Would you mind, darling, if I go now?"

I wouldn't have believed three hours ago I should have been so glad to be rid of her.

"No. Perhaps it would be safer if you went now."

"That's right." She smiled brightly at me. "You believe in safety, don't you, David?"

"We won't go into that."

"No."

She slipped off the bed. I didn't watch her dress. I kept my back turned to her and remained at the window.

"You're not angry with me, David?"

I turned.

"No, of course not. It's all right."

"I'm glad. I only want you to be happy."

"Yes."

"I'll come again soon."

"Yes."

She didn't move towards me. We were suddenly strangers. At the door, she paused to blow me a kiss. Her big violet eyes were expressionless. Her smile was stiff. I suddenly realized I wasn't the only one who wanted to be alone.

I didn't sleep any more that night.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE next morning, after I had finished my routine work, I went down to the garage to clean the big Alfa-Romeo six-seater. My brain works better when my hands are busy, and I had a lot to think about.

Laura had jarred me badly last night, but thinking about what had happened in the daylight, it seemed impossible that she had been serious.

After she had left me, I had been ready to believe she was serious. I had even decided she had deliberately picked on me to

murder her husband, and that was why she had thrown herself at me in the Duomo.

But now, in the bright light of the sun, I realized how darkness distorts the mind, and I convinced myself she couldn't have been serious.

I went over our conversation in my mind. She had been so relaxed and calm. She couldn't have realized what she had been saying. No one could have been so unmoved who was deliberately planning a cold-blooded murder.

No, she couldn't have meant what she had said. It was the kind of loose, meaningless talk that sometimes comes out of darkness that you wouldn't own to in the daylight.

But it worried me. It had left a maggot in my mind.

She had talked of three hundred million lire. Half to you, she had said, and half to me.

I thought of what I could do with that sum of money. I could buy a passport. I would be free again. I wouldn't have to cross the road every time I saw a policeman.

You could let him slip, couldn't you? she had said.

Yes, I could let him slip. It would be easy. He would fall on the mosaic floor. I thought of his brittle, emaciated body. He wouldn't suffer. A fall like that would kill him quicker than a bullet through his head.

I felt sweat on my face.

Now, every time I lifted him it would go through my mind that I had only to let him slip and I would collect one hundred and fifty million lire.

She had left a maggot in my mind all right.

But it would be murder, and I wasn't going to do it. I wasn't even going to think about it.

I paused in my polishing to wipe the sweat from my face.

"Oh, David . . ."

She gave me such a start I dropped the tin of polish as I spun round.

She was in her white swim-suit, her bathing-cap in her long, slim fingers. Her face was a little pale, and there were smudges tinder her eyes. She gave me an uneasy, hesitant smile.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"I guess my nerves are jumpy this morning," I said, and bent to pick up the tin of polish. "You certainly came up like a ghost."

"I have some shopping to do in Laveno. Is the boat ready?"

"Yes."

"I want you to come with me. There'll be things to carry. Will you be ready in an hour?"

"Yes."

She turned and walked with her long, graceful stride down the steps to the swimming-pool.

I stood looking after her, feeling a creepy sensation run up my spine and into the roots of my hair.

She came down the harbour steps, looking very cool and lovely in an apple-green frock and a big straw hat. Her white net gloves and white shoes set off the frock, and made her look like an expensive mannequin about to model for *Vogue*.

"I'll take her," she said as I started the engine, and she sat in the bucket seat in front of the wheel. I sat just behind her.

She drove expertly, sending the boat along at a fast clip, and keeping close to the shore. We passed Reno, and then Cerro, then she suddenly closed the throttle, and turned the nose of the boat towards a little cove, sheltered by overhanging willow trees. She ran the boat in under them, and let the nose of the boat bump gently against the bank. She turned and faced me.

"I had to talk to you this morning, David."

"I thought you would want to," I said, and waited.

"We were like strangers last night: it was horrible."

"We got on to a pretty horrible subject."

"You don't really believe I want to get rid of Bruno?"

"I know what you said, Laura."

"What I said and what I meant are two different things."

"I hope so."

She studied me anxiously.

"Have I spoilt everything for us, David?"

"You certainly jarred me."

"But I didn't mean it! Please believe me, darling. Nothing is going to happen to Bruno. Even if you said this very moment you would do something, I wouldn't let you, and if you did, I'd never forgive you."

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm not going to do anything like that. It's not my idea of fun to murder a helpless man."

"That's right. It's not my idea of fun either."

"Let's forget it, Laura."

"It was my dream that did it, darling. It was such a vivid dream. You were lifting him. Dr. Perelli and Nurse Fleming were in the room, and so was I. As you lifted him from the chair, something went wrong; you stumbled. Dr. Perelli called out. Bruno fell head down on the floor. You had hold of his legs; his head hit the——"

"Shut up!" I said, grabbing hold of her arm. "I don't want to hear!"

She stared at me, and a curious expression came into her eyes, an inquisitive, excited look, as if she wanted to peer inside my mind and see what was in there.

"Oh, David, I don't know what's come over you," she said. "Why do you shout at me like that?"

"Was I shouting?" I let go of her arm. "I'm sorry."

"You woke me up, didn't you? You knew I was dreaming, and I wasn't really awake when I started talking the way I did. I was putting my dream into words."

"Let's drop it, Laura," I said. "There's no point in driving it into the ground."

"But I want it to be all right with us, David."

"It is all right."

"You frightened me last night when you said you would leave me. You're not going away?"

"I wasn't planning to go away."

"I was so worried. Please tell me, David, you do believe now I wouldn't want to hurt Bruno."

"Yes, I believe you."

"I wish you sounded more convinced," she said, uneasily. "I wish I could prove it to you. Now look, David, if I really intended to get rid of Bruno, I should now have to get rid of you first, shouldn't I? I would be suggesting you went away because I should have to find someone else, and you would be in the way, wouldn't you? But I don't want to get rid of Bruno, and I want you to stay with me more than I want anything else in the world. So please tell me you're convinced."

"I keep telling you to forget it."

She sat looking at me.

"Is it all right, David?"

"Yes, it's all right."

She leaned towards me, raising her face, so I kissed her. Her lips felt soft and alive against mine. Her arms went round my neck.

"Dear David, I don't know what I would do without you."

I pulled away from her.

"I'm not going to live in the boathouse any more, Laura."

Alarm jumped into her eyes. "But why, darling?"

"It puts a label on us. We were crazy to have started it. I'm going to get a room in the village like Bellini did."

"But then we won't be together at night."

"We can meet at the boathouse, but I'm not living in it any more. I've made up my mind about that."

Again she gave me that inquisitive, probing look.

"So you remember what you said last night?" she asked. "You said all the police wanted was a good motive. They would only have to see the boathouse to know we were lovers."

"I know what I said." <

"You're not afraid of the police, are you, David?"

I had to make an effort to meet her eyes, but I did it.

"I'm not afraid of them. I just don't feel comfortable living in that place. It's too luxurious."

"All right, darling, but won't you hate having a room in the village? It won't be much."

"I'm used to roughing it."

"Well, if you're determined, I can't stop you. This doesn't mean we won't spend nights together?"

"No."

"I don't think we'd better stay here any longer. I've a lot of shopping to do in Laveno."

"Okay, let's go."

"And it is all right with us, darling?"

"It's all right."

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When we got back from Laveno there was a telegram waiting for Laura. I was carrying in the box of groceries as she opened it, and I heard her surprised exclamation.

"It's Valeria," she said in a whisper. "She's coming here next Tuesday."

Maria came out of the kitchen at that moment to ask if Laura had seen the telegram.

"Yes, thank you. It's from Valeria. She is coming home next Tuesday."

Maria's face lit up, and she clasped her hands with delight.

"Signor Bruno will be so pleased!"

"I expect he will," Laura said indifferently, then turning to me, she went on, "I'm afraid you'll have to find a room in the village. I shall want the boathouse for myself now signorina Valeria is coming."

"Yes, signora."

Laura looked over at Maria.

"Do you know where he can get a room, Maria?"

"Perhaps at the garage," Maria said. "Giam Bicci told me he wanted to rent a room."

"You could try there, David," Laura said, and walked across the hall and into Bruno's room.

I heard her say, "Valeria's coming home, Bruno. I wished she had given me a little more notice. I thought she wasn't coming back until September."

The door closed, and I went into the kitchen and put down the box of groceries.

"Where do I find Bicci?" I asked Maria as she began to empty the box.

"Just before you reach the village. The quickest way is through the garden and along the hill path."

"Thanks." I lit a cigarette. "I'll go down there after lunch. You looked pleased when you heard signorina Valeria is coming home."

"Pleased?" Maria beamed at me. "I am very pleased. She should have come before. You can have too much education.

Signor Bruno has been pining for her. You will see a big change in him when she arrives."

"I hope I shall."

It was while I was waiting for lunch that I made up my mind what I was going to do.

Although Laura had convinced me she hadn't meant what she had said, I knew the situation was dangerous. It was a situation as old as the hills: two lovers and a rich husband who is in the way. The money involved was an enormous sum, and consequently an enormous temptation. I didn't trust Laura, and I didn't trust myself. Already she had planted a maggot in my mind. If I remained long enough in her company there was no telling how she might influence me. We might drift into murder: other people had done it, end we could do it.

There was only one solution to this situation. I had to get out. It wasn't going to be easy to break with Laura. When she was with me she was overpoweringly attractive, but I knew I had to break with her. The thought of returning to my sordid room in Milan didn't appeal to me, but anything was better than this sick feeling of uneasiness that was now gnawing at my mind.

In six days' time Valeria would be returning. When she arrived, I would leave, I told myself. Six more days, and then I would pack up and return to Milan.

At the back of my mind I knew I should go at once, but the temptation to have a few more days on the Lago and a few more nights with Laura was too much for me. And besides, if I went now it was probable Laura wouldn't give me the seven thousand lire that was to be my week's wages, and I wanted that money.

I wondered if Torrchi had any news for me about a passport. He had promised to try to arrange something for me, although he had warned me the price would be high.

I decided to go into Milan after tea and have a talk to him. It wouldn't do to let him imagine I wasn't still anxious to get out of the country. He might also know something about Bellini, and I was very curious to know what kind of man Bellini was.

After lunch I went down to the village to see about a room.

The village was about a mile from the villa by road, but if I went through the garden gate as Maria had directed me I could walk along a path cut in the face of the hill, overlooking the Lago, and shorten the walk by three-quarters of a mile.

The path was narrow: on one side was the steep hill face, on the other a sheer drop into the Lago. It was safe enough to use in daylight, but most certainly not at night.

Giam Bicci was a fat little man with a big grey moustache and a completely bald head. He took me upstairs and showed me the

room, which wasn't much, but at least it was clean. We agreed **on** a price, and I told him I'd move in some time tomorrow.

"You come from the villa?" he asked, eyeing me inquisitively.

"Yes. I've taken Bellini's job."

He scowled.

"That Bellini! I'm glad he has gone."

"What was the matter with him?"

"Matter? Everything! A brute of a man; always quarrelling, always after the girls, always getting drunk."

"Did he have a room in the village?"

"At first, but he made such a nuisance of himself, they got rid of him. He stayed at the boathouse, so I hear. A good thing he has gone."

"Are you sure about the boathouse?" I asked, alert now.

"He stayed there at least a week before he had to go."

"Why did he go?"

Bicci passed an oily hand over his bald head and scowled.

"Trouble with a woman."

I could see he wasn't going to enlarge on the subject so I changed the subject by asking him if he could let me have a boat.

"I might do a little fishing in my spare time."

"You can use the green boat with the outboard motor. You will find it on the beach."

"Thanks. I'll let you know if I want it."

I walked back to the villa, turning over in my mind what I had learned. So Bellini had used the boathouse. That made him Laura's lover. My doubts about her came surging back. Was she really planning to murder Bruno, or was she what I had at first suspected, a woman who had to have a man—any man; even a drunk like Bellini?

My next move now was to talk to Torrchi and see if he could give me some more information about Bellini. Every scrap of information I got would help me decide what was going on behind Laura's cold and inscrutable mask.

I walked aimlessly through the gardens and paused to look up at the villa. All the shutters were closed. In the heat of the afternoon everyone, including Nurse Fleming, went to their rooms for a siesta. Bruno was left on the verandah, where he was supposed to rest for two hours.

I could see him now, alone and motionless, lying in the shade, and I had an idea he was watching me.

I had him on my conscience, and looking up, seeing him there, I thought he must be feeling damned lonely. It was all very well for Nurse Fleming to say he must rest, but he had all night in which to rest, and it could be no fun to be left during the day while everyone took their ease and were rid of him.

I decided on an impulse to go up there and see if he wanted company; he might even like me to read to him. I went down to

the boathouse and took Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* from the bookshelf, and went back to the villa,

I felt embarrrassed when my eyes met his, and I half wished I hadn't come. But I could see he was pleased to see me, and after hesitating, I went up to him.

"I've been reading Vasari," I said, holding up the book. "Some of it is amusing. Perhaps you'd like me to read a little of it to you?"

His eyes lit up with surprise and interest.

"There's a nice piece about Bandinelli and his feud with Cellini," I went on. "Would that interest you?"

His eyes thanked me. It was extraordinary how easy it was to understand him if you watched his eyes. I pulled up a chair and sat down.

It took me a little under an hour to read the chapter on Bandinelli, and when I had finished I looked up to see hov; he had liked it.

"It's wonderful stuff considering it was written over four hundred years ago, isn't it?" I said, laying down the book. "I've been through the four volumes a dozen times." I went on to tell him about my book and of the progress I had made.

I could see he was taking a lively interest in what I was telling him. It was a new experience for me to find an interested audience when I talked about my book, and I got so carried away with my subject I forgot the time, and Nurse Fleming caught me in the middle of an enthusiastic description of the Graffito pavement in Siena's Cathedral.

"And what do you imagine you're doing here?" she demanded tartly as I got hurriedly to my feet.

"I've been reading to the signore," I said. "Just passing the time."

She started to say something, but she happened to catch Bruno's eyes, and they told her to shut up so plainly that she gave an annoyed shrug and turned away.

He looked hopefully at me as if asking me to come again. I nodded, and walked down the steps into the garden.

Laura appeared from the little summer-house, carrying a book, and I waited for her as she came up the path.

"Would you mind if I went into Milan this evening?" I asked, aware that Nurse Fleming was watching us from the verandah. "I want to collect some of my books."

She nodded.

"Yes. of course. Would you like the car?"

"If it would be convenient."

"Yes, take it I'm not going out."

I bowed to her and went down to the boathouse to change.

Ten minutes later I was speeding along the road to Sesto Calendo, and within an hour I was in Milan.

I left the car at the parking lot by the Duomo, and went in search of Torrchi. I found him sunning himself by the main entrance, his eyes on the lookout for a likely handbag.

"Signpr David,'" he exclaimed, his face lighting up. "This is a great pleasure. Where have you been? For days now I have looked for you."

"I've a job on the Lago Maggiore."

He raised his bushy eyebrows.

"You have given up the Duomo?"

"For the time being. I hope to be back by next week. How are you prospering, Torrchi? You don't look very busy. Will you have a drink with me?"

"Certainly. I have had a successful day, and in half an hour Simona is meeting me here. But let us have a drink. She is never punctual."

As we walked down Corso Vittorio Emanuele I enquired after Simona.

"She is very well," Torrchi said. "At the moment she is working again as a model. An American lady is employing her. Simona is always well behaved when she has something to do." He shot me an inquisitive glance. "You still haven't changed your mind about that diamond clip?"

"That's past history, Torrchi," I said as I pushed open the door to Piero's *trattoria.* "I haven't got it now. You can forget it."

Piero brought us a flask of Chianti. He seemed very pleased to see me.

"I was hoping, signore, you would bring the beautiful signora here again," he said.

"Perhaps one day she will come again," I said.

When he had gone, Torrchi asked, "You still see the signora then?"

"Never mind about her," I said, and poured out two glasses of wine. I pushed one across the table to him. *"Salud/"*

We drank.

"Signor David," Torrchi said after he had wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, "I have some news for you."

"What news?"

"About the passport."

"Well, go on," I said. "What about it?"

"Jacopo came to see me last night. He has been ill, but he is working again. He says he can arrange things for you."

"Is he any good, Torrchi?"

"Good?" Torrchi slapped the table with the flat of his hand. "There is no one *to* touch him. He is the best in the country."

I felt a little prickle of excitement run up my spine.

"You mean he really can do something?"

Torrchi made a wry grimace.

"At a price."

"Yes, of course: at a price." Even though I expected that snag I felt deflated. "Did he say how much?"

"Six hundred and fifty thousand."

"Is he crazy?" My voice shot up. "Six hundred and fifty thousand! It's robbery!"

Torrchi looked quickly over his shoulder, but there was no one else in the room except Piero, who was working at the cash-desk.

"I know, I told him he couldn't do business at those prices, but he won't listen. He says the risk is bad. Getting the passport blanks costs a lot of money. He says there are many people who have to be paid. He doesn't get more than ten thousand out of it for himself."

"He's a liar," I said.

Torrchi shrugged.

"The work is very good, signor David. I've seen some of it. You wouldn't have any trouble."

"I haven't the money."

Torrchi looked at me slyly.

"Maybe the beautiful signora would lend it to you?"

"Leave her out of this, Torrchi!"

"Excuse me, it was just a suggestion."

I drained my glass and refilled it, pushing the flask over to Torrchi.

"I always thought that idea of mine was a pipe dream," I said. "Looks as if I'll have to remain in this country until I rot."

"You want so very much to get back to America?"

"I can earn a living in America, Torrchi. I'm an architect."

"Yes, that I can understand. Well, maybe you'll have a little luck. I'll talk to Jacopo again. He may come down a little."

"Forget it. How's Giuseppe?"

"Just the same. He gets drunk every night, but he works very hard during the day."

"He has the constitution of an ox. I know what I wanted to ask you, Torrchi. Have you ever run across a man named Bellini? I don't know his other name. He is big and ugly and smokes cigars."

Torrchi looked startled.

"Mario Bellini? Yes, I know him. He used to have a room in Via del Ponte. Why do you ask?"

"What kind of man is he?"

"Not a good man: a man of violence."

"Is he in Milan?"

"Not now. He went away about four months ago. I heard he had gone to Rome."

"Tell me about him, Torrchi. It's important."

"He owned two street women," Torrchi said, grimacing. "He was also a bandit. His methods were very crude. He relied on

violence: a dark alley, a long wait, then a blow on the head. You know what I mean?"

"Milan is full of thugs like that."

"Yes, but he was the worst of the lot. Three times he has been in prison. He spoilt the trade. If he had stayed longer in Milan the police would have doubled their patrols."

"Why do you think he has gone to Rome?"

"Someone told me so. Maybe he's gone somewhere else. It doesn't matter so long as he stays away from Milan."

"Describe him to me, Torrchi."

"He's a very big man, over six foot: very powerful. He has big black eyebrows, a dark bluish jaw and small angry eyes. All the time he is angry. There is a little circle of baldness on top of his head, and he smokes many cigars."

"Anything else you know about him?"

Torrchi rubbed his nose with the back of his hand.

"You remember Andre Gallio, the pickpocket?"

I nodded.

"Bellini killed his brother, Luigi. That is why he left Milan."

"Sure of that?"

Torrchi nodded.

"The police never found out, but I know. Andre knows too."

"Why don't you go to the police then?"

Torrchi smiled.

"There is no nftd to go to the police. Andre is a member of the Mafia. Very soon Bellini will be dead: they are looking for him now."

"How did it happen?"

"Luigi was working in the Duomo. He hooked a very fine pearl necklace. Bellini saw him take it and demanded half the value. Gallio told him to go to hell. Bellini laid for him, but Gallio was too quick. He started to run. Bellini shot him and took the necklace. Andre came up just as Bellini was leaving. He saw him."

I lit a cigarette. As I flicked out the match I wondered if Laura had any idea of all this. Again the little spark of suspicion began to glow in my mind.

"I have to get back to the Duomo now, signor David," Torrchi said. "Simona will be waiting. Will you come?"

I shook my head.

"I must be moving too. Give her my love. It has been nice seeing you again, Torrchi."

"This job you have got: it is a good one?"

"It's all right."

"Good. You don't want me to do anything more about the passport?"

"It is too much. But leave it open, Torrchi. I may think of a way."

When I went up to the villa to lift Bruno into bed that evening I was surprised to find a tall, thin man with him.

Laura was sitting on the verandah rail, and Nurse Fleming was bustling about in the background, looking efficient.

I guessed the tall, thin man was Dr. Perelli. He had a chin beard and a pair of rimless glasses on his hooked nose. He gave me a long, searching stare as I came up the verandah steps.

"This is Chisholm, doctor," Laura said. "Shall he wait?"

"No, no, I'm just going," Perelli said in a deep, harsh voice. "I'll be in again on Tuesday. Did Valeria say what time she'd be arriving?"

"No, but I expect she'll come in on the midday train. Come to lunch, doctor. I know you're almost as anxious to see her as Bruno is."

"I'll try to. I may be too busy. I'll telephone you."

"You can put signor Fancino to bed now," Laura said, turning to me.

Aware that Perelli was watching me, I manoeuvred the chair into the bedroom.

Nurse Fleming had already turned down the bedclothes.

As I pulled the chair close to the bed, I suddenly remembered Laura's dream.

Dr. Perelli and Nurse Fleming were in the room, and so was I. As you lifted him from the chair, something went wrong; you stumbled. Dr. Perelli called out. Bruno fell head down . . .

I felt a sudden, cold sickness in the pit of my stomach. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Laura come into the room, followed by Dr. Perelli.

Laura said, "He lifts Bruno very well now. He's quite the best man we've had."

I looked across at her.

Was it the trick of light or had she gone a little pale? Her eyes seemed to glitter as she gave me a swift glance, and then immediately looked away.

I took off the coverlet.

Bruno was watching me. There was a puzzled, enquiring expression in his eyes as if he sensed my sudden tension.

I picked him up.

Nurse Fleming moved the chair out of my way. She pushed it a little harder than necessary. It skidded against the night-table and rebounded against me.

The sharp corner of the foot of the chair rammed into the back of my knee. I was off balance, as I was about to lower Bruno on the bed.

I stumbled.

Laura gave a sharp, little cry.

Perelli said sharply, "Look out!"

I went down on one knee, holding on to Bruno firmly, taking the shock on my knee.

The sound my knee-cap made as it hit the stone floor was like the snapping of dry wood.

1 straightened up and carefully laid Bruno on the bed. The whole thing had taken perhaps three seconds. What could have been a fatal accident was now nothing more than a little clumsiness. He hadn't even been jolted.

"I'm very sorry, signore," I said; my mouth was dry, and my muscles were fluttering in my legs.

"It was my fault," Nurse Fleming said. "I've never done such a thing before."

Bruno's eyes smiled at me.

"You really must be more careful, nurse," Perelli said angrily. "If this man hadn't been so agile . . ."

"I told you he was very good," Laura said quietly. She was as white as a fresh fall of snow.

"Are you all right, Bruno?" Perelli asked, bending over the still, thin figure.

I walked stiff-legged onto the verandah. When I was out of their sight I wiped the sweat'from my face.

As I was moving away, Perelli came out.

"That could have been a very dangerous accident," he said. "You did well to avoid it."

I didn't say anything. I was scared my voice would give me away.

"Come with me to my car," he said abruptly, and walked along the verandah, down the path that led to the front of the house.

Aware that my legs were shaky, I followed him.

When we reached his car, he turned, saying, "You're an American?"

I saw the danger of that at once. If he asked to see my permit papers and discovered I hadn't any, I could imagine he would notify the police.

"Not exactly, signore. My father was an American officer during the first war. My mother was a foolish Italian girl who should have known better. I have retained his nart^Ae at her request."

That seemed to satisfy him for he asked, "Did Nurse Fleming engage you?"

"No, signora Fancino."

His face hardened.

"I see. Nurse Fleming tells me you have been reading to signor Fancino."

"Yes; she objected, but I think he was glad of the diversion."

"She won't object in the future," he said tartly. "You have my permission to amuse him during the afternoon, and when your other work permits you. I find him a lot brighter today."

"I shall be pleased to do what I can."

He pulled at his beard while he stared at me. I could see he was still a little doubtful of me.

"Signor Fancino was considered one of the most brilliant men in Italy," he said abruptly. "It is particularly hard on him to be in his present position, cut off from any intellectual pursuits. The main reason why he isn't making any progress is because he has now no outlet to exercise his brain, and that fact depresses him. Nurse Fleming tells me you were reading Vasari to him."

"I thought it would be a change from the tripe she insists on reading to him."

"How is it you are interested in Vasari?"

"I'm writing a book on Italian cathedrals. That is why I am here. The work gives me money to live on and enough leisure to complete my book. I told signor Fancino about it. It seemed to interest him."

"Of course it would interest him. He was responsible for moving all the treasures from the various cathedrals when the invasion began. He is an authority on art, and has supervised the restoration of a number of frescoes that were damaged during the war. You couldn't do better than tell him about your book if you know what you're talking about."

I laughed.

"I know what I'm talking about," I said. "Is there any hope of his recovering?"

Perelli shook his head.

"He'll never recover the use of his limbs, but his speech might return. That is mainly psychological: due to shock. If his interest is sufficiently awakened, or if he experienced a violent shock, or if he could create the desire to express himself again, he could very easily regain his speech."

"Medical treatment won't do it then?"

"No, but if he made up his mind he could do it himself."

"Does he know?"

"Not yet. I've told no one, and I don't want you to tell anyone either. It is too early yet. He must first get rid of his depression, and there must be a much greater improvement in his general health before he can make an attempt. I think you could do a lot for him, that is why I'm telling you this. He is much more alert and brighter since you talked to him. Of course, the news that his daughter is returning has also helped him." He put his bag in the car, then asked, "Have you a room here?"

"I'm staying in the village, at the local garage."

He looked happier when I told him that.

"I shall be in again on Tuesday. I hope to see a further improvement."

I watched him drive away.

I had just finished packing when I heard the lock click back. Laura came in.

She was pale and her eyes were deep-set.

"I saw the light, David, so I thought I'd come down,"

I put the suitcase on the floor beside the other, and straightened.

"Your dream nearly came true," I said, looking at her. "I'm going to believe in dreams in the future."

"It didn't quite come true."

"No."

She moved listlessly to the window.

"I wjis scared, David. I thought you were doing to drop him."

"I didn't intend to drop him."

I sat on the bed, keeping away from her, and took out a packet of Lucky Strike. I lit one and put the packet away.

"What did Perelli talk to you about?"

"He told me it was a good idea to read to Bruno."

She turned.

"Is that all?"

"He wanted to know who I was, who engaged me, and where I was sleeping. I told him I had a room in the village."

"Did he say how Bruno is getting on?"

"He said he was depressed, but if his interests were stimulated he would make better progress."

"He didn't say if he would move again?"

"He said he wouldn't ever regain the use of his limbs."

She drew in a quick breath of relief.

"He really said that?"

"Yes."

"And—and did he say anything about him being able to talk again?"

I remembered what Perelli had said.

"He didn't mention that."

"It would be bad for me, David, if he could make another will."

"If he could, I don't see why he should want to. You're his wife; you're entitled to a share of his money."

She began to move restlessly about the room.

"He hates me now, David. I suppose it's my fault. I haven't been very kind to him since he's been ill. I'm afraid I'm not very good with sick people."

I didn't say anything, but I was listening.

"We had a bad quarrel, the day before his accident," she went on, not looking at me. "He told me then he intended to change his will. Maria heard him. He said he was only going to leave me a third and giye Valeria two-thirds. Then the accident happened, and he hasn't been able to change it."

"I shouldn't worry about it," I said curtly.

"No, perhaps you wouldn't, David, but I can't help it. If he had died tonight——"

"Stop it!" I went over to her. "If you're going to talk like this, Laura, you'd better go."

"Don't send me away, darling." She put her arms round my neck and leaned against me. "Now Valeria's coming home we shall have to be very careful. These next few nights may be the last we'll be able to spend together in safety." She pulled my face down and kissed me. "Say you love me, David."

There was something about her that broke down my determination and will power. I found myself kissing her, and holding her to me as if I were afraid she would try to get away.

"Wait a moment, darling. Let me take this off. You're crushing it."

She slipped out of her dress. I picked her up and carried her over to the bed.

As I knelt Over her, she looked up, her hands pushing me gently back.

"David, you're worrying me."

"What do you mean?"

"Why have you suddenly decided to be nice to Bruno?"

I sat back, staring at her.

"Nice to him? You mean why did I read to him this afternoon?"

"Yes. Why did you do it?"

"I was sorry for him."

"Oh. Nothing more than that?"

"No. He was up there alone so I thought I'd try to amuse him."

"I see." Her eyes continued to search my face. "Have you read his will David?""

"How could I? What do you mean?"

"I didn't know if you had seen it by accident. I made a copy of it, and I keep it in my desk drawer. I just wondered if you had come upon it by accident."

"Are you suggesting I accidentally searched your desk?"

"Please, don't get angry, David. I might have left it lying around."

"You didn't, and I haven't seen it. Why do you ask?"

"Well, you see, David, you're in it."

I felt suddenly like a man in a haunted house who hears a door creak behind him.

"Don't talk nonsense. How can I be in it?"

"But you are: you're a member of the staff, and Bruno has left certain sums to each member of the staff who is working at the villa at the time of his death."

"But he mentions them by name?" My voice sounded off-key.

"No. He mentions Maria, of course, but covers the rest of the staff by saying all members of the staff working for him are to have a certain sum of money. So you would get the money as well as Guilio and Nurse Fleming."

"How much is it?"

"Six hundred and fifty thousand lire, darling."

"As much as that?" I said, trying to sound calm, but my heart was racing. That was the exact sum Jacopo wanted for a passport; the sum to a lira.

"Yes: don't you wish you had dropped him, darling, after all? You've missed your opportunity. You won't be able to do it a second time."

"How can you talk like that?" I said, feeling sweat on my face.

Six hundred and fifty thousand! And no strings tied to it: no need to marry Laura; no need to accept anything from her: the exact sum that would get me out of Italy!

"Why shouldn't I talk to you as I feel?" she said, reaching up and putting her hands on my shoulders. "It's not as if he meant anything to me—or to you. I wish you had dropped him, David. You would have had your money, and I would have had mine!"

"Shut up!" I said, and broke away from her. "I'm not listening to this sort of talk."

"You know, David, you sound as if you were tempted; are you?"

"No! Now, shut up about it!"

"Come and hold me, darling. Don't go away frome me."

I hesitated, looking down at her as she lay on the bed, then I sat at her side and put my arms around her again.

"David, what will you do with the money when you get it?"

"Can't you leave it alone? I don't want to talk about it!"

She raised her face to mine.

"All right, let's not talk about anything."

As I bent to kiss her, I felt her suddenly stiffen and her fingers clutched hold of my arm.

"There's someone out there!" she whispered.

"I didn't hear anything."

"I did. I'm sure. Go and see, David. Be careful they don't see you."

I slid off the bed and went quietly over to the window. The moon was hidden by the willow trees, and I looked out onto a black patch of shadow. I couldn't see anything.

Laura came over and stood at my side, keeping behind me.

I heard a faint creaking noise of oars working in rowlocks.

"Someone's down there in a boat," she whispered. I could feel her trembling against me.

"It's probably a fisherman," I said, keeping my voice down. , "There's no need to be frightened."

"Go down and see, David. Fishermen never come to the villa. You might be able to see the boat from the swimming-pool."

"I don't think——"

"Please, David!"

I went down the stairs, along the concrete path to the

swimming-pool I could hear the faint splash of oars quite distinctly now. The boat was moving away and going fast, but it kept close to the shore.

I couldn't see it; and, shrugging, I turned to go back to the boathouse. Then I stopped dead, and sniffed.

Someone had been here very recently: someone who had been smoking a cigar.

CHAPTER FIVE

I DIDN'T see Laura the next morning. Nurse Fleming told me she was busy with Maria, preparing Valeria's room. Until lunchtime I was occupied in moving my things down to the room over Bicci's garage, and fixing myself up, watched interestedly by Bicci.

I hadn't told Laura about the cigar smoke I had noticed hanging over the swimming-pool. I had said someone had been close by in a boat, but I hadn't been able to see who it was.

She had been uneasy and worried, and had left me almost immediately after my return.

I wondered who the man in the boat had been. I wondered if it could have been Bellini, but I told myself Bellini wasn't the only man in Italy to smoke cigars.

Having made my new room as comfortable as I could, I went back to the villa. On the way I though about Bruno's will and the extraordinary coincidence of the sum of money that would come to me if I remained in his employment until his death. Six hundred and fifty thousand lire. It made me sweat to think of it: the price of a passport and my freedom!

I was now in two minds what to do: to leave the villa when Valeria arrived or to give up that idea, and hang on in hope Bruno would die and I'd collect the money.

If I left the villa I knew I should be saying good-bye to any chance of leaving Italy. I could never hope to raise six hundred and fifty thousand lire unless someone gave it to me or I inherited it.

The temptation to stay was strong, but I knew I had to go. When I wasn't on my guard the thought that Bruno's death would be extremely convenient to me kept dropping into my mind. There had been moments, last night, as I had tossed and turned in the darkness, when I found myself wishing I had dropped him when I had stumbled.

This couldn't go on. I had to get out as soon as Valeria arrived.

It turned out to be a roastingly hot afternoon; too hot to sit out on the shaded verandah, and I found Bruno in his room. The

shutters were closed and the electric fan churned up the heavy air. He looked tired and exhausted as he looked up at me.

"Is it too hot to read?" I asked. "Or shall I try it and see how it goes?"

His eyes told me to go ahead, so I sat down and began reading Vasari's account of the life of Giotto. Half-way through I heard the telephone bell ring. I glanced up. Bruno was looking towards the instrument. I hesitated, not knowing if Laura would take the call in the other room, and as I was about to get up, the bell stopped ringing.

I went on reading. Twenty minutes later, Laura came in. She wore a pale blue linen dress and a big picture hat, and she brought in with her an atmosphere of suppressed excitement.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said, "but I'm going over to Stresa. Stanito has just 'phoned to tell me my pearls are ready. I left them with him last month to clean. I shall want some money."

I glanced at Bruno. I saw a puzzled, suspicious look in his eyes. He must have been wondering, as I was wondering, why she was going out on such a hot afternoon when the shops in Stresa would be closed for the siesta.

He must have been aware too of her tense excitement, which she could scarcely conceal. Her eyes were very bright, and although she had been in the room less than a minute, she had twice glanced impatiently at her wrist-watch.

While she was talking, she moved over to a small reproduction of Titian's Venus that was hanging on the wall.

"Please help me, David," she said sharply.

I put down the book and went to her.

"Signora?"

"Take this picture down, please, It may be a little dusty, and I don't want to soil my gloves."

Surprised, I lifted the picture from the wall. Behind it I saw a small wall-safe.

She began to turn the knob that controlled the combination lock.

I heard the lock click back, and she pulled open the safe door.

I stood watching her.

She took out a thick packet of ten-thousand lira notes, stripped off fifty of them, threw the packet back into the safe and shut the door.

While I rehung the picture she went over to Bruno.

"I must run. I may be a little late. I promised Helen the next time I was over to look her up, and you know how she gossips."

She waved a slim white hand in his direction and walked to the door.

"Have a lovely afternoon," she said, and blew him a kiss.

There was a long, awkward pause when she had gone. I picked up the book and sat down. I could see she had upset him, and he

was worrying about her. He looked at me, then looked away.

I began reading again, but I knew she had spoilt the afternoon for him. He was wondering where, she was going and whom she was going to meet.

After I had read a page, I glanced up. He wasn't listening. His eyes were looking towards the shuttered windows.

"Perhaps I can find something more interesting to read to you, signore," I said.

He just stared blankly at me.

"Perhaps you would like to rest?"

He didn't want to rest, but he wanted to be alone: that much he conveyed to me.

I got up.

"I'll tell Nurse Fleming you want to sleep," I said.

He looked at me indifferently, then closed his eyes.

I found Nurse Fleming in her room, reading a novel.

"He wants to sleep," I said. "I'm going down to the village. I thought you'd want_to know he's alone."

She gave ni£"acurt ro<37

"All right. I'll go in to him in a little while. I didn't think he'd want to listen to that dry stuff on such a hot afternoon."

I went out on the verandah as the motor-boat shot out of the harbour and headed across the Lago towards Stresa. I could see Laura sitting at the wheel. She was driving the boat flat out, and it was leaving a wide wake of foaming water as it streaked across the Lago.

I didn't believe she was going to collect her pearls. Someone had telephoned her, arranging this meeting: someone who aroused in her intense excitement.

Someone had been prowling around the boathouse last night; someone who smoked cigars.

It looked as if Mario Bellini had returned.

I didn't hesitate for more than a few seconds. Bicci's boat was within reach. I would go after her and see for myself. With any luck I would be able to pick up her trail even though she would have a good half-hour's start.

By the time I had got Bicci's boat launched and the outboard motor started, Laura's motor-boat was out of sight. She had been heading for Stresa, and I decided to go there first. It was possible she had gone to Pallanza as soon as she had put the *Isola Bella* between her and the villa, but I decided to try Stresa first.

It was now rather a forlorn hope, and the sun was sweltering, but I wasn't going to pass up this opportunity. She was sure I was still with Bruno, and there was a chance she would be careless and give herself away.

It took me just under the hour to get over to Stresa. The long waterfront was practically deserted, and the sun burned down on me as I walked up the beach to the promenade.

I spotted an old, shabby man, sitting in the shade, staring with sleepy boredom across the Lago, and I went over to him. I asked him if he had seen a big motor-boat come this way about half an hour ago.

"Yes, signore," he said. "It went over to the *Pescatori,* You can't see it from here. It is moored on the far side."

I thanked him and went back to my boat.

Sweat was running off me, but I didn't care. It would be easy enough to find her on the *Pescatori,* a small island, inhabitated almost entirely by the fishing community, who made a living by netting trout from the Lago.

I sent the boat bouncing across the water, past the *Isola Bella,* and keeping to the lee side of the *Pescatori,* I ran the boat ashore and got out.

The most likely place where she would be, I decided, was the small *Alhergo* at the far end of the island. I walked towards it, keeping a sharp look-out for her. The beach was deserted, and all the shutters to the shabby but picturesque houses were closed.

I spotted the motor-boat moored under a willow tree within a hundred paces of the *Albergo.*

There was a pleasant little garden at the back of the *Albergo* that led down to the water and was shaded by grape vines. I walked down the path and sat at a table in the shade, where I had a good view of the windows of the *Albergo.*

A tired-looking waiter came over to me. I ordered a *Campari* and mineral water.

I waited perhaps an hour and a half, possibly a little more. From where I sat I could see the motor-boat, so I knew she was still there, and I was sure she was in one of the rooms overlooking the garden.

My guess was right. Suddenly the shutters of one of the windows of an upper-storey room were pushed open, and a tall, powerfully built man stood framed in the window.

He wore a green silk dressing-gown that showed his bare, barrel of a chest, covered with coarse black hair. He was built like a prize-fighter, and his long, rugged face and broken, flattened nose, his crushed ears and ugly hard mouth reminded me of the statue of the Roman prize-fighter I had once seen in Rome.

He stood looking across the Lago with a bored, satiated expression of a well-fed animal. Between this thick, strong fingers, he held an uniighted cigar.

I knew I was looking at Mario Bellini, and I saw now why Torrchi had called him a man of violence: he was more than that. He could be as dangerous and as savage as a gorilla.

He remained at the window for perhaps half a minute, then he turned and disappeared from sight. As he turned from the window I caught a glimpse of Laura.

I got up and went quickly along the path back to my boat. I

had seen what I had come to see. I knew now where to find Bellini if I wanted him. There was no point in letting her know I had followed her.

But I needn't have hurried.

She didn't return to the villa until dusk.

I was leaning over the terrace wall, watching the lights of Stresa before going down to the village for the night, when I saw the motor-boat coming out of the darkness.

It was coming fast, and was zig-zagging on the still surface of the Lago, its headlamps casting two bright beams through the rapidly falling darkness.

I watched it, surprised; my surprise changing to alarm when I saw she hadn't reduced speed, and was coming at the harbour entrance practically flat out.

At the last second she must have realized she would smash the boat to pieces against the harbour wall at the speed she was going, for she swung over the wheel and went shooting away into the darkness again.

She came round in a wide circle. The roar of the engine died down as she throttled back, and she made a much slower approach. Even then she misjudged the entrance, and I heard the side of the boat grind against the harbour wall and the nose bang violently against the steps.

I leaned over the terrace wall, trying to see what was going on.

I heard her swearing in the darkness, then an electric torch switch on, and I watched her come slowly up the steps.

She passed close to me without seeing me. She walked unsteadily, humming under her breath, and as she walked up the path to the villa, she lurched, nearly missed her footing, and went down on her hands and knees.

I watched her.

She was as drunk as any street woman on a Saturday night.

I didn't see her all the next day.

I spent the morning getting the boat into shape. She had scaped the paintwork badly and twisted the brass raiL It took me until lunch-time to repair the damage.

After lunch I read extracts of my book to Bruno until tea-time. I could see he was interested in spite of a depression I had noticed when I had lifted him on to his chair in the morning.

After I had completed my evening routine I took Bicci's boat and went out on to the Lago to fish.

Why had Bellini suddenly turned up? I kept asking myself. His return had created in Laura an excitement she had never shown in her relations with me. But I didn't care. If she wanted an animal like Bellini she could have him. I was thankful I had moved from the boathouse, and out of her way.

Today was Friday. Tomorrow was my day off. Then two

more days, and I could pack my things and get out. Bellini's appearance was the final straw. The break with Laura was easy now.

I was fishing about three hundred yards from the harbour of the villa. I heard the motor-boat engine start up, and a moment later the motor-boat edged out of the harbour and went racing across the Lago towards Stresa.

Laura sat at the wheel. She was smoking a cigarette, and she was bareheaded. She didn't look in my direction, and the boat was quickly swallowed up in the fading light.

Another rendezvous with Bellini, I thought, and losing my interest in fishing, I started the outboard motor, and turned the nose of the boat towards Arolo.

It was long past midnight before I heard the roar of the motor-boat's engine. I was lying in the narrow, hard little bed in my small room, half asleep, but the sound brought me awake, and I got out of bed and went to the window.

She was coming back in the same crazy fashion as last night, and came past my window with a rush that sent waves lapping against the boats moored just below me.

Bellini was with her, and I heard his voice above the sound of the engines, shouting for her to cut down the speed.

By leaning out Of my window I could see the motor-boat edge into the harbour.

I waited and watched.

Five minutes later the lights in the boathouse sprang up.

As soon as I had lifted Bruno the next morning, I went back to the garage and asked Bicci if he could lend me a car.

I had nothing to do all the morning, and felt in need of company. Even Giuseppe's company was preferable to my own thoughts. The fact that Laura had taken Bellini back to the boathouse the moment I had moved out sickened me, and although I tried to kid myself I didn't care, I kept brooding about her.

Bicci pointed to an old, battered Fiat.

"You can have that. Pay for the petrol. I won't charge you for the car."

I thanked him and backed the car over to the pump.

While he was filling the tank, Laura, in the Alfa-Romeo, came sweeping down the road. She pulled up sharply when she saw me and waved.

I went over to her.

"David, I forgot to give you your money."

She was pale, but her eyes glittered, and there was a sparkle in them I hadn't seen before.

"It's not time yet, is it?" I said.

"You may as well have it before it slips my mind entirely." She

opened her purse and handed me seven one-thousand lira notes. "Where are you going?"

"To Milan."

"Come with me. I'm going in now."

"I don't know when I'll return," I said, not looking at her. "I think it'd be better if I had my own transport."

She gave me a searching look.

"Please yourself. I'm sorry I haven't seen you these last two days. Some friends of mine are staying at the Regina. It's a bore, but there it is. Are you comfortable in your new room?"

"It's all right," I said curtly.

"Well, I must get on. I was hoping to see you tonight, but I have to go to Stresa again. Let's make it tomorrow night at the boathouse, shall we?"

"As it happens Giuseppe is coming to spend that night with me," I lied. "He hasn't seen the Lago before, and asked if I could put him up."

"Can't you put him off?"

"I'll try."

"I want to see you tomorrow night, David." She smiled at me. "Well, good-bye for now."

I stood looking after the big car as it flashed down the road, then I walked over to the Fiat.

Whatever happened I decided as I headed for Sesto Calendo I wasn't going to the boathouse on Sunday, even if I had to drag Giuseppe all the way from Milan to Arolo. From now on, I was through with her.

As I drove along the busy Corso Magenta, heading towards the Duomo, I saw a girl waving violently to me from the sidewalk.

It was Simona.

Not without difficulty, I pulled over to the kerb, waving to the infuriated and horn-shrieking drivers to pass me.

Simona came running up; her dark, animated little face peered at me through the window.

"I thought it was you," she said. "Can you give me a lift?"

"Certainly." I leaned over and opened the door. "Do you want to go to the flat or somewhere else?"

"I want to go for a ride," she said, getting in and sitting at my side. "I have half an hour to waste before I start work. Have you half an hour to waste?"

"I haye nothing to do. I was on my way to see Giuseppe."

"That old ruin? You don't want to bother with him. Drive to the park, and let us sit in the sun for a few moments."

"That's a good idea," I said, Turning left and heading towards the Piazza Castello. "How is Torrchi?"

"He is well," Simona said, making a little face. "He is always

well. I haven't seen you for some days. Where have you been hviding yourself?"

"I'm working on the Lago Maggiore, but I shall be back in Milan on Tuesday."

"Then you go away?"

"No, I remain in Milan."

"But I thought you were going away now you have your papers."

I gave her a puzzled stare.

"What papers, Simona?"

"Torrchi told me you wanted a passport. It is all right, I don't talk to people. What Torrchi says to me is a secret."

"Torrchi said he could get the papers, but the price was too much. I haven't the money."

"No one has any money these days," Simona said gloomily. "Even Torrchi won't buy me a hat."

I slowed down as we entered the park, and pulled up opposite the entrance to the Castello Sforesco.

"If you have a cigarette, I will smoke," Simona said, crossing her slim legs and showing me a beautifully shaped knee. "Did Torrchi tell you I am working again?"

I gave her a cigarette.

"Yes, he said you were modelling."

Simona nodded.

"She's an old fool, and can't paint at all, but she pays well. I have opened a savings account for my old age."

"That's a good idea."

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

"How much did Torrchi pay you for the diamond clip?"

"I haven't sold it to him. I gave it back to the signora."

She nodded.

"If you tell me I promise I won't mention it to him. I am very anxious to know. I will let you kiss me if you will tell me."

"That's very generous of you," I said, smiling at her, "but I haven't sold it to him."

She gave me a sudden dark scowl."

"I kiss very well. How much did he give you?"

"Now look, I haven't sold it to him. The signora has it, so will you stop talking about it?"

"Why do you lie?" she demanded hotly. "He has it. He doesn't know I have seen it. He has hidden it from me. It is necessary for me to know how much he gave you."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded, swinging round in my seat to stare at her. "Torrchi has the clip?"

"Yes! I saw him looking at it when he thought I was asleep."

"Not the signora's clip. It must be some other, Simona."

She wiggled impatiently.

"It's the same. When he went to work I searched the flat and found it. It is the same. Did you sell it to him?"

I shook my head.

"No: I keep telling you."

Simona's eyes narrowed. She slid her hand under her blouse **to** scratch herself under the arm.

"Does the signora own an Alfa-Romeo?"

"Yes; why?"

"Then she sold it to him. The car drove away as I was coming back from work. A woman was driving. It is very rare to see a woman driving a car in Milan. I remembered her."

"When was this?"

Simona screwed up her face as she thought.

"Last Tuesday, in the early afternoon."

The following evening I had seen Torrchi, and a few hours later Laura had told me about the terms of Bruno's will. I. realized in a flash that she must have bribed Torrchi with the diamond clip to tell her the price of the passport so she could tempt me with the exact sum in the hope I'd change my attitude about Bruno.

"What colour was the car?" I said, controlling my rising anger with difficulty.

"Dark blue."

"Think carefully, Simona, did you notice if it had a blue sun-shield across the windscreen?"

She nodded.

"Yes, it had, and there was a silver mascot on the radiator cap:] a lion's head."

That was Laura's car.

"Can you find out from the signora how much Torrchi gave her?" Simona asked. "It is very important. Torrchi and I have an arrangement: whatever business he does I get ten per cent. He tries to swindle me when he thinks I don't know what he is doing."

"I'll try to find out," I said. "If I hear, I'll telephone you."

"You promise?"

"I will do my best."

She glanced at her watch.

"Now, please drive me to Piazza Piemonte or I shall be late."

I drove in silence, my mind busy, and when I reached the Piazza I pulled up and opened the car doorr

"You won't say anything to Torrchi about the clip?" Simona said.

"It is unlikely I shall see him. I have an appointment with Giuseppe."

"You waste your time. You should find yourself a nice girl I could find you one for a small consideration."

I shook my head,

"Giuseppe may be an old ruin, but at least he is reliable. So long, Simona."

I drove over to the Duomo and parked the car, then I walked to Piero's and had lunch.

I didn't make much of a meal, and when Piero came over to gossip I was very short with him.

At a few minutes after two o'clock, when I was sure Torrchi would be at home, I drove to his apartment, left the car outside and climbed to the fourth floor.

I rapped on the door.

Torrchi opened it almost immediately. I saw him give a little start when he saw me, but his round fat face lighted up as he threw open the door.

"Signor David! The last man I expected to see. Come in. I have still some good Scotch whisky left."

I walked into the apartment, closed the door and leaned against it. My hand, working behind my back, slid the bolt.

"I happened to be passing, Torrchi, and I thought I'd enquire about the passport. Have you seen Jacopo?"

Torrchi nodded his head vigorously.

"I saw him this morning." He shrugged. "But he won't alter his price. He says it is not worth the risk. Six hundred and fifty thousand; not a lira less."

I walked over to the table and sat down.

"You remember the diamond clip belonging to the signora, Torrchi?" I said quietly.

I saw him stiffen.

"Yes, signor David. What of it?"

"I hear you have it." »

He started so violently that he spilled the whisky he was pouring out.

"No, I haven't got it!" he said, meeting my eyes with difficulty.

"She gave it to you, didn't she?"

"What is this?" Torrchi said, putting down the whisky. "What is this nonsense?"

"What did she want in return, Torrchi?"

"I don't understand. The signora hasn't given me anything. Why should she? Who has been telling you lies?"

"What did you trade for the clip, Torrchi?"

Colour came into his swarthy face.

"If this is a joke I don't like it. Let us change the subject."

"I'm not joking. She gave you the clip. I want to know why."

"She didn't give me the clip! You are making a mistake, signor David, Come now, have a drink. It is too hot to quarrel."

I leaned across the table and hit him with my open hand across his face. He staggered back, snarling at me.

"I'm sorry, Torrchi," I said. "I've got to know. I don't want to beat it out of you, but I will if I have to."

"Get out!" Torrchi said, his voice shrill. "You are 110 longer a friend of mine."

I stood up.

"Don't be a fool, Torrchi. Why did she give you the clip?"

"She didn't give it to me!"

I moved round the table, and he backed slowly away.

"Why did she give you the clip?"

He set his back against the wall, his lips off his teeth, his eyes angry and frightened.

"Stay away from me! I know nothing about the clip."

As I moved in on him, his hand went behind him. I made to hit him with my left fist, and brought over my right at the last moment in a long looping swing that caught him on the side of his head, knocking him to his knees.

He bounced against the wall, rolled over and began to climb to his feet. He had a short stabbing-knife in his right hand, and he thrust at me with the speed of a snake striking.

The blade missed me by inches. He stabbed at me again, but I was going away from him.

I knew he was an expert with the knife, but I wasn't scared of him. I had been in a number of knife fights since I had been in Italy, and I knew how to handle him.

Moving fast, I circled away from him. He came after me, his head down, his body crouched, the knife pointing at me.

"Better drop it, Torrchi, before you get hurt," I said, putting the table between us.

"Get out or I will kill you!" He said through clenched teeth.

My hands closed round the back of a chair. I picked it up.

He darted to one side and came in with a rush. I backed away, thrusting the four legs of the chair at his face. He caught hold of one of the legs and tried to cut at me from over the top of it, but his arm was too short.

I drove all my weight against him and slammed him against the wall, pinning him inside the legs of the chair.

He cursed me. trying to pull the chair away, but I leaned my weight against it and held him.

"Drop that knife, Torrchi!"

He snarled at me.

I jerked the chair out of his hands, and before he could move, shifted it, and slammed it back so two of the legs drove into his chest.

The breath came out of his body like the hiss of a punctured tyre. The knife dropped from his hand. I flung the chair from me, jumped in close, grabbed his arm and wrist. I spun him round, bending his arm and twisting it up his back. I forced him on to his knees.

He started to struggle, but I twisted his arm harder, wrenching

it further back. He caught his breath in a quick gasp and stopped moving.

"Spill it, Torrchi," I said. "Why did she give you the clip?"

"She didn't."

I put a little more pressure on his arm, and he howled softly, tried to resist the pressure, so I put on some more.

I saw sweat begin to run down his neck.

"I'll keep this up until you tell me," I said, panting a little myself. "I've got to know."

He started to curse me, so I leaned my weight on his arm, and his cursing cut off into a shuddering groan.

"You're breaking my arm!"

"I don't give a damn about your arm. If I have to break it, I'll break it. You won't pick any more pockets with a busted arm, Torrchi."

I began to increase the pressure. I heard his bones creak. He dropped flat on his face, pulling me with him. For a moment he almost broke my hold, then I shoved my foot on the back of his neck and grounded his face into the carpet. I gave his arm another wrench that made him yell out.

"I'll tell you!" he gasped. "Only let go of my arm."

I eased the pressure a little, but I didn't release my hold.

"Why did she give you the clip?"

"She wanted to know if you were still trying to leave the country. I said you were."

"Did you tell her why?"

"I didn't have to," he gasped. "She knew."

I let go of him, kicked the knife across the room and went over to the window. I was badly shaken. If what he had just said was true the situation was dangerous.

Torrchi sat up, groaning, holding his arm. Sweat streamed down his face. He didn't look at me.

"Tell it from the beginning," I said. "Everything."

"She came here in the afternoon," Torrchi said. "I recognized her. She didn't tell me her name, but I knew she was the one you are in love with." He peered cautiously at me. "It is right, isn't it: you are in love with her?"

"Tell me what happened! Tell me quickly or I'll break your dirty neck!"

"Yes, signor David. I will tell you exactly what happened," Torrchi said hurriedly. "She said she wanted to help you, but you were too proud to accept her help. She asked if you were still wanting to leave the country as if she knew all about it, but just wanted to make sure. I told her I didn't talk about my friends. Then she brought out the clip. She said I could have it if I told her what she wanted to know."

"And you told her?" I said, so angry I could have killed him.

"It was a great temptation, signor David," Torrchi said,

miserably, "but I knew you loved her and she loved you, and it seemed I was helping you by telling her. Of course, the clip made a difference, but it did seem I was helping you as well as myself."

"Go on, you damned little rat! What did you tell her?"

"I said you wanted to get out of the country, and I was trying to get a passport for you."

"You told her how much Jacopo wanted?"

"Yes, I told her that."

"Well, go on, what else did she want to know?"

"She asked if the police were looking for you."

"Well, go on!"

Torrchi hesitated.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," he said cautiously. "I told her you had run away from the Army, and that I had too. I explained you had no papers, and if she wanted to help you she could give you the money. I was being a good friend to you, signor David. I told her if she really loved you she would find the money and make you take it."

"Was that all she wanted to know?"

Torrchi frowned.

"She did ask if your name really was Chisholm."

I felt a cold chill run up my spine.

"I told her as far as I knew it was[A]--Torrchi went on, rubbing his arm tenderly. "Then she asked if I had ever heard anyone call you Chesham; I think that was the name, and I said I hadn't."

I felt as if someone had socked me in the belly. She knew! She must have known all the time! That's why she had picked on me!

"You're a fine pal, Torrchi," I said, my voice husky. "I always thought you were to be trusted."

Torrchi was looking ashamed of himself. He didn't look up.

"But she loves you, signor David. It's not as if she would want to harm you."

"Oh, go to hell!" I said, and crossed over to the door.

"Have a drink, signor David," Torrchi pleaded, scrambling to his feet. "Just to prove we are no longer enemies."

"No! We're not enemies. We're not friends. We're nothing to each other."

I slid back the bolt, opened the door and went out.

Now, any time she wanted to get rid of me, any time I didn't do what she wanted, she had only to pick up the telephone and tell the police where to find me to get me hanged.

I was in a jam, and I knew it.

CHAPTER SIX

I told her you had run away from the Army . , .

As I drove along the monotonous autostrada that connects Milan with Sesto Calendo, I remembered very vividly how that trouble had begun.

I remembered the exact date: April 23rd, 1945 : two days after Bologna had been liberated, and when American and British troops, by establishing a bridgehead across the Po, had knocked the guts out of the campaign.

What was left of my unit, about a hundred and fifty men, had been in the thick of the fighting, and in the lull that followed we had been pulled- out of the line to regroup. We had been sent down to a tiny village on the banks of the Reno, about twenty kilometres from Praduro e Sasso.

By now, most of us had an idea the fighting would be over in a few days. It had been a slogging campaign, and we weren't sorry to have the opportunity to take it easy.

On this particular day, I and two other sergeants were bathing in the river when Lieutenant Rawlins came down the bank and waved to me.

We liked Rawlins. He was big and tough and humorous. He had slogged along with us now for the past six months, fighting with us up the backbone of Italy, looking after us, and leading us into the tough spots, always three jumps ahead of us, never looking back to see if we were coming, but just keeping on, sure we were right behind him, as we invariably were. He was a good officer and a fine man.

I swam over to him and straightened up, the water coming to my waist.

"Sorry to break it up, sergeant," he said, grinning at me, "but I want you. Looks pretty good in there."

"It is pretty good, Lieutenant," I said, and began to haul myself up on to the bank.

He reached out and gave me his hand: nothing snooty about Rawlins. He had that rare talent of being able to treat his men like equals without losing his firm hold on the reins.

"Get dressed, sergeant," he said, dropping down on the grass. "We're going down to H.Q."

While I rubbed myself down, he lit a cigarette and tilted his cap over his eyes.

"You speak Italian, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Pretty well?"

"I'm bi-lingual, Lieutenant. I lived ten years in Florence when I was a kid."

"How was that?" he asked, looking up at me.

"I was born in Florence. My father was a painter; not mucli of one, but he was pretty enthusiastic. When I was ten years old, his brother died, and left him some money and a house in Carmel, California. We left Florence and settled in Carmel, but I've never forgotten the language."

He nodded.

"Know Florence pretty well?"

"I was there for two years in 1934. I was studying architecture, specializing in the Renaissance period. Yes, I know it pretty well."

"How about Rome and Venice?"

"I can find my way around them. What's cooking, Lieutenant?"

He flicked his cigarette into the river.

"Can you drive a car?"

"Yes; I've driven for years."

"Think you could act as a guide? You'd have to be ready to answer any question shot at you, and give the right answer: the historical as well as the art angle."

"I guess I could manage it," I said, wondering what he was getting at. "I've got a copy of the *Guide Bleu* somewhere. I guess I could get along all right."

"Well, there isn't anyone else," Rawlins said, getting to his feet, "so it'll have to be you."

"What do I do, Lieutenant?"

"You're detailed to take General Costain on a sight-seeing trip. Florence, Rome and Venice; starting tomorrow."

I stared at him.

"Isn't he interested in fighting this war, Lieutenant?"

Rawlins hid a smile.

"He's on sick leave, sergeant. Better not let him hear you talk like that: he's the original firebrand. Off the record, Chisholm, this isn't going to be an easy assignment. If I could do anything about it, I wouldn't be sending you or any of my other men, but H.Q. has your record, and the General's asked for you."

"What kind of a guy is he, then?"

"Like I said: the original firebrand. You'll have to watch your step. He has very set ideas how a soldier should look and behave. I'll kit you out for the job, but you've got to be immaculate; and when I say immaculate, I mean immaculate. He'll even check to see if the insteps of your boots are polished, and if they're not—God help you!"

I scratched the back of my neck and grimaced.

"You couldn't say I. was sick, Lieutenant? This doesn't sound my cup of coffee."

Rawlins grinned.

"It isn't. It isn't anyone's cup of coffee, but maybe it'll do you good. It's time some of you sergeants braced up your ideas. Better

get hold of that guide-book of yours. If you give him a bum steer on anything, you'll imagine an atomic bomb has hit you."

"You make it sound like a vacation."

"I'll get you some leave when you're through—you'll need it. Come on, let's get down to H.Q. and get your papers fixed. You're to report to him at Bologna at ten hundred hours, tomorrow morning, so you haven't much time."

The Headquarters of General Costain at Bologna was in Via Roma, near the railway-station.

I reported to a grey-faced major at three minutes to ten hundred hours the following morning.

I had been to a number of H.Q.s during my service in the Army, but I had never seen one as clean and as smart as this one.

The floors were so polished you could look down and see your face in them. The brass door-handles shone like diamonds. I saw a big, burly sergeant open a door by putting a sheet of paper over the handle so as not to spoil the shine. The men at the desks looked as if they had justsfepped out of an envelope of cellophane; none of them lounged. Tney all sat their chairs like a good horseman sits his horse.

The grey-faced Major went through my papers as if his life depended on finding some mistake in them, then he turned jaded, tired eyes on me and went over me inch by inch with the microscopic thoroughness of a scientist in search of an invisible germ.

"Turn round," he said.

I turned round and felt his eyes creeping up and down my back.

"Right. At ease, sergeant."

I turned and shuffled my feet a little and waited, looking over the top of his head in the approved manner.

"You know what you have to do?"

"Yes, sir."

"What?"

"At eleven hundred hours I drive the General from here to the Grand Hotel, Florence, arriving in time for lunch. We remain in Florence for four days, then leave for Rome, stopping at the Continental Hotel, Siena, for two nights, and then on to Hotel Flora, Rome for three nights. From Rome I'm to drive the General to Venice by way of Terni, Fano, Ravenna, Ferrara and Padua. We stay at the Hotel Londra, Venice, for four nights and return to Bologna, arriving May 8th."

The Major stroked his lean nose and nodded his head.

"That's right, sergeant. The General will tell you what he wants to see in Florence. You know the place?"

"Yes, sir."

"At the back of this building you will find the General's car. Hennessey, the General's servant, is out there now. You better go and look at the car and talk to Hennessey. He'll tell you what

you'll need to know. Report back here at five until eleven sharp."

"Yes, sir."

I saluted, about-faced and marched out.

On my way I saw some of the desk-sergeants looking at me the way you look at someone who is dying of smallpox.

I found Hennessey in the yard at the back of the building, putting some hand baggage into the boot of an enormous Cadillac.

Hennessey was a tall, thin man with a deadpan face and eyes like flint stones.

"You the driver?" he asked, eyeing me up and down.

"Yeah," I said. "Some car."

"You'll grow to love it," he said. "Take a look at this." He held up the handbag. It was made of leather, and I could see my face in its polished side as clearly as if I were looking in a mirror. "Hand polished," Hennessey went on, with a bitterness that made my flesh creep. "There are five of the bastards. Takes you two solid hours a day to keep them like this. I know; I have to do them. Well, that's the way he wants them, and that's the way you'll keep them."

- "You mean I have to polish his baggage?" I said, gaping.

"You do if you want to remain in one piece," Hennessey returned, and laid the handbag in the boot as if it were made of egg-shells. "Take a look at the car. That's another little job you've got to do. Spotless, no grease, polished, and that goes for the inside as well. Every time you stop to let the General eat or relieve himself, you clean the car, see? He doesn't like to get into a dirty car. He has a thing about it. Many a time I've eaten my dinner with one hand and cleaned this sonofabitch with the other. Don't forget the ash-trays. It he finds even the smell of ash in those trays when he gets into the car, he'll put it down in his little book."

""What book?"

Hennessey spat carefully on the concrete, then erased the mark with his boot.

"You'll get to know his little book. Everything he doesn't like goes into that book. Everything you forget to do, every dirt mark, every mistake you make goes into that little book. Then he hands it over to Major Kay with instructions, and you get it in the neck. I got three days' field punishment for forgetting to empty an ash-tray."

I surveyed the enormous expanse of glittering coachwork, and my heart sank.

"Aren't you coming on this run?" I asked.

"Me?" Hennessey let his cold, granite face dissolve in a split-second grin. "This is my first vacation from the General in four months. No, I'm going to enjoy myself. It's all yours, sergeant, and I hope you enjoy yourself as much as I'm going to enjoy myself. I don't think it's likely, but I hope so just the same."

I opened the car door and glanced at the controls. It was the

finest car I'd ever seeii, let alone handled. It had everything from a cocktail-bar to electrically driven windows.

"Is he as tough as I hear he is?" I asked without hope.

"No; he's tougher than that," Hennessey said. "Know what puzzles me?"

"You tell me."

He looked furtively from right to left before saying, "How he's managed to live so long. I can't understand why some guy hasn't knifed him before this." He looked hopefully at me. "You've got fifteen days with him. Just you and him, and no one else for him to pick on. Maybe you're the guy to do it. Maybe by the fourteenth day you'll blow your top and stick a knife into the bastard. Do that, sergeant, and everyone here from the Colonel down to me will ask the Pope to make you a saint."

"I don't scare that easy," I said, and grinned at him. "I once worked in a unit that came under Patton. They don't come tougher than Patton."

Hennessey stared at me.

"Patton? You don't call him tough, do you?"

"He's a tough general: no one tougher."

"Then you've got a wonderful experience ahead of you," Hennessey said dreamily. "You haven't begun to live yet. Patton, huh? That's the funniest thing I've heard. Excuse me, sergeant, while I laugh."

"The Major said you would tell me what I want to know," I said coldly. "Is this it or is there some more of it?"

Hennessey produced a sheet of folded paper from his pocket.

"I've put it down for you. Slip up on one of these items, sergeant, and you'll lose your stripes. Now listen: he likes to be called at seven. Not a second before or after, and he'll check you with his watch. All his things must be ready. Watch his shoes. He likes the insteps polished and you've got to take the laces out every time you clean them. If he finds polish on his laces, he'll walk up the wall. He likes his bath exactly sixty-five degrees, and if you've never tried to get water at an exact temperature in a hurry, you've a sweet experience ahead of you." Hennessey glanced at his notes and then gave me a sly little smile. "He puts his teeth in a box by his bed. You have to polish them. That's another of his little fads. Not a spot or a speck or out comes his little book. Coffee, two fingers of Vat 69, and one piece of toast must be ready for him when he comes out of his bath. The coffee must be at 80 degrees or there'll be hell spread over the room. You get out while he dresses, but wait outside the door. When he's ready for you he'll call you, and he only calls once, so stick outside the door and keep your ears open. He doesn't call loud. He'll tell you what he wants to do for the day, and he'll only tell you once. You don't write anything down; you listen and you remember, or the book comes out. When you're not moving about

the room, stand to attention. He likes guys to stand to attention: thumbs along the seams of your trousers, head up, eyes front and up, no movement. He loves a guy who stands like that, so don't forget it, sergeant. Speak only when he speaks to you; even if the goddamn car catches fire, go on driving until he tells you to stop." Hennessey paused to look at me. "Getting all this, sergeant?"

"I'm getting it," I said grimly.

"He likes to get drunk in the evenings," Hennessey went on. "Sometimes he gets so plastered he doesn't know where he is. That's when you take over. He expects you to take him home and put him to bed. Be careful how you handle him. He's dynamite when he's drunk. I've seen him break a guy's arm like you break a match because the guy didn't get out of his way quick enough. If he wants to drive the car, say your prayers. He's the craziest driver in the world, and he doesn't give a damn how he gets there so long as he does get there. I'm not saying he i<'t good, but when a guy rushes these narrow streets at sixty miles an hour, it gets a little nerve-racking for his passenger."

I glanced at my watch. In two more minutes I was due to report to Major Kay.

"Thanks," I said, "you've told me all I want to know. Even if half of it is lies, it still sounds horrible. Anyway, I hope you have a good leave. You make it sound as if you deserve it."

Hennessey closed one eye.

"It's all fixed. She's dark, eager and wicked. I don't reckon I'm going to see daylight for fifteen splendid days. Just as soon as you pull out of Bologna, I'm on my way over to her."

I got in the car and drove it round to the front entrance. Then I went inside and reported to Major Kay.

"Wait by the car, Chisholm," he said, getting to his feet. "The General will be out in two minutes."

I went outside again.

There were four white-helmeted policemen standing like statues before the front entrance. Hennessey stood by the car door, his chin pointing upwards, his body rigid. I took my place at his side and came to attention.

We couldn't have waited more than two minutes. Three officers came out: two colonels and Major Kay. They stood to attention near us.

Then the General came out.

He was wearing a grey herring-bone suit, and he carried a slouch ha't in his hand. I expected him to be in uniform, and he surprised me.

He was of medium height, powerfully built with big, lumpy shoulders. His face was the colour of mahogany, big and fleshy. His mouth was a thin line, as straight and as shapeless as the edge of a foot rule. His eyes were deep set and a washed-out blue.

They were restless eyes, and as cold and as remote as the snows of Everest.

He came across the sidewalk almost casually, but his eyes missed nothing. They went over me with the intensity of the flame of a blow-lamp. Then he looked at the car. He stood looking at it for perhaps two minutes. Then he walked slowly round it, eyeing it from every angle. He came back to the sidewalk, and looked me over again.

"You Chisholm?"

His voice was soft and low. You had to listen hard to hear what he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Let's look at the engine."

I opened the hood and stepped back.

He stared at the engine as if he had never seen the inside of a car before.

"Is that oil, sergeant?" he asked, pointing to the distributor head.

I looked.

I had to look twice before I could make out a fine film of oil.

"It could be, sir."

He took out his white handkerchief and wiped the distributor head. He showed me the black smudge on the crisp white linen.

"Is that oil, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who serviced this car?"

Hennessey said in a strangled voice, "I did, sir."

"Oh, yes, Hennessey; you again. I wonder how many more times I have to tell you I don't like oil on my handkerchief." He rolled the handkerchief into a ball and tossed it in the road. "Major Kay!"

Major Kay stepped forward.

"Sir!"

"Fifteen days' kitchen fatigue for this man, and cancel his leave."

"Yes, sir."

The General looked at me.

I had the car door open before he could say anything. He gave me another look, probing and inquisitive. I had beaten him to the punch, and he knew it.

He climbed into the car and settled himself down.

I closed the door, slid under the wheel and started the engine.

The soft voice murmured behind me, "Go ahead."

I engaged gear and pulled away from the kerb. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the two colonels and Major Kay come to the salute.

The last thing I saw was Hennessey's white, agonized face.

I might have been driving an empty car for all the reaction I

got from the General during the run from Bologna to Florence.

But I was aware of his presence all the time. I smelt his burning cigarettes. I heard him clear his throat. I knew when he changed his position. Each little sound he made brought me to the alert, like an out-fielder in a ball match when the pitcher commences to wind up.

I couldn't imagine what state my nerves would be in at the end of fifteen days if I kept on like this.

We arrived at the Grand Hotel, on the bank of the Arno, exactly at thirteen hundred hours. I was out of the car and had the door open before the car was properly at a standstill.

He gave me his probing, inquisitive stare as he got out of the car.

"Leave the luggage to the hotel staff," he said. "Take the car to the garage. We won't need it any more today. I've reserved a room for you. Have y6ur lunch and meet me by the reception-desk at fourteen hundred hours."

"Yes, sir."

I watched him walk across the broad sidewalk and disappear into the hotel. He held himself upright, but he walked slowly like a man with a secret illness. I remembered Lieutenant Rawlins telling me he was on sick leave, and I wondered what was the matter with him.

I got the luggage out of the boot and handed it over to the two hotel porters, warning them to handle it carefully.

Then I drove the car round to the garage. Before I locked it away, I checked it over. It was covered with dust, and there was a lot of ash on the floor in the back.

He had said he didn't want the car that afternoon, but there was nothing to stop him changing his mind. I decided to spend half my lunch-time cleaning up the mess inside and giving the car a dust over.

Working at speed, I got the car back into shape again, but it took me closer to forty minutes than half an hour. Sweat was running off me when I finally backed the car into one of the lock-up garages.

I ran round to the hotel entrance, collected the key of my room, took the elevator to the second floor, and walked along the half-mile corridor to my room.

It was a nice room, overlooking the Arno. As soon as I had dumped my kit, I 'phoned down to the desk and told them to send me up a plate of sausage sandwiches and a half-bottle of *vino rosso.*

By the time I had bolted the sandwiches, washed and brushed myself down, it was close on two o'clock.

I reached the desk at the same time as he did.

"We'll go into the lounge," he said, "and get our bearings."

We went into the lounge.

There were a few staff officers lingering over their coffee and brandy, a handful of dowagers, a number of Italian business men and a couple of lieutenant-generals who stared at me as if they couldn't believe their eyes. A sergeant in the lounge of the Grand Hotel! An unheard-of thing! Then they spotted the General, and hurriedly remembered a pressing appointment.

The General sat down at a table and I stood before him, while the dowagers and the business men gaped at me.

"Sit down, sergeant," the General said, "and let's get at it."

I sat on the edge of a chair and waited.

"We have only four days here," he went on. "I want to see as much as I can. What do you suggest?"

"The Cathedral, the Baptistery and the Medici Chapels will take care of this afternoon, sir," I said. "Tomorrow there's the Uffizi Gallery and the Palazzo Vecchio, and in the afternoon the Pitti Palace and the Piazzale Michelangelo. The following day, the Santa Croce and Bargello. In the afternoon the San Marco to see the painting of Fra Angelico, and a drive around the town to look at the various palaces. The last day we could go to Fiesole, and look at the surrounding country."

He nodded his head.

"That takes care of the culture. How about the nights?"

"Depends on what you want to do, sir. There's not much night life in Florence except for cafe music, some gambling and the opera. I know a couple of places where they put on a leg show, but they're not much."

He gave me a long, slow stare.

"Women?"

That jarred me a little, but I didn't let him see it.

"There's only one place that has any class. I haven't been to it, but I've heard it's all right. The rest are the usual cat-houses; some of them dangerous."

"In what way dangerous?"

"They have a habit of knocking you on the head and lifting your roll, sir."

He showed his teeth in a mirthless smile.

"I like tough spots, sergeant. After all that culture, I'll need to relax. We'll take in a couple of these cat-houses and see if we can persuade someone to try and knock me on the head."

"Yes, sir."

He produced a fat wallet from his inside coat pocket and opened it. It was stuffed with ten-thousand lira notes.

"This should be an inducement for them to start something, shouldn't it, sergeant?" He waved the wallet at me. "It should make some fingers itch, don't you think?"

"Yes, sir."

He nodded, then thumbed off two of the notes and thrust them at me.

"Go and buy yourself a suit. From now on I don't want you to wear your uniform." He gave me a cold little smile. [4] NXt'rc botli on vacation, sergeant. "

"Yes, sir."

I took the two notes.

He glanced at his strap-watch.

"Be back here by fifteen hundred hours, changed and ready to go out."

"Yes, sir."

I nearly broke my neck buying that suit, a shirt and tie and getting back to the hotel and changing by three o'clock, but I did it.

He was waiting for me by the desk.

He looked me over.

"What were you before you joined the Army, Chisholm?"

"An architect, sir."

He nodded.

"Don't forget you're a soldier now," he said, his washed-out blue eyes on my face. "An architect is all right in peacetime, but he's not a damn' bit of use in a war."

"No, sir."

"Get the car. I don't feel like walking."

I nearly laughed in his face.

"Yes, sir."

I went round to the garage and drove the car to the front entrance.

The General came out and looked at it. He walked slowly around it, eyeing it carefully.

I was ready at the door when he reached it, and I opened it for him.

He peered inside, glanced at the ash-trays and then got in.

As he sank on to the cushions he said, "Thank you for taking care of the car. I'm getting to be a faddy old man, but I like it kept clean."

I was so surprised I nearly showed it.

"-Yes, sir," I said, and got in under the wheel.

At that moment I almost liked him.

We returned to the hotel around half after seven.

"Leave it there," he said as he got out of the car. "We'll need it tonight."

"Yes, sir."

"Meet me at the reception-desk at eleven hundred hours."

He went into the hotel, shuffling through a bunch of picture postcards he had bought of the Cathedral, the Baptistery and the Medici Chapels.

I emptied the ash-trays, swept out the car and spent ten minutes

with a feather duster taking off the dust on the coachwork. Then I went into the hotel.

I made certain he wasn't in the lounge before going over to ths small American bar. I ordered a double whisky. I needed it.

All the afternoon the General had sopped up information the way a sponge sops up water.

We had gone over every inch of the Cathedral, spent twenty minutes before Michelangelo's *Pieta* while he questioned me about its history. We had stood for a long time before Ghiberti's bronze doors of the Baptistery while he examined each miraculous' panel like a man who is desperate to absorb something of beauty before he loses his sight. We remained in the Medici Chapel long after closing-time while the custodian followed us around, hoping we would go, but anxious not to offend the signore who had given him two thousand lire to let him wander undisturbed.

The General had sat under Michelangelo's masterpiece *Night and Day* while I had outlined the history of the Medici family, and I could see he was absorbing each word with an interest that was almost fanatical.

As we came out into the noisy, bustling street, he said, "I enjoyed that, Chisholm. Thank you. If you're as good an architect as you're a guide, you should be quite an architect."

And that was high praise, coming from him.

After my drink, I went into the restaurant. I was given a table in a corner away from the brass hats and the profiteers. I worked through one of the best dinners I've ever had.

I kept an eye out for the General, but he didn't show up. I guessed he was eating in his room.

After dinner I went up to my own room, washed, shaved and stretched out on my bed to rest until nine o'clock.

Now I had had the time and the opportunity to observe the General closely, I came to the conclusion that there was something queer about him.

All the time I was with him I had a feeling of acute tension. I was like a blind man walking on ice, knowing there were thin patches, but unable to see them; knowing too, sooner or later, I was going to fall in.

It was pretty obvious that he drank too much. He had the washed-out, swimming eyes of a drunk, and when you looked closely at him you could see, under his heavy sun tan, his skin was criss-crossed with tiny purple veins that didn't show at first glance.

But there was something more to his queerness than drinking. His eyes were restless. They flickered around a room, like the darting of a snake's tongue; as if he thought someone was going to gun for him, and he had to be on a constant look-out to duck in time. His eyes weren't scared. He wasn't a frightened man.

He was a man on the look-out for trouble, not just now and then, but all the time.

Every so often his face would contract as if he suffered a sudden sharp stabbing pain, and this contraction worried me. His hands were as restless as his eyes. He had broad, brown, powerful hands with short, thick fingers, kept immaculately clean with polished nails. They were on the move all the time, either drumming on his knees or moving slowly up and down his coat front or clenching and unclenching.

He was the most unrestful, unnerving man I had ever met, and I knew instinctively there was a savage and brutal temper just below the surface that he controlled with difficulty.

I went on brooding about him until a few minutes to nine, then I went downstairs and met him at the reception-desk.

He had changed into a dark blue suit, and the moment I looked at him I knew he had been hitting the bottle.

His face was flushed; there were beads of sweat on his forehead, and his eyes glittered.

But he was all right on his feet. When he walked across the lounge, he didn't lurch. But I had an uneasy feeling he was in a mean mood, and I had only to give him an excuse for him to turn on me.

I opened the car door.

He got in and sank on to the cushions.

I waited, holding the door, and looking at him.

"What are you staring at?" he demanded, glaring at me. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Waiting for instructions, sir," I said, stiff as a ramrod and looking over his head.

He rubbed his hand over his face and stared blankly at me.

"Hell! I don't know. It's your job——" He stopped, shook his head as if trying to clear his brain, went on, "Now, wait a minute. What about this leg place you were talking about? Let's go there; and snap it up."

"Yes, sir."

I drove as rapidly as I could along the narrow road that runs by the river bank, turned left at Via de Tornabuoni, right at Via Porta Rossa, past the *Mercato Nuovo,* into a side street off the Piazza della Signoria, and pulled up outside a three-storey building. Over the double glass doors was a neon sign that spelt out in red and green letters: *Casino.*

I opened the door.

"This is the place, sir."

He got out slowly and stood looking at the sign.

"Doesn't look much."

"I don't think it is, sir."

"Wait for me. I may not be long."

He pushed open the glass doors, and disappeared down the flight of stairs.

I got into the car, backed it away from the entrance, and lit a cigarette.

I waited five hours in that car: the longest five hours I've ever spent.

Around two o'clock, he came out.

I drove the car up to him, jumped out and held open the door.

He got in without a word. His breath stank of spirits, and he fumbled for a long moment before he could find the cushioned seat. Then he dropped back on it so heavily, the springs groaned under the impact.

"The hotel," he said, and rested his head back and shut his eyes.

I drove back to the hotel.

He was asleep when I opened the door. I leaned in and gently shook his arm.

He came awake so fast, he startled me out of my wits.

One moment he was lying against the cushions, dead to the world, the next second he was bolt upright, and his left hand had clamped over my wrist in a paralysing grip.

He twisted my arm savagely, bringing me forward and on to my knees on the floor of the car. His right hand caught me around the throat, and his fingers dug into my flesh like steel hooks.

I had been in a few rough houses in the Army, and had come up against guys who were stronger and tougher than I, but I always felt, when I mixed it with them, I had a chance of beating them.

But in that paralysing, murderous grip, I knew I hadn't a chance in the world, and I was scared silly.

He held me like that for maybe a couple of seconds—it seemed like hours to me—then released me.

"What the hell are you playing at?" he snarled. "How dare you touch an officer!"

I straightened up, gasping for breath, and somehow came to attention.

"I've a mind to break your goddamn neck," he went on. "Lay hands on me again, and I'll have you court-martialled."

"Yes, sir," I managed to get out.

He climbed slowly out of the car.

"You'll get seven days' detention for that, sergeant," he said, glaring at me. "Maybe that'll teach you to keep your hands to yourself!"

He walked slowly into the hotel without looking back.

I fingered my throat and cursed him.

On the stroke of seven the next morning I rapped on his door.

If I hadn't been straining my ears I wouldn't have heard him tell me to come in.

I opened the door and carried in the tray.

He was standing by the window in a silk dressing-gown, his hair tousled and a cigarette hanging from his shapeless mouth. He looked ten years older than he had done the previous night, and there were lead-coloured smudges under his eyes.

" 'Morning, sergeant," he said mildly.

" 'Morning, sir."

I set down the tray and stood to attention.

He came over and looked at the tray, picked up the whisky and carried it back to the window.

"Run my bath, sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

I ran his bath, took the temperature of the water, added more cold, decided it would be about right by the time he had finished the whisky, and returned to the bedroom.

"What do we do today?" he asked.

He had already drunk the whisky, and held the empty glass In his big, brown hand as if he didn't know what to do with it.

"You wanted to see the Uffizi Gallery and the Palazzo Vecchio this morning, sir," I said. "In the afternoon, the Pitti Palace and the Piazzale Michelangelo."

He frowned at me.

"Was that what we had arranged to do?"

"Yes, sir."

He mussed his hair still more, put down the glass and went over to the night table.

"I guess we can do better than that," he said. "Take a look at these."

He handed me the picture postcards of the Cathedral, the Baptistery and the Medici Chapels he had bought the previous afternoon.

"I don't know where they came from," he said. "Maybe the hotel manager sent them up, but they look pretty good to me."

I stared at him and he stared at me.

"The Cathedral looks terrific," he went on. "I think we should see that first. Look at that tower—what do they call it?"

"The campanile, sir."

He sat on the bed and began to rub his eyes with the heels of his palms.

"Yes. Well, for God's sake, we should see that first. Your job is to act as a guide, sergeant. I shouldn't have to tell you this. Take a look at that Medici thing. Ever seen anything like it? I haven't We'll take that in too. Maybe tomorrow we'll go to this gallery of yours."

I started to say something, then stopped.

"Nine sharp at the reception-desk, sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

I about-faced, walked smartly to the door, opened it and went out.

I went down to the restaurant and had breakfast. While I chewed my way through a couple of rolls, butter and marmalade, I wondered about the General.

Was he kidding me in the hope I'd speak out of turn and give him a chance to slap a charge on me, or had he really forgotten where he had been the previous afternoon? If he had forgotten, he was a sick man, and I remembered again Lieutenant Rawlins saying he was on sick leave.

If he had forgotten, then he must be in a bad way. He might go on visiting the Cathedral, the Baptistery and the Medici Chapels until the end of his leave. He might even want to overstay his leave.

A lot of guys who had been through a battle went off their heads. They called it shell-shock or war neurosis or something like that. A few of them went right round the bend. I'd met some of them, and had seen what had happened to them. Maybe the General had gone a little round the bend himself.

I decided to watch him for a couple of days, and then, if he continued to act strange, to put a call through to Major Kay and ask him what I had better do.

It was a sound idea, but it would have been a lot sounder if I had got up right away and put the call through. I wouldn't have got into the jam I did get into if I had done that, but I wasn't sure, and I didn't want to stick my neck out.

It's a dangerous thing for a sergeant to call up a major and tell him a general is going round the bend.

The General was waiting at the reception-desk when I came out of the lounge on the stroke of nine.

"We'll go first to this Cathedral," he said. "The hall porter tells me it's the place to see. You should have known that, sergeant."

"Yes, sir," I said.

He went out and inspected the car. He even wiped the distributor head with his handkerchief. I had gone over every lead, every pipe, every goddamn connection, with my own handkerchief about half an hour before, and I knew he wouldn't find any oil: he didn't.

He inspected the coachwork and the inside of the car. He couldn't find anything to grumble at, so he got in and sat down.

I drove him to the Cathedral.

It was like a carbon copy of the previous afternoon. He went over every inch of the place. He stood looking at Michelangelo's *Pieta* as if he had never seen it before, and made me tell him its history. We examined Ghiberti's bronze doors of the Baptistery. We went to the Medici Chapels, and I told him the history pf the

Medici family while he sat under Michelangelo's *Night and Day* just as he had done the previous afternoon.

He seemed to be sopping up the information with the same fanatical interest, but this time I wasn't fooled. He even bought the same picture postcards he had bought before.

We got back to the hotel in time for lunch.

"Where do we go this afternoon?" he asked as he got out of the car.

"There's the Uffizi Gallery if pictures interest you, sir," I said. "The bulk of the great Italian masterpieces are on show there."

"I want to see the pictures," he said. "Do you know anything about pictures, sergeant?"

"A little; enough to tell you a few points of interest, sir. If you want details we could hire a guide."

"I don't want details. I dare say you can tell me what I want to know. Fourteen hundred hours sharp."

Once again I was tempted to telephone Major Kay, but I didn't. I decided to see what happened during the afternoon and the evening. If he continued to act queer, I'd call the Major in the morning.

After lunch we went to the Uffizi Gallery.

I was glad I had spent many hours in the gallery in the days before the war. My knowledge stood me in good stead, as he wanted to know details of the artists' lives, how they mixed their colours, the meaning behind Botticelli's *primavera, and his Calumny,* and a host of other questions.

We got back to the hotel around' six o'clock. He had bought a big bunch of picture postcards of the masterpieces that particularly appealed to him, and he told me to come up to his room and go through them. He made me tell him the history of the artists all over again while he jotted notes down on the back of the cards.

We did this until seven-thirty.

"I guess we'll finish these tomorrow," he said, laying aside the cards. "I've enjoyed today, sergeant. You're a damned good guide. I wish I had your knowledge of painting. It's a subject that interests me."

I suggested he should read Vasari's *Lives of the Painters,* and he made a note in his notebook.

"Go and get some dinner. What are we doing tonight?"

"Whatever you wish, sir."

"Yeah." He stared blankly at me. "Didn't you say there was some kind of leg show in town? Maybe that'd be amusing."

"There is one sir, but it isn't much."

"I'll chance it. I've got to relax, sergeant. Can't go on being educated all day and night. Lef s take in the leg show."

My heart sank.

"Yes, sir."

"Twenty-one hundred hours sharp, sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

I had visions of another five-hour wait in the car.

When we met at nine o'clock, I had a half-pint of Scotch in my hip pocket and a paper-backed novel. I wasn't sitting in that car for five hours with nothing but my thoughts to keep me company.

I took him to the same Casino as before. He made the same remarks about it, and I agreed with him.

"Wait for me. I may not be long."

But this time I wasn't fooled. I settled myself down with the book and the half-pint of Scotch and forgot about him.

Around eleven o'clock, I happened to look up and saw him standing in the doorway of the Casino,, staring towards me. I did some quick moving, got the car going and pulled up beside him.

"What the hell do you mean, keeping me waiting?" he said in a low, furious voice. "My God! I'll teach you to keep awake! You'll lose your stripes for this, and I'll see you don't get promotion again."

"Yes, sir," I said.

He got into the car.

"Drive to the end of the street and stop there."

He was drunk all right, but not so drunk as he had been the previous night.

I drove to the end of the street and pulled up.

We waited.

We waited for maybe ten minutes, then I heard the click of wooden shoes coming along the sidewalk.

"Open the door," the General said under his breath.

I got out.

Coming down the street towards us was a tall, blonde girl in a fur coat, hatless, and walking on very high-heeled shoes.

She couldn't have been more than twenty-two or -three, but she was old in sin and experience. She had big, hard eyes, and even the heavy load of lipstick couldn't disguise the greed and hardness of her mouth.

She stopped by the car and I opened the door.

As she got into the car I caught a whiff of her perfume: the kind of stuff that needed plenty of fresh air to go with it.

She sat down beside the General, and patted his hand.

"What a lovely car, darling," she said, showing him her small, white teeth. She opened her coat. She had the big bosomy chest the Italian women seemed to specialize in, and her strapless evening gown seemed to be having hard work in coping with it.

"Where do you live?" the General asked, looking at her the way he might look at a dirty rifle.

"Via Speziali: it's not far, darling."

"Do you know it, sergeant?" he asked, looking at me.

"Yes, sir."

"Go there then."

I shut the door, got in under the wheel and drove rapidly along Via Dei Magazzini, past the famous Church of Orsanmichele, to Via Speziali. I slowed down.

"This is it, sir."

"The house by the lamp-post," the girl said, leaning forward.

I pulled up by the lamp-post, got out and opened the car door.

The girl got out and gave me a quick, sly wink, then walked across the sidewalk and began to fumble in her bag for her key.

The General climbed out of the car slowly. He looked up at the house, frowning.

It was tall and narrow and in darkness.

"Wait here, sergeant," he said softly. "Keep your ears alert. If I shout, come running."

"Yes, sir."

He joined the girl as she unlocked the door.

I heard her say, "Don't make a noise, darling. I'm not supposed to bring gentlemen friends here."

I watched them disappear into the dark hall, and the front door closed.

I lit a cigarette, crossed the street, and stared up at the dark house. After about three or four minutes a light sprang up in a top-floor room, lighting up a yellow blind.

Five flights up, I thought gloomily. I hoped he wouldn't yell for me.

I paced up and down, watching the lighted window, smoking and thinking. I was pretty sure that if I ever went with a street woman, I'd be damned if I'd let my servant know about it: that is if I ever had a servant.

I walked up and down like that for maybe an hour, then suddenly I spotted *a,* shadow cross the lighted blind. I recognized the big, lumpy shoulders and the bullet-shaped head of the General. He passed three times across the blind, and I wondered what he was doing. Then he stopped before the window, pulled up the blind and opened the window.

He leaned out, looking down into the street.

I looked up at him, and waved to attract his attention.

"That you, sergeant?"

His voice, soft and low, just reached me.

"Yes, sir."

"I want you. Come on up."

I wasn't certain if I had heard him correctly.

"Shall I come up, sir?" I called.

"Yes, damn you! Come up!"

Puzzled, I crossed the street, pushed open the front door of the house, and groped my way across the dark hall. In front of

me I could just make out a flight of stairs. I went up them quietly, walked along a passage, found more stairs and went up them. I kept going like that, feeling my way in the darkness, climbing stairs, until I thought I was going on climbing them all night.

Above me suddenly I saw a light, and I quickened my step.

"Come on, sergeant," the General said impatiently. He was standing on the landing, peering over the banister rail at me. "We don't want to be here all night."

I ran up the last of the stairs and joined him on the landing. I was breathing heavily.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want your help, sergeant," he said. He was standing with his back to the light, and I couldn't see his face clearly, but I didn't like the short, jerky way he was breathing, nor the husky way he spoke.

"Yes, sir," I said, staring at him.

"Go in there and see what you make of her. I think she's passed out."

I hesitated.

"Passed out, sir?"

"Go in there, damn you!"

The sudden viciousness in his voice sent a chill up my spine. I knew then something was wrong in that room.

I walked past him and went to the door and looked into the lighted room.

It was big; furnished with big lounging chairs, a settee, gay rugs, and a sideboard loaded with drinks. On the opposite side of the room was an archway that led to the bedroom. From where I stood I could see the foot of a divan bed.

"She's in the bedroom," the General said. "Go and look at her."

There was an odd smell coming to me as I stood in the doorway : a smell I seemed to recognize.

"Perhaps she wouldn't like it, sir," I said, my mouth turning dry.

"She won't mind," the General said, and his thick fingers closed on my arm. He shoved me forward. "Go and look at her."

I crossed the room, and as I reached the archway I knew what that smell was. My stomach tightened into a hard coil of nausea, but I had to be sure.

Standing in the archway, I looked into the bedroom, and I looked at the bed. I felt cold sweat start out over my body, and my mouth suddenly filled with saliva.

I have seen a man hit in the chest by a mortar bomb. I have seen a shell drop squarely on five men as they sat around an ammunition-box, playing Gin Rummy. I have seen a pilot bale out with his parachute in flames and come down within fifty feet of me, smashed to pulp. But I've never seen anything so gruesome and ghastly as what I saw on that bed.

The knife lay on the floor: a big carving-knife, red with her blood. He had hacked her to pieces. He had ripped her open the way you rip open a pig. The only thing about her that was untouched was her face.

She was grimacing at me in terror, her big, hard eyes wide and staring, her white teeth gleaming in the lamplight, her blonde hair spread out on the pillow.

I shut my eyes and turned away, sick to my stomach. I stood, my hand against the wall, fighting the urgent need to vomit, my body as cold as ice.

"Better sit down, sergeant," the General said. "You don't look so good."

I controlled my nausea, stiffened, and looked at him.

He was standing by the door. He held a Beretta automatic in his right hand, and it was pointing at me.

The little Swiss clock on the overmantel struck the half-hour: its sharp, bell-like chime sounded loud in the still, silent room.

"Sit down, sergeant," the General said. "I want to talk to you."

I sat down on the arm of the settee. I was glad to. The muscles in my legs were fluttering.

He moved slowly round the room, keeping me covered with the gun until he reached the sideboard. He poured two big whiskies without lowering the gun, took one, moved away, and jerked his head at the other whisky.

"Get it, sergeant, and sit down again."

I went over to the sideboard, collected the drink and returned to the settee. My hand was shaking so badly I slopped some of the drink on the carpet.

The General took his whisky in one long swallow. I took mine more slowly.

"That's better," he said, and set the glass on a table. "I wanted that." He touched his forehead with his fingers, shook his head, frowning. "You saw what I did to her?"

"Yes," I said.

"They call that a brainstorm, I guess," he said, and again shook his head. "I've been waiting to do that for months. It's a damn' funny thing, sergeant, how an idea like that creeps up on you. Maybe if they let generals go in the front line and take a smack at the enemy, it wouldn't have happened. I'm not cut out for desk work. Every now and then I've got to have a blood bath. It accumulates inside my head. It keeps growing until I can think of nothing else, then I can't work any more, and I have to let off a little steam."

I didn't say anything: I couldn't.

"Well, it's done now," he went on, and sat on the arm of an armchair. "I feel a hell of a sight better already. By tomorrow I'll be fit to start work again." He took out a cigarette-case, lit a

cigarette, and tossed the case to me. "Have a smoke, sergeant. You and I have to talk seriously."

I let the case lie at my feet.

"It's a damned nuisance there'll be a fuss about her," he went on. "She isn't worth making a fuss about, but they'll try and p!n it on someone. Now I'm going to ask you a question, and I want an unbiased answer. Who do you think is more important to the Army: you or me?"

I looked at him.

"Come on, sergeant. You can answer that one," he said mildly.

"I guess you are, or you were," I said huskily.

He smiled.

"I still am, sergeant. Now I've got this little business off my mind I'm as good as I've always been. I'm good for another couple of years before it'll bother me again. I know. This isn't the first time it's happened."

He blew smoke down his wide nostrils while he studied me.

"I want you to take the rap for this, sergeant," he said. "Someone's got to take it. The Army can't do without me, but it can do without you."

I had had a feeling something like that was coming.

"This is murder, General," I said, trying to speak calmly. "I'm not taking a rap like that. You did it; you've got to foot the bill."

He got up and went back to the whisky-bottle, poured himself another drink and returned to his chair.

"The Army comes first, sergeant," he said, sitting down. "Now, listen. I like you. I wouldn't be talking like this to you if I didn't like you. You're a good fella. You're the best damned sergeant I've ever met. That's why I'm giving you a chance to live. If I didn't like you, I should have put a bullet in you as you went to look in that room. I should then have called the police and told them I had found you here. I should have told them you had stolen my car. I followed you here. I came in just after you had killed her, and you attacked me so I had to shoot you. And because I am who I am, they would have believejd me."

I sat staring at him, a cold chill criwling up my spine.

"So you'll either agree to take the rap or I'll have to shoot you, sergeant. Now, don't get scared. If you agree to take the rap and keep your mouth shut, I'll fix it you get away. I'll give you money and an hour's start. After an hour I'll call the police and tell them you are responsible for the mess in the other room. How do you feel about it?"

"You can't do it!" I said shakily. "You couldn't get away with it."

"Don't be a damned fool!" he snapped, his eyes hardening. "Of course I can get away with it. Sergeants are ten a dime. You're no use to the war, and I am. Make up your mind!"

"But they'll know it is you!" I said feverishly. "You talked to the girl at the night club. You must have been seen."

He shook his head.

"I didn't talk to her. All I had to do was to raise my thumb. No one saw me do it, and that was all I had to do for her to grab her coat and come running after me." He took something out of his pocket and held it up between finger and thumb. "I took your identity-tag when you were cleaning the car, sergeant. You shouldn't leave it lying around. They'll find it by the bed. That's all they'll need. That and my evidence." He stood up abruptly, the gun pointing at me. "Going to be shot now or will you take a chance of beating the rap?"

I remembered his great strength. Even if I did manage to get the gun from him I knew I couldn't lick him in a fight. I knew too, looking at his set, blank face, I was within a heartbeat of being shot.

"I'll take the rap," I said.

He relaxed, nodded and smiled.

"I'm glad, sergeant. I' wouldn't want to shoot you. You can beat it if you use your head. I'll give you enough money to see you through. Now listen to me. Take the car and drive as fast as you can to Perugia. Leave the car there. Make for Rome. You'll have to go on foot, and keep off the main roads. Once you get to Rome, you'll be safe. I'll tell them you were in uniform. They won't think of looking for you dressed like you are. You can stay hidden until this blows over, and it will blow over pretty soon. In a few days the fighting's going to stop, and the Italians will be too busy putting their house in order to bother to look for you."

He took out his wallet, counted out ten ten-thousand-lira notes, screwed them into a ball and tossed them into my lap.

"That should hold you. Now, get going. .. ."

"My unit will think I've deserted …" I began.

"Don't talk crap," he said. "Your unit will know you've killed a woman. They won't expect you back. Now, get going. You have an hour from now. Every second you waste talking puts a noose around your neck."

I stood up and began to move to the door.

The Beretta covered me all the way.

"Don't think you'll get away with this," I said.

"I'll get away with it," he said, and smiled. "Now, get going."

I opened the door and began the long, blind walk down the dark stairs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As I drove along the narrow road that skirted the Lago and would eventually bring me to Arolo, I thought how lucky I had been that the surrender of the German armies in Italy had hit the headlines at the same time as the woman's body had been discovered. The German surrender had crowded out all other news.

From what I could make out from two small, separate paragraphs in a newspaper I got hold of, the General hadn't telephoned the police. He had waited until I had gone, then had left my identity-tag by the bed, and had walked back to the hotel.

He had reported to the police that his car had been stolen, and had telephoned to Major Kay, telling him I had deserted. It was three days before the body was found. By then the General was back in Bologna. He was never even questioned about the murder.

I hadn't been in any danger. I had already reached Rome by the time the Italian police began a disorganized search for me. In Rome I met Torrchi, who was picking pockets in St. Peter's. It was he who suggested I should become a guide, and found me a room next to the one he shared with Simona.

I had told him I had deserted from the Army: an explanation that satisfied his curiosity. He had deserted from the Italian Army himself months ago, and considered no sane man would remain in any Army longer than he could help.

At that time there were scarcely any newspapers to be had, and the one I did find contained only a small paragraph about the murder and another about the General losing his car.

The paragraph covering the murder stated the police were looking for Sergeant David Chesham, who they thought could help them in solving the mystery.

As the police were apparently looking for Sergeant Chesham, I thought it safe to continue to use my own name, and I was satisfied few people would remember that small paragraph.

Thinking about it now as I drove along the narrow road, It didn't seem possible that this had happened to me six years ago. For the first four years I had been content to remain in Italy, earning a living as a guide, and moving from town to town, collecting information for my book.

Then I began to think of the opportunities I was missing, and longed to get back to my home country. I began to investigate the possibilities of getting hold of a faked passport, but the price made it impossible.

When I reached Arolo I left the car in the wooden lean-to and went up to my bedroom.

For the first time in six years I was scared.

How Laura had found out that I was a fugitive I couldn't imagine. But she knew, and apparently I had been in her power without being aware of it ever since we had first met.

My immediate reaction was to pack my bag and bolt, but after a little thought I decided that wouldn't solve my problem.

If I did go, she might tell the police who I was, and the hunt would be on again. This time it would be very different. The police were organized now, and my chances of escaping from them would be slender indeed.

I came to the conclusion that I had better wait and see what she was going to do; how she could make use of her information. Until I knew that, I couldn't afford to make a move myself.

The following day was Sunday. Laura had suggested we should meet that evening. I decided it would be safer now to meet her- than to put her off. It was possible she might come out into the open, and then I could decide what to do.

I didn't see her during the morning. In the afternoon I read to Bruno as usual.

Nurse Fleming reminded me that she was leaving first thing on Monday morning for her usual day and night off.

"Mrs. Fancino looks after him while I am away," she told me. "She understands what to do for him. There is nothing extra for you to do."

Laura appeared at tea-time, looking pale, with smudges under her eyes. She came up to me as I was walking along the path on my way back to my room.

"Hello, David," she said, and smiled up at me. "Am I seeing you tonight?"

"Yes."

I looked at her, but there was nothing in her eyes that told me she was planning anything.

"I'm glad. We'll meet at the boathouse about nine. I don't want to be too late tonight."

"I'll be there."

"I'm looking forward to it."

She turned away and sauntered back towards the villa.

* * *

Now that we were going to meet again, the thought of having to make love to her sickened me.

My mad infatuation for her was now as dead as last year's snow, and I knew it would never come back. She had said she didn't want to be late, and that might mean she didn't expect me to make love to her. If she did, I was determined to have a show-

down with her. Anything was better than pretending to be in love with her any more.

A few minutes to nine o'clock I got into Bicci's boat and rowed over to the boathouse.

She was coming down the steps from the villa as I pulled into the harbour.

"Hello, David," she said gaily. "You're punctual."

There was that look in her eyes that had caused all the trouble; only now it made me feel a little sick.

"Hello," I said, and got out of the boat. "Shall we talk here? It'll be cooler than indoors."

"Think of the mosquitoes! I don't want to be bitten alive. Of course we must go in."

She went ahead of me, and I followed.

She was wearing a thin, crepe-de-Chine dress, and by the way it clung to her body, little else besides. She ran up the stairs, unlocked the door, and went across the room to throw open the windows.

"Give me a drink, David. A big whisky, and have one yourself."

I made two drinks, and brought them over to her. She took one, touched glasses with me, and smiled into my eyes.

"It seems ages since we've been alone together, doesn't it?"

"I guess it does."

"Have you missed me, David?"

I hesitated for a second, then took the plunge. I had to stop this before it got started.

"Do we have to pretend, Laura?" I said.

She raised her eyebrows as if surprised.

"Why, David, what's the matter?"

"You know as well as I do."

She wandered over to the bed and sat on it, drawing up one slim leg under her. She raised her face, showing me the column of her white throat.

"Don't be silly, darling. Come and kiss me."

"If you want to be kissed, why don't you go over to the *Pescatori}"* I said, not moving.

She sat very still, her eyes suddenly hard, her mouth tight shut.

"What do you mean by that, David?"

"The only person you're kidding is yourself."

"I suppose you have been spying on me?"

I nodded.

"Yes, I've been spying on you. It's an old custom on the Lago. You said so yourself." I lit a cigarette and carefully put the burned match into the box. "I was curious to see what your friend Helen was like. I had no idea she had hair on her chest and smoked cigars."

For a moment I thought she was going to throw herself at me. She looked like an enraged tigress. Then she controlled herself

with an effort. She crossed her slim legs, pulled down her skirt over her knees and put down her glass of whisky.

Every movement was slow and deliberate. But I wasn't kidded. She was giving herself time to recover. I really had socked one in under her guard.

"I think we had better talk this over," she said in a cold, flat voice.

"Just as you like."

I looked steadily at her, but I was sweating a little, knowing she had the whiphand if she wanted to play it that way.

"I don't like spies, David."

"I don't like them myself," I said, "but since you assured me you loved me, I felt entitled to find out who your sparetime lover was, and I did find out. I discovered I am your spare-time lover, and Bellini is still your old and trusted one. Why did you get rid of him for me if you were not going to stick to me?"

"How do you know he's Bellini?" she demanded angrily.

"He happens to be a well-known character in Milan. He's been in prison three times. He is a murderer and a professional thug, and he's not above living on street women. I can't say much for your choice, but no doubt he has his particular charm."

Red stained her face, and her eyes blazed at me.

"Is he any worse than you?" she said. "At least he doesn't cut women to pieces, nor did he run away from the Army when he should be fighting. He's not that kind of a coward."

"I thought we were bound to come around to that before long," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "Torrchi told me you had been doing a little spying on your own account. It's a pity you haven't got your facts right."

She stood up.

"I'm quite satisfied with my facts, David. There's no need for you to look so frightened. I don't intend to give you away. I'm sorry I called you a coward just now. I didn't mean it."

"You still want to get your facts right," I said. "I didn't kill her."

"Oh, but you did, David. I found out about you years ago. Perhaps you remember Major Kay? At one time he and I were very good friends. He told me about you. He showed me your photograph and told me what you had done. You were quite a sensation at Bologna for a time. Then when I saw you outside the Duomo I recognized you."

"So that explains why you appeared so interested in me. You imagined you had found just the man to murder your husband, didn't you?"

"You don't imagine I'm in the habit of throwing myself at any down-at-the-heel loafer I see, do you, unless I have a very good reason?"

"If Bellini is anyone to judge by, that's exacdy what I do think, Laura."

She laughed.

"You're not going to make me angry, David. Now we are on the subject, why did you kill that woman?"

"I didn't kill her," I said. "If you knew Major Kay, you have probably heard of General Costain. He killed her and framed the killing on me."

"Then why don't you tell the police? I'm sure they'll believe you, even if I don't."

"All right, forget it," I said impatiently. "I didn't kill her, but I don't expect you or the police to believe me. Why didn't Bellini murder Bruno? Why did you bother with me when you had Bellini to do your dirty work?"

She moved over to the window and sat on the window-seat.

"You have no idea, David, how very stupid Mario is. At one time I did think he might be able to do it, but after I had discussed it with him I realized he was bound to make a mistake. He isn't clever like you. Sometimes I wonder if he has a brain at all. He would do something ghastly, and implicate me. So I didn't ask him. I asked you instead."

I studied her.

"So you really mean to get rid of Bruno?"

"Oh, yes; when the right man and the right opportunity comes along I shall certainly get rid of him. He's completely useless. He's treated me very badly, and I want my freedom and his money."

"You're a cold-blooded bitch, aren't you?" I said.

She smiled.

"I suppose I am, David, but I'm patient. I've waited four years now. I'm prepared to wait another four years."

"Well, you can count me out," I said. "Your schemes to drag me into this are not going to work."

"Don't be too sure," she said. "Suppose I said to you, 'David, get rid of Bruno or I'll tell the police where to find you.' What would you say to that?"

"I'd tell you to go to hell," I said evenly.

She half turned to look at me.

"I wonder if you would. Well, never mind. I'm not going to put it to a test. Shall we break up the party? I'm tired."

"I'm clearing out when Valeria arrives," I said quietly.

She raised her eyebrows.

"I don't think you can afford to take that attitude, David. It would be safer for you to wait until I told you to go."

"Go ahead and tell me to go."

"I'll think about it. Good night, David."

I let her get as far as the door, then I said, "Wait a minute, Laura."

She turned, her eyes suddenly wary. >

"What is it?"

"Two can play at blackmailing," I said evenly. "I'm leaving when Valeria arrives, and there's nothing you can do about it if you think a moment. If you give me away to the police, I shall give you away to Dr. Perelli. I know I haven't such a good case as you have. I know it's your word against mine, but I'll make him suspicious. I'll tell him you're planning to murder Bruno. I'll tell him I'm your lover, and I'll tell him Bellini's your lover too. He's no fool. He doesn't like you. If he made enquiries he would get enough evidence. You haven't covered your tracks all that cleverly. He would take care nothing happened to Bruno. He even might find some way of changing the will. So watch your step, Laura. Blackmailers shouldn't have secrets. They leave themselves open to a counter-punch."

She stood motionless, her eyes glittering, her face a blank mask.

"Good night, David," she said, and went out, closing the door behind her.

I hadn't won a victory, but at least I had pulled off a stalemate.

The following morning, after she had prepared Bruno for the day, Nurse Fleming went off to Milan.

It seemed odd not to have her bustling about, although Maria attempted to deputize for her by continually coming into the sick-room while I waited for Laura to take over.

When Laura finally did come in, she scarcely looked at me, and I left her with Bruno and went down to the harbour. I spent the morning cleaning the boat.

It was almost lunch-time when I had finished, and on my way up to the villa I saw Laura coming towards me.

"Valeria will be arriving at midday tomorrow," she said, her eyes not meeting mine. "I want you to meet the train. Take the boat. She prefers to come across the Lago."

"All right," I said.

Then she looked at me. Her face was expressionless, but her eyes were hostile.

"And, David, I've been thinking about what you said last night. I've decided to let you go if you want to. I shouldn't like to think I was keeping you here against your will."

"That's very nice of you, Laura," I said. "I had an idea you wouldn't want Dr. Perelli to be an arbitrator between us. Don't imagine you can give me away after I've gone. Dr. Perelli would visit me in jail if I gave him an idea what I wanted to talk to him about."

"I wasn't thinking of giving you away," she said, and gave me a hard little smile. "Don't be so suspicious, David."

"I think I have every reason to be suspicious."

"I shall have to find someone else to lift Bruno," she said. "It may take a few days. Will you stay until next Monday?"

"I would prefer to go as soon as Valeria arrives."

She lifted her shoulders in an indifferent shrug.

"I know what you would prefer to do, but that is scarcely the point. Someone must be found to lift Bruno. You don't expect Nurse Fleming to do it, do you? Or are you so damned selfish you don't care?"

I hesitated. My instincts warned me to get out as quickly as I could, but her request was reasonable. She had to find someone to take my place.

"All right," I said. "I'll wait until next Monday, but not a day longer. It's up to you to find someone by then."

"I will," she returned. "Thank you so much, David. It's very considerate of you."

The jeering expression in her eyes warned me I had made a mistake.

"And when you have gone, David," she went on, "shall we agree to forget each other, and our eccentricities—shall we call them?"

"Sure," I said, and moving past her, continued on my way to the kitchen.

The stalemate had turned into a victory after all.

I spent the afternoon reading to Bruno while Laura rested in her room.

There was a feverish look of excitement and anticipation in his eyes, and I guessed he was thinking of his daughter.

I would be sorry to leave him. During the short week I had known him I had come to respect and admire him. But I had to go. I couldn't go on living in this atmosphere. Once his daughter was here to look after him, I felt he would be safe from any danger. Laura wouldn't dare do anything to him with Valeria and Nurse Fleming continually about.

As Bruno didn't seem particularly interested in what I was reading, I put down the book.

"I'm sure you'll be very glad to have your daughter with you again," I said. "Now she is coming back, I shall be leaving. I have still a lot of research to do, and I want to go to Orvieto to study the Cathedral there. I'll be sorry to leave you, but I hope you will understand I can't spend the rest of my days here when there is so much for me to do elsewhere."

He showed his surprise and disappointment very plainly, but that soon passed, and I could see he agreed with me that I had to think of myself.

I continued this one-sided conversation, telling him that I intended to push the book on rapidly, romancing a little about my future plans, knowing most of the things I told him wouldn't be possible. I was still talking when Maria brought in the tea.

I left them together before Laura came in.

After I had settled Bruno for the night, Laura followed me out on to the verandah.

"You can go back to your room now, David," she said. "I shan't need you any more. I shall be using Nurse Fleming's room, so I shall be on hand if he wants anything."

She was not quite casual enough, and I had a feeling she was planning something, and wanted to be sure "I would be away from the villa, and not likely to return.

"I'm going into Milan," I said. "I have a date with Giuseppe. I may be back late, but if you think you might want me I can put him off"

"I shan't want you," she said. "Do you want to take the car?"

"I'll use Bicci's."

"Good night, David."

As I walked down the path to the village, it occurred to me that tonight was Laura's last safe chance to get rid of Bruno. When Valeria returned, her chances were going to be a lot less, and none of them safe. Had she planned to do something tonight? Was that the reason why she had agreed so easily to my leaving? Had she decided to let Bellini do what I had refused to do?

The thought brought me to an abrupt standstill. In an hour it would be dark, and Maria would have gone home. L a u r a would be alone with Bruno.

I went on down the path to the village.

Bicci was closing up for the night.

"I'm going into Milan," I said. "I may be late. Can I have the car?"

"Certainly," he said. "It has petrol. Go ahead and enjoy yourself."

"Signora Fancino may telephone," I said. "If she wants me, tell her I don't expect to get back until one o'clock."

"I'll tell her."

I got in the car, backed it out of the lean-to and drove off down the road until I came to the bend that would hide me from Bicci's view. I ran the car off the road, turned off the engine and got out.

I had an idea Laura might check my movements. She would be satisfied now that I had gone to Milan.

I reached the villa as the moon came up over the distant mountains. I moved silently and cautiously, keeping under cover, and I took up a position behind a big willow tree where I had a view of Bruno's room.

Laura was sitting in an armchair, away from the bed, reading. There was a Chopin record playing on the radiogram. The scene looked so quiet and domesticated that I wondered if I were wasting my time.

After a while I saw the light in the kitchen go out, then Maria came into Bruno's room. She was dressed to go home. She said

something to Laura, who put down her book, got up and went with her out of the room.

I moved forward, ran up the verandah steps, and pulling a big cane settee away from the wall, I squeezed behind it and crouched down on the floor.

I was now immediately below Bruno's window, and even if Laura did come out on to the verandah she wouldn't be able to see me.

I heard her return.

"Maria's gone home now, Bruno. I think I'll turn in. I'll be more comfortable in bed with my book. I'll put out the light. You may as well try to sleep."

The radiogram stopped playing, and a moment later the light went out.

Then a light sprang up in Nurse Fleming's room.

I waited for perhaps five minutes. Then I heard a soft step on the verandah. I saw Laura come out silently from Nurse Fleming's room and go quickly down the steps towards the harbour.

She had left the light burning so Bruno would imagine she was still there. She was safe in her deception. He couldn't call out, and had no reason to think he was alone in the villa.

I went after her as far as the terrace that overlooked the boat-house. Lights showed in the big bay window.

I watched her run down the steps and disappear through the doorway to the boathouse. I gave her a few moments, then followed her down. In the harbour was a small rowing-boat, tied up alongside the motor-boat.

I was immediately below the windows of the boathouse, in the shadows. I heard the windows being opened.

"It's like an oven in here," Laura said. "Why didn't you open the windows?"

Her voice came clearly to me in the still quietness of the Lago.

"Well, it's open now," a man said in a harsh, curt voice. "What's been happening?"

Glancing up, I caught sight of the massive figure of Bellini as he moved over to the window.

"Valeria will be coming tomorrow," she said. "David goes next Monday. The nurse has asked for a long week-end. It's working out beautifully. Friday is the night, Mario."

Bellini grunted.

"So long as it is Friday. I'm sick of this waiting. I've got to get out of the country."

"We can't do it before Friday. We can't afford to make mistakes. Besides, David must have time to get to know her. That's more important than anything."

"You're so damned cautious," Bellini growled.

"Oh, no, Mario. You're too reckless. I'm not taking any risks for the sake of a few extra days. Now listen to what I'm going to

tell you, and please try to remember it. You will come here at nine on Friday evening. I shall be waiting for you. If everything is all right, you'll go up to the villa. I'll remain here to make certain no one comes. No one will come, but we've got to be sure of that. You mustn't come near here until Friday night. You do understand, don't you?"

"Of course I understand," Bellini growled. "But there's too much damned talk. When do I get some money? That's what I want to know."

"You had fifty thousand lire only a few days ago," Laura said sharply. "I can't let you have any more."

"I've got to have some more," Bellini snarled. "Don't I keep telling you I've got to get out of the country? It isn't safe here any longer. You don't know what these devils are like once they start hunting for you. I want a million lire. That's what you promised me, and I'm damn' well going to have it."

"You shall have it on Friday. I'll sell my pearls. But you won't get anything, Mario, if you make a mistake on Friday."

"I don't make mistakes, and if you try any tricks, little viper, I'll break your neck."

Laura laughed.

"There'll be no tricks, Mario."

"There'd better not be. Come here. We've talked enough for tonight."

"But you do understand, Mario?"

"Stop talking, and come here!"

It was just after one o'clock when I heard Laura coming up the steps from the boathouse. She was smoking a cigarette and humming to herself, and moved a little unsteadily.

I watched her mount the steps to the verandah and go into Nurse Fleming's room by the casement windows.

I waited for the light to go out before I returned to my room. I waited some minutes, then I was surprised to see a light spring up in Bruno's room.

Moving fast and silently, I reached the verandah and crept up to the open window.

"Not asleep yet?" Laura was saying. "Have you been wondering where I've been all this time?"

I looked into the room.

She faced him, resting her hips on the edge of the table at the foot of the bed, her arms folded, a cigarette hanging from her scarlet lips. She had been drinking, and although she wasn't drunk, I could see by the expression on her flushed face that she was in a spiteful and vicious mood.

She had changed into a pair of green lounging pyjamas, and her small feet were in leather heelless slippers. As I watched her,

she ran her fingers Through her copper-coloured hair and smiled at Bruno.

"I've been down to the boathouse," she went on. "Don't you wish you could spy on me, Bruno?"

She flicked ash on to the floor while she looked at him, her chin tilted aggressively, her mouth hard.

The light from the table lamp fell on Bruno's face. His eyes were alert and wary.

"It's about time we had a showdown," she said. "Every since your accident, I've been patiently waiting for this moment."

I stood in the shadows, watching her. I could hear her as easily as if I was in the room.

"Let's start at the beginning, Bruno," she went on. "As far back as the time you realized what a mistake you had made in marrying me. It was a mistake: a mistake on both sides. I married you for what I could get out of you. I thought I could put up with you because you were so rich, but when I found you weren't over-generous, and then when you began to despise me, I realized you weren't the only one who had made a mistake."

She stubbed out the cigarette, took out a packet from her pyjama pocket and lit another.

"Being married to three hundred million lire was a novelty at first," she went on, "until I realized I wasn't going to get much of it. If you had been kinder to me, Bruno, I might have tried to settle down and accept what you doled out to me, but you were so damned patronizing, and when you found your interests weren't mine, and my friends bored you, you deliberately set out to make me feel your inferior. I've never forgiven you that. Then when you decided to make our marriage impersonal and you insisted on separate rooms, I realized something would have to be done."

She pushed herself away from the table, and went over and sat on the bed.

"It would have been safer for you, Bruno, if you had divorced me. I would have gladly given you grounds for a divorce if you had promised me a decent settlement. But it didn't suit you to divorce me, did it? All you could think about was Valeria and whether a scandal might hurt her chances. You didn't consider me for a moment!"

She dropped her cigarette on the floor and put her foot on it.

"Then you had to spy on me. What did it matter to you that Laurence and I were lovers? I didn't mean anything to you. All that talk about behaving myself for Valeria's sake! Then you did the stupidest thing you have ever done. You might have known I wasn't a person you could threaten in safety. When you told me you were going to alter your will if I didn't give Laurence up I decided I had to do something about you, and do it fast."

She leaned forward, her lips parted in a cruel little smile.

"I want to watch your face when I tell you this, Bruno. I've

been storing it up for four years, waiting for the right moment to tell you. I let the hydraulic fluid out of the brake system, Bruno. The police thought the tank or whatever ybu call it had been accidentally punctured, but I did it. When you went rushing off to meet Valeria, I knew you would drive crazily as you always did, so I fixed the brakes. It was my bad luck and your damned obstinacy that the smash didn't kill you, but at least it put you in bed and made you useless and gave me the whiphand!"

She sat staring at Bruno for perhaps a minute. It seemed an incredibly long time to me. I watched her fascinated as one is fascinated by a repulsive but beautiful snake.

"How calmly you take it," she said at last* "You were always so calm and indifferent about anything I've ever said to you. But I'm going to jolt you out of your calm smugness. I haven't finished yet, Bruno! I'm going to make you suffer for the way you've treated me. I'm going to make you sorry you're not dead!"

She got off the bed and began to pace up and down, passing so close to the window I only just ducked back in time.

"It was stupid of you to leave Valeria so much of your money, Bruno," she went on. "Why did you have to leave her this house and the boat as well? You didn't bother to think what would happen to me did you? Well, she's not going to have the money or the house or the boat. I'm going to have them! Do you hear?" She went over to the bed and glared down at him. "I'm going to have everything! Valeria's going to die on Friday night. It sounds dramatic, doesn't it? But that's what's going to happen. It's taken some time to arrange. It hasn't been easy, but it's been fun doing it. Poor little Valeria is going to be murdered on Friday night. She's going to be another victim of a maniac, and the maniac is your nice, intelligent David Chisholm."

She bent over Bruno, her eyes glittering.

"You think I'm drunk, don't you? You don't believe any of this: but you'll see! Wait until Friday night! You'll see for yourself then! You don't think David's a maniac either, do you? But he is! The police are looking for him! That's why he's been hanging about in Milan all this time. He hasn't a passport; he's an Army deserter, and he's in hiding. I knew about him long before I ever met him. The major of his unit was a friend of mine. He told me about him. Your clever, nice David hacked a woman to pieces about six years ago. When I saw him outside the Duomo I recognized him from a photograph I had been shown. I knew he was the man I was looking for. It was so easy, Bruno. I had only to pretend to fall in love with the fool, and he came here without a murmur."

She straightened Bruno's pillow, smiling down at him.

"At first I planned for Bellini to get rid of Valeria, but he said it wasn't safe." She sat on the bed, her hands folded in her lap,

her eyes glittering. "I had to find someone who would be immediately suspected by the police. That's why I picked on David. The fool imagined I wanted him to get rid of you. But he wouldn't do it, so I knew it would be no use telling him I wanted to get rid of Valeria first."

She took another cigarette from the packet and toyed with it while she watched Bruno.

"So Bellini is going to do it, and David's going to get the blame. This is what is going to happen, Bruno. I want you to know all the details. Nurse Fleming is going away on Friday until Tuesday morning. On Friday evening, as soon as Maria has gone home, Bellini will come to the villa. I shall be in the boathouse. David will be working on the car. I'll make sure he has a job to do so hp is near the house. You and Valeria will be alone."

She leaned forward.

"I want you to imagine the scene, Bruno. Bellini will surprise Valeria before she can cry out. He'll probably break her neck. He may have to do it in this room. It depends if he can catch her before she cries out. I hope he does do it in here, Bruno; the shock may kill you and save me a lot of trouble. He will leave as soon as he is sure she is dead. I shall then come up and find Valeria and call the police. They will suspect David. They'll know for certain when they find out who he is. Then in a couple of days you will be found dead, Bruno. Dr. Perelli will assume delayed shock has killed you."

She got up and walked over to a chair and picked up a cushion.

"Have you ever thought how easy it would be for me to finish you, Bruno?" she asked, coming over to the bed. "All I would have to do is to put this cushion over your face and hold it there. You wouldn't last long, would you?"

She bent over him, the cushion hovering within a few inches of his white, set face.

"It would be so easy. I'm so tempted to do it now, but that would be stupid. Valeria first, then you next."

She tossed the cushion back into the chair.

"Not quite so calm now, are you? Think about it. Only four more days, and there's nothing you can do about it. You can't tell anyone; you can't warn Valeria, and you can't do a damn' thing about it! But you'll be able to see the thing happen. You'll see Nurse Fleming go off for the week-end. You'll hear me tell David to work on the car. You'll hear me tell Valeria that I'm going down to the boathouse to enjoy a little swing music on the radiogram that you can't bear to hear. You'll see Maria go home. You'll lie there with Valeria sitting beside you, knowing Bellini is coming, and you won't be able to warn her. You'll see Bellini creep in. You'll see him put his hands on her throat, and I hope you'll suffer!"

She leaned over him, her voice suddenly hoarse with vicious fury.

"I've waited four years for this, and I'm going to enjoy every second of it, starting from now!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

I STOOD on the hot platform feeling thoroughly jaded as I waited for the Paris train to arrive. I had had only an hour or so of sleep. The conversation I had overheard last night haunted me.

When I had gone up to the villa to lift Bruno, I had been shocked to see such a change in him. He looked so ill I wanted to send for Dr. Perelli, but Laura, who didn't leave me alone with him for a moment, wouldn't hear of it.

"He's being stupid about Valeria," she said impatiently. "Please don't meddle with what doesn't concern you, David. He'll be all right when she arrives,"

"But he's ill I tell you!"

"Don't fuss," she said sharply. "Dr. Perelli's coming to lunch. He can see him then."

The look Bruno gave me as I lifted him told me he believed Laura's story about me, and I was glad to get out of the sick-room.

He must have spent a hellish night by himself, knowing there Was nothing he could do to stop Laura carrying out her sadistic and murderous plan. It was a wonder the poor devil hadn't gone out of his mind.

As I paced up and down the platform I thought how lucky I had been to overhear her plan. I was now forewarned and prepared. I had had a narrow escape, but now I knew what she planned to do, I could put a stop to her scheme easily enough.

She relied on my being at the villa for the scheme to operate at all. But I was going to take good care not to be at the villa on Friday night. If I wasn't there she wouldn't dare go ahead. Some time on Thursday evening, when it would be too late for her to organize another plan, but not too late for her to warn Bellini that her scheme had flopped, I would tell her I was going to be in Milan on Friday night.

No matter what happened I was determined to leave the villa for good on Friday morning. If she threatened to give me away to the police, I would threaten to give her away to Perelli. Thinking about it, I was satisfied this was stalemate, and I would make her realize it.

A white finger of smoke against the blue sky interrupted my

thoughts. The train came into sight round the bend. I moved over to the entrance to the station and took up a position where I would have a good view of the passengers as they came out.

I had no idea what Valeria Fancino looked like, and I tried hopelessly to pick her out from the crowd of passengers as they began to swarm into the station yard.

"It's David, isn't it?"

I turned sharply.

A girl stood before me, looking up at me.

She was young and dark and straight-shouldered. She was pretty too, small-featured with big brown sparkling eyes. She made an irresistibly attractive picture as she smiled up at me.

"Why, sure," I said, startled. "How did you know?"

She laughed.

"Oh, Maria sends me all the gossip. She said you were tall, dark and handsome, and an American. How's Bruno?"

"He's looking forward to seeing you," I said cautiously.

"I should never have left him. Well, I'm back now, thank goodness, and I won't leave him again."

I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Her bubbling energy, her fresh young beauty and her natural unspoilt manner hypnotized me.

"Have I a smut on my nose or something?" she asked, laughing. "You're staring at me as if I were something out of a zoo."

I felt myself turn hot.

"Excuse me, signorina. Have you much luggage?"

"Masses of it, I'm afraid." She waved towards two sweating porters who were struggling with a heap of luggage. "They're supposed to be looking after it."

"I'll take care of it," 1 said. "Will you wait in the cab over there? I won't keep you long."

While I was supervising the loading of her luggage into another cab, I thought of the conversation I had listened to last night. This was the girl Laura coldbloodedly planned to murder! Up to now she had been just a name to me. I hadn't even considered her when I had stood in the shadows listening to Laura's ruthless plan. I had been shocked by what I had heard, but not because Laura was going to murder this girl, but rather because she planned to implicate me in her scheme.

As we drove down to the harbour, surrounded by luggage, she in one cab and I in another, I realized I couldn't possibly leave a girl like this to stand up alone against Laura and Bellini. Up to this moment I had been thinking only of myself. Now, I realized that upsetting Laura's plan this time wouldn't mean that she would give up the plan. I would save myself from getting involved, but Valeria would still be in danger. Sooner or later Laura would try again. She wouldn't give up easily. Thinking about it, I knew I had a problem on my hands; a problem that had to be solved.

We reached the harbour. While the two cabmen and I got the luggage on board, Valeria stood in the shade and watched us. When I had got the last piece on board and had paid off the cabmen, she came down to the boat.

"Thank you so much," she said as I helped her into the boat. "I don't know what I should have done without you. May I handle her? I can see how beautifully you keep her. I'm really quite good with her. At least, Bruno always said so."

"Go ahead."

I took the seat just behind her.

She manoeuvred the boat out of the harbour like a veteran, opened up the engine, and sent the boat shooting across the Lago.

"It's wonderful to be back," she said, glancing over her shoulder at me. "Isn't this a lovely spot? I think it's the most beautiful place in the world."

"Well, it's one of them," I returned. "I'll be sorry to leave it."

And as I said this I realized I should be still more sorry to leave now she had arrived. "

"But you aren't going away, are you?"

"Yes. I'm leaving on Monday. Signora Fancino is looking for someone to take my place."

"Do you want to leave?"

"Not exactly, but I have other work to do."

"But must you go? Maria tells me you have been reading to Bruno, and have done him a lot of good."

I thought of the way Bruno had looked at me this morning. I might have done him some good during the past days, but I wasn't going to do him any good now.

"I want to get on with my book."

"Oh." She showed her disappointment. "I'm sorry. I was hoping to hear about your book. I know quite a lot about cathedrals myself. I used to go around with Bruno when he was working for the Minister of Fine Arts."

"That's the way it is," I said, and changing the subject, asked about her stay in Paris.

She talked gaily all the way across the Lago, and when we edged into the harbour I was sorry the trip was over.

"How on earth are you going to get all this luggage up to the villa?" she asked as she jumped from the boat on to the harbour wall.

"I'll fix it. I'll take the boat further upshore and borrow Bicci's truck. He'll give me a hand."

"Oh, Bicci! Is he still in the land of the living? I used to be his favourite woman years ago," she said, laughing. 'Tell him I'll come down as soon as I can and pay him my respects. Thank you for meeting me, and for looking after my luggage."

I watched her run up the harbour steps, her short skirts

billowing out in the breeze, her long, slim legs bounding from step to step, and I drew in a long, slow breath.

She remained a vivid picture in my mind as I reversed the boat out of the harbour and headed upshore.

I had just finished manhandling Valeria's luggage and was returning to the truck when I saw Dr. Perelli coming towards me.

"What's been happening since last I was here?" he demanded, his black beady eyes searching my face.

"Nothing unusual, signore," 1 said.

"You saw the state signor Fancino was in this morning?"

"Signora Fancino said he was over-excited at the thought of seeing his daughter again."

"Rubbish! Something has happened. He is worried almost out of his mind. You can see that, can't you?"

"I thought he looked depressed," I said cautiously.

"That's scarcely the right word. He had made repeated attempts to convey something to me, and I'm sure he had had a great shock."

"Perhaps the excitement——"

"Nonsense! This is much more than excitement. Well, if you don't know anything about it, there's no use talking about it." Fie got into his car and started the engine. "I shall be in tomorrow. He is not to be disturbed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, signore."

"You're quite sure you don't know what has upset him?"

"I'm quite sure."

He gave me a long, suspicious stare, then engaged gear and drove away.

I returned to the villa, my mind busy. As I reached the front door, Laura appeared.

"Dr. Perelli seems anxious about Bruno," she said, and I could see she was uneasy. "I think he's making a fuss about nothing, but he's left instructions that Bruno must have complete rest and quiet. Did he tell you?"

"Yes."

"It's unfortunate for Valeria, but there it is. I've asked her to go to Pallanza this afternoon. There are some things I want. You had better go with her. I don't want her to go alone."

I remembered what she had said to Bellini last night.

We can't do it before Friday. We can't afford to make mistakes. Besides, David must have time to get to know her. That's more important than anything.

Obviously she didn't intend to waste any time.

"M right," I said. "Will you be coming?"

"No, David. I have other things to do." She gave me an inquisitive stare. "What do you think of Valeria?"

"What is there to think?"

"Don't you find she's pretty?"

"I suppose she is."

Her eyes hardened.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic,. David. I thought all American men fell for young and pretty girls."

"Did you? That's not very sound reasoning. You might just as well say that all American women fall for cigar-smoking thugs, but I assure you they don't."

I walked past her, and up the path to the truck.

I had hoped to tell Bruno I had overheard Laura talking to him last night, and to assure him nothing was going to happen to Valeria on Friday. But now it didn't look as if I would get the opportunity of being alone with him.

I knew how he must be suffering, but it would be too dangerous to insist on seeing him alone. Whatever happened, I mustn't give Laura any idea that I knew what she was planning to do.

After lunch I did make an attempt to see him, but I was immediately sent about my business by Nurse Fleming.

Worried and uneasy, I went down the harbour steps to the boat.

Valeria was waiting for me. Her face was clouded and unhappy.

"What can be the matter with Bruno?" she asked as I got into the boat. "He looks dreadful. Laura says it's because he's over-excited at seeing me again, but I just don't believe it."

"It doesn't seem likely."

"Now Nurse won't let me see him. It's too bad. I'm sure I could , brighten him up."

"It's not Nurse Fleming's fault," I reminded her. "Dr. Perelli tells me your father must have complete rest and quiet."

"Do you think Laura knows something about this?"

"I have no idea. Let's forget it, shall we?"

"I don't want to forget it!" she said sharply. "I think she's upset Bruno. You've been here a week now. You must have seen she doesn't give a damn about him. She never has cared. I think she's at the bottom of this relapse of his."

"Aren't you rather jumping to conclusions?"

She faced me, her chin tilted and her eyes determined.

"It wouldn't surprise me if you knew more about this than you make out!"

"Well, I don't," I said. "It's no use getting worked up about it. You won't help him, and you'll only make yourself miserable. Come on, let's go. Do you want to handle her?"

"No, I don't think I will. You do it."

As I reversed the boat out of the harbour, she went on, "David, if you know anything about this, you would tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would," I said. "Relax, will you?"

I opened the engine up and sent the boat shooting through the water towards Pallanza.

We spent some time wandering through the narrow streets of the town. When Valeria had bought the various things Laura wanted, we went down to the harbour.

Time passed quickly in her company. I found her easy to talk to, and we both had similar viewpoints on many things.

We sat in the shade, and she asked me about my book. Once launched on that subject, answering her questions, and discussing the various cathedrals and works of art we both knew, sent the hands of my wrist-watch whizzing round.

"Do you realize the time?" she said suddenly, jumping to her feet. "It's nearly seven, and Bruno will be waiting to go to bed."

"It won't take us long to get back," I said, and we both ran down to the boat.

We got back in twenty minutes, and she thanked me for giving her such an enjoyable afternoon.

"Don't thank me," I said, smiling at her. "I enjoyed it myself."

Both Laura and Nurse Fleming remained in the room when I lifted Bruno from the chair to the bed.

I had an impression that he was shrinking from my touch as I lifted him. It was an unnerving experience to know I now excited fear in him.

His face was grey and drawn, and his eyes sunken. It was plain to see his mind was in a turmoil, and his suffering acute.

Nurse Fleming bustled me out of the room as soon as I had put him on the bed, and Laura followed me out.

"He is going to remain in bed tomorrow. Don't come up in the morning. If you want to make yourself useful take Valeria off my hands. I don't want her to keep coming in and out. She only upsets Bruno. Take her out for the day: to Milan if you like."

I looked at her.

"You're suddenly very concerned about Bruno's health, aren't you?"

"I'll tell Valeria to be ready at half past nine tomorrow morning. You can have the car," and she went back into Bruno's room, shutting the door in my face.

The rest of the evening, until I went to bed, I spent wrestling with my new-found problem: how to make Valeria safe, and yet keep out of trouble myself.

The obvious solution would be to go to Perelli, but I didn't trust him not to give me away.

One false move on my part and I would have the police aiter me. The situation was dangerous and tricky, and although I racked my brains for a way out, I couldn't think of one that would make Valeria safe and yet not involve me in a man-hunt once more.

I had only three more days to decide what to do.

Finally, just before I fell asleep, I decided to carry out my original plan to be away from the villa on Friday night, and hope that Bellini would get tired of waiting and take himself off. Then I would have to think of some way of neutralizing Laura permanently.

I was waiting at the garage the following morning at half past nine when Valeria joined me.

"Laura says I'm to go to Milan with you," she said, frowning. "Do you want to go?"

"If you want to."

"Well, I do, but I don't like being treated like a child. She practically ordered me to go. For two pins I'd stay right here just to show her I won't take orders from her."

"If you want to go, let's go," I said, smiling at her determined expression.

"I must be back in time to see Dr. Perelli when he comes. He said he would be in at lunch-time."

"Then that settles it. We wouldn't have time to go to Milan and get back again by lunch-time. Suppose we go over to Stresa for the morning and do Milan tomorrow?"

We agreed to do that.

We spent a very pleasant morning in Stresa, looking at the shops and watching the tourists embark on the *vaporetto* for a visit to Pallanza.

Valeria asked me about the fighting in Southern Italy, and I told her about some of the things I had seen and done, and about the liberation of Rome.

Conversation came easily, and I found her a delightful companion. As before, time slipped away quickly, and we got back only just in time to catch Perelli as he was leaving.

He looked thoughtful as we came up to him.

"How is he, doctor?" Valeria asked anxiously.

"Much the same," he returned. "He's had a severe shock, and something is preying on his mind. I wish I could find out what it is. However, I've given him a sedative, and he should sleep most of the time. I don't want anyone to disturb him. I've told Laura to keep away from him, and you must too. Nurse Fleming can do all that's necessary. She won't be going away this week-end. It's probable, after a good rest, he'll begin to make progress again, but until he does, he mustn't have visitors."

I immediately wondered how Laura had reacted to this news. Her plan would have to be postponed if Nurse Fleming wasn't going away, and she must be furious with herself for so upsetting Bruno.

And at the same time I was relieved to think I now had time to work out a plan to make Valeria permanently safe.

Perelli glanced at me.

"I heard you intend to leave this Monday. Is that right?"

"Well, yes," I said, suddenly reluctant to be final about my leaving. "I did think of going."

"I would be glad if you would stay on another week. If he improves I shall want him to get some sunshine, and that'll mean lifting him again. I don't want him to have a stranger to handle him until he gets a little stronger. Do you think you could stay on another week?"

I hesitated.

"Please stay," Valeria said. "I know Bruno dislikes changes. It would help him if you did stay. Will you?"

"Well, yes, I'll stay," I said, more willing than I sounded. "I'll be glad to."

Perelli nodded.

"There won't be much for you to do this week, but next week I hope to get him over this setback, and it might be an idea to get him down into the garden. What he really needs is a complete change of scene. I'm tempted to move him to the Regina at Stresa for a week if he makes reasonable progress."

"That's a wonderful idea," Valeria said enthusiastically. "He isn't in danger, is he, doctor?"

Perelli shook his head.

"Oh, no. His heart's sound enough, but he's had a bad shock. You mustn't worry about him. Let him rest. In the meantime, you get around and enjoy yourself. I'd tell you if there was something really to worry about."

He nodded to me and gave Valeria an affectionate pat on her arm.

"Have a good time and stop worrying," he said, and went off in his car.

Valeria turned to me, her eyes sparkling.

"That's good news, isn't it?" she said. "And I can't thank you enough for staying on."

"I'm glad to be of some use."

"Now look; if I can't do anything for him, there's no point in us sticking around the house. Let's go over to the *Isolt Bella* this afternoon and look at the gardens. Then tomorrow we'll go to Milan. We might stay for lunch and make a day of it."

"I don't know about that. I'm here to work. You'd better ask signora Fancino."

"Oh, she won't mind. Shall we go?"

"If she agrees, it's okay with me."

After lunch, as I was leaving the kitchen, Laura called to me.

She was pale, and there was a drawn, bleak look in her eyes.

I could imagine how she was feeling. Bellini had been difficult about the delay when I had listened-in to their conversation. Now there was to be more delay she was likely to have serious trouble with him, and from her expression she was worried and furious.

"Did Perelli ask you to stay on?" she said curtly.

"Yes. Was it your idea?"

"Of course not. I'm not anxious for you to stay, David. I think it would be better for you to go."

"Okay, if that's the way you feel. You'd better tell Perelli. It suits me to go on Monday. I only put off going because he asked me to."

She gave me a hard, shrewd look.

"Since he had arranged for you to stay, then you'd better stay. I'm glad to hear it was Dr. Perelli who persuaded you. I had an idea you were getting infatuated with Valeria."

I restained my temper with difficulty.

"Is that all you want to say?"

"Not quite. Apparently Valeria wants to commandeer you. She seems to imagine I might have objections. I haven't. So go ahead and enjoy yourselves."

She turned away and walked with her slow, lazy stride along the verandah to her room.

During the next five days Valeria and I spent practically every hour of the day in each other's company.

We went to Milan, to Como and to Pavia. We took the boat up the Lago to Locarno. We climbed the Motterone, and had a picnic lunch on its summit, revelling in the fine panorama which extends over the plain and the whole of the chain of the Alps. We went out with the fishermen at night and caught trout. We bathed, we talked and we enjoyed ourselves.

To me it was a standing still of time; the stepping out of the sordid, turbulent stream of life in which I had been drifting on to a bank of peace and happiness. There had never been a period in my life that I had enjoyed more.

I don't know the exact moment when I fell in love with Valeria. It could easily have been when I had first met her; when she had seemed to me the embodiment of youth, beauty, innocence and joyous living, when the sight of her had hit me like a physical blow.

But I wasn't aware I was in love with her until one afternoon when we were sitting under the trees on the little, secluded beach at Cerro I happened to look up and meet her eyes, and we looked at each other.

I knew then, and I knew I meant something to her, for she looked quickly away and flushed.

I sat there, silent, nursing this discovery which frightened me.

It was the kind of love I had never experienced before. It was nothing to be compared to the mad, physical infatuation I had felt for Laura. It was altogether on a different plane. But I knew it was a hopeless love. I was thirteen years older than she. I had no

money. I was wanted by the police. I had no future in front of me.

"David . . ." Valeria began and stopped.

"Yes?" I said, not looking at her.

"You puzzle me. Why are you living like this in Italy? Oh, I know your book is a reason, but couldn't you find something better to do than what you are doing?"

"For the love of Mike, don't start worrying about me," I said with an attempt to laugh. "I can look after myself."

"Can you? You don't seem to be making much of a job of it."

"Nonsense! I'm doing fine."

"Are you really going when Bruno gets better?"

"Yes. I've got to go. I want to finish my book."

She sat for a long moment, staring across the Lago.

"It's going to be very dull here without you," she said at last.

I felt my mouth turn dry.

"You'll be all right. You'll soon find things to do."

She looked at me.

"You won't change your mind and stay?"

"You said just now I should be doing something to better myself," I said. "Well, that's what I'm going to do. I have to go, Valeria."

"But you don't have to go if you don't want to, David. You could take over Bruno's work."

"What work?" I asked sharply.

"Before Bruno met with his accident, he was in charge of the work of restoring war-damaged churches in Lombardy. The work is being carried on now by the department, but no one has bothered to do anything about his notes and material on the damage. I know he would be so pleased if you would get them into some sort of shape. Bruno would pay you, of course, and it would give him such an interest to know what you were doing."

Here was a temptation, but I knew it would be useless even to think about it.

"No, I'm sorry, it can't be done. As soon as I've finished my own notes I want to go home."

She got to her feet.

"Yes, I should have thought about that. Well, all right, David, if you want to go home . . ."

We both were unusually silent as we walked back to the villa, and for the first time since we had met, conversation lagged.

During those five days Bruno had made no progress. The following day, which was Wednesday, Dr. Perelli was expected. f

I was helping Guilio, the gardener, to cut up logs for the winter fires when Perelli arrived. I saw him go into Bruno's room. He was in there a long time, over an hour, and when he came out he looked thoughtful, but satisfied.

I saw him have a long talk to Valeria, then he looked over to me and beckoned.

As I came towards him, he left Valeria and joined me.

"I want to talk to you," he said abruptly. "Come with me to the car."

Puzzled at his abruptness, I followed him.

When we reached the car, he said, "First of all, I'm glad to tell you signor Fancino's much better. He has come out of his sleep, the rest has done him a lot of good, and I think he will now make progress."

- "That's good news," I said. "I'm glad."

"Yes. If he continues to make progress today, we'll move him into the sunshine tomorrow. I've told Valeria she can sit with him this afternoon. Nurse is anxious to get away for the week-end. Her sister in Milan isn't well, and I think if he continues to go on as he's going on, she can go."

Immediately my heart sank. I knew that with Nurse Fleming out of the way, Laura would most probably start her plan into operation again.

"I see," I said.

"Nurse Fleming tells me Valeria and you have been going about a lot together," Perelli said, his beady eyes on my face.

"I suppose we have," I returned. "Signora Fancino asked me to take signorina Valeria off her hands."

"Yes, so I understand. While signor Fancino is unable to supervise his affairs I am Valeria's guardian," Perelli said. "I don't think it is wise for her to be so much in your company, Chisholm. I have nothing against you, but she is a young and impressionable girl. I don't want her to become fond of you. She will be much more with her father now, but when she has some spare time I should be glad if you would make it your business to avoid seeing her."

I felt the blood rising to my face.

"In that case, doctor," I said curtly, "you had better make some arrangements for her amusement. Signora Fancino isn't much company for her, nor is Nurse Fleming."

He smiled.

"Don't get angry, Chisholm. You know as well as I do a young girl may get sentimental about a man as good-looking as you if she is continually in his company. I don't forbid you to see her. I'm asking you to see she doesn't make a fool of herself. I think your suggestion is a good one, and I'll see what I can do."

"All right," I said. "I'll watch it."

"Thank you. You still want to leave next Monday?"

"Yes."

"Then I will find someone to take your place. I have already told signora Fancino that I will undertake to find a man. I will

have no difficulty. You can make arrangements to leave definitely on Monday."

"Thank you," I said.

He nodded and got into his car.

"I haven't been offensive to you, Chisholm?" he asked, looking up at me through the window.

"No, of course not. I would have said the same thing in your place."

"Yes. I thought you were a sensible fellow," he returned, and smiled. "I see I haven't made a mistake."

He set the car in motion.

I stood for some moments staring after the car, then I went slowly along the path to the garden.

Valeria came running down from the verandah and joined me. Her face was flushed and her eyes were angry.

"I want to talk to you, David," she said. "Please come down to the harbour."

"I'm busy just now," I said, avoiding her eyes. "I have to help Guilio."

"I want to talk to you," she repeated. "Will you please come with me? This is important, David."

"All right."

I followed her down the steps to the harbour. When we reached the screen of willow trees, she turned to face me.

"What did Dr. Perelli say to you just now?"

"He told me your father is a lot better. It's good news, isn't it?"

"He said something else, didn't he? He told you we weren't to see each other."

I smiled at her angry, anxious face.

"He's quite right, you know, Valeria, We've forgotten **I**'m the hired hand around here. Peopled talk. Nurse Fleming is scandalized."

"How dare she interfere!" Valeria exclaimed. "And he has no business to interfere either!"

"But he has. He's your guardian, and you're still only a kid."

"I'm nothing of the kind! David! You don't want us not to meet, do you?"

"In my position I obey orders."

"But that doesn't answer my question."

"It's been fun going around with you," I said slowly. "I've enjoyed your company, but I'm not going against Dr. Perelli's orders."

"But that's not answering my question! Don't hedge, David. This is too important to be stupid about. I don't want you to go away. I don't want you not to see me. I love you, David."

"You're not to say that!"

She moved close to me.

"You love me too, don't you?"

I had her in my arms before I knew what I was doing.

"Oh, David, darling," she said, her arms going round my neck.

Then I realized what was happening, and I tried to push her away, but she held on.

"Don't, David."

"But we can't do this. We just can't do it!"

"You do care, don't you?"

"All right, I care, but we can't do anything about it. What would your father think?"

"Don't be silly, David. This is between you and me. The moment I saw you in the sun, looking so puzzled, trying to find me, I . .. "

"Stop it!" I said fiercely, and forcibly pushed her from me.

She was saying practically the same thing that Laura had said in that dirty, sordid room in which we had made love.

"David!"

"It's no good! We're miles apart in our lives, in our ages, in everything. It's no good."

"Of course it's all right," she said, smiling up at me. "I'll talk to Bruno. He'll understand. He likes you. He'll give you that job I told you about. You can stay heire. You can get on with your book too. Oh, darling, can't you see it's all right?"

"It isn't all right, Valeria. You don't know how sorry I am about this, but it just won't work. You don't know anything about me, and anyway, I'm too damned old for you. I'm not going to argue about it. It's got to stop right now!"

"Valeria!"

Laura's voice came down the steps.

"Valeria! Are you there?"

"Go to her," I said, giving her a little push. "Don't let her find us together."

"I'm not going to give you up, David," Valeria said fiercely. "I know you love me, and I love you. I'm not going to let you do anything stupid."

She turned and ran up the harbour steps.

I had the whole afternoon ahead of me. I decided to take Bicci's boat and go somewhere where I wouldn't be disturbed and consider what I was going to do.

As I was endeavouring to start the outboard engine, I heard the motor-boat start up in the boathouse. A moment later the big boat came out from under the screen of willow trees and headed across the Lago towards Stresa.

Laura was sitting at the wheel.

I sat for a long moment watching her. The nightmare was going to start all over again.

I yanked savagely at the starting-rope and the outboard engine spluttered into life. I went after Laura.

Already her boat was a small dot ahead of me. I could guess where she was going, but I wanted to be absolutely sure that she was meeting Bellini.

I reached the *Pescatori* after a little less than an hour's run. As I went past, I spotted the motor-boat moored by the *Albergo's* landing-stage.

I kept on, satisfied now that she was going ahead with her plan. When I reached the harbour at Stresa I tied up the boat and climbed up to the promenade.

I knew now that I had to decide what to do. I couldn't put it off any longer.

I walked slowly along in the hot sunshine until I reached the flower gardens opposite the Regina Palace Hotel, then I sat down, lit a cigarette and considered what best to do.

Going away on Friday would only postpone trouble for Valeria. Besides, I couldn't leave Valeria alone in the villa now, not knowing if Laura might spring a surprise, and trick Bellini into a murder without me to take the consequences.

Although I had known all along that unless I did something drastic I should only be postponing the danger, I had funked facing up to the issue.

But at the back of my mind I knew there was only one solution; there could be no other, and so far I had refused to admit it. Up to now I wouldn't even let it get as far as a concrete thought.

The situation as I saw it was this: Valeria was in love with me. I was in love with her. There was a job waiting for me; a job I could do and enjoy. There was even a remote possibility that Bruno might be persuaded to let me marry Valeria.

All this could happen if it were not for Laura. A word from her would get me arrested and possibly hanged for a murder I hadn't committed. More important still, she was planning to murder Valeria.

Valeria's safety and happiness, my safety and happiness, were in Laura's hands.

So long as Laura remained alive, neither Valeria nor I was safe, but if Laura happened to die, the whole picture would change to our advantage.

There it was at last, out into my mind as a concrete thought, a thought I had been nursing at the back of my mind for the past two days.

If Laura happened to die . . .

I flung the cigarette from me and stood up.

This was crazy thinking! I told myself. I was getting caught up in this atmosphere of murder. It was easy to say to oneself, 'If Laura happened to die, we would be safe.' Laura wasn't going to die.

Unless . . .

I walked slowly over to the rail that guarded the promenade and leaned against it, looking across the Lago at the red roofs and white houses of Arolo.

She was planning to murder Valeria; why shouldn't I plan to murder her? What right had she to live? It would be poetic justice.

My heart was hammering against my side, and my mouth was dry. I tried to push the thought from my mind, but I knew now it was the only solution. If I wasn't to lose Valeria, Laura had to go.

I had had a feeling ever since Laura had tried to persuade me to get rid of Bruno that it would be easy to drift into murder. The atmosphere of the villa, Laura's ruthlessness, my own circumstances, my love for Valeria were all ingredients for murder.

But how to do it in safety? Was there some way in which I could implicate Bellini? Laura was going to implicate me, why couldn't I implicate Bellini? Again it would be poetic justice.

Time was running out. I had only two clear days to perfect a plan.

I lit another cigarette, and I was surprised to see how steady my hand was. My heart-beat was now back to normal. I was aware only of feeling cold in spite of the hot sun. I walked back to the seat and sat down.

I had to be very careful. Every murderer was supposed to make at least one mistake. I had to be sure I made no mistakes. Too much depended on the issue to make the smallest slip.

First, the motive.

There had to be a strong motive which would point to Bellini.

Already he was a suspect. He had a prison record and a reputation for violence. The police wouldn't be difficult to convince, provided I supplied them with a good motive.

What was it to be?

Laura's pearls.

She had got them back from Stanito now, and she had worn them once or twice. It should be simple enough for me to get them from her room if she wasn't wearing them on Friday night.

Bellini had worked at the villa. He would know about the pearls. What would be more obvious than that he should decide to steal them, and in stealing them, kill Laura?

I felt a little trickle of cold sweat run down my face, and I wiped it impatiently away.

Laura had arranged to meet Bellini at the boathouse at nine o'clock on Friday evening.

I was supposed to be working on the car in the garage.

Valeria would be sitting with Bruno.

A few minutes before nine I would go down to the boathouse and let myself in with the key she had given me.

When Laura arrived I would hit her over the head, and then go down to the harbour and wait for Bellini to come.

I should have to be very careful with Bellini. But there was plenty of cover down there, and it would be dark. A blow on the head with a sandbag would leave no bruise. I would hit him as he was stepping from the boat. Then I would put the pearls in his pocket and tip him into the Lago. I would overturn his boat, and return to the garage.

With any luck the police would think, in his haste to get away, Bellini had upset the boat and had been drowned.

At first glance the plan seemed a good one.

There were the obvious snags.

Suppose Bellini arrived first?

Suppose they arrived together?

I would have to consider alternative ideas, but the main principle seemed sound.

I sat for a long time in the hot sunshine, going through the plan step by step, weighing the risks, hunting for the likely mistakes, considering every possiblity.

And during that time I learned that murder can be a fascinating subject. I was no longer sickened by the idea;, no longer afraid. It seemed to me, as I sat there, staring with sightless eyes across the Lago, that • I was now only one step away from a happiness which, this morning, had seemed an impossibility.

CHAPTER NINE

AROUND four o'clock I left the Stresa waterfront and walked up to the station to catch the four-forty to Milan.

I was careful to mix with a crowd of tourists who were queueing up for tickets, and I went through the barrier with them.

It was essential I shouldn't be singled out nor give any cause to be recognized. My trip to Milan had to be as secret as possible.

I got into a crowded third-class compartment, and sat between a fat woman who nursed a bundle on her knees and a tall, thin man in black who could have been a commercial traveller.

No one paid any attention to me, and as the train rattled along the line, I wondered how these people in this crowded compartment would react if they knew what was going on in my mind.

I wouldn't have believed it possible, even a day ago, that I could plan to murder two people, and yet experience no feeling of hesitation, fear nor horror of what I was going to do.

Once I had accepted the fact that this was the only solution, I was now as cold-blooded and as ruthless as Laura had been the night she had tried to persuade me to drop Bruno.

My only concern was not to make a mistake, and even that didn't worry me greatly.

During the hour and a half I had spent on the Stresa waterfront considering my plan, I realized that both Laura and Bellini were unconsciously playing into my hands.

I remembered Laura telling Bruno that she would go down to the boathouse to play swing music on the radiogram. This would be in my favour for the music would cover any sound she might make if I couldn't reach her fast enough to stop her crying out.

Bellini, as he rowed across the Lago, would be expecting to see a light on in the boathouse, so I wouldn't have to work in the dark.

The only serious difficulty I could foresee was if either of them were late or if they both arrived together, but I decided this was unlikely.

To establish a reasonable alibi, Laura would leave the villa some time before nine o'clock. She would probably blast the radiogram so that Valeria and Bruno would know she was in the boathouse. The noise would also serve to cover any sound Bellini might make as he approached the villa. On a still night the sound of the music would travel far.

But I had to take every precaution. Bellini was immensely powerful. I knew I wouldn't stand a hope against him if it came to a struggle. I had to have a gun. I had no intention of using it, but if he didn't give me an opportunity to hit him with the sandbag. I had to have a gun to control him.

I knew it was dangerous to get a gun, but as I had to have one, I finally decided to make use of Torrchi. He had a gun, and I planned to steal it.

Although Torrchi had never told me so, I knew he was a member of the Mafia. Giuseppe in a moment of drunkenness had told me he was. If I had to shoot Bellini I would leave the gun near his body. The police would trace the gun to Torrchi.

I was pretty sure that the police suspected Bellini of Luigi Gallio's murder. The police would also know that Luigi was a member of the Mafia. They would assume that as Bellini was leaving the boathouse after stealing the pearls he had run into Torrchi, who had traced him to the Lago, and Torrchi had shot him. If Torrchi had a foolproof alibi for that night, and I hoped he would have, then I hoped the police would assume that Torrchi had given orders to another memeber of the Society to kill Bellini, and had supplied him with the gun.

I had no intention of implicating Torrchi if I could help it, but as he had betrayed me to Laura, I felt no compunction in using him if I needed him.

I didn't want to shoot Bellini, but if he proved difficult to handle, I might be forced to do so. In which case I had now an alternative plan.

I hadn't spent that long period, sitting on the Stresa waterfront, for nothing. I had gone over the plan again and again with minute thoroughness, and I now felt confident that I had taken care of every contingency.

I reached Torrchi's apartment house around six o'clock. There was a telephone booth practically opposite, and I went in and called his number.

I listened to the burr-burr-burr for some minutes, then, satisfied that there was no one in the apartment, I crossed the road and went up the four flights of stairs.

I met only an elderly woman on the third-floor landing, who glanced at me indifferently as she opened her front door. I passed her and mounted to the fourth floor.

I knocked on Torrchi's door and waited.

Nothing happened.

Quietly I pushed open the letter-box flap, slipped my fingers in and took out the front-door key.

Simona was always losing her key, and I knew Torrchi kept a spare key in the letter-box.

I unlocked the door, stepped into the sitting-room, closed and locked the door after me. I returned the key to the letter-box.

Then I began a hurried, but careful search for the gun.

I found it eventually under a pile of Simona's underclothes in a drawer in the bedroom.

The gun was a Colt .38 automatic. I checked it to see if it was loaded. It had four bullets in the magazine and one in the breech. I dropped it into my pocket, and as I did so I heard the letter-box flap click back.

I moved quickly into the sitting-room, my heart hammering against my side, and stepped into the window recess, behind the window curtains that were already drawn.

I had scarcely adjusted the curtains when the front door opened.

"I keep telling you he won't be back until nine o'clock," Simona said impatiently as she walked into the room. "But if you're scared you can go home. Don't think I care."

"I'm not scared."

I recognized Umberto's voice.

I moved the curtain a fraction of an inch so I could see into the room.

Umberto was standing-with his back to me. Simona was smiling up at him, her dark little face animated, her eyes expectant.

"I want my present now," she said. "What are you going to give me?"

Reluctantly Umberto began to fumble in his trousers pocket.

"I don't know if it is safe," he said uneasily. "If Torrchi found us——"

"He won't be back until nine. How many more times do I have to tell you?" Simona said, exasperated. "He has gone to a meeting."

"Well, if you're sure. I can't afford more than a thousand lire."

Simona took his arm and pulled him into the bedroom.

"You must give me more than that," she said, her voice suddenly hard. "A thousand lire is nothing."

She closed the door.

I could hear Umberto protesting as I moved silently from my hiding-place, reached the front door, opened it and stepped into the passage.

I walked down the four flights of stairs to the street.

When I reached the Piazza Loreto I went into a haberdasher's shop and bought a pair of thin leather gloves. I took a little trouble in selecting them. The gloves I finally bought fitted me like a second skin.

Then I walked down Corso Buenos Aires until I came to an ironmonger's shop which desplayed a notice in the window:

Keys of every description cut while you wait.

I went in and gave the assistant the key of the boathouse that Laura had given me, and I asked him to make a duplicate.

I had to wait twenty minutes. Then the assistant came back and handed me the two keys. I paid him, and went into the street again.

The first move in my plan was now successfully completed. I had a gun, a pair of gloves and a spare key to the boathouse. I now needed a sandbag, but that wouldn't be difficult to make.

Walking quickly, I headed back to the railway-station.

I got back to my room around nine-fifteen. I had brought sandwiches and a flask of Chianti with me from Milan as I didn't want to go up to the villa. I was anxious to avoid seeing Valeria until my plans were complete.

I had supper, then lay on my bed and smoked until I heard Bicci and his wife come up to bed. I waited an hour, then I went silently downstairs to the garage. I found a small piece of sacking that would suit my purpose, also a box of sand in which Bicci did his small castings. I took some of the sand, some wire thread, and returned to my room. I made a sandbag. It was simple enough to make. Torrchi always carried one. He used to say it was the best settler of arguments he knew. I had often handled his, and I knew the right size and weight mine should be.

I sat for some time balancing the sandbag in my hand, my mind busy.

Tomorrow .. . then Friday.

I slept peacefully that night. For the first time since I had moved into this little room I didn't dream.

The following morning I went up to the villa.

Nurse Fleming was on the verandah as I came up the steps. She actually smiled at me.

"Is signor Bruno using his chair this morning?" I asked.

"Oh,, yes. He's had a splendid night, and seems much brighter. When I come back from my week-end, Dr. Perelli wants to move him to the Regina Palace for a complete change."

"When do you go, nurse?"

"Tomorrow morning."

I was puzzled by Bruno's surprising recovery. He must have known that as soon as Nurse Fleming left, Valeria would be in danger again. Then why had he made such a remarkable recovery?

The only possible explanation I could think of was that Laura had managed to convince him she had been lying, and she had no intention of harming Valeria. But had she seen him alone? As far as I knew she hadn't had the opportunity of talking to him.

"Has signora Fancino been with signor Bruno alone since he has been so bad?" I asked casually.

"Only for a few minutes on Tuesday when I went for a walk in the garden," Nurse Fleming returned, looking at me sharply. "Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking you'll be glad to have a little time off It's not much fun for you to be stuck indoors on such fine days."

"There are a lot of things people have to do that they don't like," she said tartly. "Now, come along. I can't stand here gossiping all day. I'm sure Mr. Fancino is waiting impatiently to be moved onto the verandah."

That must be the answer, I thought, as I followed her along the verandah. Laura had realized that until Bruno stopped worrying, Nurse Fleming wouldn't leave him, and her scheme couldn't go ahead. She must have managed to convince him she had been torturing him for nothing, and consequently Bruno now imagined he had nothing further to worry about.

As I entered the room, Bruno looked at me. His eyes were probing, but they were no longer afraid. And when I lifted him he didn't seem to shrink from me, and I concluded that Laura had also convinced him the story she had told him about me was also not true.

After I had put him on the chair, I said, "I am very glad to see you're so much better, signore. I hope you will continue to make progress."

"All right, Chisholm," Nurse Fleming said tartly. "I don't think we'll have any speeches this morning. Run along now. I have to wash the patient."

I smiled at Bruno, but I was a little uneasy. His usual friendly

look was missing, although his eyes weren't hostile. It **was as** if he wasn't sure of me now; as if I presented **a** puzzle to him.

On my way to the garden I ran into Laura.

I could see immediately that the strain was beginning to tell on her. Her face had a thin, bony look, and there were dark smudges under her eyes.

"Where were you last night?" she asked sharply. "I wanted you. I can't have you running off like this, David, without your telling me where you are going."

I smiled at her.

She meant nothing to me now. She had no charm for me any longer, and looking down at her, I wondered how I could have been such a fool as to have fallen in love with her.

"You're forgetting I'm not your servant any longer," I said. "I don't have to tell you where I am going. I'm only remaining here these few days to oblige Dr. Perelli."

Her eyes flashed angrily, but she controlled her temper.

"All right, David, if that's how you feel. Will you please give me the key to the boathouse? You forgot to return it."

I had been certain she would ask me for the key sooner or later, and that was why I had taken the precaution to have a duplicate made.

"Here it is," I said, taking it from my pocket. "I should have returned it before now, but it slipped my mind."

She took the key.

"Please don't forget Nurse Fleming is going away for the week-end. I don't want you to go off just when you think you will when she's not here."

My eyes studied her face, shifted to her forehead. I found myself thinking that was where I should have to hit her; a very hard blow with something heavy that would crush the bone. She would die quickly and without pain.

"David!"

I jerked my mind back to what she had been saying.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking of something else. Yes, of course, I shall be here."

She gave me a puzzled stare.

"That is all then, David."

I walked away from her.

I had to find a weapon with which to kill her. That was something I had overlooked. It would have to be something in the boathouse: something that Bellini would be likely to grab up and strike her with to stop her screaming.

A little after eleven o'clock I saw Laura drive away in the Alfa-Romeo, heading towards Sesto Calendo. As soon as the **car was** out of sight, **I** went down to the boathouse.

I unlocked the door to the apartment and went in, leaving the door ajar,

I stood looking round the room.

On the overmantel was a small bronze bust of Dante on a square pedestal. I crossed the room and lifted the bust by its head. It was heavy, but it had a good balance as I swung it in my hand.

It made an ideal weapon. The sharp corners of the pedestal would make a fatal wound, provided I hit hard enough.

I put the bust back where I had found it, and then looked for a likely hiding-place where I could wait for Laura if she happened to be late.

I went into the dressing-room. The big wardrobe would be an excellent place of concealment. I opened the doors, making certain they opened silently. There was plenty of room for me to stand in. I closed the doors, and moved back into the sitting-room.

As I entered, I saw Valeria standing in the doorway, looking at me, her eyes startled.

"Why, David, what are you doing here?"

Her unexpected appearance jolted me badly. I wondered how long she had been standing in the doorway. If she had seen me handling the Dante bust!

I stood staring at her, my brain frozen, my mind refusing to make words.

"What's the matter, David? Why are you looking like that?"

I pulled myself together with an effort, and smiled at her. It wasn't much of a smile, but it was a smile.

"You startled me out of my wits," I said, my voice husky. "I thought it was Laura."

"I'm sorry. You look so strange, David. Has anything happened?"

"Why, no. You just startled me."

She came over to me.

"Are you sure nothing has happened? When you came out of that room I scarcely recognized you. You—you frightened me, David."

"I didn't mean to," I said. "You really did startle me. I shouldn't be here, and I thought Laura had caught me. The door was open, and I was curious to see what the place was like. It's pretty good, isn't it?"

"I hate it," Valeria said, and shivered. "The atmosphere's horrible. Don't you feel it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Anyway, let's go downstairs. What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for you. I came down to the harbour, and when I didn't see you I came upstairs to see if Laura were here."

"She's gone to Milan, I think."

I followed her down the stairs, and we paused by the harbour wall.

"David, about yesterday . .."

"Sit down," I said, sitting on the harbour wall. I pulled her down beside me. "I've been thinking about yesterday. Did you really mean what you said?"

"Of course I did, David." She put her hand on mine. "I meant every word of it."

"And about that job?"

"Yes."

"You realize everything depends on your father—anyway, until you become of age?"

"I know, and besides, I wouldn't do anything to worry him, David. But I think I can persuade him to give you the job if you'll take it. Then when you are working here, it willl be easier to get him used to the idea that we love each other."

"Yes. Well, I'll take the job, Valeria, if he'll let me have it."

She looked quickly at me.

"David, something has happened, hasn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Yesterday you wouldn't consider taking it. You were so sure and determined. Why have you changed your mind?"

"I hadn't had time to think about it," I said, not looking at her. "Last night I realized I was being pigheaded and proud. I could see I was throwing away our happiness together."

"I don't want to be stupid about this, David, but I have a feeling something has happened to make you change your mind. You've changed too in yourself since last night. I don't know how to explain it, but you've become harder. There's a look about you . . ."

I knew I had changed. I knew that the moment I had decided to get rid of Laura and Bellini some powerful force had taken charge of me. It was as if I had opened the door in my mind and let in a stranger.

"Nonsense," I said, getting to my feet. "You're imagining it. Now listen, darling. Dr. Perelli doesn't want us to be together. We mustn't antagonize him. Nurse Fleming will tell him if you're away from the villa for long. He could stop my getting this job, so we must be careful. You go on back now."

While I was speaking, she looked at me with the same unsure, puzzled expression in her eyes that I had seen in Bruno's eyes.

"You do love me, David?"

I took her in my arms.

"More than anything in the world. It's all right, Valeria. There's nothing to worry about. I'm a little het-up naturally that I might lose you, but that's all."

"You're sure that's all?"

"Yes, of course. Now, go on up, darling, before you're missed. Don't say anything to Bruno about the job until he gets a little stronger. Saturday or even Sunday will be soon enough."

She kissed me and clung to me for a moment.

"You will be happy to stay, David?"

"I shall always be happy so long as I have you with me," I told her.

I watched her run up the harbour steps. Then I suddenly remembered that I had handled the Dante bust without gloves. My finger-prints would be on it!

As I went up the stairs to the apartment again I thought it was that kind of mistake that gave the average murderer away.

In the afternoon I went through my clothes and various belongings, and selecting only the essential things, I packed them in a small handbag.

I had to think of every contingency. If something unforeseen happened, and, in spite of all my careful thinking, my plan didn't succeed, I had to have a line of retreat.

If things went wrong, I intended to take the motor-boat and make a dash up the Lago to Brissago, the Swiss frontier town.

I was confident there was no boat on the Lago faster than this one, and if the police came after me I wouldn't have much difficulty in shaking them off.

I would leave the boat a mile or so from Brissago, and then, travelling over the hills, would take my chance in the darkness to get across the frontier. I would then make for Locarno, where I might remain for a day or two mingling with the tourists, and then double back through Como, and then on to Milan. From Milan I would go to Rome, where I was sure I could hide myself until the search for me had cooled off.

Fortunately I wasn't short of money. I had the seven thousand lire Laura had paid me, and three thousand I had saved.

I didn't anticipate anything going wrong, but I was determined not to neglect a single detail.

I took the bag down to the boathouse and concealed it under the boat's tarpaulin.

Then I ran the boat into the harbour and began to check over the engine. I had to be certain of a quick getaway in case of an emergency.

While I was working on the boat, I heard the sound of an outboard motor, and glancing up I saw a small boat heading towards me.

At the tiller was a heavily built man in an open-necked white shirt and flannel trousers. He cut off the engine and let the boat drift towards me.

I got out of the motor-boat and walked along the harbour wall, wondering what he wanted.

As the boat came closer I could see he was youngish, with a sun-reddened face and a heavy, aggressive jaw. He grinned amiably at me.

"Pardon me," he said, with a strong American accent, "is there anywhere around here where I can get some gasoline? I seem to be running low."

"There's a garage about two hundred yards from here," I told him. "See that willow tree? If you land there and walk up the shore you'll come to it."

"Thanks."

He leaned forward and grabbed hold of one of the mooring-rings on the harbour wall.

"You American?"

"Half and half," I said cautiously. "On vacation here?"

"That's right. My wife and I are staying at Stresa. Some spot, isn't it? What's that island over there?"

"The *I sola Bella.* It belongs to the Borromeo family. They've had it since 1650."

"Is that right?" He looked impressed. "I'd like to get a look at it. Can one go over the place?"

"Sure, but it will cost you a hundred and fifty lire. There's nothing free in Italy, you know."

He laughed.

"I guess that won't bust me."

"It's worth seeing for the terraced gardens alone, but there's also a fine picture-gallery that you might care to see."

"Sure. I'm nuts about pictures. Well, thanks, I'll get filled up with gas. and then go over and take a look. Much obliged,"

"You're welcome," I said.

"You'll pardon me, but haven't I seen you before?" he asked casually, looking up at me.

"I wouldn't know," I returned. "In Milan maybe."

He shook his head.

"I've never been to Milan. I had an idea I've seen you in the Army. I was at General Costain's headquarters at Bologna, way back in 1945."

If I had stepped on a snake I couldn't have reacted more violently. I knew I went white. I could feel the blood leave my face, and I must have jumped six inches.

But the boat had begun to drift away, and he leaned forward to grab at the mooring-ring. I was pretty certain he hadn't seen me jump.

"I wasn't in the Army," I said.

The words seemed to rattle in my dry mouth.

"Oh, well, I guess I'm thinking of someone else," he said. "You remind me of a sergeant who took the General on a sight-seeing trip." He laughed. "This sergeant stole the General's car and deserted. Can't say I blame him. The General was about the worst louse I've ever met in the Army, and I've met a few."

I didn't say anything: I couldn't.

"Funny how one remembers a thing like that," he went on,

chuckling. "Someone one sees starts the memory clicking. Wonderful thing—memory. That was six years ago, and I remember the commotion as if it happened yesterday." He let go of the mooring-ring. "Well, I mustn't keep you. Thanks a lot for your advice. I'll get over and take a look at that picture-gallery."

He waved to me, started up the outboard engine and swung the nose of the boat around to head towards Bicci's garage.

I stood looking after him, my mouth dry, the muscles in my legs fluttering and my heart pounding against my side.

After I had been over the boat I went up to my room and lay on the bed. I had planned to have a sleep, as I intended to keep watch on the villa during the night, but I found sleep didn't come.

I kept thinking about that American.

For six years I had lived in Italy, mixed with tourists, rubbed shoulders with hundreds of people in crowded Milan, and had never met anyone who had even given me a second glance.

Then suddenly, just when I had so much on my mind, this guy had to appear from nowhere and recognize me.

I felt cold sweat on my face as I lay in the semi-darkness. I had pulled the blind against the afternoon sun, but the room was uncomfortably hot. In spite of the heat, I sweated ice.

Would he think about me? Would he come back for another look?

I tried to remember having seen him at Bologna headquarters, but I couldn't place him.

There had been a number of sergeants in the orderly-room, and in Major Kay's room. He might easily have been one of them.

If he did come back and place me, would he give me away? He seemed a good type of guy. He was out of the Army now. Why should he bother, unless he knew about the girl Costain had killed? If he thought I was responsible, he might give me away.

I began to wonder if it were safe to go ahead with my plan with this man in the vicinity. Was he the unforeseen event that one reads about that upsets the perfect murder?

I had to go ahead, I told myself. I had to trust to luck. Maybe he wouldn't stay long. I had to get him out of my mind.

Around eight o'clock I went up to the villa.

Valeria was sitting with Bruno, a book in her lap. Nurse Fleming was knitting. There was no sign of Laura.

Valeria looked up and smiled as I came along the verandah.

"Is it time to move signor Bruno?" I asked, pausing at the foot of the chair.

Nurse Fleming consulted her watch, then put away her knitting.

"Yes. We'll get him in now," she said, and got up.

Valeria also got to her feet.

I noticed Bruno looked quickly at her, and then at me.

I wheeled the chair into the bedroom and lifted him on to the bed.

"I'm going for a swim now, darling," Valeria said to him, and bent and kissed him. "I'll be in again after dinner."

Again I saw his eyes go from her to me and back to her, and this time his eyes were worried.

I had an idea he knew there was something between Valeria and myself, and he didn't like it.

I didn't blame him. After all, I was just the hired hand, and she was the heiress to a hundred million lire.

If I had been in his place I shouldn't have liked it either.

As I followed Valeria out of the room I told myself that in a few days' time I would put that right. Once I had removed the danger, got rid of Laura, I could prove to him I was worthy of Valeria if he would only give me the chance to work at this job.

Valeria said, "Will you come swimming with me, David?"

We were walking down the garden path together.

"Better not," I said. "Did you see the way he was looking at us? I think he's caught on already. I'm going to work in the garden. Nurse Fleming can tell him what I'm doing. We mustn't worry him, Valeria. You go on and have a swim. It's better this way."

"It's so silly," she said. "Why can't people live their own lives?"

"You'll live your own life soon enough," I said, smiling at her. "Maybe you won't think so much of it when you can do exactly what you like. It isn't all fun, you know."

She gave me a quick look.

"Then let's meet by the harbour after dinner."

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, Valeria, but I have to go into Milan tonight. I'm expecting a friend from Rome."

Again she looked at me.

"David, you're not planning something, are you? You're making me uneasy, I don't know how to explain it, but there's something so hard and purposeful about you now. You worry me."

"You would look hard and purposeful if you were in my place," I said, smiling at her. "I have a big job on my hands, darling. I've got to convince your father that I'm worthy of you, and that will want a lot of doing. I'm determined to succeed."

She looked at me doubtfully.

"You will succeed, David, but don't let it change you."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Nurse Fleming come out on the verandah.

"Go and have your swim. Nurse Fleming's watching us," I said, lowering my voice,

I turned away and walked along the path towards the toolshed. I collected a basket and a hand-fork and settled down to weed the big rose-bed. I worked in the garden until dusk.

It was just after eleven o'clock when the last light went out, leaving the villa a darkened outline against the night sky.

I had been sitting on the grass, my back against a tree, waiting. . As soon as the light went out, I got stiffly to my feet and walked quietly down the path to the terrace, overlooking the boathouse.

I chose a dark, shadowy place under the trees and sat on the balustrade and waited.

I didn't know what I was waiting for, for I wasn't going to miss anything that night. I had an idea Bellini might come over for last-minute instructions. If he did, I wanted to hear what was said.

An hour dragged by, and I began to wonder if I were wasting my time. But I was so keyed up I knew if I went to bed I shouldn't be able to sleep, so I decided I might as well stay out in the cool night air even if nothing did happen.

The hands of my watch pointed to twelve-thirty before I heard the stealthy creaking of oars in rowlocks.

Soundlessly I slipped off the balustrade and ducked down into shadows.

I could see down into the harbour, and after a few moments I saw a boat glide in.

I recognized Bellini's massive figure as he got out of the boat and made it fast to one of the mooring-rings.

He disappeared from sight.

I wondered if he had gone to the boathouse. I knew Laura hadn't left the villa. I had been watching her in her room, and she had been the last to turn out the light.

As I was about to move out of my hiding-place to see if he had turned on the light in the boathouse, I saw him within fifteen feet or so of me.

He gave me a bad fright. He had come up the steps like a ghost. Another second I should have come out of my hiding-place, and he would have seen me.

I crouched back, holding my breath, and watched him.

He paused at the head of the steps, his head on one side, and he looked like a great, brutal gorilla as he stood there, listening.

Then he continued on up the path, making no sound and moving with surprising lightness for a man of his size.

I went after him, keeping well away from him, and taking every precaution to make no noise.

He took the path to the garage.

I kept after him, and saw him pause at the sliding doors to

look back over his shoulder. For a horrible moment I thought he had seen me. Then he pushed open the door arid entered the garage and closed the door behind him.

I sneaked up to the garage as a light sprang up in the uncurtained window at the rear. I went round to the back and peered through the window.

Bellini was laying out a tool-kit on the bench.

He wore a singlet and a pair of black flannel trousers. His great, muscular arms were covered with thick, black hair, and sweat beads glistened on his face and neck.

He opened the hood of the car and began to work on the ignition wiring.

He worked for some time, changing the leads over, and messing up the whole system. He was making sure I would have a job on my hands tomorrow evening, and I wouldn't be through until after he had carried out his part of Laura's plan.

He worked for about half an hour, then set down his tools and wiped his hands on the seat of his trousers. There was a hard little smile of satisfaction on his face as he surveyed his handiwork.

Then he stiffened to attention, cocking his head on one side. Moving with silent swiftness, he snapped off the light, shoved the roll of tools into his hip pocket and went quickly to the door.

"It's me," Laura said under her breath. "Have you finished?"

"Yes. He won't fix that in a hurry."

"You shouldn't have put on the light, Mario. I saw it from the house."

"I had to have a light," he said irritably. "Did you expect me to work in the dark?"

"You should have brought a flashlight."

"You're always finding fault! Why didn't you do it yourself, if you're so smart?"

"Oh, shut up!" Laura said fiercely. "If you make a mistake tomorrow night, it'll be the last mistake you do make. Can't you use what damned brains you have sometimes?"

"I shan't make a mistake," Bellini snarled.

"You had bettter not! Don't be late. Do you understand? You must be at the boathouse by nine o'clock."

"I'll be there."

"I'll be playing the radiogram. If the radiogram isn't playing, go back. You mustn't come near the place if it isn't playing. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You'll hear it long before you reach the harbour. If it isn't playing, turn back. You'll know something has gone wrong."

"All right, all right. I'm not deaf."

"So long as you understand. If it is playing, go straight up to the villa. Don't let her see you. Don't let her cry out. David

mustn't know what has happened until the police arrive. Do you think you can stop her making a noise?"

"Of course," Bellini said scornfully. "There's no one better at that game than me."

"As soon as it's done, get in the boat and go back to the *Albergo.* Stay there until I come over. I may not be able to get over until Monday or Tuesday. It depends on what the police do."

"I've got to have some money," Bellini said urgently.

"I'll have sixty thousand lire by Monday. You'll have to make do with that until I sell my pearls."

"It's not much," Bellini said.

"It will have to do," she returned sharply. "I can bring you more at the end of the week when you are in Switzerland. Now go back to the *Albergo."*

I watched Bellini move silently away into the darkness. Laura went back to the villa,

I remained where I was, breathing heavily, my hands clenched at my sides, my heart racing.

I hadn't wasted my time.

I had them both now where I wanted them.

CHAPTER TEN

THE next morning I woke at ten minutes to seven. I lay in the narrow, hot little bed and stared at the patch of blue sky I could see through the window.

Today is the day, I thought, and ran my fingers through my hair. This time tomorrow . . .

I moved my legs restlessly under the sheet. Somewhere downstairs I heard movements: the clatter of cups and saucers, the heavy plodding of feet, the murmur of voices. I heard Bicci clear his throat noisily.

This time tomorrow . . .

I wondered if I would be in this bed, in this room, listening to these noises going on below me, or if I should be in a prison cell in Milan or hiding in the hills the other side of the Swiss frontier.

I threw off the sheet and swung my legs to the floor. There was a sick feeling of tension in the pit of my stomach, and in spite of the already growing heat in the room I felt chilly as if an east wind were blowing through the open window.

I sat on the edge of my bed, staring down at my naked feet. In a little over thirteen hours' time, I thought, I shall have killed two people. It was like saying, 'In a hundred years' time I shall be dead': something one says, but doesn't realize.

My mind began to brood over the details of my plan, but I quickly stopped that. There was no point in going over the details again. I had been over them enough times. I had taken care of everything. I had been as careful as I knew how, and I knew I couldn't be more careful. Now, it depended on luck. If I were going to get away with it, I would get away with it. If I were going to get caught, then something unforeseen, something beyond my control, would be responsible. Nothing I could do now, nothing I could think of, would help me My thinking, my planning, my preparations were as complete as they ever would be. There was no point in thinking about the plan. All I had to do now was to wait until nine o'clock tonight, and then go ahead and put it into operation.

I got up and walked down the passage to the little bathroom. I took a cold bath, and then shaved. My hand was steady, and I didn't cut myself. I didn't even nick my skin, although I expected to.

I dressed and went downstairs.

Signorina Bicci put two fried trout before me and a pot of strong coffee.

Bicci was already serving petrol. I could see him through the window turning the pump-handle while he chatted with a truck-driver.

After breakfast I went down to the water's edge and smoked a cigarette. The Lago looked very beautiful in the bright morning sunshine; the water was still and blue, and the sky was full of lazy white clouds.

Around eight o'clock I walked up to the villa.

Nurse Fleming, out of uniform, and looking surprisingly smart in a grey dress and a small straw hat, was waiting impatiently on the verandah.

"I thought you were going to be late this morning," she said tartly.

"I'm never late. Bicci's bringing the car up right away."

I followed her into Bruno's bedroom. She had already washed and shaved him, and he looked at me with alert eyes as I gave him a stiff little bow.

"Good morning, signore," I said. "I hope you are feeling stronger this morning."

"He is making good progress," Nurse Fleming said, wheeling the chair to the bed, "But he had rather a restless night."

I lifted him from his bed to the chair and stoood aside while she covered him over, then I wheeled the chair on to the verandah.

Laura was waiting by the verandah rails. She gave me a swift, searching look, and said good morning in a cold, flat voice.

"You might carry Nurse Fleming's bag to the car, David," she said.

"Yes, signora," I said.

Tonight, I thought, looking at her, *I shall kill you. These are your last hours on earth. Enjoy them: be charitable: don't look so cold and irritable. In thirteen more hours you will be dead. You could live a lifetime today if you tried hard enough, but instead, you will continue to scheme and plot and think about the money you imagine you are going to have. You will wait impatiently for the hours to pass, instead of trying to delay time, and make full use of the life that is left to you.*

"David! Did you hear me!"

I started.

"I beg your pardon, signora," I said, and turned away.

I saw Nurse Fleming staring at me uneasily. I knew Laura was looking after me as I moved along the verandah. I didn't care. It was too late now for her to do anything. The trap was sprung.

I took Nurse Fleming's handbag down the path to the waiting car and put it on the seat beside Bicci.

She came out and got into the car.

"Be careful you don't jolt him while I am away," she said, as the car began to move.

"I'll take good care of that," I said, and stood watching the old car bounce and bump down the dusty road.

Well, the curtain had gone up. The first opening move in my plan, and also in Laura's plan, was now made. Nurse Fleming had gone. The next move would be Maria's departure. Then the other moves would follow swiftly. But until Maria had left the villa, the curtain would remain up on an empty stage.

I took Bicci's boat and a rod and cruised off shore. When I got about five hundred yards from the harbour I cut the engine and put out a line.

The sun was hot, and reflected from the water up on to my face. Away in the clear distance I could see the fishing-boats goi"ng over to the *Pescatori* from the night's fishing. I wondered if Bellini was out of bed yet, and my eyes strayed to my wrist-watch. Eight-forty-five. It had been eight-forty-five for the past hour it seemed. Minutes were going to be hours; hours, months. I hunched my shoulders and tried to empty my mind of thought.

The boat drifted a little. A small puddle of dirty water in the bottom of the boat threatened to wash over my feet.

I saw Valeria come down the harbour steps. She was wearing a yellow swim-suit. She looked very young as she stood on the harbour wall while she put on her bathing-cap. It was the first time I realized she had a good figure: as good as Laura's, but it didn't turn my mouth dry or set my heart thumping as Laura's had. My feelings weren't like that about Valeria. She was going to be my woman; there would be time to get feelings like that when she was really mine.

I watched her dive into the water and swim lazily towards me.

When she was about fifty yards from the harbour she turned back. I realized she hadn't noticed me in the small green boat, and I was glad. I didn't want to have to talk to her until this thing was over.

I watched her swing herself on to the wall, and then run up the harbour steps, pulling off her cap as she ran. I watched her all the way up to the villa, and then lost sight of her.

I played with the rod, jerking the line, while I thought about her. Thinking of her and our future together was like looking at the Taj Mahal by moonlight.

Around ten-thirty, the man in the white shirt who had so startled me by asking me if I had ever been to General Costain's Headquarters went past in his motor-boat.

He had a girl with him: a blonde with a dumpy figure. She wore a green frock that didn't suit her complexion. She looked the type of girl an Army sergeant would marry; a girl who would want a lot of kids.

He waved to me, giving me a broad, friendly grin. I waved back, but my smile was stiff at the edges. I watched the boat go on towards Pallanza, and when it was out of sight I drew in a long, shuddering breath.

It was all right, I told myself. He hadn't been thinking about me. He hadn't really recognized me. He couldn't have given me that grin if he thought I was Sergeant David Chisholm, deserter and murderer.

I flicked the line and hunched my shoulders.

It was going to work out all right, I told myself. He had been the one man I was scared of: the unforeseen event. Now, nothing would upset my plan.

It was like looking at a red traffic light and seeing it turn to green.

I kept away from the villa during the heat of the afternoon. From two until four I lay on my bed, staring up at the ceiling, forcing my mind to stay empty, and counting the flies as they walked up the walls and across the ceiling.

I couldn't sleep. I knew as soon as I relaxed, my mind would be filled with pictures of what was going to happen at nine o'clock this night. I had to make a continous effort not to think, and counting flies seemed as good an occupation in this heat as any.

A little after four I went down to the garage.

Bicci was fitting a set of new plugs into the engine of a truck.

I hung around, watching him, and making meaningless conversation. He was a difficult man to talk to as he never had any opinions of his own. He always agreed with anything I said, no matter how stupid or outrageous.

I soon got tired of talking to him, and I went down to the shore and began to throw pebbles into the water. Every so often I would

glance at my watch. Once I even held it to my ear, sure it had stopped, but it hadn't.

It seemed impossible for time to move so slowly.

Finally, I decided I had to do something to kill the remaining four hours or I would go crazy. I pushed Bicci's boat into the water, started up the engine and headed towards Stresa.

I took it slowly, chuntering through the water at half throttle, keeping my mind empty.

The *vaporetto* passed me on its way to Pallanza. A number of tourists, lining the rail, stared at me as if they had never seen a man in a boat before.

I altered course slightly so I would be able to circle the *Pescatori.* I went in fairly close. On the shore, sitting on an upturned boat, a cigar between his teeth, was Bellini, sunning himself and scowling.

As I swung the nose of the boat away from the island I saw him look at his wrist-watch. Laura would be in the villa, looking from time to time at her watch: three people waiting for nine o'clock: three people with murder in their minds.

As I passed the *Isola Bella* I saw the man in the white shirt and his wife standing on the terrace, looking at the set gardens below.

Hearing my boat, he glanced up, said something to his wife, and waved.

I waved back.

He beckoned, inviting me to land, but I shook my head, pointing to my wrist-watch. I wasn't going to give him the chance of asking more questions.

I pushed open the throttle and went on towards Stresa, but I didn't land. Keeping close to the shore, I went the length of the promenade, watching the crowds as they hung over the rails, seeing the carriages and the cars dawdling in the sunshine. Then I swung the boat away from the shore and headed back to the villa.

It was half past six when I ran the boat alongside the landing-stage. As I got out I heard someone running across the beach. I glanced up. It was Valeria.

"Where have you been all day?" she asked, smiling at me. "I've hunted everywhere for you."

"Over to Stresa," I said, and on the spur of the moment went on, "Bicci wanted some spare parts. I hadn't anything to do so I went over for him."

"Let's go in the shade, David. I want to talk to you."

"Is she up there, looking after him?"

"Yes. I'm on night duty."

"Did she arrange that?"

She gave me a surprised look.

"Well, she did suggest it."

I went with her across the beach to the shade of the willows.

"I have news for you, David."

I stiffened.

"Good news?"

"Yes, darling; wonderful news,"

She sat on a rock, pulling me down beside her.

"I've talked to Bruno.'"

"Not about us?"

"Not exactly. I talked to him about the job. He wants you to do it, David,"

I sat still for a moment, feeling a tingle of triumph run up my spine. Who said it wasn't going to work out all right? Each step was going my way: first the man in the white shirt, and now this,

"Are you sure, Valeria?"

"Yes. I could tell by his eyes. He was delighted."

"You didn't say anything about us?"

"Oh, no. That must come later." She swung round to look at me. "Are you pleased, darling?"

"Pleased? That's not the word. It's terrific!"

"I shall have to talk to Dr. Perelli. He has all Bruno's papers, but as Bruno agrees, Dr. Perelli won't raise any objections."

"So I don't have to go on Monday?"

"Of course not. You'll have a room in the villa too. I'll get it ready for you tomorrow, darling. You'll need a desk. We can go into Milan and choose one."

"I don't see why I shouldn't continue to lift Bruno," I said. "What's the point in having someone strange to do it when I'm on the spot? We'll tell Dr. Perelli not to send his man."

She slipped her hand into mine.

"We'll be able to see each other more often. You'll be working in the house. Oh, David, I'm so pleased!"

I took her in my arms.

"What will Laura say?"

"What does it matter what she says?" Valeria asked. "It's nothing to do with her."

Well, anyway, it wouldn't be anything to do with her by tomorrow.

I pulled Valeria to me and kissed her.

A few minutes to half past seven, Valeria and I went up to the villa.

Laura was sitting on the verandah, reading. Bruno lay on his chair, his eyes on the distant peak of the Motterone.

"Is it as late as all that?" Laura said, closing her book. She looked at her wrist-watch. "It's time you went in, Bruno. Valeria will stay with you this evening. I'm going down to the boathouse after dinner. A session of swing music will do me good, and I know you don't want to listen to that."

Bruno looked at her, his eyes alert, but her cold expressionless face told him nothing.

I wheeled the chair into the bedroom as she moved off down the verandah to her room.

"I can't thank you enough, signore, for giving me this opportunity," I said to Bruno after I had lifted him on to the bed. "I'll do my best to carry on your work the way you want it done."

His eyes smiled, then went to Valeria and back to me again.

"We'll talk about it in the morning," Valeria said, touching Bruno's forehead lightly. "He's had a long day, and I think he should rest now. Go and have supper, David. What are you doing tonight?"

I was glad I was standing with my back to the light, and I didn' t have to meet her eyes.

"If you don't want me for anything, I'll do a little night fishing."

"Look in about ten-thirty before I go to bed," she said, "and see how I'm getting along. I think Bruno should sleep now. Don't make a noise when you come in."

"Does he realize how grateful I am to him?" I asked as we moved away from the bed to the verandah.

"You don't have to be grateful. You'll be helping him. He's been worrying about his notes."

"Well, tell him not to worry any more."

I realized as we stood side by side by the verandah rail that the next time I saw her it would be over.

I touched her hand.

"I love you, Valeria."

"It's lovely to know that, and I love you too."

I left her and walked along the verandah to the garden steps.

Laura appeared from her room.

"Oh, David, something has gone wrong with the car," she said, coming to me. "I don't know what it is. The starter doesn't work. Would you look at it after dinner? I have an early appointment in Milan tomorrow."

You have no appointment tomorrow, nor any other morning, I thought, turning to look at her.

Her face was as hard as chiselled marble, and her eyes were glittering.

"Yes, I'll look at it. "

"Will you try to put it right?"

. "I'll put it right."

"If I could be certain of having the car for tomorrow morning . . ."

"I'll put it right."

She gave me a long, hard stare, then went back into her room.

The time was eight-thirty-five. From the open garage door I watched Maria as she walked down the path to the gate.

I watched her move slowly and heavily down the road until she was out of sight. I had now only twenty-five minutes before I went into action. I had the automatic in my hip pocket. The sand-bag was inside my shirt. I was steady, and my nerves were surprisingly calm, but I had that sick feeling of tension in the pit of my stomach that had been worrying me all day.

I glanced towards the villa. Laura was coming along the verandah, heading towards me.

I picked up a screwdriver and went back to the car. When she came into the garage I looked busily at work.

"Have you found out what's wrong?" she asked, standing in the doorway.

I turned to look at her.

She was standing with the fading light behind her, as she had stood that day in Piero's *trattoria,* and I could see the shape of her slim legs and rounded thighs through her skirt.

She was wearing her pearls, and again I felt a little tingle of triumph run up my spine. Another step going my way, I realized with a sick sense of shock that I had forgotten about the pearls. I would have gone down to the boathouse without them, and I should have been without a motive to pin on Bellini.

But it was going my way. She had corrected my first mistake.

"Someone's been playing a game," I said. "The ignition is all messed up. It'll take me half the night to put it right."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. If you want the car by tomorrow morning, you'd better let me get on with the job. Every lead has to be traced. It's a swell mix-up."

"Do what you can, please."

"I'll fix it."

I heard her go away as I bent over the engine. I waited a a moment or two, then straightened up. She was already halfway down the garden, heading for the boathouse.

I put down the screwdriver, walked over to the bench and wiped my hands clean on a lump of waste. Then I pulled on the gloves I had bought.

I looked at my watch. It was now eight-forty-five.

I gave her three minutes to get down the steps and enter the boathouse, then I went after her.

The light was fading rapidly now.

The sun had gone down behind the row of hills ten minutes or so ago, casting a red glow over the Lago and the edges of the peaks.

I was wearing rubber-soled sneakers. I made no sound as I went down the steps to the harbour. When I was within sight of the boathouse I paused to listen.

I could see the light coming through the big open window, and a moment later the sound of swing music came surging out into the silent night air, powerful and penetrating, and increasing in volume as Laura adjusted the control.

Bellini couldn't be far away now, I thought as I went quickly down the steps and reached the entrance to the boathouse. I paused to look across the Lago, but it was now too dark to pick out a small boat that might be heading this way.

I checked my watch.

It was now nine minutes to nine o'clock.

I went up the stairs to the apartment, reached the front door and touched it lightly with my fingers. It was locked.

I took out the duplicate key. My hand was steady, and I sank the key into the lock at the first attempt. I had no fear of her hearing me. The radiogram was now at full blast. I had no fear that she would be heard if she screamed.

I turned the key and gently pushed open the door.

She was kneeling on the window-seat, looking out of the window, her back turned to me, her hands on the sill.

I closed the door.

"Laura."

I had to raise my voice to get above the sound of the music.

I saw her shudder, then she pushed herself away from the window and whirled round. Her face was the colour of old ivory, and her eyes were wide with shock, fear and sick rage.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped, taking an unsteady step towards me.

"I thought I'd better come down," I said. "I can't fix the car."

She looked quickly at the clock on the over-mantel. Panic and rage made her ugly.

"Go back to the garage and try again!" she said violently. "Don't come here, worrying me! It's your job to fix it!"

I moved across to the overmantel, my eyes on the Dante bust.

"I can't do impossibilities."

We were both raising our voices to get above the sound of the music.

"Do what I tell you! Go at once!"

"There's nothing I can do," I said. "I'm going over to Stresa now. I have a date with a friend. You'll have to use Bicci's car if it's so important."

She could see her whole carefully prepared plan blowing up in her face.

She stood staring at me, and I could read her mind as easily as if she were putting into words what she was thinking.

In another three minutes Bellini would be here, and I would run into him. Bellini must be stopped.

That was what she was thinking.

She turned quickly towards the radiogram. If she turned that off, Bellini would go back.

My hand closed round the head of the Dante bust.

She was reaching for the switch as I caught hold of her shoulder and spun her round.

She stared at me, her face convulsed with rage. She saw the bust in my hand. She saw I was wearing gloves. Her eyes met mine. In that second of life that was left to her she seemed able to read in my eyes what I was about to do, and how I had beaten her at her own game.

Her scarlet mouth opened to scream. A vicious, frightened gleam came into her eyes, the way a wild animal looks when trapped.

She flung up her arm to protect her head, but I caught her wrist, and then hit her on the side of her head with all my force. The shock of the blow ran up my arm. The corner of the pedestal sank into her skull, and I felt something warm and wet spray my face. I dropped the bust as she fell forward, her fingers clawing at my shirt.

I flung her off.

She fell on her side and rolled over on her back, her skirt coming up over her thighs.

I stood over her. My breath was coming in great laboured gasps, and sweat ran into my eyes, blinding me.

I didn't have to touch her to know she was dead. No one could look like that and not be dead.

I stood for two or three seconds, gulping in air, then making an effort and trying not to look at the widening circle of blood that soaked her glossy, copper-coloured hair, I jerked the pearl necklace from her throat, and walked unsteadily to the door.

The moon came up over the hills and shed a white brilliance on the still water of the Lago.

I stood in the doorway of the boathouse and looked across the water. About a quarter of a mile away I could just make out a small rowing-boat heading towards me, and I drew in a long, slow breath of relief.

The boat couldn't reach the harbour for at least a quarter of an hour. Bellini, in spite of his promise, in spite of his assurance, was late!

I leaned against the wall of the boathouse. My legs were unsteady, and my heart beat so violently I thought I was going to suffocate.

I wanted to run away. The thought of having to tackle Bellini now filled me with horror.

"Chisholm?"

The shock of hearing the soft voice near me was so great that- I nearly fainted. I looked slowly in the direction of the voice;

slowly, like a man, expecting to see a ghost, who hears a suspicious noise behind him.

Moving towards me, from out of the shadow of the willows, I saw the tall bony figure of Dr. Perelli.

"Chisholm?"

"Yes."

"Come under cover. What are you doing here?"

The radiogram continued to blast out swing music, and I could scarcely hear what he was saying. I was so scared I couldn't move.

He caught hold of my arm.

"That fellow Bellini's on his way over," he said urgendy. "Get under cover. I don't want him to spot us."

I let him lead me into the shadows.

"Why did you come down here, Chisholm?"

And I had been crazy enough to think it was all going my way.

"I wanted to tell signora Fancino about the car."

My voice came out as a gasping croak.

"Did you see her?"

"No. The door was locked. I couldn't make her hear."

"That's good. I was afraid you might have warned her. Do you know what she is planning to do?"

"Planning to do?" I repeated stupidly. "What do you mean?"

"She and Bellini plan to murder Valeria tonight. He's on his way over now," Perelli said. "I've set a trap for him. The place is surrounded by police."

I didn't say anything. My heart seemed scarcely to beat.

"The woman's unbalanced," Perelli went on. "I've always been uneasy about her. It's quite unbelievable. It was she who caused Bruno's accident. She tampered with the brakes. She wants his money, of course. She has persuaded Bellini to murder Valeria tonight, and then she plans to murder Bruno. She is arranging it that you will be accused of Valeria's death. It's an incredible plot."

"How do you know this?" I said, forcing the words out.

"She couldn't resist telling Bruno what she was going to do. She thought she was safe as he couldn't speak. But the shock and worry gave him back his speech. I told you if he tried hard enough he would regain his speech. He told me in time to take the necessary precautions."

I thought of her up there in the boathouse, and I drew in a long, shuddering breath.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said.

"I was afraid you wouldn't play your part well enough. I wanted to catch them red-handed. Besides, it wasn't until yesterday that I learned the full story about you, Chisholm. Up to yesterday you were also a suspect."

I stared at him, blood hammering in my temples.

"What do you mean?"

"She told Bruno you had killed some woman in Florence during

the war. I went to the American Embassy to find out details." He glanced over his shoulder. "Captain Boos, will you come here, please?"

A man came out from behind the trees.

"Hello, Chisholm."

I recognized him as he came out of the darkness: the man in the white shirt, only now he was wearing uniform.

"I'm John Boos of the Provost Marshal's office. We've been hunting all over for you," he went on. "Didn't you ever see our adverts in the Press? I thought we'd never find you. It's all all right. We caught Costain doing another of his little jobs about a year ago, and he told us he had pushed that Florence killing on to you. You have nothing to worry about now. You're in the clear."

I stood like a statue, unable to move nor speak, staring at him.

"He's coming now," Perelli whispered, and pushed me back against the wall.

The rowing-boat was only a hundred yards or so from the shore, but it wasn't Bellini in the boat. The man who rowed was smaller, and as he came closer I could see he wore the peaked cap of the *polizia*.

"Now What's gone wrong?" Boos muttered to Perelli, and walked out on to the wall.

The police officer pulled alongside.

"Bellini's been knifed," he said, looking up at Boos. "He's dead. From the way he was cut it looks like a Mafia job."

"Hell!" Boos exclaimed. "That upsets your trap, doctor. What are you going to do now?"

"I'll go up and talk to her," Perelli said grimly. "She may give herself away. I'd like you to come with me," he went on to the police officer as he climbed up on to the harbour wall.

"I wish she would stop that damned noise," Boos said, looking up at the lighted window. He put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm glad about you, Chisholm. You must have had a pretty rough time. But you're okay now. I'll take you to Milan and fix a passport for you. If you want to go home, say the word. We'll cover all expenses."

I was too stunned even to think. In a few minutes they would find her up there. If I was going to get away, I would have to go now. But I remained where I was, crushed by what I had heard. I need not have killed her. If only they had told me!

"You coming, Captain Boos?" Perelli asked.

"I guess not. I had better keep out of it. I'll stay here with Chisholm."

Perelli and the police officer went into the boathouse.

Boos took out a cigarette, lit it and glanced at me in the flame of the match. I saw the startled look of shock jump into his eyes.

"What's this? Have you hurt yourself?"

I didn't say anything.

The beam of his flashlight lit up my face.

"You have blood all over you. What have you done?"

"Why couldn't you have told me?" I said savagely. "Why didn't you tell me yesterday I was in the clear?"

He caught hold of my arm.

"Have you killed her?"

"Yes, I've killed her. I thought it was the only way out for Valeria and me. I killed her because you kept your damned mouth shut!"

Boos hesitated.

"They wouldn't catch you in the motor-boat," he said under his breath. "I'll go up and keep them talking. Get the boat and go. From what I've heard about her, she didn't deserve anything better."

Upstairs the music stopped abruptly.

"Get going!" he urged.

I thought of the past six years of hiding. Then I had always **a** hope that Costain would be caught and I would eventually be in the clear. Now, I had no such hope. I should be in hiding for the rest of my days.

"Where do you think I'd go? What have I got to live for?" I said. "I've been on the run now for six vears; do you think I want a lifetime of it?"

"Don't talk; get going!"

"Don't kid yourself you're doing me a favour," I said. "I'm staying here, and I'll take what comes to me."

Perelli appeared at the window and leaned out.

"Captain Boos! Don't let that man get away!"

Boos lifted his heavy shoulders in an uneasy shrug.

"He's not trying to get away," he said, and walked over to the boathouse.

I stood on the harbour wall, looking across the still waters of the Lago, feeling more alone than I had ever felt before in my life.

THE END

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