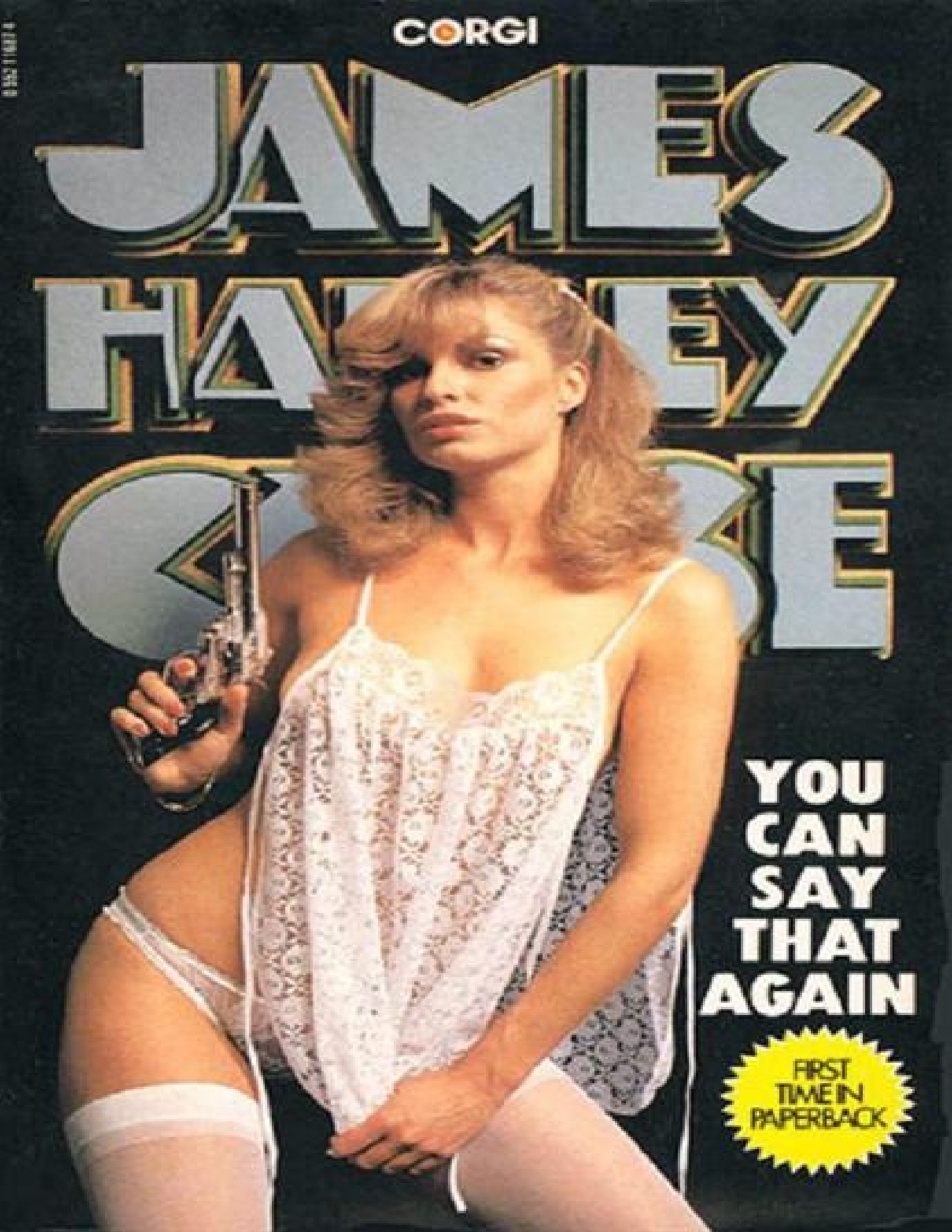
CORGI

JAMES HADLEY CHASE



YOU CAN SAY THAT AGAIN

FIRST TIME IN PAPERBACK

Table of Contents

chapter one
chapter two
chapter three
chapter four
chapter five
chapter six
chapter seven
chapter eight
chapter nine
Epilogue

You Can Say That Again

James Hadley Chase

1980

chapter one

For the past week, I had been sitting, alone, in my walkup apartment, staring into space and waiting. I had run out of cash, and even worse, out of credit. My lifeline, right at this moment, was the telephone.

When the bell rang — the first time in seven, gruesome days — I nearly broke a leg getting to the receiver.

'This is Lu Prentz's secretary.'

'Hi, Liz!' I wasn't a bit-part actor for nothing. I instilled into my voice sincere pleasure: not a desperate screech for help, but smooth, no panic, completely at ease. 'You just caught me. I was on my way out.'

I knew this crummy dialogue wouldn't jell with Liz Martin, but I knew she would go along with it. She had had enough experience, working with Lu Prentz, to know all his clients were desperate for work.

'Mr. Prentz wants to see you urgently, Mr. Stevens,' she told me. 'May he expect you?'

'What does that mean — urgently?'

'After lunch. Three o'clock?'

There was a time when Lu Prentz talked business with me over a lush-plush lunch, but that was in the dim past. The only time he wanted to see me now was to remind me I owed him five hundred and three dollars.

'Is he worrying about what I owe him, Liz?' I asked in my bored voice. 'Is that what he wants to see me about?'

'It's a job, Mr. Stevens.'

'I'll be there at three o'clock.'

As I hung up, I took in a long, deep breath. Man! Could I use a job! Any goddam job!

A few years ago, I had been a big success, playing the baddie in Western movies. Then I moved onto the friend who never got the girl: strictly second role parts, then the guy who got shot early in the movie, then the character who sat around looking menacing for a fifty second take, then nothing much: a few bit parts, then a bigger part in a TV serial, and now, I was, what is known in the trade, resting.

I was pushing forty: tall, handsome, dark and divorced. My wardrobe, carefully cherished, was beginning to show signs of wear. I had been waiting and waiting. I was so far down the tunnel, I didn't go out, scared to leave the telephone, didn't eat more than a hamburger a day which was sent in, but still hoping for the big break.

Lu Prentz was known as the last line of retreat for the unsuccessful and aging actors and actresses. When all the big agencies, the not-so-big agencies, the minor agencies were no longer interested, Lu was willing to try. He often said with his oily smile: Who knows? Some sucker could buy you, and it's dollars in my bank.

To give Lu his due, he had, over the past six months, staked me when the wolves were gnawing at my door. He had explained, when handing over the loot to me, that he had faith in me. He felt convinced he would get his money back, plus twenty-five percent interest. Taking his money, I was happy to agree with him, but I felt he was taking a risk. I had even sold my car.

But if Liz said there was a job, she meant just that.

Liz Martin was a worldly eighteen year old. She had been working for Lu for the past three years. If anyone had a heart of gold, she had. I've seen her cry when some skinny, aged actress had been given the bum's rush out of Lu's shabby office.

Liz was typing like crazy when I walked into the tiny room that served as an outer-office. I gave her my wide, friendly smile.

Liz was a thin, tiny blonde with big blue eyes and the kind of appeal spaniels have: a little doleful, but longing to be loved.

'Hi, Liz,' I said, closing the door. 'Is the alligator back from crunching bones?'

She nodded and pointed to Lu's door.

'Go right on in, Mr. Stevens, and good luck.'

Lu Prentz sat behind his desk, his pudgy hands resting on the grubby blotter, his eyes closed. From the heavy flush on his face, he had been reducing the level in a Scotch bottle at someone else's expense.

Lu was short, squat and over-fat. Balding and clean-shaven, when he remembered to shave, he gave the appearance of a no-good uncle returning to the homestead in search of a dollar. He always wore the same shiny blue suit. He went in for hand-painted floral ties and bottle green shirts. It was only when he opened his eyes and looked at me, I recalled he was not only sharp, not only shrewd, but as hard as tungsten steel.

'Sit down, Jerry,' he said, waving to the client's chair. 'I think something's come up that could be useful to you.'

I sat down carefully knowing from experience, this chair was as comfortable as the Iron Maiden, designed to get rid of Lu's clients in the shortest possible time.

‘You’re looking well, Lu,’ I said. ‘Long time, no see.’

‘Never mind the B movie dialogue,’ he said, releasing a gentle burp. ‘Just listen.’ He screwed up his little eyes as he contemplated me. ‘You owe me five hundred and three bucks.’

‘Don’t let’s go over past history, Lu. What’s come up?’

‘I’m just reminding you because if you land this job, the first thing you do is to repay me.’

‘What job? TV?’

‘I don’t know what the job is, but my instincts tell me there could be money in it.’ He tapped his beaky nose. ‘Always providing you get the job.’

‘You’ve eaten too much for lunch. You’re rambling.’

‘Stop wasting my time! Just listen!’

So I listened.

This morning, at ten o’clock he told me, a man, calling himself Joseph Durant, had come to the office. This man made a big impact on Lu. He was around forty—five years of age, well fed, swarthy and smooth. He was immaculately dressed in a suit that only big money could buy. He wore black lizard skin shoes and a Cardin tie. These points registered with Lu. The look of this man gave off a strong aroma of wealth. Mr. Durant said he was interested in hiring an out-of-work actor. He understood, by asking around, that Mr. Prentz specialized in out-of-work actors.

Lu, giving his oily smile, said he also had many other clients who were earning big money in movies and TV

Mr. Durant had waved this obvious lie aside. Did Mr. Prentz have photographs of these actors who were out-of-work and were looking for an assignment?

Lu said he had some four hundred photographs of excellent actors who were, unfortunately, resting at this moment.

‘I’ll look at these photographs,’ Durant said.

‘Well, four hundred . . . maybe you can give me some idea of the kind of man you had in mind? I could then put the data through my computer (Liz Martin) and come up with a selection.’

Durant nodded.

‘I need a man between thirty-five and forty—five years of age. He must be at least six feet tall. His height is important. He should be slim: not more than a hundred and sixty pounds. He should be able to drive a car, ride a horse and swim well. He must have a placid temperament. I don’t want one of these showoff actors who think they are tin gods.’

Lu had only five out-of-work actors on his books who vaguely matched this description, and all of them considered themselves major gods. He made a big thing about producing the photographs. These Durant examined.

Lu gave me his oily smile.

‘He picked you, Jerry. He wants to see you before deciding to engage you.’

‘What is this?’ I asked. ‘Who is he? Is he a talent scout?’

‘I doubt it.’ Lu shrugged. ‘He was secretive. I do know he reeks of money, and that’s what we are both interested in . . . right?’

‘You can say that again,’ I said with feeling.

‘Okay. Now tonight, at exactly ten—thirty, you will walk into the lobby of the Plaza hotel. You will then go to the newsstand and buy a copy of Newsweek. You will then go to the main bar and order a dry martini. You will sit at the bar and look through Newsweek. You will have a few words with the barman, finish your drink and return to the lobby. You don’t rush any of this. You will be watched. Your manner, your movements and the way you conduct yourself are of interest to Mr. Durant. You will sit in the lobby. If you have satisfied Mr. Durant, he will approach you. If you have flopped, he won’t, and after waiting half an hour, you go home and forget it ever happened. That’s it. It’s up to you.’

‘You have no idea what he wants?’

‘No idea.’

‘No talk of money?’

‘No talk of money. This is an audition. It’s up to you.’

I thought about this. It seemed odd to me, but it could turn out to be a job.

‘He looks like money?’

‘He stinks of money.’

‘Well, okay. What have I to lose? I’ll be there.’

Lu switched on his oily smile.

‘Good. Now remember, a placid temperament. This guy means what he says.’

‘A placid temperament? That means a yes-man.’

‘Nice thinking, Jerry. That’s what it means.’

‘Suppose he hires me? How about the money? Do you handle that end of it?’

Lu's little eyes turned cold.

'If he talks money, refer him to me. I'm your agent, aren't I?'

'You must be. I don't seem to have any other agent.' I gave him my boyish smile, minus sincerity. 'Well, okay, I'll be there.' I paused, then went on. 'There's one little thing, Lu, we should settle before I leave you to your hive of industry. I go to the Plaza. I buy Newsweek. I buy a dry martini . . . right?'

He regarded me suspiciously.

'That's what you do.'

I widened the boyish smile.

'With what?'

Lu stared at me.

'I don't follow you.'

'Let's face the sordid facts. I'm bust flat. I even had to walk to your crummy office. I've even sold my car.'

Lu reared back in his chair.

'Impossible! I lent you . . .'

'That was six months ago. Right now, I am worth one dollar and twenty cents.'

He closed his eyes and released a soft moan. I could see he was struggling with himself. Finally, he opened his eyes and produced a twenty-dollar note from a loaded wallet and placed the bill, as if it was Ming china, on his desk.

As I reached for the bill, he said, 'You had better get this job, Jerry. This is the last handout you get from me. If you don't get this job, never let me see your face in this office again. Is that understood?'

I stowed the bill into my empty wallet.

'I always knew you had a heart of gold, Lu,' I said. 'I will tell my grandchildren of your generosity. The little bastards will cry their eyes out.'

He snorted.

'You now owe me five hundred and twenty three dollars, plus twenty-five percent interest. Now, go away!'

I went into the outer office where two aged, shabby looking men leaned against the wall, waiting to see Lu. The sight of them depressed me, but I managed to give Liz a bright smile. I walked down to the street. As I set off to my dreary apartment, I hoped, as I have never hoped before, that tonight would produce the vital break I needed.

* * *

As I walked into the lobby of the Plaza hotel, the wall clock showed 22.30.

In my better days, I had often frequented this hotel, using the bar and the restaurant when dating some willing dolly bird. Then, the doorman would lift his cap, but this time, he merely glanced at me as he hurried down the steps to open the door of a Caddy from which spilled a fat man and a fatter woman.

The hotel lobby was fairly crowded with the usual mob who milled around, greeting each other: most of the men in tuxedos and the women in their war paint. No one paid any attention to me as I walked across the lobby to the newsstand. The old dear who had been behind the counter since the hotel had opened, smiled at me.

'Why, hello, Mr. Stevens! I've missed you. Have you been away?'

Well, at least someone remembered me.

'France,' I lied. 'How are you?'

'Middling. None of us get any younger. And you, Mr. Stevens?'

'Fine. Give me Newsweek, will you, baby?'

She simpered. It is easy to please those without money or fame. She gave me the magazine and I paid.

Then conscious I might be watched, I gave her my charming smile, said she looked younger than when I had last seen her, and leaving her dazed with joy, I walked slowly through the mob to the bar. I resisted the temptation to look around to see if I could spot Mr. Durant. I only hoped he was there, watching my performance.

The bar was crowded. I have to weave my way through and past the fat, scented women and the fat, potbellied men to the bar.

Jo-Jo, the negro barman, was serving cocktails. He had put on a lot of weight since I last had seen him. He gave me a quick glance, then a double take, then he beamed at me.

'Hi, Mr. Stevens. Be with you in a second.'

I rested my elbows on the bar: another who remembered.

When Jo-Jo eventually reached me, I asked for a dry martini.

'Long time no see, Mr. Stevens,' he said, reaching for a shaker. 'You're quite a stranger.'

‘Yeah. You know how it is.’ I didn’t give him the guff about being in France. Jo-Jo was too worldly wise.

‘Sure. We come and we go and we return to this city.’

Was there a look of sympathy in his eyes?

‘Anyway, nice to see you again.’

He poured out the drink and went to serve a party clamoring for refills.

I suddenly felt pretty good. It was months now since anyone had said it was nice to see me. Most of my so-called friends crossed the street when they saw me coming.

I wondered if my performance with Jo-Jo had been long enough. Holding my drink, I looked around, but the mob was so dense, I couldn’t pick out anyone who looked anything like Mr. Durant as Lu had described him. I sipped the drink and looked at the magazine.

When Jo-Jo had finished serving. I signaled to him.

‘A pack of Chesterfields, please.’

‘Yes, Mr. Stevens.’ He produced the pack. ‘Is the drink okay?’

‘Fine: no one quite like you to mix a dry martini.’

He beamed.

‘Well, I guess I’ve mixed a few in my time.’

‘I’m in a hurry. I’ll pay now,’ and I put a ten spot on the counter.

He gave change and I slipped him a quarter.

‘Hope to see you again, Mr. Stevens,’ and he went off to serve more drinks.

I finished the martini, lit a cigarette, then wandered into the lobby. It was less crowded. The mob was milling towards the restaurant and the exits.

My heart was now beating over fast. Would Mr. Durant appear? I put on my nonchalant expression and moved to one of the lounging chairs. I sat down, opened the magazine and stared sightlessly at the printed pages. Suppose I had flopped? There seemed no obvious rush to hire me.

Play it cool, I told myself, and stubbed out my cigarette in the ash bowl on the table by my side. I crossed one leg over the other and turned the pages.

Twenty long minutes dragged by, and nothing happened.

By now the lobby was nearly empty. I looked around. An elderly couple sat away from me. A thin man and a thinner woman were talking to the reception clerk. Four bellboys sat on a bench, waiting for new arrivals. A little old woman sat alone, looking forlorn and lonely with a toy poodle to keep her company. Two men, smoking cigars, studied papers. There was no sign of anyone remotely looking like Mr. Durant.

I waited. There was nothing else I could do, and while I sat there a black cloud of depression began to gather around me. Fifteen minutes later, the cloud was dense.

I had flopped!

I put down the magazine and lit a cigarette. So what was I going to do? I thought of the long walk back to my apartment. I couldn’t afford a taxi. Out of Lu’s handout, I had eleven dollars and a few cents left in my financial world, but, at least, for the moment, I had a roof over my head, but for how long?

Had Lu been serious about me not showing my face in his office? I thought about this, and decided he was bluffing. He wouldn’t release his hooks in me until I had repaid what I owed him.

So, back to my apartment to face another interminable wait by the telephone. At least, Lu’s handout would keep me from starving.

It was comfortable in the hotel lobby. No one bothered me. I was reluctant to leave for the long, dismal walk home. So I settled back and forced myself to take an interest in the remaining people in the lobby. The thin man and the thinner woman had left. The elderly couple had been claimed by another elderly couple and were being steered towards the restaurant. The two businessmen continued to smoke their cigars and discuss whatever they were discussing.

My eyes shifted to the little old woman with her poodle.

Hotel lobbies are cluttered up with little old women: some of them thin, some fat, but always on their own and lonely. This little old woman was a typical specimen. I guessed she had lost her husband, had money, was on a conducted tour of California, and would return to some lonely mansion where a butler and a number of aging maids robbed her blind. She had spent money on herself: her ash-blonde wig was immaculate: her glasses bejeweled: her emerald green dress probably from Balmain, and diamond rings flashed on her fingers.

I became aware she was staring at me and quickly shifted my eyes. In spite of not looking at her, I still felt her staring at me.

Jeepers! I thought, have I started something with this old lonely? It seemed I had for she got out of her chair, picked up

the poodle and came over to me.

'It must be Mr. Jerry Stevens!' she exclaimed, pausing at my side.

Man! I thought as I stood up. I only need this! I gave her my charming smile.

'Mr. Stevens! I don't want to intrude, but I feel I must tell you how much I loved your performance in The Sheriff of X Ranch.'

If ever there was a movie that stank - The Sheriff of X Ranch took the Oscar for all stinkers.

I glued on my charming smile.

'That's very kind of you, madam. Thank you.'

'I've been following all your movies, Mr. Stevens,' she went on. 'You have an outstanding talent.'

Talent? I could hear Lu's braying laugh.

I looked directly at her and received a slight shock.

This woman wasn't the usual hotel lobby loner. There was steel in her dark blue eyes and her lips were paper-thin.

'Thank you,' I said, not knowing what else to say.

She peered at me, smiling.

'I was about to have a late dinner. I wonder if you would join me?' She paused, then went on, 'Oh, Mr. Stevens, do be my guest! It would give me so much pleasure!' Again a pause, then seeing I was floundering, she went on, 'I would so much like to hear about your work, but perhaps you have already dined?'

Dined? My last meal had been a greasy hamburger at midday. I was starving hungry.

All the same, I hesitated. Some forty minutes had dragged by. Mr. Durant had had all the time in the world to hire me. This old woman was obviously loaded. Be my guest. I couldn't resist such an invitation. The thought of a big, juicy steak and a mass of french fries brought saliva to my mouth.

'Why, that would be nice. Thank you.'

She patted her hands together.

'I am so pleased! I didn't think . . .' She smiled. 'Let's go then. I adore Westerns. I am sure you can tell me how they are made. There must be so many interesting tricks.' She began to move to the exit. I was surprised. I had imagined we would eat in the hotel restaurant, but as she kept moving, I followed her.

Out on the steps, the doorman lifted his cap and bowed to her, then he whistled. Almost immediately, a dark blue Silver Cloud Rolls Royce appeared out of the darkness. A Japanese, in a grey uniform, wearing a peak cap, had the door open.

'There is a nice little restaurant,' she said, pausing. 'You must know it. The Benbow. Would it bore you to eat there?'

The Benbow! I had never been there, but I knew of it. The best restaurant in the district! Even in my affluent days, I had never dared face their prices. Before I could say anything, she got into the car. A little dazed, but with the black cloud of depression now dispersed, I sat in luxury at her side.

The chauffeur slid into the driving seat and edged the car into the traffic.

'Madam,' I said, smiling in her direction. 'I failed to get your name.'

'How stupid of me.' She put her hand on my arm.

The poodle she was nursing shifted off her lap and onto my knees. The little beast began to lick my face. If there is one thing that drives me out of my mind it is to be licked by a dog. I shoved him away with some violence, and as I did so, I felt a sharp prick in my thigh.

The dog, yelping, fell to the floor. I started upright.

'Madam!' I exclaimed. 'Your dog has bitten me!'

'Dear Mr. Stevens. You must be mistaken. I am sure Cookie would never do anything like that. He is the most gentle little gentleman and he adores . . .

The rest of what she was saying faded into darkness.

* * *

The room was large and comfortably furnished and lit by a number of shaded lamps. I found myself lying on a double bed. My head felt heavy and my mouth was dry. I made an effort and half sat up, staring around in bewilderment. Opposite the end of the bed was a big wall mirror. My reflection as I lay on the bed showed me I was not only bewildered, but not a little frightened.

The luxury of the furnishing did something to reassure me. A lot of money had been spent making this room more than comfortable, and money always reassures me. Heavy window drapes were drawn shut.

I looked at my watch. The time was 8.45. Was it morning or evening? How long had I been lying on this bed? It had been 23.00 when I had got into the Rolls. I thought of the prick in my thigh I had imagined had been a nip from the poodle.

It dawned on me, with a feeling of panic, the little old woman had given me at shot of some quick acting drug.

Good God! I thought. I've been kidnapped!

I scrambled off the bed and crossed to the window drapes and dragged them back. A solid steel shutter covered the window. I shoved against it, but it was immovable. Turning, I looked around the room to a door. Even as I reached it, I saw there was no handle.

The door was as immovable as the window shutter. I went into the bathroom: deluxe fitments, but no window. I peered into the wall cabinet. It contained two toothbrushes in cellophane wrapping, an electric shaver, a bottle of aftershave, a bath sponge also in cellophane wrapping and toilet soaps. I looked at myself in the shaving mirror. From the stubble on my face, I had only been drugged a few hours.

I made use of the bathroom facilities while I tried to control my panic. It was a good move. After shaving and washing, I felt a lot better when I returned to the room. I also became aware I was hungry.

Crossing to the bed, I saw a bell push by the shaded bedside lamp. I hesitated for a moment, then pressed the button. I kept my finger on it for several seconds before releasing it.

Then I sat in a big lounging chair and waited. I didn't have to wait long. The door without a handle slid aside and a man, pushing a trolley, entered. The door snapped shut behind him.

This man was a giant. He was a good six inches taller than myself and I am six foot one. He had shoulders a weight lifter would envy and huge muscular hands. His head was completely shaved and his face was something out of a horror comic: thick nose, lipless mouth and small glittering eyes. Working in Westerns, I had come across a lot of rough-toughs, playing baddies, but off the set, they had been as gentle as kittens: but not this man: he would be as unpredictable as a gorilla and as dangerous as a wounded tiger.

He pushed the trolley into the center of the room, then looked at me. His savage little eyes chilled me. I began to say something, but stopped. He frankly scared the hell out of me. I just sat there and watched him stalk to the door which slid open and snapped shut behind him.

I took out my handkerchief and wiped off my hands and face, but the aroma of cooked food brought me to my feet. I went to the trolley. What a feast! A thick, juicy steak, a bowl of sizzling french fries, a pile of pancakes oozing maple syrup, toast, butter, marmalade and a pint sized pot of coffee.

I pulled up a chair and gorged myself. Food gives strength, I told myself, as I cut into the steak. Okay, I had been kidnapped, but at least, I wasn't going to starve.

When I had finished eating, making sure there was nothing left, I found a pack of Chesterfields and a lighter on the trolley. I lit up and went back to the lounging chair and sat down.

I was now much more relaxed. I thought about last night and the little old woman. It seemed to me she must be connected with Mr. Durant. This could only be the explanation of my kidnapping. I hopefully reasoned that Mr. Durant had decided I was the type he was looking for, and for reasons best known to himself, had brought me to this room, to extend the audition. Then I thought about the Ape who had brought in the trolley and I began to sweat again. I told myself not to start heroics with him. Tangling with him would be like tangling with a buzz saw, and that I was not going to do.

So I waited and sweated.

A half hour crept by. I kept looking at my watch, wondering when the action would begin. I had smoked four cigarettes and was beginning to fidget when the door snapped open and the ape man came in. He was followed by a short, swarthy complexioned man I immediately recognized by his lizard skin shoes as Joseph Durant.

As I made a move to get to my feet, he said in a hard metallic voice, 'Stay seated, Mr. Stevens.'

He walked to a lounging chair and sat down. I studied him. Lu's description had been accurate, but Lu hadn't added that this man not only gave off the aroma of wealth, but he also gave off an unmistakable aroma of sinister menace.

I glanced at the Ape, standing by the door. He was staring at me the way a tiger stares at a prospective meal. I decided to wait for Durant to make the opening move.

He took his time. His hard black eyes studied me, then he inclined his head in what I hoped was a nod of approval.

'Mr. Stevens,' he said finally, 'you are naturally wondering what this is all about. There is no need for you to be alarmed. It was necessary to bring you here the way you were brought here.'

'Kidnapping is a Federal offence,' I said, annoyed that my voice sounded so husky.

'So I believe.' He looked at his fingernails. 'This isn't the moment, Mr. Stevens, to discuss the legal aspects of bringing you here. Later, perhaps, but not now.' He crossed one solid leg over the other and swung a lizard skin shoe in my direction. 'There are facts about you, I need to confirm.' He paused, then went on, 'You are a bit-part actor with some success in Western movies. You have been unemployed for some six months. You are looking for work.' He eyed me. 'Is that correct?'

'Well, yes. I am looking for work,' I said defensively. 'Westerns are not the in-thing at the moment. They . . .'

He cut me short.

'You have no money. In fact, Mr. Stevens, you not only have no money, but you are in debt and you owe rent. Is that correct?'

I shrugged.

'Correct.'

He nodded.

'I believe I can offer you employment,' he said. 'The financial return to you will be more than adequate. I am prepared to pay you one thousand dollars a day for at least thirty days, possibly longer, providing you are prepared to conform to certain conditions.'

For a long moment, I sat still, stunned.

One thousand dollars a day for at least thirty days, possibly longer!

This can't be true, I thought. Where's the catch?

Yet looking at this man, I realized that one thousand dollars a day to him would be chick-feed. As Lu had said this man stank of money.

But I wasn't so bemused as to grab at such an offer. There was something about this man that warned me I could be walking into trouble. Again, I glanced at the Ape, standing motionless, glaring at me.

'That sounds interesting, Mr. Durant,' I said in my nonchalant voice. 'What are the conditions?'

'I want to buy your full hearted cooperation,' he returned. 'I understand that you have a placid temperament. Is that correct?'

'That depends. I've never had trouble with my directors. I've . . .'

He cut me off with a wave of his hand.

'Whole hearted cooperation. Let me spell it out. I will only hire you at one thousand dollars a day if you will do exactly what I tell you to do without any query or hesitation. That is what I mean by wholehearted cooperation. What I will ask you to do will not be dangerous, won't be breaking the law and won't be beyond your powers. You either give me your wholehearted cooperation or you don't get hired.'

There must be a catch in this, I thought, but my mind was already browsing over the thought of one thousand dollars a day.

'Just what is it, you want me to do?'

He studied me for a long, uncomfortable moment.

'So you are not prepared to give me your wholehearted cooperation without further details? Be sure about this.'

Was there a warning in his voice? I began to sweat again. To be paid one thousand dollars a day would be marvelous, but I felt in my bones there must be a catch in it. The kidnapping, the Ape, this big money bait and Durant, looking like someone connected with the Mafia, made up a scene that scared me. *It won't be dangerous, won't be breaking the law, won't be beyond your powers*. This was too glib. In spite of being desperate to earn money, I wasn't going to walk into anything, blind.

'No,' I said firmly, 'I'm not prepared to give you my wholehearted cooperation unless you tell me just what it is you want me to do.'

I heard a low growling noise from the Ape: a sound like distant thunder. Durant scratched his forehead, frowned, then shrugged.

'Very well, Mr. Stevens. I had hoped that this offer of money would be enough for you to agree to any work offered to you.'

'Then you are mistaken. So what do you want me to do?'

His thin lips parted in a wintry smile.

'As you insist, I will give you some idea of what will be required of you.' He paused, then taking out a lizard skin cigar case, he selected a cigar, rolled the cigar between his lips, then nipped off the end with a gold cigar cutter. He glanced over his shoulder at the Ape, who moved forward, struck a match and held the flame while Durant puffed.

While this was going on, I shook out a cigarette from the pack of Chesterfields and lit up.

'I need you to impersonate a man who resembles you,' Durant said, behind a cloud of rich smelling smoke.

This was the last thing I expected to hear.

'Impersonate? Who is this man?'

'For the moment, that is something you needn't know.'

'Why is it necessary for me to impersonate this man?'

Durant made a movement as if a fly was irritating him.

'The man you will be impersonating needs freedom of movement,' he said, a sudden rasp of impatience in his voice. 'He

is being constantly watched by a group of people. His freedom of movement is essential for promoting an important business deal. As he is being harassed by his business rivals and the press, we have decided to hire a standin — that is the word, I believe, you use in the movie world: a man who will draw off this group and the press who are becoming a nuisance, while the man you will be impersonating will be able to leave the country, travel in Europe and complete this deal without the constant worry of being followed and spied on. Once the deal has been completed, you will be able to return to your normal way of life with some thirty thousand dollars in your bank.'

I sat back and thought about this while Durant smoked and stared away from me. I had read enough about industrial spies. Once, I had played an industrial spy in a low grade movie. The machinations of the big wheelers to put through a deal had long ceased to surprise me. If this big wheel was being spied on, it seemed to me to be a smart move to hire a standin. It wouldn't bother me to be spied on, and there was this bait of one thousand dollars a day.

'But why the kidnapping?' I asked to gain time.

Durant let out an exasperated sigh.

'Now you have been told what you are required to do,' he said impatiently, 'you must see the utmost secrecy was necessary. No one knows you are here. You don't know where you are. Should you decline to cooperate, you will again be drugged and returned to your apartment.'

Again I thought, then said, 'How do I know I will be paid when I have completed the job?'

The wintry smile returned. He took from his wallet a slip of paper. The Ape moved forward, took it from him and handed it to me. It was a credit note on the Chase National Bank for one thousand dollars in my name.

'Every day you are here and working for me, you will be given a similar credit note,' Durant said. 'You don't have to worry about money.'

I no longer hesitated.

It won't be dangerous, won't be breaking the law, won't be beyond your powers.

So why not?

'Okay, Mr. Durant,' I said. 'You have yourself a deal.'

'It is understood then, Mr. Stevens,' he said, his black eyes like the points of an icepick, 'I am buying your wholehearted cooperation? You will do exactly what you will be told to do?'

Just for a moment I wavered, then made my decision.

'You have yourself a deal,' I repeated.

chapter two

I sat in the lounging chair and waited.

I was committed. I had said I would give Durant my wholehearted cooperation. I had a credit note in my wallet for one thousand dollars. According to him, tomorrow, I would be given another credit note for another one thousand dollars.

I was to impersonate some unknown big wheeler dealer while he went off to fix a deal his rivals either wanted to stop or wanted to know about. In return for impersonating him, I would, after thirty days, find in the Chase National Bank thirty thousand dollars to my credit.

When I had said it was a deal, Durant had nodded, got to his feet and moved to the door. He had paused, stared at me with his hard black eyes and said, 'Wait, Mr. Stevens,' then he left, followed by the Ape and the door slid shut.

So I lit a cigarette and waited.

I was far from feeling easy. There was something about Durant and the Ape that scared me, but I needed this kind of money. I had been assured there was no danger and I wouldn't be breaking the law, so it seemed to me, I would need to have my head examined to turn down an offer like this.

I waited uneasily for some thirty minutes, then the door slid back and the little old woman, plus her poodle, came in. The door must have been controlled by an electronic beam for she had taken only a couple of steps forward before the door snapped shut.

She was wearing a fawn, turtle neck cashmere sweater and black slacks: a rope of pearls with a sheen on them that told me they were genuine, completed this chic outfit. She paused and gave me a friendly smile. The poodle made a whining sound and struggled in her arms as if anxious to give me a lick of death.

'Mr. Stevens,' she said gently. 'May I intrude?'

I regarded her sourly, then got to my feet.

'Well, you're here, aren't you?' I said.

She moved further into the room, still smiling and sat down in the chair recently occupied by Durant.

'I have come to apologize, Mr. Stevens. I can quite understand how you are feeling. This must be so strange to you.'

Remaining standing, I said, 'Mr. Durant has explained.'

'Of course, but I don't want you to have any bad feelings, Mr. Stevens. Do sit down. I feel I must explain further.'

So I sat down.

'How nice of you,' she said, staring at me with her dark blue, hard eyes. 'Tell me, Mr. Stevens, is your mother alive?'

'She's been dead for the past five years,' I said curtly.

'Sad. Mr. Stevens, I am quite sure, if she were living, she would have done what I did. The man we are asking you to impersonate is my son.'

I thought of my mother: a kind, homely body without a brain in her head, but with a God fearing conscience.

'My mother wouldn't have drugged a man and kidnapped him,' I said coldly. 'Let us leave her out of this.'

She played with the poodle's ear.

'One never knows with mothers,' she said, still smiling. 'In trouble, they can rise to unexpected things.'

This was beginning to bore me. I shrugged and said nothing.

'I want you to believe, Mr. Stevens, that I do admire your work and your talent,' she said. 'It makes me very happy that you have agreed to cooperate. Your help will be more than appreciated.'

'I'm getting well paid,' I said woodenly.

'Yes. I understand that money is important to you.'

'Isn't it to most people?'

'I'm afraid you are still a little hostile, Mr. Stevens. Do please relax. You will be doing a most helpful job and when it is over, you will have quite a lot of money.'

She smiled. 'I am doing this for my son. Please understand.'

But I couldn't relax. There was something about this old woman that scared me as Durant scared me, but I made an effort. I forced a smile.

She nodded.

'That's better.' She patted the poodle. 'I've so often thought, when watching your movies, what a nice smile you have, Mr. Stevens.'

'Thank you.'

'Well, now, let us get down to business as my son so often says. You have been kind enough to give us your whole hearted cooperation.' For a brief moment, her smile became fixed, and the steel in the dark blue eyes showed. 'That is

right, isn't it?'

'Frankly, I'm getting bored with that phrase,' I said. 'I told Mr. Durant, I agreed to his terms. Do we have to go over and over it again?'

She gave a light little laugh.

'You must forgive an old woman, Mr. Stevens. Old women are inclined to be repetitive. Oh, incidentally, do call me Harriet. Let us be informal. May I call you Jerry?'

'Of course.'

'This afternoon, Jerry, we will begin. I have a good make-up man who will transform you as nearly as possible to resemble my son. Please be patient with him. He is a perfectionist and I must admit, a little tiresome. We want to be sure that you will resemble my son so closely no one viewing you from a distance won't know you are not my son. Is that understood?'

'That's okay with me.'

'Do call me Harriet.'

'Okay, Harriet.'

She lifted one of the poodle's ears, rubbed it between her fingers making the dog whine with pleasure.

'Then there will be other sessions. There will be other things for you to learn, but I am sure you are a quick study. Most actors are.' She smiled at me.

'I'll do my best,' I said.

'Of course you will. Nothing difficult, but it is important.' She paused, then went on, 'Are you married, Jerry?'

This unexpected question surprised me.

'Divorced,' I said curtly.

'So many people in the film world are divorced. Where is your wife?'

'Does that matter?'

She shook her head and gave me a playful smile.

'Please, Jerry, be cooperative. I need your answers to the questions I am going to ask.'

'She's in New York. She married again.'

'You don't see her?'

'I haven't seen her for the past five years.'

'Children?'

'None.'

'Your mother is dead. Your father?'

'He's dead too.'

'Your relations? Brothers? Sisters?'

I began to get a creepy feeling up my spine.

'Now that you mention it,' I said. 'I have no relations.'

'How sad!' She didn't look sad. 'So you are quite on your own.'

'That's it.'

She nodded.

'Now, an attractive man like you must have a girlfriend. Tell me about her.'

'An actor worth one dollar and thirty cents doesn't have a girlfriend.'

Again she nodded.

'Yes, of course, but very soon, Jerry, with thirty thousand dollars in your bank, you will have many girlfriends. It is all a matter of patience.'

She was right there. I had all the girlfriends I needed when I had been making money. With thirty thousand dollars in the bank, I would only have to whistle.

'Now that we have your wholehearted cooperation, Jerry,' she went on, after a pause, 'I want to tell you about Mazzo.' She spent a moment fondling the poodle. 'I really don't know what I would do without Mazzo. His appearance is deceptive, but there is nothing he wouldn't do for me . . . nothing.'

I looked blankly at her.

'You have already met him. Mazzo is my loyal and true servant who brought you that delicious meal that I had ordered specially for you.'

I gaped at her.

'You mean that — that Ape of a man?'

She patted her poodle.

‘You mustn’t speak unkindly of Mazzo’s looks. No one can be as handsome as you, Jerry. Mazzo is going to be your constant companion, Jerry. He will help you in many things. Without him by your side, I don’t think you would succeed in impersonating my son. For years now, Mazzo has been my son’s bodyguard. When you are seen together, it will be assumed you are my son.’

The thought of having that Ape as a constant companion gave me goose pimples.

As I was about to protest, she went on, ‘Changing the subject, Jerry, have you ever met Larry Edwards?’

‘Why, sure,’ I said, surprised by the question. ‘Why do you ask?’

I certainly remembered Larry Edwards. He was like me: an unemployed bit-part actor. We often met at Lu Prentz’s office, both hunting for work. We hadn’t much in common, as both of us wondered if one of us would get a job the other was hoping for, but we did have an occasional beer together and moaned about our hard times.

‘I was just wondering. He was rather like you in appearance: tall, dark,’ Harriet said, smiling. ‘He hadn’t your personality, of course. We did consider him for the job you have now accepted. In fact, we brought him here and discussed the idea with him, but he wouldn’t cooperate. He raised all kinds of difficulties. I am so very glad you aren’t going to be difficult, Jerry . . . so very glad.’

I stared at her, feeling a chill move over me.

‘You are talking about him in the past tense,’ I said.

‘Yes . . . sad.’ She rose to her feet. ‘I’ll ask Mazzo to bring you some books. Please tell him what you would like for lunch.’ She made for the door.

‘What’s happened to Larry?’ I asked, my hands clammy.

She paused at the door.

‘Oh, didn’t you know? He had an accident. Something wrong with the brakes of his car, I believe.’ Her dark blue hard eyes fixed me. ‘He’s dead.’

The door slid open and she was gone.

* * *

An hour later, the door slid back and Mazzo came in, carrying a number of paperbacks. These he set on the table.

‘You want something to read?’

This was the first time I had heard his voice and the sound startled me. It was husky and soft whereas I expected a growl of a bear.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

He stalked over to the chair Harriet had been sitting in and sat down. He grinned at me, showing small white teeth a rat might envy.

‘We’re going to live together, palsy, so we may as well get acquainted, huh?’

‘Why not?’

He nodded his shaven head.

‘There’s nothing to it, palsy, so long as you do exactly what I tell you to do. It’s dead easy money, but don’t ask with the questions. I tell you to blow snot, you blow it. Get it? I tell you to look left, you look left. Get it? I tell you to look right, you look right. Get it? I tell you to run fast, you run fast. Get it?’

‘You have made your point,’ I said.

He wrinkled his forehead.

‘You mean you get it?’

‘I get it.’

‘Okay. The other jerk didn’t get it.’ He lost his smile and looked like a tiger regarding a prospective meal. ‘Too bad for him.’

My mouth turned dry.

‘I heard he had a car accident.’

‘Sure . . . jerks like him often have car accidents.’ He smiled at me. ‘You’re smart, palsy. You won’t have a car accident.’

I didn’t say anything. The hint was there because Larry Edwards hadn’t cooperated, he had been murdered. I couldn’t accept this, but the hint was there.

‘Now, this afternoon, palsy, we start business. Just go along with it, huh?’

I nodded.

‘A creep will come and work you over. Just sit still and let him have his way. Get it?’

Again I nodded.

He smiled.

‘You know, palsy, you and me are going to get along fine together. I saw that movie of yours: The Sheriff of X Ranch. I thought it stank.’

‘So did I,’ I said hoarsely.

He widened his smile.

‘See what I mean? We’re going to get along fine.’

‘Mrs. Harriet liked it.’

‘Sure . . . women! They like anything that moves.’

He got to his feet. ‘Whatcha want to eat for lunch, palsy? You name it, you have it.’

My stomach was churning. The thought of food made me cringe.

‘I had a fine breakfast. Nothing, thanks.’

He released a soft laugh. It sounded like someone stepping on a pair of bellows.

‘Take it easy, palsy. You have nothing to worry about. I’ll have something light fixed for you, huh?’

He moved his great body to the door, turned, smiled his rat smile and went away.

Could Larry have been murdered?

I sat there, sweating.

Something went wrong with his brakes.

No, I couldn’t believe it. I pushed the frightening thought out of my mind.

So I just sat still. I didn’t even get up to look at the paperbacks. I had this frightening thought that now I had committed myself and had accepted the first payment, I would have to do whatever these people told me to do.

He had an accident. Something wrong with his brakes. He’s dead.

I thought of Mazzo’s rat smile.

Man! I thought. What the hell have you walked into?

Can it be possible, that unless you go along with these awful people, if you don’t do just what they want you to do, you could finish up dead?

I sat there, working myself up into a monumental panic.

At 13.00, Mazzo wheeled in a trolley.

‘Take something, palsy,’ he said. ‘It’ll be a long afternoon.’ He regarded me. ‘You feeling okay?’

‘Yes, but I don’t want anything.’

‘You eat something. Get it?’ There was a sudden snarl in his soft voice. ‘You’ve work to do,’ and he stalked out.

So I ate some of the lobster soup because I was scared not to. It was so good, I finally finished it, then sat away from the trolley, fighting the inclination to throw up.

Then action began.

Mazzo came in, inspected the empty tureen, smiled at me and wheeled out the trolley. Then Harriet, minus the poodle, came in, followed by a short, fat man in a short sleeved white overall, carrying what looked like an expensive vanity box.

This man was something to see. His hair, thick and long, was dyed the color of apricots. His eyelids were tinted pale blue and his lips were shell pink. He paused as the door slid shut and gave me a half sly, half roguish smile.

‘Jerry, dear,’ Harriet said. ‘This is Charles. He knows just what to do. Do, please, be cooperative. I want to make sure you will pass as my son.’ She turned to the fat little man. ‘Charles, this is Jerry Stevens.’

‘My dear boy!’ Charles gushed, bounding forward. ‘I can’t tell you how thrilled I am to meet you. I have seen so many of your wonderful movies! What talent! The Sheriff of X Ranch! I was overwhelmed!’ He seized my hand and shook it. ‘It is my great, great pleasure to meet you!’

‘Thank you,’ I said, not believing a word of this gush.

‘Charles!’ A curt note in Harriet’s voice made him stiffen. ‘You are wasting my time!’

‘Yes, yes, of course.’ He gave her a cringing smile. ‘We mustn’t waste time.’

I saw tiny sweat beads on his forehead.

‘Then get on with it!’ She moved to the door. ‘Ring when you have finished.’

Both Charles and I watched her leave, then when the door slid back, I said, ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Sit down, please, Mr. Stevens.’

He went to the box, opened it to display a complete make-up kit. From it he took a pair of calipers, a scratch pad and pencil.

‘I have to measure your face, Mr. Stevens. Forgive me for inconveniencing you,’ he said.

I held my head still while he took measurements, noting the results on the scratch pad.

As he was taking the measurements between my eyes, I became aware that he was whispering. Between his gush and his whispering, his conversation went like this: ‘Marvelous eyes, so full of personality. I’ve been kidnapped! Who are these people? Mr. Stevens! Your features are so regular! This dreadful woman terrifies me! I have been a prisoner for more than two months. Now allow me to measure your ears. Just turn your head to the right. Who is she? Please tell me. That’s perfect. Now the left ear.’

I realized this aged queer was in the same predicament as I was. He had been kidnapped to turn me into Harriet’s son.

‘I don’t know,’ I whispered. ‘I’m supposed to impersonate her son. I ‘ve been kidnapped too.’

Then looking beyond him as he was measuring my left ear, I saw Mazzo had come in silently. The sight of him, staring at me, scared the hell out of me.

Charles, seeing my change of expression, looked over his shoulder. I felt his fat frame tremble.

‘Ah, Mazzo!’ he exclaimed in a thin, shrill voice, ‘I have finished. All will be perfect!’

Mazzo moved into the room. On his arm, he carried clothing. He gave Charles his hungry tiger look, then he showed his rat teeth at me in a smile.

‘Put these on, palsy,’ he said.

He tossed a suit onto a chair.

‘Of course,’ Charles said. ‘The clothes.’

Aware that I was now sweating, I stood up, stripped off my clothes and put on the suit Mazzo had tossed on the chair.

This was some suit: a dark grey mohair that must have cost a bomb. It fitted me like a glove. Charles, his eyes frightened, fluttered around me, patting the suit, then he drew back.

‘The clothes will be no problem.’

Mazzo smiled at me.

‘You’re lucky. They didn’t fit the other jerk.’

I took off the suit and put on my own clothes while the two of them watched me.

My mind was darting around in sick panic, Jesus! What have I walked into? I thought. I looked at the wilting, sweating Charles who was smiling at Mazzo like a dog expecting a beating.

‘The hair,’ Charles said. ‘That needs attention. I must do that. Please sit down, Mr. Stevens.’ He went into the bathroom and returned with a towel which he draped around my shoulders.

From his box, he produced a comb and scissors. He began to snip while Mazzo prowled around the room. Between the snips, and while Mazzo was at the far end of the room, Charles breathed words, leaning forward, his lips nearly touching my ear.

‘They are paying me so much! I’m so frightened! What has happened to the other man? I put in hours of work on him.’

Then Mazzo came back and stood over us, and he remained standing over us so this frightening one-way conversation had to cease.

Finally, Charles stood back and surveyed me: his tinted lidded eyes pools of fright.

‘Yes! Perfect!’ he exclaimed. ‘Now, the limp. Mr. Stevens, please give me your right shoe.’

I took off my right shoe and gave it to him. He went to the table and sat down. From the box, he took a small screwdriver and levered off part of the heel of my shoe. Again from his box, he produced a leather wedge which he screwed to the heel.

All this took a little time. I just sat, watching him, while Mazzo stood watching me and Charles.

‘Let us see,’ Charles said. ‘Please put on the shoe and walk to the window and back.’

I put on the shoe, stood up and walked to the window. The thick wedge he had screwed to the heel of my shoe threw me slightly off balance. I found I was walking like a man with an injured leg. I limped back and stood, waiting.

‘Perfect,’ Charles said.

At this moment, the door slid back and Mrs. Harriet came in, carrying the poodle.

‘Well, Charles?’

‘The hair. Please tell me.’

Her dark blue eyes surveyed me for a long moment, then she nodded.

‘Excellent,’ she said. ‘You are a great artist, Charles.’

He began to simper, then the simper turned into a grimace. I could read his fears. He was a kidnapped captive as I was.

‘And the walk?’ Harriet said.

‘That has been arranged.’ Charles gave me a pleading look. ‘May I ask you, Mr. Stevens, to walk to the window and back?’

So I limped to the shuttered window and back.

‘Please do it again, Jerry,’ Harriet said.

So I did it again.

'Yes, it will do,' she said. 'Now, we are getting somewhere. Take Charles to his room, Mazzo. Charles! We must not waste time. Get working on the mask.'

'Of course.' He walked before Mazzo and out of the room.

Harriet sat down.

'Now, Jerry, you have to earn the money we are paying you. So far, so good. Now you have a more difficult task. You must to able to forge my son's signature.'

At this moment, Durant came in, carrying a briefcase.

He went to the table and sat down, zipped open the briefcase and produced a pack of tracing paper, a Parker pen, and a stack of paper which he laid on the desk.

Harriet got to her feet.

'I will leave you with Mr. Durant. He will explain what you are required to do,' and she left.

Durant regarded me.

'Come here and sit down, Stevens,' he said.

I came there and sat down opposite him at the table. I noted I was no longer 'Mr.'.

'This is a matter of practice, Stevens,' he said. 'Here is the signature you must copy and perfect. You will use tracing paper until you feel confident you can reproduce the signature without aid.' He pushed a sheet of paper towards me on which was scrawled a signature. He then placed a sheet of tracing paper over the signature.

'Copy it and keep copying it.' he said. 'You must be able to write this signature perfectly at a moment's notice. This will, of course, take you several days. Work at it, Stevens.' He stared at me. 'No one gets paid one thousand dollars a day without working for it.'

He got to his feet, crossed over to the electronic door and the door snapped shut behind him.

I looked at the scrawling signature: John Merrill Ferguson.

For a long moment, I stared at the signature, scarcely believing my eyes.

John Merrill Ferguson.

If the signature had been that of Howard Hughes, I couldn't have been more taken aback. Howard Hughes was dead, but John Merrill Ferguson, according to the newspapers, was very much alive. While waiting for telephone calls, I used to read a lot of newspapers my neighbor left for me. They contained continual references to John Merrill Ferguson who, according to the press, had taken over Howard Hughes' mantle. The press called him the mysterious billionaire wheeler dealer who pulled strings that made politicians dance, who could, with a flick of a finger, make the stock market of the world either rise or wilt, who seemed to have a financial finger in every big deal.

I sat there, staring at the signature. Into my mind, came the frightening thought that I was being groomed to impersonate this man!

Me! A bit-part unsuccessful actor to impersonate one of the most powerful and richest men in the world!

I realized now the answer to this mystery that had been baffling me. The little old woman with her Rolls Royce: Durant reeking of money: Mazzo, possibly a killer: this room with its electronic door and luxury furnishing: the frightened Charles who had, like me, been kidnapped.

A man of John Merrill Ferguson's power had only to give orders and what had happened to me and to Charles just happened.

I thought of Larry Edwards.

Jerks like him often have accidents. You're smart, palsy. You won't have an accident.

It now came to me with a frightening impact that, because Larry had refused to cooperate, he had been murdered! Knowing now who I was dealing with, suspecting some vast financial deal was being planned and that secrecy was essential, these people wouldn't let Larry free after kidnapping him, sure he would talk.

So there had been a murderous accident.

This wasn't going to happen to me! I would cooperate.

Man! Would I cooperate!

With a sweating, unsteady hand, I drew the tracing paper and the signature towards me and began to try, desperately, not only to earn my one thousand dollars a day, but also to keep alive.

* * *

Two hours later, I threw down the pen and stared at my last effort. The floor was littered with screwed up tracing paper. My last effort to forge John Merrill Ferguson's signature was worse than my first.

My hand ached, my fingers were stiff, and panic made my heart pound.

I pushed back my chair and stood up. I began to pace the room. Suppose I couldn't forge the signature? Would Durant look for someone else? Would this result in a prick of a needle and an accident skillfully arranged?

I had to succeed!

I flexed my fingers, then walked into the bathroom and ran water into the toilet basin until it ran hot. I immersed my aching hand in the water. When the water cooled, I emptied the basin and refilled it with hot water. After a while my hand became relaxed. I returned to the table and began work again.

I was still at it, an hour later, when the door slid back and Durant, followed by Mazzo, came in.

Durant looked at the mess of screwed up paper on the floor, then he came over to the table and picked up my last effort and studied it.

I watched him, my heart thudding.

Finally, he said, 'Not bad. I see, Stevens, you intend to cooperate. For a first attempt, this is encouraging.'

I sat back in my chair, feeling a surge of relief run through me.

'That will do for today. Tomorrow, you will try again.' He regarded me with his hard, ruthless eyes. 'You have three days in which to perfect the signature.' He turned to Mazzo. 'Clear up this mess, then attend to Stevens' needs,' and he left.

Mazzo found a wastepaper basket and began picking up the balls of paper. I helped him. When the room was tidy again, Mazzo smiled at me.

'Palsy, you're going to survive. Anyone who can please that sonofabitch is smart.'

I didn't say anything, but I registered the fact that Mazzo had no time for Durant.

'Well, palsy, how about a little workout in the gym?' Mazzo asked. 'A big guy like you doesn't want to sit on his butt all day. Let's go and loosen up.'

I was glad to get out of my prison and walk along the corridor to an elevator. He and I sank between floors, and when the elevator stopped, the door swung open. Mazzo led the way into a large, fully equipped gymnasium.

'I've seen you on TV, palsy. You're a good fighter,' Mazzo said, giving me his rat smile. 'Let's put on the gloves, huh?'

I did consider myself a good scrapper. When playing the roles of baddies in Westerns, I had prided myself not to have a double. But, looking at this man mountain, I felt a qualm.

'I have to be careful of my hands, Mazzo,' I said. 'I have this writing job.'

Again the rat smile.

'Sure . . . sure. Nothing to it, palsy. We wear gloves. Just a little sparring. Nothing to it.'

He went to a locker and produced two pairs of sparring gloves. Seeing there was no way out, I took off my jacket and shirt while he did the same. The sight of his huge muscles alarmed me. I put on the gloves and waited until he also put on the gloves, then we faced each other.

I pranced around him, noting he was slow on his feet: a man of his size had to be slow. He pushed out his left and I shifted my head and poked him hard on his nose.

He shuffled away, and I saw surprise in his little eyes.

He sent over a left hook. It was telegraphed, and I took it on my right glove, but the force of the hook sent me back. I knew if one of his punches landed, I would be flattened. He hit like a pile driver.

We pranced politely around. I poked his head back when he came too close and he snorted. This went on for some minutes, then I saw an evil smile flicker on his lipless mouth. I felt instinctively, he was about to launch a blockbuster. I didn't give him time to get set.

I weaved towards him, jabbing with my left in his face, throwing him off balance, then I let fly with my best right hand hook with all my weight behind it. My fist smashed on his jaw and he went down as if the bones in his legs had turned to putty. His shoulders crashed down on a wrestling mat: his eyes rolled back: he was out to the world.

I tore off the gloves and knelt beside him, lifted his shaven head, patting his cheeks.

I was scared witless that when he recovered, he would tear me apart.

It took more than ten seconds for him to come to the surface. When I saw the light of life come into his eyes, I pushed him into a sitting position, then I stood away as one might stand away from a drugged tiger, getting to its feet.

He peered at me, then he smiled: not a rat smile this time, but a wide, friendly grin.

'That was a beaut, palsy,' he said, and shook his head. 'Man, can you sock!' He offered me his hand and I dragged him to his feet. He rubbed his jaw, then burst out laughing. 'And I was dim enough to take you for a phoney.'

I drew in a long, slow breath of relief.

'I'm sorry, Mazzo. You had me scared. If you had caught me with one of your blockbusters, I couldn't have worked for Mr. Durant. I had to uncork my best.'

He peeled off his gloves and again rubbed his jaw, staring at me, then he nodded his shaven head.

'You're right, palsy. Listen, don't say anything about this to that sonofabitch. He would have my balls. Okay?'

'Sure, and would you skip the palsy routine. Call me Jerry.'

He stared at me for a long moment, then nodded.

'Yeah. Well, come on, Jerry, let's have a workout.'

Although I was practically sure he was a killer and I feared him, I had a feeling that now he just might be on my side. We worked together throwing a medicine ball around and with the bars until we were both sweating.

I felt I had made a major step forward.

After we had showered and redressed, he led me back to my room.

By now, I was hungry.

'You ask, you get,' Mazzo said when I said it was time to eat. 'Anything goes here.'

So I asked for chicken Maryland.

He patted me on my shoulder.

'You like that, Jerry? Me too.' He rubbed his jaw and widened his smile. 'You're going to survive.' He tapped his vast chest. 'I'm telling you,' and he went away.

* * *

The next day was a replica of the previous day.

When Mazzo wheeled in the breakfast trolley, I found another credit note in my favor for one thousand dollars. This was encouraging.

Breakfast over, I sat at the table and worked on John Merrill Ferguson's signature. I was in a more relaxed mood, and I began to feel more confident.

After an hour, I discarded the tracing paper and kept on writing the signature on ordinary paper. I was still doing this, an hour later, when the door slid back and Durant came in. He stood over me, studying my many attempts.

'Take a fresh piece of paper and write the signature,' he said.

I did as I was told. He took the paper and examined the signature.

'Yes. You are doing well, Stevens. Keep at it. I want you to be as familiar with this signature as you are with your own.' He moved away. 'I have been making arrangements for you. I have paid your rent, and your clothes and personal effects have been packed and are here. I have seen your agent, Prentz, and have paid him the commission he asked for. I have told him you are now in Europe, working for me. You have no further ties nor debts.' He paused to stare at me. 'You are entirely at my disposal.'

I felt scared. There was something in his staring eyes that sent a red light flashing in my mind.

'Continue with the signature,' he went on. 'Tomorrow, if I am satisfied, you will be moved from here, and you will begin the impersonation.'

'Where do I go?' I asked huskily.

'You will be told later. So far, Stevens, you are proving satisfactory. Remember, you don't ask questions,' he said curtly and left me.

It took me some minutes before I could bring myself to begin again the dreary chore of writing the signature.

I was committed. At least, so far, I was giving satisfaction and making money.

Lunchtime arrived. Mazzo wheeled in the trolley.

The meal was a big prawn salad, decorated with slices of lobster meat.

'Okay?' he said, smiling at me. 'Build yourself up, Jerry. You have work to do this afternoon.'

Two hours later, when I was still working on the signature, the door opened. Mazzo, followed by Charles, came in.

Charles was carrying his make-up box. Mazzo had a suit over his arm and a pair of shoes in his hand.

'Mr. Stevens!' Charles exclaimed rather breathlessly. 'We must get to work.' His eyes were darting with fright and there were sweat beads on his forehead. He put the make-up box on the table. From it he took what looked like an overlarge rubber surgical glove.

'Get into these clothes, Jerry,' Mazzo said.

It was the same suit I had put on before. I put it on.

'Now the shoes.'

These I put on.

'Please sit down, Mr. Stevens,' Charles said.

Carefully, he unfolded the piece of rubber and it became a face mask. This he fitted over my face.

‘This is the thinnest latex, Mr. Stevens,’ he said. ‘It won’t be uncomfortable. It is on this base I work.’ He was molding the rubber mask to my skin. There were blank eyepieces and I could see without trouble. ‘Now the eyebrows and the moustache.’ He worked away, then finally stood back. ‘It is simple, Mr. Stevens. You will have a good supply of eyebrows and moustaches. I have three masks, in case you have an accident. You will be able to arrange this yourself without trouble.’

He took a photograph from his make-up box, studied it, then studied me. ‘Excellent. Please go to the mirror. See for yourself.’

I got to my feet, and because of the raised wedge in the heel of the shoe, I limped to the wall mirror and surveyed myself. For a long moment, I stared, feeling a cold chill run over me. This wasn’t me! The man in the mirror was a total stranger. The latex mask showed a handsome, heavily tanned face with a thin nose, a firm mouth and an aggressive jaw. The thin eyebrows and the pencil line moustache gave this image distinction. I just stood staring, and it was only when I moved that I convinced myself that the reflection in the mirror was me, and not someone else.

I became aware that Harriet and Durant had come into the room.

I turned.

‘Walk,’ Durant said.

I limped across the room, turned and limped back to the table.

‘Wonderful!’ Harriet exclaimed. ‘No one could tell them apart! Your talents, Charles, are worthy of your great reputation.’

Charles simpered.

‘Thank you. Great care must be used to fit the mask. Mr. Stevens is used to making up. There will be no problems.’ He smiled uneasily. ‘Now, my work is done. I would like to go home. I have many, many commitments.’

‘Of course,’ Harriet said. She waved to Mazzo. ‘Arrange for Mr. Charles to go to his home.’

‘Thank you, thank you.’ Charles’s face lit up with relief. ‘You can depend on my discretion. I am so glad everything is so satisfactory.’ He moved to the door, paused to give me a shy smile. ‘It has been a pleasure, Mr. Stevens. Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye,’ I said, thinking he was lucky to get out of this mess, but, then, how was I to know this was his last goodbye?

chapter three

I spent the whole of the following morning practicing John Merrill Ferguson's signature. By now, I was getting fluent, and it no longer worried me that the task was beyond my powers.

Again, with the breakfast trolley, there was a credit note for one thousand dollars.

As I worked, after breakfast, I remembered Durant had said that today, I would be moved from here and begin the impersonation. The sooner it began, the sooner I would be free.

After lunch, Durant appeared with a legal looking document which he put on the table.

'Use a pencil and sign here,' he said curtly.

Picking up a pencil, I signed Ferguson's name with a flourish.

Durant examined what I had written, then nodded.

'Do it again in ink,' he said.

Using the Parker pen, I signed over the pencil signature.

Again he studied what I had written, then he regarded me with his hard, dark eyes. 'You have passed the test, Stevens.' He crossed to a chair and sat down. 'The impersonation will begin this evening. You will be taken to Mr. Ferguson's residence in Paradise City, Florida. There, you will meet Mr. Ferguson's wife. She knows about this impersonation. You have nothing to worry about. You will have your own quarters, and you will have no contact with the staff. Mr. Ferguson hasn't had contact with his staff for some time, so this will not be considered unusual. Mazzo will attend to your needs. At certain times, wearing the disguise, you will show yourself in the grounds of the estate. Mazzo will be with you. Three times a week, you will be driven to the corporation's office. Again Mazzo and others will be with you. None of the staff will approach you. All you will have to do is to sign letters and documents. I will be directing the operation. I have arranged for Mr. Ferguson's personal secretary to go on vacation. I have replaced her with a woman who has never seen Mr. Ferguson. No problem there.' He paused to stare at me. 'You will do exactly what I say. You will sign any paper I give you without question.' Again, he paused to stare at me. 'Is that understood?'

'Yes,' I said.

'As you see, Stevens, you are being well paid for very little effort.'

If it was going to be that simple, I agreed with him, but was it?

He got to his feet.

'We leave at seven this evening. You will wear the disguise. Mazzo will assist you. Whenever Mr. Ferguson takes a trip, there are always spies and the press. Do exactly what Mazzo tells you, and there will be no problem.'

Taking the document I had signed, he left.

Paradise City! I had often read about this fabulous playground for billionaires, and I had often dreamed of taking a vacation there. So that's where the Ferguson residence was. To add to the excitement, I was to meet Ferguson's wife.

Man! I thought, you are moving up in the social scale. When this impersonation was over, I promised myself I would find some cute dolly-bird and have a real vacation in Paradise City, spending some of the thirty thousand dollars that would be waiting for me in the Chase National Bank.

With these thoughts to entertain me, the rest of the afternoon passed quickly.

At 18.00, Mazzo came in, carrying a suitcase.

'Here we go, Jerry,' he said, putting the suitcase on the table. 'Change into these clothes.'

He produced an off-white linen suit, a pale blue, silk shirt, a dark red cravat and a pair of fawn colored loafers.

I put on the clothes.

'Pretty fancy, huh?' Mazzo said, and released his sighing laugh. He took from a box the latex mask. 'Can you fix this?'

'Sure.' I limped into the bathroom. They hadn't forgotten to build up the right heel of the new pair of shoes.

It took me a little time to fix the mask. I was scared of damaging it, but I finally got it fixed. Then I gummed the eyebrows and the moustache in place.

Mazzo stood in the doorway watching me.

'It sure is something,' he said. 'I wouldn't know you from the boss.'

'That's the idea,' I said.

'Here's a hat and dark glasses,' Mazzo went on, producing a broad brimmed white hat which I put on. He then gave me black skiing goggles.

Again he stared at me.

'I'll fetch Mr. Durant. He'll want to see you before we take off. Go over by the bed and wait.'

When he had gone, I stared at myself in the long mirror.

So this is what John Merrill Ferguson, one of the richest and most powerful men in the world, looked like.

An extraordinary feeling of excitement ran through me. This man, facing me, was John Merrill Ferguson! I lifted my right hand and John Merrill Ferguson lifted his right hand. I took two steps back and John Merrill Ferguson took two steps back. I smiled at him and he smiled at me.

Then a thought dropped into my mind. What had this man got that I hadn't got? Never mind about his money and his power. Certainly, I hadn't his money nor his power, but I had his face, his clothes, and I could now easily forge his signature.

This thought seed had dropped into my mind: no more than a tiny seed, but seeds germinate. This thought seed was forgotten as I heard Durant come into the room.

I limped out of the bathroom, limped across the room to the bed, then turned and faced him.

I felt a tingle of satisfaction when I saw the startled expression jump into his eyes.

After staring at me, he said, 'Very good.' He turned to Mazzo who was standing in the doorway. 'We'll go,' he said, curtly, and left the room.

'I told you, Jerry,' Mazzo said, grinning. 'It's a beaut.'

I made no move, but looked directly at him.

'This is just a suggestion, Mazzo,' I said in my confidential voice. 'Wouldn't it be safer, if from now on, you call me Mr. Ferguson instead of Jerry?'

He gaped at me.

'Whatcha mean? Listen, palsy, you're not the boss. I don't call you Mr. Ferguson. You do what I tell you to do and that's it.'

'You call me Jerry or palsy, Mazzo,' I said, 'and someone overhears and we are in the shit. I am Mr. Ferguson. I do what you tell me, but call me Mr. Ferguson.'

He rubbed his huge hand over his shaven head while he thought. I could almost hear his brain creaking, then finally, he nodded.

'Yeah. You've got something.' Then he grinned. 'Okay, Mr. Ferguson, sir, let's go.'

I didn't realize, as I followed him from the room, the tiny seed thought had begun to germinate.

I followed him down the broad staircase into the brightly lit lobby.

Harriet Ferguson, cuddling her poodle, stood in the doorway of the main living room.

Durant, holding a briefcase, stood by the front door.

Mazzo moved aside.

'Go ahead, Mr. Ferguson,' he said.

I passed him on the stairs, and seeing the old woman was watching, I paused on the final stair and looked directly at her. I heard her catch her breath. I smiled at her. The smile was stiff because of the mask, but it was a smile.

'It is fantastic,' she exclaimed, looking at Durant.

'Yes,' he said. 'We must go.'

Mazzo gave me a slight nudge. I limped forward, then went up to the old woman.

'Madam,' I said. 'I hope you are satisfied.'

'You could be my son,' she said, and I saw tears in her eyes.

'That would be a privilege,' I said, hamming it up.

Then I lifted her hand and brushed it with my lips: ripe corn, straight out of a 1935 movie.

I turned away and limped towards Durant who was watching the scene with that sour look a director got when I so often tried to steal a scene from the lead.

Outside, in the gathering dusk, was the Rolls. The Jap chauffeur was holding open the door.

Durant got in. I followed. Mazzo sat with the chauffeur.

As we drove onto the highway, Durant said, 'When we reach the airport, Stevens, we will find the press waiting. They can't get near you, but they will be there. We fly in the Corporation's aircraft. You will do exactly what Mazzo tells you. There will be no problem. Don't hurry. Remember, you are John Merrill Ferguson. You will be well guarded. When you climb the stairway of the plane, you can pause, turn and lift your hand. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Mr. Durant,' I said.

'Once in the plane, Stevens,' he went on, 'you will nod to the air hostesses and sit. You won't be disturbed until we arrive. I will brief you on the arrival.'

The seed of thought was continuing to germinate.

'There's one small point, and it could be important,' I said. 'This is only a suggestion, Mr. Durant. Wouldn't it be safer for you to quit calling me Stevens? I don't know what you call Mr. Ferguson, but wouldn't it be wiser to call me what you

call him? A slip of the tongue could bitch the whole operation, and I don't want to be blamed.'

I didn't look at him, but looked steadily at the back of the Jap chauffeur's head.

There was a long pause, then Durant said, 'Yes, you have a point, Mr. Ferguson. You are showing intelligence.'

'If it comes unstuck, Mr. Durant, I wouldn't want it to be my fault.'

'Yes.' He breathed heavily. 'Then you had better call me Joe.' The rasp in his voice told me how he hated this.

'Okay, Joe.'

Nothing more was said until we reached the airport.

Then Durant said, 'Do nothing. Say nothing. Leave this to Mazzo.'

I couldn't resist my triumph.

'I hear you, Joe,' I said.

The Rolls was obviously expected.

Guards opened the double gate and saluted as we drove through. Feeling like royalty, I slightly raised my hand in a return salute.

'Do nothing!' Durant snarled.

The car drove around the perimeter of the airfield.

Ahead, I could see blinding lights and a big crowd of figures. Beyond them was an aircraft, floodlit.

Man! Was I getting a bang out of this!

The Rolls drove through a raised barrier that immediately descended. Some fifteen men stood at the foot of the stairway to the plane. They looked what they were: tough, efficient bodyguards.

Mazzo slid out of the car. Durant gave me a nudge, so I got out, and he followed me.

'Get moving!' Durant rasped. .

In the dazzle of the floodlights, I walked towards the stairway.

There was an immediate clamor of sound.

'Mr. Ferguson! Look this way!'

'Mr. Ferguson! Just a few words!'

'Mr. Ferguson! A moment, please!'

Voices shouted: the baying of the press. Flashlights went off. I could hear the whirr of TV cameras. This was the most exciting moment of my life! This was the stuff I had so often dreamed about when I hoped I would finally become a great movie star with the press clamoring and photographers fighting to get near me.

I started up the stairway with Durant following closely behind me. My heart was thumping.

'Mr. Ferguson!'

The name was repeated over and over again. The sound waves of the voices hammered around me.

Man! Did I feel great!

At the top of the staircase, I paused, turned and looked down at the sea of faces, the TV cameras, the bodyguard, the struggling photographers. Feeling like the President of the United States of America, I lifted my hand in a regal salute, then Durant, moving up, practically shoved me inside the aircraft and the show was over.

* * *

I had often read about the private aircrafts owned by wheeler dealers, but this aircraft, as I moved past two smiling girls, wearing dark green uniforms with brown pillbox hats, made me gape.

The passenger accommodation had been replaced by small leather covered lounging chairs, an executive desk with a high black leather chair, a big cocktail bar, a board room table with ten chairs and a wall-to-wall heavy pile dark red carpet.

To the side, was a leather chair with a leg extension which looked comfortable enough to sleep in.

'Sit there,' Durant said, pointing to the chair.

I lowered my body into the comfort of the chair, took off my hat and dropped it on the floor.

Mazzo came forward, picked it up and took it away.

Durant went forward and out of my sight. I heard the aircraft's door slam shut.

Through the drawn curtains of the windows, I could see the glare of the TV lights and I itched to draw aside one of the curtains to take a look at the press below, but this wasn't the time.

A few minutes later, the aircraft's jets came alive and minutes later, the aircraft began its take-off.

Durant returned and sat at the desk. He opened his briefcase, took out a mass of papers and began to read.

I relaxed in the chair, closed my eyes and thought about the reception I had had. What it was to be worth billions of

dollars! I thought of my dreary years of grind, trying to make it as a movie star. Now, suddenly, I was being treated as one of the richest and most powerful men in the world, and I loved it!

I was content to lie there with my thoughts for the next twenty minutes, then it occurred to me that as I was John Merrill Ferguson, I should receive some attention.

Durant was still immersed in his reading. I glanced around and saw Mazzo dozing in a chair behind me.

'Mazzo!' I said sharply.

Both he and Durant looked up.

Mazzo hesitated, then got to his feet and came to me.

'A double Scotch on the rocks, and I want something to eat,' I said.

Mazzo blinked, then looked at Durant who glared at me, hesitated, then nodded.

'Okay, Mr. Ferguson,' Mazzo said and went away.

After staring at me for a long moment, Durant returned to his reading.

One of the air hostesses brought the drink. I gave her a nod of thanks. By the time I had finished the drink, a meal, brought on a trolley was served: an excellent hors d'oeuvre, followed by a fillet of steak in a wine sauce and a selection of cheeses.

The two air hostesses served me. I guessed Durant had been smart enough to have got two girls who had never seen Ferguson. Their reactions were of two girls serving one of the richest and most powerful men in the world. One of them, a cute blonde, kept giving me a sexy smile. I was sure I could have put my hand up her short skirt and she wouldn't have squealed.

Cigars and brandy followed.

Man! I thought this is the way to live!

'Would you like something to read, Mr. Ferguson?' the sexy one asked.

I remembered I had been out of circulation now for three days.

'Get me a newspaper, please,' I said.

She hip-swished away and returned with the California Times.

I settled down to read.

There was nothing new in the paper: the usual dreary depressions, the President's hopeful promises, Russia growling. I turned to the Hollywood hews. The paper gave up two pages to the film world: who was suing who, who was the new love-in, who might get the Oscar: stuff that interested me.

On the second page was a photograph of Charles who had designed the mask I was wearing.

I stared at the photograph, then read the caption: *Charles Duvine: Hollywood's Master Make-Up Artist: A Suicide*.

My heart skipped a beat as I read on.

Charles Duvine, wrote the reporter, had been away for two months. *It was believed he had been on vacation in Martinique. He had returned to his luxury penthouse in Santa Barbara two nights ago. The Security guard said Mr. Duvine seemed to be in a depressed, nervy mood. The following morning, the Security guard, on his usual patrol, had found the body of Mr. Duvine, lying on the paved surround of the high-rise. It appeared that in a moment of deep depression, Mr. Duvine had thrown himself from the terrace of his penthouse. The police were satisfied that it was suicide.*

I closed my eyes as I let the newspaper drop from my trembling fingers.

Larry Edwards who could have talked: dead from defective car brakes. Now, Charles Duvine who had turned me into John Merrill Ferguson and who also could have talked: a suicide.

Cold, clammy fear grabbed at me.

Then the truth of my predicament hit me like a sledgehammer. When I had served my purpose, I too would cease to live!

Once this mysterious business deal had been completed, Ferguson and Durant wouldn't let me live in case I talked. They would have me murdered as they had had Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine murdered!

I was so frightened, I nearly threw up. I felt cold sweat running down my back. I felt cold sweat running down inside the mask I was wearing.

'A little more brandy, Mr. Ferguson?' It was the sexy hostess standing over me.

Because of the mask she couldn't see how frightened I was.

Brandy? I needed it!

'Yes, thank you.'

She put a big snifter half full of brandy on the table in front of me.

'If you would like to have a nap, sir,' she said, 'Your room's all ready. We have five hours before landing.'

'I'll do that,' I said, and got to my feet.

The mask was now becoming unbearable. I had to take it off.

She picked up the snifter and walked past Durant's desk towards a door.

'Taking a nap, Joe,' I said huskily as Durant looked up.

I saw Mazzo start to his feet, but Durant shook his head. Mazzo sat down again.

I followed the girl into a cabin with a bed and a fitted closet. There was a bathroom leading off the little room.

She put the snifter on the night table and smiled at me.

'Is there anything else, Mr. Ferguson? I'm not busy for the next couple of hours,' and she arched her eyebrows invitingly.

If I hadn't been so scared and longing to take off the mask, I would have been tempted.

'Nothing now, thank you.'

'Call me Phoebe, Mr. Ferguson. I'm entirely at your service,' and after hesitating, she smiled again and left the cabin, shutting the door.

I slid the bolt home, then went into the bathroom and carefully removed the mask. Laying it down, I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

Did I look a wreck! This was Jerry Stevens, a washed-up, bit-part actor scared witless, white faced, sweat beads, a mouth that twitched. Very far from the last time I had seen myself in a mirror: the confident, powerful John Merrill Ferguson who I had asked myself what he had got that I hadn't got.

I washed my face and hands, then returned to the cabin. I drank nearly all the brandy, then sat on the bed, trying to steady my shaking hands. I finished the brandy and set down the glass before I dropped it. After a few minutes, the brandy began to bite and my heart beat began to return to normal. I lit a cigarette.

I thought about Charles Duvine. Maybe two thugs or even Mazzo had been waiting on the penthouse terrace: a prick of a needle and away into space.

I shuddered.

This could happen to you. This will happen to you when Durant has no further use of you. Well, at least, you know what to expect.

Durant said I was to impersonate Ferguson for a month, possibly longer. That must mean I was safe for at least thirty days, and during those thirty days, I had to find a way out of this nightmare.

I began to get over my scare.

Thirty days!

A lot could happen in thirty days. I was forewarned.

There must come a moment when I could escape. I would go to the police. They would give me protection. I had ample proof. I'd show them the mask. I would get them to check the Chase National Bank that all this money had been paid to me. I would get Lu Prentz to tell them that Durant had hired me.

I began to relax. Maybe the two big brandies now gave me confidence.

Then I heard a slight sound that set my heart thumping again. Looking at the door of the cabin, I saw the door handle turn, but the bolt stopped the door opening.

I began to sweat again.

'You okay, Mr. Ferguson?' Mazzo whispered through the door panel.

The brandy made me exclaim, 'Piss off! I'm trying to sleep.'

'Okay, Mr. Ferguson.'

I sat like a stone man, watching the door handle. It moved up and down for a moment or two, then came to rest.

Sitting there on the bed, staring at the door, I understood the feelings of a trapped rabbit.

* * *

I was awakened by a gentle tapping on the door.

'Mr. Ferguson, please. We will be landing in one hour.'

'Thank you,' I said and looked at my watch. The time was 23.30.

I didn't remember falling asleep. I did remember lying on the bed while I wrestled with my fears. The brandy must have had a lot of authority.

I stripped off, showered and shaved, regarding my pale face in the mirror. Then I spent time putting on the mask, the eyebrows and the moustache.

Stepping back, I surveyed myself in the mirror. John Merrill Ferguson stared back at me, and at the sight of him, I began to lose my fears.

No one was going to murder John Merrill Ferguson!

He could have people like Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine murdered, but he was too powerful for anyone to murder him.

This childish reasoning helped to restore my confidence.

As I dressed I assured myself that I could handle this situation as long as I remained behind the protection of John Merrill Ferguson's mask.

I opened the door and walked into the main cabin.

Durant sat at the desk, still reading papers. Mazzo was drinking coffee.

'Still at it, Joe,' I said in a hearty voice, and I gave him a slap on his shoulder. 'You work too hard.'

Not looking to see his reaction, I crossed to the lounging chair and sat down, aware Mazzo was gaping at me.

Phoebe came to my side.

'Coffee, Mr. Ferguson?' she asked.

'Sure,' I said. 'Thanks.'

By the time I had finished a cup of coffee and smoked a cigarette, the aircraft was circling Miami airport.

Durant came over to me.

'We fly directly to the residence by helicopter,' he said. 'There will be the press again, but they won't be allowed to get near you. You will be escorted to the helicopter.' He paused to give me a glowering stare. 'I don't want any theatrics from you . . . understand?'

'Sure, Joe!' I said. 'Anything you say.'

By the slight flush that came to his hard face, I could see he hated me calling him Joe, but he knew he was stuck with it.

Phoebe, now wearing her pillbox hat, came in to ask us to fasten our safety belts as we were about to land. Five minutes later, we landed at an obscure corner of the Miami airfield.

There was a wait. Looking out of one of the windows, I saw the fifteen tough bodyguards had descended, and had made a menacing circle at the foot of the stairway.

In the distance, under a blaze of lights and held back by a barrier was a crowd of reporters and camera men.

Again, I experienced this tremendous excitement: these men were waiting to see me: to try to have a word with me: John Merrill Ferguson.

Again, I heard the exciting baying of the press. Their shouts were Wagnerian music in my ears.

The fifteen bodyguards closed in on me, forming a wedge. I was hurried to the waiting helicopter. I was tempted to pause and wave to the press, but I was hurried on. I was practically lifted into the helicopter with Durant, following me. The door slammed shut.

The pilot turned in his seat.

'Hi, Mr. Ferguson,' he said with a wide respectful smile.

Mazzo, sitting behind me, murmured, 'Lacey.'

'Hi, there, Lacey,' I said in a hail-fellow-well-met voice. 'Good to see you.'

Obviously, this was the wrong thing to have said for the pilot's eyes bugged in surprise, but I couldn't care. I was up in the clouds with the immortals again. The fans began to revolve and the chopper took off.

'Keep your mouth shut,' Durant snarled under his breath.

'Sure, Joe,' I said. 'No problem.'

I was looking down at the crowd of press men, the photographers and the TV cameras outlined in the floodlights. I watched them drop out of sight.

It took some twenty minutes before I had my first sight of Paradise City: and what a city! In the brilliant light of the moon, I could see the beaches, still crowded at nearly midnight with people swimming, the palm trees, the wide boulevards packed with cars, the *luxe* high-rises: a picture of opulent wealth.

Flying over the big, luxury villas set in acres of gardens, the helicopter crossed a broad expanse of water, littered with motor cruisers and yachts to what looked like an island. I was to learn later this was Paradise Largo where the super-rich lived. Skirting the trees, I saw John Merrill Ferguson's home: a baronial style house you only saw in 1959 movies: a huge, imposing structure, surrounded by lawns and flowerbeds, bursting with color.

The helicopter settled on the lawn.

I couldn't resist saying to the pilot as I followed Mazzo, 'Thanks for the trip, Lacey.'

'My pleasure, Mr. Ferguson,' he returned, his voice startled.

Waiting, was an electric golf cart. Durant, looking like the wrath of God, waved me to the front seat and climbed into the back. Mazzo slid under the driving wheel, and we set off towards the house.

Was I getting a bang out of this!

'Listen to me, Stevens,' Durant said, leaning forward and tapping me on my shoulder. 'I told you to keep your goddamn

mouth shut. Mr. Ferguson never speaks to his staff.'

'Sorry, Joe. I'll know next time. Anything you say.'

We pulled up outside the front entrance of the house.

All the terrace lights were on. Double doors stood open. We got out of the cart, and led by Mazzo, I climbed the twenty marble steps, paused to look along the big terrace, set with lounging chairs and tables, and boxed in with banks of multi-colored begonias.

We entered a big hall, walked down a long, broad corridor. On the walls hung modern works of art. We reached an elevator.

'Take him to his quarters,' Durant snapped to Mazzo. 'Mrs. Ferguson will see him tomorrow morning,' and he stalked away.

Mazzo grinned at me as he opened the elevator's door.

'You heard what Mr. Big said, Mr. Ferguson,' and he waved me into the elevator.

As the elevator rose, I said, 'I bet even his mother hated him.'

'If she didn't, her lid needed refixing.' Mazzo said and gave his sighing laugh.

The elevator decanted us into a lobby. Facing us were two doors.

'Here's where you live, Mr. Ferguson,' Mazzo said and opened one of the doors. Clicking on the lights, he moved into an enormous room so luxuriously furnished, I paused in the doorway to gape.

There was everything in this room a billionaire could desire: a vast desk with telephones and recorders, lounging chairs, two big settees, a TV set, a big, fully equipped bar, a big fireplace and wall-to-wall thick pale fawn carpeting. On the walls hung modern art paintings. I recognized at least four Picassos. There was a forty foot wide picture window and glass doors leading onto a big, flower decorated terrace.

'Here's where you sleep, Mr. Ferguson,' Mazzo said, opening a door. He was grinning at the way I was gaping.

I followed him into another vast room: the same fawn wall-to-wall carpet: built-in closets, another TV set and an enormous bed that could have slept six in comfort. Again, the walls were decorated with modern paintings.

'Nice, huh?' Mazzo said.

I just gaped. This was the ultimate in luxury.

'Well, okay. Let's get some sleep,' Mazzo said. 'You'll have a busy day tomorrow. The bathroom's through there.' He went to one of the closets and took out a pair of silk, grey pajamas and a pair of Gucci slippers. These he tossed on the bed. 'See you in the morning,' and he left me.

I stood for a moment, staring around, then I heard a faint click.

Mazzo had locked me in.

* * *

I woke from an erotic dream in which I was chasing Phoebe who was stark naked except for the pillbox hat. I was rapidly overtaking her when I felt a heavy hand on my arm.

I opened my eyes to find Mazzo bending over me.

'Must you do that?' I snarled, sitting up. 'I very nearly had her.'

He released his sighing laugh.

'Breakfast, Mr. Ferguson, then business.' He went to a closet and produced a brocaded dressing gown.

'Hurry it up!'

Groaning, I struggled out of bed and went into the bathroom. I took a shower, shaved, put on the dressing gown and came out to find Mazzo wheeling in a trolley.

I sat down as he poured coffee and served two sets of devilled kidneys.

The meal over, he said, 'You have all the clothes you'll ever need, Mr. Ferguson.' He threw open the doors of the closets. 'Help yourself.'

I went over and inspected the contents of the closets.

Once, I had been invited to the house of one of the biggest movie stars who was a showoff. He had sadistically shown me his wardrobe, and I had been sick with envy. What he had shown me was peanuts to John Merrill Ferguson's wardrobe. There must have been some two hundred suits, racks of shirts, racks of shoes and so on.

'Before you dress, Mr. Ferguson, get with the mask,' Mazzo said. 'You're going to be on show.'

I went into the bathroom and put on the mask and completed the disguise, then I returned to the bedroom. It took me some twenty minutes to decide on a cream with a faint blue stripe suit that fitted me like a glove. While I was changing, I remembered Durant had said I was to meet Mr. John Merrill Ferguson's wife.

‘What’s the wife like, Mazzo?’ I asked as I knotted a dark blue Cardin tie.

He released a long, low whistle.

‘You’ll find out, the way I found out,’ he said. ‘Just watch it. Take a tip from me, play it light.’ He rubbed his shaven head as he regarded me. ‘That line of yours with Mr. D. is okay. He can’t do much about it, so he has to take it, but watch it with Mrs. F. To her, you are Jerry Stevens. Two-bit actors are something she happened to have trodden in on the sidewalk. Even the Boss handles her with care and Mr. D. acts like he’s scared of her. Me, she looks at like I was a three month old stiff, crawling with maggots, so watch it.’

For a moment this information disconcerted me, but looking in the mirror, seeing John Merrill Ferguson looking right back at me, I relaxed.

‘Okay, Mazzo, I’ll treat her with care.’

A buzzer sounded in the living room. Mazzo went in, lifted a receiver, said, ‘Yes, Mr. Durant. He’s all fixed.’

I came into the living room.

‘Mrs. F. is on her way,’ Mazzo said. ‘Just watch it. You’re doing fine so far, don’t upset the crap cart.’

Feeling suddenly the way I once felt when I first walked onto a movie set, I went across to the big desk and sat down. For something to do, I picked up a leather bound appointment diary and flicked through the pages. Every half hour of each day was filled with unknown names. John Merrill Ferguson certainly was an occupied man. Then I flicked on, coming to the month of June: three months ago. The diary began to thin out. July there were only three names. August one name. September was blank.

I didn’t hear the door open. I was staring at the blank September pages, then I heard Mazzo give a slight cough. I looked up.

She was standing just inside the door, regarding me.

I felt, as long as I lived, I would always remember my first sight of Loretta Merrill Ferguson. There are women and women. In my trade, I had seen the best and the worst: the fat, the thin, the cuties, the beauties, the tough and the not-so-tough, the big stars, the starlettes, the gimmes, the desperates, the degenerates, the sex-starved, the nymphos and . . . but why go on? I had seen them all, but I had never seen any woman like Mrs. John Merrill Ferguson.

She was the type of woman that would make any man catch his breath. There is no true way of describing her except to say she was tall, lean, with full breasts, long legs: something that most big stars have, but it was her face that riveted me. Framed in raven black Cleopatra hair style, her face was the color of old ivory and each feature was perfect: a short nose, a wide mouth and big violet colored eyes.

She was not only the most beautiful, but also the most sensual woman I had ever seen.

The sight of her turned my mouth dry and my heart racing.

I just sat there, staring at her.

Durant came into the room.

‘Stand up!’ he snapped.

I got to my feet, still looking at this fantastic woman.

‘Walk across the room!’

I limped across the room, turned and waited, aware she was regarding me as if I were a performing dog.

Durant said to her, ‘I suggest, madam, he is acceptable.’

‘Tell him to say something.’ She had a low, sexy voice. She spoke as if I didn’t exist.

‘Say something!’ Durant snapped.

I caught sight of myself in a wall mirror. I saw John Merrill Ferguson standing there. John Merrill Ferguson, one of the most powerful and richest men in the world! No one would dare tell John Merrill Ferguson what to do!

I pointed to the door.

‘Get the hell out of here, Joe!’ I barked. ‘And you, Mazzo! I want to talk to my wife!’

chapter four

I stood by the desk, looking at Loretta Merrill Ferguson.

We were alone.

After my outburst, Durant, purple in the face, had begun to bluster, but Loretta Merrill Ferguson had silenced him with a wave of her hand.

'Go away!' she had said in a voice like the crack of a whip.

Both Durant and Mazzo had left the room, closing the door as if it were made of egg shells.

So we were alone.

She studied me for a long moment, then walked to one of the settees and sat down.

'Take off that mask. I want to see what you look like.'

I went into the bathroom and carefully removed the eyebrows and the moustache, then slipped off the mask. I rinsed my sweating face, then returned to the living room.

I stood by the desk while she regarded me the way a butcher regards a side of beef, but I was used to agents, film directors, camera men regarding me so she didn't faze me. I waited, and while I waited, I stared directly at her, and my steady stare seemed to disconcert her, for after trying to stare me down, her eyes shifted: a tiny victory for me.

'Sit down!' Again the whip crack in her voice.

Deliberately, I walked to the big window and looked down at the vast, immaculate lawn, my back slightly turned to her.

'I said sit down!' she snapped.

'What a beautiful place you have here, Mrs. Ferguson, but less beautiful than you are,' I said, then took out my pack of Chesterfields, shook out a cigarette and lit it. I didn't turn, but continued to survey the garden, the big swimming pool and the three Chinese gardeners attending to the flower beds.

'When I tell you to do something, you will do it! Sit down!'

I turned and smiled at her. Mazzo had warned me about this woman. I was determined she was not going to dominate me.

'I am being paid one thousand dollars a day to impersonate your husband, Mrs. Ferguson. For that money I have agreed to cooperate, but I will not be ordered around by anyone, even the most beautiful woman I have yet seen, who hasn't the good manners to say please.'

She sat for a long moment, staring at me, then she suddenly relaxed and became all-woman. The change was startling. Her hard, arrogant face softened, the violet colored eyes lit up, her mouth moved into a smile.

'A man at last!' she said, half to herself, then she patted the settee. 'Please, come and sit here.'

Although I was only a bit-part, unemployed actor, I wasn't fooled by this sudden change. I had knocked around too long with bitches who played hell one moment, and were as sweet as honey the next. I had stood on a set, waiting for some glamour star who was no better than a whore, throw her weight around, holding up the shooting, while the director tried to placate her, and while I longed to kick her backside. Women who were too rich, too beautiful and who behaved with gutter manners were my idea of the genuine pain in the ass.

I walked to a chair, facing her and sat down, making a point not to sit by her side.

'I am at your disposal, Mrs. Ferguson,' I said.

'You could be, Mr. Stevens, you could be,' she said, still smiling. 'I could call that monkey man and tell him to spoil your handsome face.'

I smiled at her: the smile I reserve for spoilt children.

'Go ahead and call him. He and I have already sorted out who is the man and who is the boy. He landed up on the floor.'

She leaned back and laughed, thrusting her breasts at me. It was a splendid, silvery laugh so infectious I had to laugh too. We laughed together, then she said, 'You're marvelous! What a find!'

Another shift of mood? There were times when I wished I didn't know so much about women. How often had women disillusioned me? If they didn't get their way one way, they would try another and yet another.

'Mrs. Ferguson,' I said, 'if you have any instructions for me, please tell me.'

Her smile faded, and a wary look came into her eyes.

'You are obviously hostile,' she said, 'and that is understandable. My mother-in-law imagines she is some kind of a dictator. I assure you it wasn't my idea to have you kidnapped.'

I felt a small triumph. At least, she was on the defensive.

'Kidnapping is a Federal offence, but let that ride,' I said. 'I am being well paid. I am not complaining. I have agreed to impersonate your husband. Are you satisfied so far with my make-up?'

‘It is excellent, but not your voice. It might be necessary for you to speak to certain people on the telephone. Could you imitate my husband’s voice?’

‘I wouldn’t know until I heard it,’ I said. ‘I don’t think it would be a problem. Not so long ago, I had a nightclub engagement imitating the voices of well-known people,’ and I went into the routine of Lee Marvin’s voice, the voice of Richard Nixon and the rich voice of Sir Winston Churchill.

She sat, staring at me.

‘You’re marvelous!’ she said in a voice that told me she really meant what she was saying. ‘I’ll get a tape of my husband’s voice and you can hear it.’ She got to her feet and smiled at me. ‘When you think you can imitate my husband’s voice, we will meet again, Mr. Stevens.’

‘This is only a suggestion,’ I said as I stood up. ‘I don’t know what you call your husband, but wouldn’t it be safer for you to call me what you call him?’

She regarded me, her violet eyes suddenly remote.

‘I call him John and he calls me Etta.’

‘So I wait, Etta,’ I said.

From my long and often depressing association with women, I knew when a woman was turned on. I knew from the softening of the face, the faint flush, the invitation in the eyes. The signs were all there and I knew that I had only to cross the division between us, to take her in my arms and she would have given herself. It was a temptation, but not the time.

Instead, I smiled, then walked over to the window.

I stood looking down at the garden for several minutes, then looked around.

She had gone.

I felt in need of a drink. I went to the cocktail cabinet and poured a stiff Scotch. Carrying the drink, I sat down. I felt some confidence that Loretta Merrill Ferguson was not going to be a problem.

Half an hour later, while I was still sitting and thinking, Mazzo came in.

‘You’re doing fine, Mr. Ferguson,’ he said, grinning. ‘It’s my guess Mrs. F.’s taken a fancy to you.’ He crossed to the desk and taking the cover off a tape desk, he threaded on a tape. ‘She says you wanted this: one of the Boss’s business talks. Whatcha want for lunch? The Chef’s doing a clam chowder. Any good to you?’

‘Fine with me,’ I said, getting up and crossing to the desk.

‘You know how to work this? Just press this playback button.’

‘I know.’

He nodded and went away.

I sat at the desk, pressed the button and listened to the voice of the man I was impersonating. It was a distinct voice with the snap of authority in it. He was obviously dictating to his broker. I didn’t bother to listen to the words, I concentrated on the intonation, his pauses, and the quality of his voice. I felt confident I could do a good imitation. I played the tape through four times. Then as there was still unrecorded tape on the spool, I switched to record and, using Ferguson’s voice, I dictated bond selling orders and share buying orders as he had done until the tape ran out. I ran the whole tape back and started the playback. I left the desk and wandered to the window and listened. I only knew when I began recording by the bonds and share names I had invented. As I pressed the stop button, Mazzo wheeled in the lunch trolley.

‘That smells very good, Mazzo,’ I said in Ferguson’s voice. ‘I hope it’s as good as it smells.’

He was setting the table and he let fall the cutlery as he whirled around and gaped at me.

‘Jesus! You gave me a start!’ he exclaimed. ‘I could have sworn . . .’

‘Hurry it up, Mazzo,’ I said, still with Ferguson’s voice. ‘I’m hungry.’

He stood gaping.

‘You sound just like the Boss,’ he said.

‘That’s the idea.’ I sat at the table. By my plate was another one thousand dollar credit note. As I put it in my wallet, I said in my own voice, ‘Come on, Mazzo, don’t stand there like a stricken bull. I’m hungry.’

* * *

I spent the afternoon, wearing the mask, playing tennis with Mazzo.

There were four tennis courts at the back of the house, screened by high hedges. Mazzo was in the pro class and I was lucky to take two games off him in three sets. While I was retrieving a ball, I happened to glance up and saw Loretta, standing on a balcony, watching me. I gave her a wave, but she didn’t wave back. When next I looked, she had gone.

The game over, Mazzo and I walked back to the house.

‘If we run into the butler,’ Mazzo said, ‘keep going. His name is Jonas. He’s near sighted, and old enough to be dead.’

As we entered the vast hall, I saw a tall, dignified negro with snow white hair, crossing to the main living room.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Ferguson,' he said, pausing. 'May I say it is good to see you again?'

I waved in his direction and headed for the stairs.

In Ferguson's voice, I said, 'Good to be back, Jonas.'

When we reached the head of the stairs, Mazzo said, 'Very nice. You're doing fine.'

He left me in my suite and I took off the mask and had another shower. Then putting on a short toweling coat, I stretched out on the enormous bed. I idled the time away with my thoughts.

At 19.00, as I was dozing, I heard a buzzing sound.

It came from the living room. I slid off the bed and saw a red light flashing on the intercom on the desk. I thumbed down the switch, and said in Ferguson's voice, 'What is it?' Then having an idea it was Loretta, I went on. 'Is that you, Etta? I was waiting to hear

from you.'

I heard a quick intake of breath.

'Marvelous!' she said. 'Tonight, we will have dinner with Mr. Durant at nine o'clock in the dining room. Wear the mask. Mazzo tells me Jonas was completely fooled. This is the big test . . . John,' and she cut off.

This called for a very dry Martini. I went to the cocktail cabinet, but there was no ice. I hesitated for a moment, then going to the intercom, read off the print under the various buttons. I saw 'Butler' and pressed the switch. After a moment's delay, Jonas answered.

'I have no ice, Jonas,' I said in Ferguson's voice.

'It is in the lower compartment of the cabinet, sir,' he told me. 'I will come immediately.'

I cursed myself for being so stupid.

'No, don't do that. I'm busy. It's all right,' and I switched off.

That's what comes of being too confident, I told myself, opening the door of the compartment below the rows of bottles. Here, I found a well-stocked refrigerator.

What would he think? I wondered uneasily.

As I was mixing the drink, there came a tap on the door. Hurriedly moving to the window, my hands clammy, I called to come in.

'Sir, may I make you a drink?' Jonas asked.

Still keeping my back turned for I wasn't wearing the mask, I shook my head.

'It's all right. Thanks. Just leave me. I'm busy.'

'Yes, Mr. Ferguson,' and I heard the door close.

I drank three quarters of the Martini, set down the glass and wiped my face with my handkerchief, then I finished the drink and made another.

I was back on even keel, plus three Martinis, when Mazzo appeared a few minutes past 20.00.

'Big deal, Mr. Ferguson,' he said, grinning. He went to one of the closets and took from it a tuxedo outfit. 'It's a dress affair.' He produced a frilled white shirt and a black bow tie. 'You get your face on.'

I went into the bathroom and put on the mask. I was now getting expert in this exercise. When I had completed the disguise, it gave me a lot of confidence to look once again at the face of John Merrill Ferguson.

Returning to the bedroom, I changed into the tuxedo. As I was fixing the bow tie, Mazzo said, 'Jonas will be serving at the table. There will be a couple of women to help him. You don't have to worry about any of them. The women are cows. Jonas is half-blind. There are two things to remember: the Boss doesn't eat much. Don't go making a hog of yourself. The other thing is the Boss doesn't talk much: so lay off with the chatter. Get it?'

'Sure,' I said.

'Another thing: the Boss doesn't drink nor smoke, so watch it.'

'He must be quite a man,' I said. 'What does he do in his spare time?'

Mazzo leered.

'There's Mrs. F.'

Yes, there was Loretta. Seeing her in my mind, my blood ran hot: the most devastating and sexy woman I had yet met.

At a few minutes to 21.00, Mazzo escorted me down the stairs, and into the big dining room, big enough to entertain a hundred people without a crush.

Loretta, looking marvelous in a low cut scarlet evening dress, her neck and chest glittering with diamonds, was sitting in a lounging chair. Durant, wearing a tuxedo, stood by the empty fireplace, smoking a cigar. Jonas was hovering. In the center of the room was a table, laid for dinner.

As soon as she saw me, Loretta got to her feet and came to me and offered me her cheek. I brushed it with my lips,

smelling her subtle perfume.

'I hope you feel like eating tonight, John. The Chef has prepared a new dish.'

Remembering what Mazzo had said, I gave a weary shrug.

'You must try to eat,' Loretta said, smiling at me.

Aware all this was said for Jonas's benefit, I again shrugged.

We sat at the table and a lobster mousse was put before me. My gastric juices rushed into action. Then I heard Mazzo, standing behind me, cough gently.

Reluctantly, I said, 'I can't eat this,' while I stared greedily.

As if he expected me to say this, Jonas whisked away the dish and replaced it with a mixed salad. I fiddled with the salad while I watched with envious eyes Loretta and Durant eat the lobster mousse.

Loretta kept up a prattle that didn't call for me to reply. Every now and then, Durant made business remarks while I nodded to show I was listening.

A dish, smelling like heaven, was presented to me. I peered at its contents: chicken with truffles in a rich cream sauce.

'A small piece, Mr. Ferguson, sir,' Jonas coaxed like a mother with a wayward child.

A small piece?

Goddam it! I could have devoured the lot!

'Looks good,' I said, aware Mazzo was coughing again. To hell with him, I thought. 'Yes, I think I could manage some of that.'

Jonas placed a small piece of the breast on my plate.

'Carry on, Jonas,' I said. 'Don't let's be mean.'

I was aware Loretta and Durant were staring at me while Mazzo was coughing like a refugee from a T.B. clinic.

Jonas beamed as he placed more chicken on my plate.

'That's fine, Jonas,' I said when I was sure he had heaped my plate.

Jonas then served Loretta and Durant, both of whom sat in stony silence.

As I munched, I gave them an out.

'Those new pills,' I said to Loretta, 'seem to have improved my appetite.'

'I am glad,' Loretta said with a stiff smile.

'My congratulations to the Chef, Jonas,' I said as I gorged myself. To Durant, I said, 'Remarkable what these modern pills will do.'

'So I understand,' Durant snarled.

I couldn't care less. I finished what was on my plate.

Durant and Loretta had laid down their knives and forks. Jonas came to me. 'Just a little more, Mr. Ferguson, sir?'

Mazzo went into another fit of coughing which I ignored.

'Why not?' I said. 'It is excellent.'

Finally, at the end of the meal, when I had eaten two portions of apple pie which Durant, glaring at me, and Loretta, half smiling, refused, we left the table.

Durant stalked into the living room.

Feeling relaxed and very well fed, I escorted Loretta as far as the living room door, then paused. I saw Durant was lighting a cigar and was settling in an armchair.

I had no intention of spending the rest of the evening with him.

'I think I'll go to bed,' I said, and looked directly at her.

She smiled.

'You have done very well, John,' she said. 'Sleep well,' and she moved past me to join Durant.

With Mazzo at my heels, I returned to my suite.

'Look, palsy,' Mazzo said as soon as he closed the door, 'I told you . . .'

'Who the hell do you think you're speaking to?' I demanded, rounding on him. 'Shut up! Get the hell out of here!' and I stamped into the bedroom and slammed the door.

I stood waiting to see if he would come in and start trouble, but he didn't. After a long moment, I went into the bathroom and removed the mask, took a shower and, putting on pajamas, I got into bed.

I turned off all the lights except the tiny pilot light at the head of the bed, then I relaxed in comfort and thought back on the day.

The day seemed to me to have gone satisfactorily. I had passed a test with Jonas, and that was important. I had now four thousand dollars in the bank. I was controlling Mazzo. I was even getting the edge on Durant.

Yes, it had been a satisfactory day.

I closed my eyes and let my mind dwell on Loretta. I was still thinking about her when I drifted off into sleep. I slept for several hours, then came awake.

The room was in darkness.

The warmth of a naked body pressed against me.

Gentle fingers caressed me.

Only half awake, I reached out, rolled over, letting her hand guide me into her.

* * *

'No, don't move. Stay still.'

She was whispering to me, her face against mine. She was holding me tight inside her. I eased my weight off her on my elbows.

'No, don't do that. Crush me,' she whispered so I relaxed, feeling drained and drifted off into an erotic sleep.

Later, much later, with the light of the dawn coming through the shutters. I came awake. I was now lying beside her, and in the dawn light I could see her, awake, looking at me, a half-smile to welcome me out of a satiated sleep.

'Hi, Jerry,' she said.

I put my arms around her and pulled her to me.

We made slow, marvelous love, then I went back to sleep again.

The sun was bright through the shutters when I again opened my eyes.

She was talking to Jonas who was wheeling in a trolley. She had on a turquoise robe and her Cleopatra hairdo was immaculate.

As I watched her, half hidden behind the sheet, I thought she looked the most marvelous woman in the world.

Jonas poured the coffee, not looking in my direction, then he bowed and went away.

I rolled out of bed.

She was now sitting by the trolley, sipping coffee and she smiled at me as I joined her.

'Sleep well, Jerry?'

I sat down, sipped coffee, then lit a cigarette.

'An exceptional woman: an exceptional night.'

She laughed.

'John would never think of saying that, but John isn't a romantic lover.'

I looked directly at her.

'Where is your husband?'

'Yes, it is time you knew. I'll have one of your cigarettes.'

I lit the cigarette and passed it to her.

After a long pause, she went on, 'Jerry, this is a very complicated and difficult situation. I don't have to tell you who my husband is and what his position is.'

'You don't have to tell me,' I said.

'Everything I am going to tell you is in strict confidence,' she went on, looking straight at me. 'Is that understood?'

'Sure.'

'John is suffering from an obscure and incurable mental illness. It attacked him two years ago. This illness begins with loss of memory, vagueness and inactivity. The progress of the illness is slow. He was already beginning to react to this illness when I first met him. I thought he was preoccupied with business and when he was with me in the evenings, I tolerated his long silences, believing he was planning some new deal. Six months ago, he began to deteriorate fast.

Long before I did, his mother suspected that he was becoming mentally ill. There is a specialist in Vienna who is discreet. He examined John and told his mother find me that in a few months' time, John would become a vegetable, and there was no hope of a cure.'

'That's tough,' I said. 'It's hard to believe.'

'Yes, but there are complications. It is absolutely necessary to keep his illness a secret. This is the reason why you have been hired to impersonate him to give us time to reconstruct the Ferguson kingdom. It is a fantastic kingdom put together by John. Durant was and is John's right hand, but even Durant wasn't let into a number of secret and big deals John negotiated. Now, John can't handle any of this, Durant is trying to put the pieces of the scattered jigsaw, that makes up John's kingdom, into place, and he is discovering that without John at the helm, without his signature on various documents, the kingdom could collapse.'

I was listening hard, and I stared at her.

‘Why should it collapse?’

‘John has over expanded. He has been borrowing enormous sums of money from the banks and the insurance people. He has such a reputation, his name is gold, but if it became known he was mentally ill, his creditors would call in their loans. There are several vast deals due to be finalized in a month’s time. John’s signature is essential. Once the deals are completed, then the news can slowly leak that John is ill, and finally, that he is no longer in control. By that time Durant will have set up a board of directors with himself in John’s place, and the Ferguson kingdom will continue on its prosperous way.’

‘Nice for Durant,’ I said, my mind busy.

‘Yes.’ She regarded me. ‘You are a marvelous lover, Jerry.’

‘You are too,’ I said, startled by this swift change of mood.

‘I have been watching you. You take to the role of a billionaire marvelously. There are moments when I believe you feel you are John Merrill Ferguson.’

I gave her a crooked grin.

‘We actors get carried away sometimes.’

She studied me.

‘The disguise is marvelous, and the voice. You could be John.’

‘I’m not.’

‘I said you could be.’

I looked at her. There was a long pause. I felt a sudden tingle of excitement.

‘Yes, maybe I could.’ Again we looked at each other, then I went on, ‘There’s something I should know. Where is your husband?’

‘In the left wing. He has his own suite. A nurse looks after him. He is well paid and trustworthy.’

I thought of Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine. I wondered when the time came for the news of Ferguson’s mental illness to be leaked whether the nurse would also have a fatal accident.

This beautiful, sensual woman, sitting opposite me, telling me secrets, gave me no confidence. I had an instinctive feeling that once I had done what they wanted me to do, I too would be murdered.

She looked at the clock on the overmantel.

‘I must go. This morning you will be taken to the office with Durant.’ She stood up, smiling at me, then coming around the trolley as I got to my feet, she moved close to me. I put my arms around her.

‘Shall I come tonight?’ Her kiss was soft and inviting.

‘Of course. Does Mazzo know what’s going on?’

‘Don’t worry about him.’ She drew away from me. ‘Remember, Jerry, you could be John,’ then turning, she left me.

I drew in a long, deep breath. What did she mean: You could be John ? She was planning something, but what? I had time. I needed all the information I could get from her. I was sure I was walking on a lethal tightrope.

I now knew Ferguson was with a nurse in the left wing of this enormous house, and he was rapidly turning into a vegetable. I now had learned that his vast kingdom was built on borrowed money and one leak that he was mentally ill could bring his kingdom crashing down.

Mazzo came in at this moment.

‘Office today, Mr. Ferguson,’ he said. ‘Get with the mask.’

Twenty minutes later, wearing a dark business suit, the mask, the dark goggles, plus the hat, I followed Mazzo down the stairs to the waiting Rolls.

Durant was sitting in the car, reading documents. I sat by his side.

Mazzo got in beside the Jap chauffeur.

As Durant put the papers back in his briefcase, he said, ‘There are always pressmen waiting outside the building. When you get out of the car, walk with Mazzo. Your bodyguards will keep the press away. You have papers to sign. Your new secretary is Sonia Malcolm. She hasn’t seen Mr. Ferguson. There will be no problem. You will not meet any of the other staff.’

‘Anything you say, Joe.’

He turned on me.

‘I told you to call me Mr. Durant when we are alone!’ he snarled.

Feeling confident, behind the screen of the mask, I smiled at him.

‘Don’t talk that way to me, Joe. I am the Boss . . . remember?’

Looking as if he were about to have a stroke, he said in a strangled voice, ‘Listen to me, you goddam, two-bit actor . . .’

I cut him short.

‘Shut your big mouth!’ I rasped in Ferguson’s voice. ‘You listen to me! The press are waiting. All I have to do is to take off this mask and you’ll be in the shit! So stop leaning on me or I’ll damn well lean on you!’

He stared at me the way Frankenstein must have stared at the monster he had created. He opened and shut his mouth, but no words came. We did an eyeball to eyeball confrontation, then he heaved himself around and stared out of the car’s window.

Man! Was I pleased with myself!

Remember, Jerry, you could be John.

Well, at least, I was having a try.

* * *

It was quite a morning. I played the role of a billionaire, and loved it.

First, there were four press photographers at the entrance to the Ferguson Electronic & Oil Corporation, but five tough bodyguards brushed them aside as I walked into the big lobby. Durant, looking like a demon, I and Mazzo entered a plush elevator. We were whisked to the twenty-fourth floor.

John Merrill Ferguson’s office was something out of a movie set: vast, luxurious, picture windows, overlooking the harbor and beach, vast desk and so on.

The elevator took us straight into this room. Durant moved to the desk.

‘Sit there. There are many papers for you to sign.’ He now had control of his temper. ‘You had better have a trial run with the signature. These papers are important.’

I gave Mazzo my hat, then walked to the executive chair and sat down. The desk was big enough to play billiards on.

Durant regarded me the way a film director looks at an actor as he fixes a camera angle.

‘Lower the sun blind,’ he said to Mazzo.

When the room became dim, he nodded and went away.

There was a long pause while I scribbled Ferguson’s signature on a scratch pad. Then satisfied, I threw the torn sheets into the trash basket by my side and helped myself to a cigarette from a gold box.

‘The Boss don’t smoke,’ Mazzo said.

‘The new secretary doesn’t know. Relax with your mouth, Mazzo,’ I said.

There came a tap on the door and a girl came in, carrying a pile of folders.

‘Good morning, Mr. Ferguson,’ she said, coming to the desk. ‘These are for your signature, please.’

I leaned back in the chair and regarded her.

She was quite a woman: tall, well built, auburn hair, piled to the top of her head, attractive features, without being beautiful, big green eyes. She was wearing a pale blue dress with white collar and cuffs.

‘You’ll be Miss Malcolm?’ I said.

‘Yes, Mr. Ferguson.’ She looked directly at me.

‘I hope you’ll be happy here, Miss Malcolm.’

‘Thank you.’

She put the files on the desk.

Durant came in.

‘All right, Miss Malcolm,’ he said curtly. ‘Get that agreement typed right away.’

‘Yes, sir.’

I watched her cross the room. I liked her graceful walk, her slim hips and her straight back. When she had gone, Durant said, ‘Show me the signature.’

I wrote Ferguson’s signature and pushed it across the desk to him. He studied it, then nodded.

‘Sign all these letters and papers,’ he said, indicating the file. Then to Mazzo, he went on, ‘Sit by his side. He is not to read anything he signs. Understand?’

‘Sure, Mr. Durant,’ Mazzo said, and pulled up a chair. He sat down beside me.

‘Be careful how you sign,’ Durant went on to me. ‘Take your time and don’t get careless.’

‘Okay, Joe,’ I said, and reached for the first file.

‘I’ll do that,’ Mazzo said. He produced a sheet of paper from a drawer, then opening a file he took from it a letter. He laid the paper over the contents of the letter. ‘You sign there, Mr. Ferguson.’

Durant watched for a moment, then left.

The signing went on for the next two hours with long pauses to smoke a cigarette and to let my hand remain flexible. I suppose I must have signed over a hundred letters and some fifty legal documents.

When the signing was over, Mazzo pressed a switch on the intercom and said, ‘Collect the files, will you?’

Miss Malcolm came in and picked up the files.

‘Would you like coffee, Mr. Ferguson?’ she asked, pausing to give me a tiny smile.

‘That would be nice,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

When she had gone, Mazzo said in a disapproving voice, ‘The Boss don’t drink coffee.’

‘Oh, button up!’ I said. ‘She’s like me, new here.’

Mazzo shrugged and sat away from the desk, rubbing his shaven head and looking bored.

I examined all the gadgets on the desk and the panel of press buttons. I had no idea what they were all about, but they intrigued me.

Miss Malcolm came in with coffee.

‘Milk or black, Mr. Ferguson?’

‘Black, please and no sugar.’

I watched her pour. The more I saw of this woman, the more I liked her. I tried to guess her age: maybe thirty, maybe thirty-five. I looked for a wedding ring: no wedding ring.

She put the cup before me.

‘Is there anything else, Mr. Ferguson?’

I smiled at her. I would have liked to have invited her to sit down and tell me about herself, but with Mazzo fidgeting, this wasn’t the time.

‘Thank you, no.’

She left.

When I had finished the coffee, Durant appeared.

‘I want you to make a telephone call,’ he said. ‘Here is what you say and nothing else. Do you understand? You will, of course, use Mr. Ferguson’s voice.’

‘Sure, Joe.’

He picked up the telephone receiver and said, ‘Connect me with Mr. Walter Bern.’ He waited, then nodded to me, passing the receiver to me and he picked up another receiver.

Reading from the script he had given me, I said, ‘This is Ferguson. How are you, Wally?’

‘Jesus, John! I’ve been trying to get you for the past days.’ A fat, deep breathless voice, ‘John! My group is getting worked up about our loan. They keep on at me. They say I shouldn’t have advanced so much. Jeez! Thirty million dollars! Look, John, I’m sorry, but they aren’t happy.’

Reading from the script, I said, ‘Talk to Joe. He deals with loans, and Wally, you have nothing to worry about. If your group want to lose fifteen percent on thirty million, I’ll go elsewhere,’ and following the script, I hung up.

Durant nodded.

‘That was good,’ he said. ‘Now, you can return to the residence.’

So with Mazzo at my side and five bodyguards shoving the camera men aside, I got into the Rolls and was driven back to Ferguson’s home.

It had been an interesting morning. I had met Sonia Malcolm. As the Jap chauffeur drove along the boulevard, I thought of this woman. For the first time in my life, I felt an odd kinship. This was a woman I needed to know: not like the many other women I had met.

There was something about her that drew me to her.

Then I had learned that Ferguson’s Corporation had borrowed thirty million dollars and the lenders were uneasy. Sitting at the big desk, looking around the luxurious office, I had smelt power. I had shown Durant I wasn’t to be pushed around.

Yes, an interesting morning.

I thought of the man, shut up with a nurse, rapidly turning into a vegetable.

Jerry, you could be John.

Yes, I said to myself as the Rolls drew up outside the entrance to the residence, play this right and you could be John Merrill Ferguson.

chapter five

We lay side by side on the big bed. The time by the bedside clock was 03.15. The pilot light above the bed made faint shadows. I could see her nakedness: a body that couldn't have been more perfectly sculptured.

She had come silently into the room some thirty minutes ago. Our love making had been fierce, but this wasn't love: this was blatant lust. She was irresistible, but there was this thought at the back of my mind, warning me not to trust her.

We lay there. The clock ticked on. We lay silently until our breathing returned to normal. I reached for a cigarette.

'Smoke?'

'Yes.'

I lit two cigarettes and gave her one. I wondered when she would go. I was sleepy after this violent coupling.

'You are a marvelous lover, Jerry.'

'So are you.'

Was there to be much more of this banal talk?

A long pause, then she said, 'Durant is very pleased with you. He said you handled a telephone conversation marvelously.'

'That's what I'm being paid for,' I said, closing my eyes. Why didn't she go?

She went on, 'John is much, much worse. I saw him today. He didn't recognize me.'

'A dreadful thing.'

'Yes.' Another pause, then 'You should know about his mother.' Her cigarette end glowed red.

I became alert.

'His mother?'

'You have met her. She arranged your kidnapping. You know she's a ruthless, dangerous old woman.'

Did I? Well, maybe. I remembered her smooth talk about my talent, how she had drugged me, and how completely I had been fooled.

'She is quite a character,' I said.

'All she thinks about is money. She has no interest in her son except his wealth. She lives in Frisco. She never comes here to see him. Every day, she telephones to inquire about him. She doesn't want to know if he is improving. She wants to know when he is going to die. When he is dead, she will become the President of the Corporation and she will inherit his private fortune. Money is her god, so she is impatiently waiting for him to die.'

I was now very alert.

'You are his wife,' I said. 'His mother can only get what he leaves her in his will. He can't leave everything to her. As his wife, you are protected.'

She rolled away from me to stub out her cigarette.

She had a long, beautiful back. It was a sensual maneuver that wasn't lost on me, and I became even more alert.

As she rolled onto her back, she said, 'There are two major problems. John has never made a will.'

I thought for a long moment about this. It was hard to believe a man like John Merrill Ferguson shouldn't have made a will, but there are some arrogant men who won't believe they will eventually die.

'As his wife, you are protected,' I said. 'It will cause legal trouble, but your lawyers will sort it out. Anyway, is it too late? Can't you persuade him to make a will?'

'Hopeless. He doesn't even recognize me. He just sits and stares into space.'

'What's the second problem?'

She put her hands on her breasts and closed her eyes.

'Can I trust you, Jerry? We are lovers. Lovers should trust each other.'

Where had I heard that corn before? In some disaster I had acted in?

'If you mean whatever you want to tell me will be confidential, it will be confidential,' I said carefully.

'Thank you, Jerry. You are the only one I can tell and the only one I can trust.'

'So what's the second problem?'

'I am not his wife.'

That really gave me a jolt.

'What are you saying?' I slid off the bed and put on my shortie dressing gown. I turned on one of the shaded lamps. I stared at her, lying on the bed like a Playboy centerfold. 'Not his wife?'

'I am not his wife. Come and sit here, Jerry, and let me tell you.'

This was something I had to know so I sat on the bed by her side and let her take my hand.

‘Are you telling me he isn’t married?’

‘He’s not married.’ She slid her fingers up my arm. Why did I think of spider’s legs? ‘We met two years ago. He was in Las Vegas, doing a deal. He wanted a woman. Mazzo came to me. I was in show business. He hired me. Who wouldn’t want to bed with the richest man in the world? John was never such a good lover as you, Jerry, but I fell for him and he for me. He offered marriage. He meant it, but he was so busy there was no time to arrange the elaborate wedding he wanted. Then his dreadful illness began attacking him. He kept telling me that as soon as his deal was completed, we would marry and go on a world cruise. He brought me here. He told everyone, his mother, Durant, the staff, I was now his wife, and we had married secretly. I was and am, accepted as his wife. I am in name, but not in fact. I kept asking him, even begging him to legalize our union, but the illness was now too far advanced and he just made promises.’ She stared at me. ‘So you see, Jerry, if he dies, my life, as I know it now, comes to an end. His mother hates me. She suspects we aren’t married. She is a greedy, wicked old woman, and when John dies she will easily prove he didn’t marry me.’ She lay back and stared up at the ceiling. ‘All this luxury, all this money will be snatched away. I don’t know what will happen to me.’ She looked towards me. ‘There it is, Jerry. I am now asking you to help me.’

I stood up and walked around the big bedroom. I wanted to get away from her caressing fingers. Red lights were now flashing in my mind. I thought of Larry Edwards. Had Loretta told him what she had told me? Had he refused to help her? Had she turned down her thumb, and he had died?

I felt cold sweat on my body. I was a prisoner in this opulent house! I had seen the tough looking bodyguards patrolling the grounds.

‘Help you?’ I tried to steady my voice. ‘How can I help you? Look, I was hired to impersonate your . . . Ferguson. I am doing that. That’s all I’m paid to do.’

She got off the bed and walked to where she had thrown her wrap. Slowly, she put it on.

‘We are lovers, Jerry. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?’ she asked, looking directly at me. Her face could have been chiseled out of marble.

I was scared. I thought of Larry Edwards, of Charles Duvine. Play the wrong card, I told myself, and you too can finish up dead.

Because I knew I was helpless to stop them murdering me if I refused to cooperate, I decided to play for time.

‘If I can,’ I said. ‘I will help you.’

As she regarded me, I could see she knew I was scared witless. Her face lit up with a sardonic little grin.

‘I knew you would say that.’ She went over to a lounging chair and sat down. ‘I knew I could rely on you.’ She smiled. ‘You are going to marry me.’

This was so unexpected, I just gaped at her.

‘It’s the only solution.’ Again the sardonic little grin. ‘Oh, sit down! I’ll explain, now I have your promise to help me.’

So, unsteadily, I sat down, facing her.

‘How would you like to own two million dollars, Jerry?’

No words came. I continued to stare at her.

‘Jerry! How would you like to earn two million dollars?’

I pulled myself together.

‘That’s quite a lump of money,’ I said huskily. ‘Yes, who wouldn’t?’

‘You are to marry me in your disguise as John, and in return, I will give you two million dollars.’

She must be out of her mind! I reached for a cigarette, lit it while she watched me.

‘It wouldn’t work,’ I said finally. ‘This is crazy thinking. If there’s a probe, and there will be, the marriage wouldn’t stand up. The certificate will be dated. His mother will know that John is beyond marriage. You and I would get into real trouble. No, it just wouldn’t work.’

‘It is going to work!’ There was a whiplash snap in her voice that made my heart skip a beat.

‘But how?’

‘You know nothing about the power of big money. With money, anything can be arranged. When Durant told me you could forge John’s signature perfectly, I saw the solution. I made inquiries in Las Vegas. There is an elderly priest who retired two years ago, around the time I met John. He has a marriage register. I flew down there yesterday and talked to him. He needs money. His wife has cancer. His son is on drugs. We did a deal.’ She smiled her sardonic smile. ‘The day after tomorrow Durant goes to Washington. I have arranged for this priest to come here. He will give me a marriage certificate, dated two years back, when I met John. You will sign the register in John’s name, and hey, presto! I am married to John.’

I thought, then said, ‘Have you really fixed it? There should be witnesses.’

Her eyes like granite, she made an impatient gesture.

‘Jerry! It is all arranged. This supposed marriage was secret. Two witnesses were supposed to have been taken off the street. I found two poor blacks who, for a few dollars, signed the register. All that is necessary is for you to sign the register, and John and I are married.’

I could see the danger.

‘Wait a moment. You do realize that you are leaving yourself wide open to blackmail? This priest, these two witnesses, could come back again and again, and bleed you.’

She smiled. I have never seen such a cold, evil smile.

‘No one blackmails a Ferguson, Jerry.’

My mind switched to Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine. I was suddenly horribly sure that this priest and these two poor blacks would have fatal accidents.

‘Then there is another important thing you have to do,’ she said. ‘It is only the signature. The will.’

‘The will?’

‘Of course. When John married me two years ago, he made a will leaving me all his possessions.’

‘But you told me he hasn’t made a will.’

‘He hasn’t, but I have. I have a watertight, legal will completely protecting me. All it needs is his signature.’

Again the evil little smile. ‘Your forged signature, Jerry.’

I grabbed at straws.

‘A will has to be witnessed.’

She made an impatient movement.

‘When we were married in Las Vegas two years ago, the two poor blacks also witnessed the will. I have their signatures on the will. That has been arranged.’

I sat there staring at her.

‘For your cooperation and for your future silence, Jerry, I will pay you two million dollars. What do you say?’

‘You haven’t two million dollars,’ I said huskily.

Again the evil little smile.

‘I will have. You and I will have to wait until John dies, but don’t worry. Two million is worth waiting for, isn’t it? John could die within a month or so. I told you, he is getting rapidly worse.’

Was she now planning to murder John Merrill Ferguson? Looking at her, seeing that smile, I felt sure she was. I felt sure also that she would never pay me two million dollars. Once she had the forged signatures, I would cease to exist.

I had to play for time.

‘Durant? Does he know what you are planning?’

‘Don’t worry about Durant. He has his future to consider. He goes the way the wind blows.’

‘The mother?’

‘There is nothing she can do once I can prove I am John’s wife. Don’t worry about her. I am asking you, for two million dollars, will you cooperate?’ Her voice was like steel.

Because I knew I was in a trap, and for the moment, I could see no way out, and because I knew if I refused, it would be the end of me, I said, ‘You can rely on me to cooperate.’

She stared at me for a long moment, her violet eyes glittering, then she smiled, got up and left me.

* * *

Four hours later, I was still sitting in the chair when Mazzo wheeled in the breakfast trolley.

‘Sleep well, Mr. Ferguson?’ he asked as he poured coffee. He gave me a sly little grin.

I didn’t bother to answer him. I looked at the pile of scrambled eggs and sausages. My stomach cringed.

‘Nothing to eat,’ I said, and reached for the cup of coffee.

The sixth credit note from the Chase National Bank lay on the trolley.

‘You’re getting to be a rich man,’ Mazzo said. ‘All that nice loot piling up in the bank.’

Did I detect a jeering note in his voice?

I picked up the credit note and put it in my pocket.

‘Another big day, Mr. Ferguson,’ Mazzo went on. ‘We go to the office again. Get the mask on when you’re ready,’ and he left.

During those dawn hours, I had done a lot of thinking. Loretta’s promise to pay me two million dollars made no impact. I was as sure as I was sure I was a prisoner in this house, that she would never pay me. I had gone to the window and had looked down at the vast expanse of immaculate lawn. Two shadowy figures were moving around. I had gone to the

bedroom window and had looked down at the swimming pool. Two more shadowy figures stood by the pool.

I was a closely guarded prisoner, and returning to the living room, I vainly tried to think of a way to escape.

Now, sipping the coffee, a disturbing thought, sparked off by the faint jeer of Mazzo's voice, dropped into my mind.

How did I know that one thousand dollars a day was being credited to an account in my name at the Chase National Bank? I took out the credit note and examined it.

It stated that $1,000 had been credited to account number 445990, Mr. Jerry Stevens.

I remembered, in the past, when I had paid in cash, I had received a credit note, stamped and initialed. This credit note wasn't stamped, but it was initialed.

Maybe I was scaring myself for nothing, but I had to know. If these six credit notes I had received were fakes, then I was on a short term of life.

I had to know.

I was going to the office. I thought of Sonia Malcolm. She could be a remote lifeline.

Getting to my feet, I went to the desk, found a sheet of paper and wrote: *Top secret: Ask Chase National Bank, Seamore Street, Frisco if they have an account number 445990 in the name of Jerry Stevens. If yes, nod your head. If no, shake your head, but say nothing*.

I scrawled John Merrill Ferguson's signature, then folded the paper into a thin strip and tucked it under the strap of my watch.

I wondered.

How would Sonia react? Mazzo would be watching. When I gave her the strip of paper, would she keep her cool? I decided she would. There was something about this woman that gave me confidence. She was far from being a dumb secretary.

I went into the bathroom and put on the mask.

Driving down to the Ferguson Electric & Oil Corporation, Durant, I and Mazzo went through the same rigmarole as the previous day. The press still tried to speak to me. Camera men let off their flashlights, the bodyguards shoved them aside.

Durant, looking sour, had nothing to say during the drive. He studied document after document. I had nothing to say to him.

In the big office, he waved me to the executive chair behind the desk.

'I'll have papers for you to sign. Wait,' and he went away.

Mazzo sat away from the desk, crossed his legs and grinned at me.

'It beats me what these guys do with all these goddamn papers,' he said. 'Without paper, they would starve.'

'Yeah, I guess that's right.'

Sonia Malcolm came in, carrying a stack of files.

'Good morning, Mr. Ferguson.'

I watched her cross the room. I compared her with Loretta. What a difference! How women can differ!

I eased the strip of paper from my watch strap as she laid the files on the desk.

'These are for signature, Mr. Ferguson.'

I took a quick look at Mazzo who was yawning.

'Thank you, Miss Malcolm,' I said, then standing up, coming around the desk, with my back towards Mazzo, I thrust the strip of paper into her hand. As I did so, I looked steadily into her dark brown eyes.

Her fingers closed over the paper and the strip disappeared.

No reaction. No startled expression. I couldn't have wished for a better performance.

'When you are ready, Mr. Ferguson, please ring,' and she left.

I was so relieved, I could have shouted aloud. I had bet on her, and I had won!

Mazzo came to the desk, pulled up a chair, took out a sheet of paper, and said, 'Okay, Mr. Ferguson, let's get at it.' He opened one of the files, took out a letter, covered it with the paper, then said, 'You sign here.'

I had to force myself to concentrate. What would Sonia think when she read my note? Suppose Durant was out there and saw her reading it? Suppose she went to him and showed him the note?

'Hey!' Mazzo barked. 'You sign here!'

I realized I had been staring into space, my pen idle.

Again I forced myself to continue signing. This went on for the next hour. Then I could stand it no longer. I dropped the pen and shoved back my chair.

'Cramp,' I said and stood up, flexing my fingers. 'Let's have a drink, Mazzo.'

He grinned, got up and went to the cocktail cabinet.

'What'll you have, Mr. Ferguson?'

‘Join me in a beer, Mazzo.’

‘Fine.’

He opened the refrigerator and found two cans. As he snapped the lids, he said, ‘Dead easy tomorrow. Mr. D. goes to Washington. We’ll have two days easy. Some tennis, huh?’

I took the glass of beer from him.

‘Sure.’

We saluted each other and drank.

‘Seen anything of the Boss?’ I asked casually. ‘Mrs. Ferguson tells me he’s real bad.’

‘They all like to think he’s bad, but he ain’t . . .’ He stopped short and stared at me. Into his eyes came the look of a tiger on the hunt. ‘Don’t ask questions,’ he said, finished his beer and walked back to the desk. ‘Let’s go.’

He had made a slip.

Was he going to say: He ain’t that bad?

I carried my glass to the window and looked down at the ocean and the beach and the happy people disporting themselves. How I longed to join them!

‘We’d better get to work,’ Mazzo rasped. ‘Mr. D. wants this finished pronto.’

I returned to the desk, sat down and continued to sign.

By midday, I had finished the last document. I pushed back my chair as I watched Mazzo flick down the intercom switch.

I swear my heart was thudding. Would Sonia give me the information I so badly needed? My mind raced.

If she gave the ‘yes’ signal, it would mean my life could be spared. I couldn’t believe these people would stash six thousand dollars in an account to my credit and then murder me. That would be throwing money away.

But if she gave a negative sign, then I would know, eventually, when I was no longer of any use to them, the thumb would be turned down.

I tried to keep calm. Sweat was running down inside this hated mask. I sat at the desk watching Mazzo pile up the files. This was the worst moment I had ever experienced.

The door opened and Sonia came in. She walked to the desk and picked up the files while Mazzo wandered away across the room.

She looked at me and I looked at her.

‘Will that be all, Mr. Ferguson?’ she asked, holding the files against her.

Then slowly, still looking at me, she shook her head, giving me the negative sign.

If it wasn’t for the mask, she would have seen my stark fear.

‘That’s it, baby,’ Mazzo said and came between us.

She turned and left.

‘That’s a nice piece,’ Mazzo said. ‘I wouldn’t mind giving her a ride.’

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t.

On the way back to the Ferguson residence, Mazzo, who was sitting beside me in the Rolls, said suddenly, ‘Something biting you, Mr. Ferguson?’

That was, of course, the understatement of the year.

I was in a major panic. I had this thought hammering in my mind: How much longer would. I stay alive? Was this Ape of a man, sitting by my side, going to be my executioner? I remembered his jeering voice when he had said I was piling up money in the bank. I was sure he knew Durant was gypping me.

I made an effort and got control of my panic.

‘Put yourself in my place, Mazzo,’ I said. ‘I’m getting bored with this business.’

He gave a little snigger.

‘Think of all the loot you’re collecting, Mr. Ferguson. I’d go along with anything if I got paid the way you’re getting paid.’

‘How long is this to go on?’ I asked.

‘Not long now. Mr. D. is finalizing the deal. He leaves for Washington tomorrow. Then there’ll be more papers for you to sign, and that’s it.’

‘A couple of weeks?’ I was desperately probing.

‘Maybe: could be less. It depends how Mr. D. gets on with the big shots in Washington.’

‘My Agent is fixing a TV job for me at the end of the month,’ I lied. ‘Think I’ll make it?’

Mazzo stared at me, his eyes savage and hungry.

‘Why should you sweat? You’ll have lots of loot. Who wants a pissy TV job when you are rolling in the stuff?’

Then I knew for sure, they planned to murder me.

I had my panic under control.

'Yeah, that's right,' I said.

The Rolls drew up outside the entrance to the residence.

The Jap chauffeur got out and opened the rear door, taking off his cap and bowing.

Mazzo and I climbed the steps.

'How about some tennis this afternoon?' Mazzo asked.

I now realized if I was going to survive, Mazzo must have no idea that I knew what was going to happen to me. I must give the appearance of a man doing a job and at ease.

'Sure,' I said. 'What's for lunch?'

'I'll go talk to the Chef. You know your way up.'

'I wouldn't mind a couple of lean lamb chops and a salad. Nothing heavy if I'm playing tennis.' I walked up the broad stairs, paused at the head, but Mazzo had disappeared. I hesitated for a brief moment. I was tempted to bolt down the stairs and out into the garden, and down to the gates. Then I heard a faint sound and looking around, saw one of the bodyguards sitting in a dark corner, watching me. As I looked at him, he tipped his hat. Ignoring him, I walked down the corridor to the study, entered, closed the door and went over to the cocktail cabinet. I poured myself a stiff martini, then carrying the drink to the desk, I sat down. I looked at the three telephones on the desk. I lifted the receiver of one of them: the instrument was dead. I tried the other two: also dead.

I lit a cigarette and considered my future. At first glance, it looked horrifyingly bleak. I felt sure that as soon as this deal had been completed, I would go the way Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine had gone. I sipped the drink while I thought. Panic had now receded. I began to think clearly. It occurred to me that if they had me in a trap, I also, had them in a trap.

Without my signature, the big, vital deal would fall flat on its face!

Let's look at this, Jerry, I said to myself. Let's take a close look at this situation.

They had gone so far down the road, they now couldn't do without me!

Suppose they were stupid enough to get rid of me as they had got rid of Larry Edwards? So what? They would have to begin again. To find some actor to impersonate Ferguson, to get him to learn to forge Ferguson's signature, to get him to imitate Ferguson's voice would be a real problem. Durant had already tried one impersonator who had failed him. He had found me. This time, his luck had held. He not only had found a man who could pass for Ferguson, but had the talent to forge his signature and imitate his voice. It could take months, even with all the money in the world, to replace me.

My mind shifted to Loretta. Durant was leaving for Washington tomorrow. Loretta had told me as soon as he had gone, a retired priest would arrive with a marriage certificate.

In return for signing the register and also the will, she would eventually pay me two million dollars. That stupid, lying bribe hadn't even been believable to me. I had agreed because I remembered Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine, but both Loretta and Durant were far too committed for either of them to murder me.

Without me they were sunk!

Did this thought give me a lift!

All you have to do, I told myself, is to refuse to forge any more signatures. You have them over a barrel. You . . .

The door opened and Mazzo came in pushing a trolley.

'Here's your lunch, Mr. Ferguson, as ordered.'

He laid the table while I watched him. I felt good. I still had a lot of thinking to do, but, for the first time since I had been kidnapped, I could see a bright light at the end of this frightening tunnel.

'There you are, Mr. Ferguson,' Mazzo said, setting down the dish. 'I'll go feed my face. I'll be back in an hour and a half, then we'll play tennis . . . right?'

I ate with appetite. My panic was now forgotten.

Tonight, Loretta would come to my room. This would be the first showdown. She would be in for a surprise and there was nothing she could do about it.

I felt so good, I took eight games off Mazzo in three sets. I hit the ball with all my weight and strength and I could see, by his startled expression, as my passing shots zipped by him, how surprised he was. He had to pull out all his expertise to keep ahead.

When the game was over, we were both sweating and coming to the net, he grinned at me.

'You could become quite a player, Mr. Ferguson. I haven't had such a good game in years.'

'I'll beat you yet,' I said, and walked to where I had left my sweater. I remembered Loretta had said that John Merrill Ferguson lived with a nurse in a suite in the left wing of the house.

As I began pulling on the sweater, I looked to the left of the big house. On the top floor there were three big windows,

and each window was protected by iron bars.

Iron bars? A prison? Was John Merrill Ferguson a prisoner? I remembered Mazzo had said: She likes to think he's bad, but . . . Had I discovered something?

'Let's have a shower, Mr. Ferguson,' Mazzo said and he picked up the racquets.

As we walked off the court, my mind was busy. Suppose John Merrill Ferguson wasn't mentally ill? Suppose he had been locked away to give Durant and Mrs. Harriet free rein to control the Ferguson empire?

Was this story Loretta had told me that Ferguson was suffering from a strange mental illness a lie to explain to me why I had been hired to impersonate him? Why keep a man behind iron bars if he was a mental vegetable?

We reached the bottom of the steps leading to the entrance to the residence. Then abruptly I came to a stop.

Standing on the top step, was a white, toy poodle.

* * *

As I was stripping off in the bedroom for a shower, Mazzo poked his head around the door.

'Hurry it up, Mr. Ferguson, the old lady wants to see you,' he said, and I could see he looked worried.

'Mrs. Harriet?'

'Yeah. She's just arrived. Hurry it up.'

I took a quick shower. Mazzo had put out an open neck shirt and linen slacks.

'What's she doing here?' I asked as I struggled into the clothes.

'How do I know? She's here, so watch it.'

'Do I put on the mask?'

'No. She'll be here in a minute. Go out there, and wait for her.'

I put on sandals and went into the living room.

Mazzo's worried, flustered look became infectious. I too began to get worried. What was this old woman doing here, and what did she want with me?

I hadn't been in the living room for more than a few minutes when the door opened and Harriet, carrying the poodle, came in.

'Surprised to see me again?' She smiled at me, pausing in the doorway.

'Pleasantly.' I gave her my wide, movie smile of charm.

'Yes.' She moved to a chair and sat down. 'I've been hearing all kinds of good things about you, Jerry. Mr. Durant is very satisfied.'

I relaxed a little, moved to a chair and sat down.

'That's what I'm being paid for,' I said.

'It won't be long now.' She regarded me, still smiling. 'There will be a few more papers for you to sign, a few more appearances at the office, then you will be free to return to Hollywood and resume your talented career.'

I decided this was the moment to drop a spanner in the works.

'Mrs. Harriet,' I said, giving her my best smile. 'I am sorry to tell you but I am not happy with the situation as it stands.'

Her little dark eyes hardened.

'Not happy?' There was a rasp in her voice.

'No, and being so sympathetic to me, so generous in your praise for my small talent, I feel you wouldn't want me to be unhappy.'

She raised her eyebrows, her back stiffening.

'Why aren't you happy, Jerry?'

'Mr. Durant promised to pay me one thousand dollars a day to impersonate your son.'

She inclined her head, her eyes now like wet stones.

'That was the arrangement, Jerry. It is a generous amount, and you agreed.' She peered at me. 'Are you asking for more money?'

'No.' I gave her my wide smile again. 'You are an intelligent lady, Mrs. Harriet. Put yourself in my place. I am being constantly watched. I am, in fact, a prisoner. Frankly, I have no confidence in Mr. Durant.'

'A prisoner?' She gave a trilly laugh. 'It is necessary to keep you secluded, Jerry. You must see that. Aren't you happy with Mazzo? I have told him to give you good meals, to amuse you.'

'To restore my confidence, I want to be sure that I am being paid one thousand dollars a day, Mrs. Harriet,' I said, still smiling at her.

'Dear Jerry! You have the daily credit notes. Mr. Durant has arranged this. Of course the money is being credited to

you.'

'Anyone can walk into the Chase National Bank and pick up a bunch of credit receipt slips. Anyone can put one thousand dollars on these slips in the favor of Jerry Stevens. Anyone can scrawl initials.' I wiped off my smile. 'Although I am just a two-bit actor, I'm not entirely a sucker. To be happy, I want to telephone the Chase National Bank and ask them if they have a credit account in my name.' I waved to the telephones on the desk. 'These have been cut off. I want to use a telephone that is not cut off. When I hear for myself that this money, promised to me and earned by me, is credited to an account in my name, then I will be happy again.'

She regarded me for a long moment, her face like stone.

'Mr. Durant wouldn't want you to use a telephone, Jerry,' she said finally. 'You must be reasonable.'

'So, Mrs. Harriet, you are telling me I will not be allowed to use the telephone. I am not going to ask you why. I want you to listen to my side. So far, I have successfully impersonated your son. I have cooperated as required. Now it is your turn to cooperate with me. If I am not allowed to telephone the bank by tomorrow morning at ten o'clock, I will no longer cooperate.'

She looked down at the poodle and fondled its ears.

Then she looked up, smiled at me and nodded.

'For an actor, Jerry, you have unexpected shrewdness,' she said and got to her feet. 'I will arrange that you can call the bank at ten o'clock tomorrow.' She moved to the door.

I was ahead of her and had the door open.

She paused and laid her hand on my arm.

'What a sensible young man not to trust anyone,' she said.

I stared straight into those old, bleak eyes.

'Do you trust anyone, Mrs. Harriet?'

Her lips moved into the faintest of smiles.

'Then I'm not young, Jerry, dear,' she said and left me.

chapter six

I didn't want Loretta to creep into my bed while I was asleep so I sat up and waited for her.

Mazzo had served dinner in my room. He told me Mrs. Harriet was tired and had gone to bed early. He kept looking at me, his expression worried. I was sure he wanted to know what the old lady had said to me, but he remained silent.

After dinner, I tried to interest myself in a paperback, but my thoughts were far away. I had won my first battle with the old lady. I was confident, when I was allowed to call the bank, I would be told the money due to me had arrived. I had played a trump card with my threat to stop cooperating.

I sensed this sinister affair was moving to its conclusion.

Durant would return from Washington with this deal finalized, except for my forged signature. Then was the time to play hard to get.

There were two antagonists: Mrs. Harriet and Loretta. It seemed to me that both were planning to grab the Ferguson empire.

Then there was Durant: on whose side was he? The fact that as soon as he had left for Washington, Mrs. Harriet had appeared, seemed to me he was on her side.

On whose side was Mazzo? From his worried expression, I thought he could be on Loretta s side.

Who had ordered the murders of Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine? Mrs. Harriet? Loretta? Thinking about this, I decided Mrs. Harriet was the one, working with Durant. With their money, it would be easy to hire killers to fake accidents. Maybe Mazzo wasn't the killer I had thought he was.

I had a hopeful feeling that Mazzo wasn't hostile to me. Animal that he was, with careful handling, I might win him over to my side.

Then there was John Merrill Ferguson. Was he a mental vegetable or a locked-away prisoner? I thought of the iron bars at the windows. My rooms were on the right wing of the house. It would be quite a journey from my suite to his. I felt an urge to reach his prison. I might even see him. I wasn't locked in when I went to bed, but there were the guards. Could I leave my room, make a trip to the left wing of the house without being spotted?

I was thinking about this when, as silent as a ghost, Loretta came in.

As she closed the door, she paused, staring at me.

'Why aren't you in bed?' She was wearing a wrap and her feet were bare. Her face was pale and dark rings circled her eyes.

The time was a little after 01.00.

'I have been waiting for you,' I said, not moving.

She came to a chair opposite mine and sat down.

'What did that old bitch have to say to you?' she demanded.

I studied her. I could see she was only just controlling a fermenting rage.

'Nothing of importance. She just said she was pleased with the way I was impersonating her son.'

'Nothing else? Nothing about me?'

'Nothing else.'

She drew in a deep breath, and her fists relaxed into hands.

'That bastard Durant!' She kept her voice low, but her rage made it tremble. 'He told her to come! He wanted me watched while he was away! I have had to call off the priest. He was coming tomorrow. He can't come while that old bitch is here!'

I didn't say anything.

'I don't know when I'll have the same opportunity,' she went on, half talking to herself. 'When Durant gets back, he is always around. What am I going to do?'

Still I said nothing.

She glared at me.

'Don't sit there like a goddamn dummy! You said you would help me! I must have proof that I married John!'

'I'm here to do what I'm told,' I said. 'You tell me.'

'If you want to earn two million dollars, you'll have to do better than that!' she exclaimed, her voice rising.

'Can you rely on Mazzo?'

She looked startled.

'Of course. What's he to do with this?'

'Are you sure? Are you sure he won't give you away to Mrs. Harriet?'

She gave a sly little smile.

'One time, perhaps, but not now.'

I didn't have to have that spelt out. I guessed this sensual woman had seduced Mazzo. She had hooked him as she imagined she had hooked me.

The sight of her suddenly sickened me.

'Let me think about it,' I said, keeping my expression deadpan. 'Maybe with Mazzo, we could find a solution.'

She regarded me suspiciously.

'He's useless. He hasn't a brain in his head.'

That I knew, but I needed time, so I said, 'He may not be so useless. I'll think about it.'

'You'd better do more than that! Anyway, there's the will. That you will sign! I have contacted the priest. He is sending the will, witnessed by the two who witnessed the marriage certificate. It will arrive tomorrow. I'll bring it to you tomorrow night to sign.'

'Without the marriage certificate, the will will be useless,' I said. If there was one thing I was not going to do was to forge John Merrill Ferguson's signature to a will that would give this evil woman the right to claim his fortune.

I was suddenly aware that she was regarding me with an evil smile.

'Of course! The solution! Now I understand why you said we could find the solution with Mazzo.'

I stiffened.

'What do you mean?'

'It's a brilliant idea, Jerry! Of course! Mazzo! You weren't sure if I would be shocked.'

I gaped at her, but a cold feeling crept up my spine.

'Shocked?' She laughed softly. 'No, I'm not shocked Jerry. I have often wished that old bitch would drop dead. Of course! Mazzo! I felt sure you would find a solution.'

Jesus! I thought. What the hell is she babbling about?

'Solution? I'm not with you.' My voice was husky.

Again the evil little smile.

'Mazzo will do anything for me. He will creep into that old bitch's room when she's asleep and put a pillow over her goddam face. I'll be rid of her! I would then only have Durant to handle, and I know I can handle him.' She got to her feet. 'Thank you, Jerry. You won't regret this. You'll get your two million dollars. You've earned them.'

I was so horrified, words wouldn't come. I watched her leave the room, watched the door close behind her.

Man! Was I in a state!

For several minutes, I sat still, panic stamping all possible thought. Then after a while, I forced myself to stand up, walk to the bathroom and throw cold water over my head.

Drying my face, I returned to the living room to pace up and down. My panic began to recede.

This woman was a dangerous lunatic! Suppose she did persuade Mazzo to murder the old lady? He was moronic. Sex and money might persuade him. Then suppose something went wrong? Suppose the doctor wasn't satisfied? Suppose the police were called?

Loretta was so evil, if she were implicated, she could implicate me! She could tell the police it had been my idea! She would tell them I was her lover! Would they believe I had been kidnapped and held prisoner?

I had to escape from this evil house! I suddenly didn't give a damn about the money I knew would now be waiting for me at the bank. I didn't give a damn whether the old lady was murdered. I had to escape!

But how?

I went to the window and looked down into the grounds. Sure enough, two guards were patrolling. From the bedroom window, two more guards were standing in the shadows.

This was a set-up right out of a movie. It presented a challenge. With luck and care, I could reach the gates, then I would be away. I had the comforting thought that the guards wouldn't shoot at me. They would chase me if they saw me, but they wouldn't attempt to kill me. Until I had signed the final documents, my life, at least, was safe.

I made up my mind. I would try right now, and to hell with the consequences!

I went to the clothes closets. After searching, I found a track suit in dark blue and a pair of sneakers. It took me only a few moments to change into the track suit and put on the sneakers. I needed a weapon of some kind. I was determined to fight my way out if I had to.

I looked around, then went to the desk. I found a heavy, narrow silver paperweight that fitted perfectly across my knuckles. Going to the bathroom, I found a roll of elastic bandage. I bound the paperweight across my knuckles. A blow with that would stun any man.

Which way out?

I turned off the only light in the room, groped my way to the window and opened it. I looked down: a sheer drop of some fifty feet to flagstones. There was no way to climb down. I went into the bedroom and opened the window. Again there was no way to climb down.

Moving silently, I opened the living room door and peered into the long, dark corridor. There was a faint light coming up from the lobby. I crept to the head of the stairs and looked down.

A shadowy figure of a man sat in a chair by the front door. As I watched him, he gave off a faint snore. I didn't hesitate. Moving fast, and as silently as a shadow, I went down the stairs, and moved into the main living room. The guard snored on. The room was in pitch darkness. I began to inch my way, like a blind man, my left hand advanced, making sure not to upset a lamp or an occasional table. It took me five, sweaty minutes to reach the french windows. I slid between the drapes and I could see the immaculate lawn, brightly lit by the moon. As I put my hand on the latch to open the french windows, I paused.

Was this house wired against burglars?

I spent another minute, running my fingers around the frame of the doors. I encountered a wire that told me that if I opened the door, I would set off an alarm. I should have known! It made sense that all the ground floor windows and the terrace doors would be wired.

Still determined to escape, I decide to try the first floor. Moving silently, I opened the living room door a crack and peered into the big hall. I waited and listened. I could see the shadowy form of the guard, sitting by the front door, but he no longer seemed to be asleep: at least, he wasn't snoring. I waited. Watching the guard through the crack of the door, I saw him stand up. Then the full glare of the overhead lights came on, lighting up the hall. I could see a short, stockily built man standing, alert, looking towards the living room door, a gun in his hand. The gun didn't bother me. I was sure he wouldn't shoot. As I stood watching, I wondered if the front door was also wired.

Then I saw Mazzo coming down the stairs. He was wearing a green cotton dressing gown, over orange pajamas.

'Okay, Marco,' he said as he reached the hall. 'I'll handle it.'

The guard jerked his thumb to the living room door.

'Sure,' Mazzo said. 'Relax.'

I put my hand out and found the light switch and turned it down. The big living room became alight and I walked away from the door and to the middle of the room.

By touching the wire around the french windows, I had set off the alarm! Hastily, I stripped away the paperweight bound to my knuckles and as I stuffed the bandage and the paperweight into my pocket, the door swung open.

Mazzo looked inquiringly at me.

'You want something, Mr. Ferguson?' he asked, his eyes probing.

'I couldn't sleep, Mazzo,' I said. 'I was just taking a look around.'

He grinned.

'Looks like you were planning to take some exercise, Mr. Ferguson,' he said, eyeing my track suit. 'Not right now. Tomorrow, huh?'

'Okay, Mazzo,' I said. 'Then tomorrow.'

He nodded and stood aside.

'Bed now, huh? If you can't sleep, I can fix you with a pill. I can fix you with most things, Mr. Ferguson.'

I gave up. With the guard in the hall, with Mazzo, feeling sure the front door was wired, there was no point in making a desperate attempt to escape. At least, I had learned something. I was not going to escape from this house the easy way.

'I'll sleep now,' I said, and walked by him and up the stairs, ignoring the guard who was staring at me, and to my rooms.

Mazzo joined me in the living room.

'What's the matter with you?' he demanded when he had closed the door. 'You think you can get out of here? Every goddamn exit is fixed! Even I can't get out of here at night!'

I gave him a rueful grin.

'It was worth a try.'

'What's the matter with you?' he demanded. 'You're being well paid. Why do you want to get out of here?'

I stared at him.

Was he that moronic?

'Okay, Mazzo, go to bed. Sorry I got you up,' and I walked into the bedroom.

I heard the living room door shut. I waited a long moment, then went to the door and gently turned the handle.

The door was locked from the outside.

* * *

Mazzo brought in the breakfast trolley around 09.15.

I had slept a couple of hours, but before dozing off, I had done a lot of thinking. Time was running out. It was more than possible I would not be able to escape. If the security was this tight, I couldn't see how I could.

Suppose Loretta persuaded Mazzo to murder Mrs. Harriet? With a woman like her, anything was possible: I had to warn Mrs. Harriet! I had to tell her Loretta was not married to her son, that she was trying to persuade me to forge a marriage certificate and a will. I had to warn the old lady against Mazzo.

So what would happen to me when I told Mrs. Harriet about Loretta? I still had a trump card: I could refuse to sign any further documents. Then, tossing and turning in the darkness, I thought of Durant. He was ruthless. Could he force me to sign these final papers? Force me? I remembered my father who had served in the second world war, telling me how agents had been tortured, and even some of the bravest of them had been broken. Thinking of Durant, I felt he would do anything, except kill me, to get me to forge the final documents. Was my trump card such a trump card? Finally I slept and woke when Mazzo wheeled in the trolley.

'Feeling low, Mr. Ferguson?' he said. 'Nothing like a tomato juice laced with Vodka to cheer you up.'

'Just coffee, Mazzo,' I said.

'You want a run around the estate, Mr. Ferguson?' he was grinning.

'No. Tell Mrs. Harriet I want to talk to her.'

His small eyes shifted.

'What do you want with her?' There was a rasp in his voice.

'Tell her!' I rolled out of bed and went into the bathroom.

After a quick shower and a shave, I returned to find him gone.

I drank coffee, ignored the dish of scrambled eggs, lit a cigarette, then dressed.

By then it was approaching 10.00. I went into the living room to find Mazzo, sitting, staring into space.

'Did you speak to Mrs. Harriet?' I asked.

'Too early for her.' He pointed to one of the telephones on the desk. 'That one works. Go ahead and call your bank.'

I had the Chase National bank's telephone number on the credit slip. I sat at the desk, lifted the receiver and dialed. While I waited for the connection, thoughts ran through my mind. Should I tell them to alert the police? Should I yell for help? Those thoughts were dispelled as Mazzo got up and came over to stand close to me.

'Careful, Mr. Ferguson. Just business, huh?'

When a girl answered, I said. 'I want to check if Mr. Jerry Stevens has an account with you.'

'A moment, please.'

A man came on the line.

'This is Mr. Jerry Stevens,' I said. 'Tell me: has there been an account opened in my name, and has the sum of seven thousand dollars been credited to the account?'

'Hold it, please, Mr. Stevens.'

There was a long pause, then the man said, 'Yes, Mr. Stevens. A sum of seven thousand dollars was credited to your account yesterday by telex. It's all in order.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'Who . . .'

Mazzo's big hand broke the connection.

'That's it, Mr. Ferguson. Happy now?'

Well, at least, I now knew I had seven thousand dollars waiting for me if I could get out of this nightmare place.

'Oh, sure,' I said. 'Now, I want to talk to Mrs. Harriet.'

'Yeah. I heard you the first time.' Mazzo grinned. 'You'll talk to her. She's not so young. She gets up late, but you'll talk to her. I'll fix it. How about some exercise?'

'Not right now. I'll wait.'

'Okay.' Mazzo shrugged. 'Want anything special for lunch?'

'I want to talk to Mrs. Harriet!' I practically shouted at him. 'To hell with lunch!'

'Take it easy, Mr. Ferguson. I'll talk to the Chef.' He went into the bedroom, wheeled the trolley out to the door. 'Just take it easy, huh?'

He left, shutting the door behind him. I heard a faint click that told me the door had been locked. It wasn't until an hour later that Mrs. Harriet, carrying her poodle, came into the living room. She was wearing a black trouser suit with a dark red collar and cuffs. Her wig was immaculate. A button of glittering diamonds ornamented her ensemble.

'Good morning, Jerry dear,' she said, smiling at me. 'Mazzo tells me you wanted to talk to me.' She moved to a chair and sat down. 'I do hope you are satisfied. I do hope you are no longer unhappy. Mazzo tells me you called the bank. You

now know, don't you, the money we promised you has been paid.'

I sat opposite her.

'The money owing to me was only paid by telex yesterday,' I said. 'I was promised one thousand dollars a day. It is only because I warned you I wouldn't cooperate, you arranged to pay the money you owe me. That doesn't give me confidence, Mrs. Harriet.'

She gave a chuckling little laugh.

'Dear Jerry! You don't really understand finance, do you? Let me explain. To pay you a thousand dollars a day would be a loss of money to me. Money earns money. Even one thousand dollars can earn money: not much, but a little, and a little money amounts to big money in time. You would have been paid in a lump sum when your job is finished. I assure you of that. The Fergusons always meet their commitments. However, you have no need to worry, Jerry dear. Every day you remain here, one thousand dollars will be credited to your account. At the end of the week, you may telephone the bank and make sure of that.' She fondled her poodle's ears, smiling at me. 'Happy now?'

There was nothing I could say to this. I shrugged.

'So glad.' She continued to smile. 'Mazzo tells me you tried to run away. Wasn't that rather silly of you? You see Jerry we are relying on you. Perhaps, it was a sudden nervous reaction?' Her dark little eyes suddenly hardened. 'You won't try to run away again, will you?'

'I would if I could,' I said. 'I make no promises.'

'Dear Jerry! How unfortunate! Why do you want to run away when you are making so much money?'

'The reason why I asked to talk to you,' I said, 'is to tell you that Loretta is planning to have you murdered.'

She lifted her eyebrows.

'You think that?'

'Mrs. Harriet, this is a nightmare house! Loretta told me that she can persuade Mazzo to creep into your bedroom while you are asleep and smother you with a pillow. She has seduced Mazzo and she tells me she is sure he will do what she tells him to do. Can you wonder why I want to get away from this goddamn house? I'm telling you, you could be murdered and I too could be implicated!'

'How kind of you, Jerry. How kind of you to think of me.' Her fingers continued to fondle the poodle's ears.

'Do you understand what I am saying?' I demanded.

'Of course, Jerry dear, of course. What else did Etta say to you?'

I stared at her. I had imagined when I told her Loretta planned to murder her, there would have been some reaction, but there she sat, fondling the poodle, smiling, completely at ease.

'Are you and Loretta out of your minds?' I asked, my voice shooting up. 'Don't you understand that any night, you could be murdered?'

She gave a trilly laugh that grated on my nerves.

'Poor Jerry! I do appreciate your loyalty. Nothing like that will happen. Please don't worry about it.'

I found I was sweating.

'Right! I've warned you! If you think you won't be murdered, that's your goddamn funeral! I've told you!'

'Of course, Jerry dear. It is sweet of you. Did Etta tell you that my son is mentally ill?'

I clenched and unclenched my hands.

'Yes, and he is in the left wing of the house, supervised by a nurse.'

'And did she tell you, Jerry dear, she isn't married to my son?'

I gaped at her.

'You know that?'

'She told you?'

'Yes.'

Again the trilly laugh.

'And did she tell you she was arranging with a priest to come here with a register and you should forge my son's name?'

'So you know about it? Then there's the will.'

'Of course. Poor Jerry! What a turmoil you must be in. You are doing a marvelous job substituting for John who is out of the country. You have been so loyal to me. I am going to be quite, quite frank with you.' She leaned forward and patted my knee. 'I am going to tell you the sad truth in strict confidence. I am afraid Mr. Durant wouldn't approve, but never mind. You have earned the right to know the truth.'

I sat still, staring at her.

'Now, Jerry dear, please give me your promise to say nothing about what I am going to tell you.' Her dark little eyes probed mine. 'Will you promise?'

I had to know. This situation was driving me crazy.

'Yes, I promise,' I said, and waited.

'So glad, Jerry dear. You see, it has all happened before. Etta told the same sad story to Larry Edwards and he, worried as you are, came to me. I suppose she offered you two million dollars to forge my son's will?' She nodded. 'Yes, of course, she did. She made the same offer to Larry. I tried to reassure him, but he no longer wanted to cooperate.' She gave me a steady stare. 'I paid him off.' She shook her head, her eyes sad. 'Rather a nice young man. Such a shame he had that accident.'

My mouth turned dry. The threat was there.

'You must be worrying and wondering, dear Jerry,' she went on. 'Of course, Etta is John's wife. They were married two years ago. I'm not asking you to accept my word. I can give you proof.' She put down the poodle and getting up, walked across to a cabinet which she opened. Then she returned, carrying a large envelope. 'See for yourself. Here are the photographs of the wedding. It is quite a social occasion,' and she laid the envelope on my knees.

I took out a collection of press photographs. Loretta, looking radiant, wearing a white wedding gown with a veil, held onto the arm of John Merrill Ferguson. They were surrounded by people: Mrs. Harriet, Durant, a number of faces that meant nothing to me. I flicked through the other photographs: Loretta cutting the cake. She and John Merrill Ferguson toasting each other with champagne, and so on and so on.

I returned the photographs to the envelope, then looked at Mrs. Harriet.

'Then why did she tell me she wasn't married to your son?' I asked, my voice unsteady.

'That, of course, is the sad secret my son and I have been concealing for the past year,' Mrs. Harriet said quietly. 'We need your cooperation, dear Jerry. You have shown you are loyal. You are entitled to know. You have given me your promise to say nothing once you leave here. I accept your promise.' She reached out and patted my knee. 'Loretta is mentally ill.'

This didn't come as a surprise to me. I had already formed an opinion that Loretta was crazy.

'So all this talk about not being married, that your son is a nut, about persuading Mazzo to murder you is just the talk of a lunatic?'

'Of course, Jerry dear. Mazzo would never think of doing such a thing. I have complete faith in him.'

'She said she and he were lovers.'

Again the trilly laugh.

'Poor Etta is plagued with sexual temptations. She seduced poor Larry.' She looked slyly at me. 'And I imagine you too, dear Jerry. That I can well understand. Men find her irresistible, but not Mazzo. Poor Mazzo had his equipment — shall we call it — shot away in the Vietnam war. No, Mazzo is not capable of going to bed with any woman.'

It took me a moment or two to absorb this information, then I said, 'Your son is not kept behind iron bars with a nurse?'

'You have noticed those windows? There are times when it is necessary for her protection to keep Etta confined. Yes, there is a resident nurse. We have barred the windows for Etta's safety. Once, she nearly threw herself out of an upper window. Hers is a peculiar mental illness.' Mrs. Harriet paused to make cooing noises to the poodle, then went on, 'It began when she had a miscarriage. Both my son and Etta longed to have a son. The baby boy miscarried. From that moment, Etta went mentally to pieces. She began having delusions. We noticed that when the moon was full, she became more than difficult, and she had to be confined. At the waning of the moon, she becomes reasonable enough to lead a normal life. Whenever there is a full moon and when John is away, I come here. There will be a full moon in a few days, and she will be confined. We have consulted the best specialists in the greatest secrecy, but there is nothing they can do for her.' She sat back, fondling the poodle. 'There, Jerry, you now know our tragic secret. My son can't bear the thought of anyone knowing. He adores Etta. I ask you to be patient and please continue to cooperate with us. It won't be for much longer.'

My mind switched to Larry Edwards. It would seem he wanted out, and refused to cooperate and had a fatal accident. This wasn't going to happen to me!

'Thank you for confiding in me, Mrs. Harriet,' I said, in my sincere voice. 'Now I know the facts, of course, you can depend on my cooperation.'

She beamed at me.

'I'm so glad. You won't regret it. Don't pay any attention to what poor Etta says. Be kind to her. Pretend you will do what she asks you to do. For the next few days, she will become more and more imaginative.' She got to her feet. 'Remember, Jerry, dear. John has so much influence. The Fergusons are always most generous to those who help them.' She moved to the door. 'Have a good lunch. Ask Mazzo for anything you fancy.' She opened the door, her little dark eyes searching my face. 'Have a nice day,' and she was gone.

* * *

After a light lunch, Mazzo suggested tennis.

I couldn't remain in this room all the sunny afternoon, so I agreed, but I wasn't in the mood. The result was Mazzo won in three straight sets.

As we put on our sweaters, he eyed me thoughtfully.

'Got something on your mind, Mr. Ferguson? You can play better than that.'

'Just not in the mood.' I picked up my racket. 'Tell me, Mazzo, did you fight in Nam?'

'Who, me?' He gave his sighing laugh. 'Vietnam? The Boss pulled strings and got me off the draft. Everyone listens to the Boss. I was too important as his bodyguard to go farting around in Vietnam.' He paused and stared at me. 'Why the question?'

'I was out there. I just wondered.'

'No, sir. That mess was strictly for the suckers.'

He left me to take a shower. When I had dressed, I went into the living room and sat down.

Mrs. Harriet had lied to me that Mazzo had been wounded in Nam and was now incapable of going to bed with a woman. Why? If she had lied to me about Mazzo, had she lied to me about Loretta? Could those wedding photographs she had shown me have been faked? It was easy to substitute Loretta's face for some other girl's face. I went to the cabinet from which she had taken the envelope of photographs, opened it and stared at the empty shelves. After examining the photographs I had returned them to the envelope and had put the envelope on the desk. While playing tennis, they had been removed.

I returned to my chair.

Who was I to believe?

Was John Merrill Ferguson a prisoner behind bars or was the prison waiting to confine Loretta?

Were both of these women lunatics?

I was convinced now I wouldn't be able to escape at night. I was free to walk in the grounds with Mazzo during the day. I went to the window and looked down at the wide expanse of lawn. Two guards were wandering around. I went into the bedroom and looked down at the swimming pool. Again two other guards were wandering around. Were there more guards among the trees, out of sight?

I felt confident I could put Mazzo out of action, then which way would I run?

The estate was surrounded by ten foot high walls.

Could I get over them? I imagined trying and the guards closing in. That wasn't the way. I returned to the living room window. To my left was the triple garage, the doors opened. I could see the Rolls, a Caddy and a Jaguar. I remembered the big double iron gates at the end of the drive. With a car as strong and as heavy as the Rolls, driving fast, I could smash a way through those gates. With the windows up and the doors locked, the guards couldn't stop me.

Here was my way of escape!

I pulled a chair to the window and sat down. From where I was sitting, I had a clear view of the garage.

The time was 17.15.

After some ten minutes, the Jap chauffeur came down the outside stairs from an apartment above the garage. He was wearing a shirt and his grey uniform trousers.

I had forgotten him. He could present a problem.

Would I have to cope with him as well as Mazzo? My hopes of escaping sagged a little. Japs were tricky to handle: quick, judo, karate. I remembered I had had to tangle with a Jap in a spy movie. He practically flattened me, and the director had to tell him to take it easy.

Maybe the chauffeur wouldn't be around when I made my break.

I wondered if the ignition key would be in the ignition lock. Could I start the Rolls without it? The business of opening the bonnet, fiddling with the ignition wires could cause a fatal delay.

I watched the Jap close the garage doors, then he climbed the stairs and disappeared.

Tomorrow morning, armed with the paperweight, I would tell Mazzo I needed exercise. We would take a walk around the grounds, then end up by the garage.

I was still thinking when Mazzo wheeled in the dinner trolley.

'Chicken Maryland, Mr. Ferguson,' he said. 'Special for you.'

'Mrs. Harriet talked to me, Mazzo,' I said, coming to the table. 'She tells me Mrs. Loretta is as nutty as a fruit cake. What do you think?'

He served the chicken and placed the plate before me.

‘Don’t worry your brains about what Mrs. Harriet says. You do your job like I do mine, and everything will be fine.’

‘And another thing,’ I said, looking directly at him. ‘She told me you had your balls shot off in the Vietnam war.’

He stared at me. His brutal face suddenly blank.

‘What was that?’

I repeated what I had said.

‘I told you, I wasn’t in the goddamn Vietnam war!’ he snarled.

‘Oh, sure.’ I began to eat, aware he had moved away and was continuing to stare at me.

‘Why would she say a thing like that?’ he muttered.

‘Because Mrs. Loretta told me you were screwing her, Mazzo, and I told the old lady. She said you couldn’t screw any woman, and why.’

‘Me? Screwing Mrs. F.?’ Mazzo’s voice shot up a note. ‘That’s a goddamn lie!’

‘Loretta told me that because she had hooked you, Mazzo, you would murder Mrs. Harriet: creep in her room and smother her with a pillow,’ I said casually. I laid down my knife and fork, turned and looked directly at him.

He stood motionless, sweat on his forehead.

‘I’m telling you this, Mazzo, because you need me as a friend, and I need you as a friend. Loretta is mad enough to murder Mrs. Harriet and pin the murder on you.’

I could almost hear his brain creaking. He stood there, like a vast ape, trying to put thoughts together.

‘I’m warning you, Mazzo. Both these women are dangerous. You could have a murder rap slapped on you, and you would have no answer,’ I said.

He pulled himself together.

‘Shut your mouth!’ he snarled. ‘More talk like that and I’ll tear your goddamn head off!’

He went away, slamming the door.

I had sown a seed of fear in him. I was sure of it.

Tomorrow, I would try to escape.

chapter seven

I spent a restless night. Although I was determined to try to escape the following morning, the more I thought about my plan, the less confident I became.

I felt confident I could knock Mazzo out, but there was the Jap chauffeur. He bothered me: an unknown factor. There was the problem of the ignition key. Did the chauffeur leave the key in the ignition lock? I thought that was unlikely, but there were guards around, and he might just think no one could get at the car and steal it, and he could leave the key in the lock.

I then thought of the high iron gates. Would they withstand the shock of the Rolls, driven fast at them? It would be a hell of a letdown if the Rolls bounced off them.

In spite of these doubts, I was determined to try.

I was shaving when I heard Mazzo wheel in the breakfast trolley. I finished shaving, slapped on lotion and walked into the living room.

'Morning, Mazzo,' I said. 'Let's have some exercise this morning. How about a little jogging?'

My plan was to jog around the estate and finish up by the garage. I would tell Mazzo I hadn't seen the engine of a Rolls, so let's take a look. Once inside the garage, I planned to knock him cold, get into the Rolls, lock the doors, hope the ignition key would be in place and take off.

'You're going to the office this morning,' Mazzo growled.

I looked sharply at him.

'Is Mr. Durant back?'

'Mrs. Harriet's orders. Eat your breakfast.'

I suddenly wasn't hungry. What was cooking? If Durant was back with the final papers to sign, time was running out for me.

I drank coffee, ate a piece of toast and ignored the ham and eggs.

Mazzo went into the bedroom. I followed him and watched him take a suit from one of the closets. I saw the suit was mine! I began to panic.

'You don't put on the mask,' Mazzo said. 'You go to the office as yourself. Get it?'

'What's the idea?'

'You talk too much. You're paid to do what you're told. Get dressed! We leave in half an hour,' and he left me.

I stood for a long moment, motionless, my heart thumping.

You go to the office as yourself!

This could mean only one thing: Durant was back with the final papers for my signature, then he would tell me I was free to go. Probably, he would tell Mazzo to take me to the Miami airport for a plane to Los Angeles.

During the drive to the airport, there would be a prick of a needle and I would cease to exist.

Man! Was I in a sweat!

I went to the liquor cabinet and poured myself an enormous Scotch. I drank it down as if it were water, then I stood still until the Scotch hit me. It stiffened my wilting spine.

Come on, Jerry, I said to myself. You're not dead yet.

I decided, when I reached the office, I would refuse to sign. That would throw a spanner in their murderous works. What could they do? At least, delaying tactics would gain time for me.

Feeling a little high, I put on my own clothes and my own shoes. After wearing John Merrill Ferguson's super suits, my suit looked terrible as I stared at myself in the wall mirror. I had forgotten how shabby I had been looking. No wonder Lu Prentz had stopped inviting me to lunch. I looked what I was: an unemployed, seedy, bit-part actor. Then I remembered I had seven thousand dollars in the bank. If I could get out of this mess, I would refit my wardrobe and pester

Lu until he found work for me. But I had to get out of this mess first!

'You'll want the make-up kit,' Mazzo said. He had come silently into the room.

'What's all this about?' I demanded, staring at him.

'You heard me! Pack it!'

Take it easy, I told myself as I walked into the bathroom.

Remember, you have the last word: no signing.

I put the mask, the moustache and the eyebrows in the make-up box. Mazzo took the box from me. On the bed was a suitcase, packed with the dark mohair suit I had worn which belonged to John Merrill Ferguson.

Mazzo put the make-up box in the suitcase, closed the lid and snapped the locks.

‘Let’s go.’

We went down the stairs and to the open front doors.

There was a beat-up looking taxi waiting. At the wheel sat Marco, the night guard.

A man came out of the shadows of the hall and took the suitcase from Mazzo.

‘This is Pedro,’ Mazzo said. ‘He’ll take care of you. You do what he says . . . get it?’

I looked at the man: short, squat, broad shouldered, wearing a pale blue light weight suit and a dark brown panama hat.

During my movie days, I had come across all kinds of toughies and thugs, but this man took the Oscar. It flashed into my mind that he could be my executioner. He looked deadly enough to be just that. Had he murdered Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine?

‘Aren’t you coming?’ I asked Mazzo.

He gave a sly grin.

‘I’ve things to do. Go along with Pedro. He’ll take care of you.’

Pedro waved me to the taxi. I had an urge to bolt, but I saw two guards standing close by in the sun, watching. Sweating, I walked down the steps and climbed into the taxi. As I settled on the springless seat, Pedro sat by my side. The taxi drove off.

‘Relax, Mr. Stevens,’ Pedro said in a soft spoken voice. ‘You do your job, and I’ll do mine, huh?’

His job? To murder me?

I said nothing.

As we reached the high double gates, I leaned forward. A guard opened the gates. Looking at the gates, I felt sure, if ever I had the opportunity, I could smash my way through them in the Rolls, but would I ever now have the opportunity? Had I left it too late?

I sat back as the taxi left the Largo and headed for the City. Should I make a break to escape when I got out of the taxi to enter the Ferguson Electronic & Oil Corporation offices? The press would be there. Pedro wouldn’t dare pull a gun. I decided as soon as we reached the offices, I would bolt. The guards and Pedro couldn’t chase after me on the busy street.

Then I was suddenly aware that the taxi had turned off the main boulevard and was cutting down a side street.

Startled, I looked at Pedro.

‘This isn’t the way,’ I said, dry mouthed.

He gave a little grin.

‘We go in the back entrance, Mr. Stevens,’ he said. ‘That way we don’t have to worry about the news jackals.’

It was as if he had read my mind. Panic took hold of me again. Should I throw myself out of the car. I looked at the car door, then saw the car door handle had been removed.

Pedro’s heavy hand fell on my arm.

‘Take it easy, Mr. Stevens.’

The car slowed and turned down a long, dark ramp.

At the end of the ramp was a pole which lifted and we drove into a big underground garage.

From the shadows came three men: Ferguson’s guards. They grouped around the car, silent, watchful and sinister.

Pedro got out, carrying the suitcase.

‘Let’s go, Mr. Stevens.’

I got out of the taxi and looked around. As if on cue, the three guards closed in, so I walked with Pedro to an elevator. We entered. He pressed a button. The guards stood back as the elevator raced upwards.

Pedro walked me down a long corridor, then opened a door and stood aside.

‘Take it easy, Mr. Stevens,’ he said. ‘Just sit and wait, huh?’

I walked into a luxuriously furnished waiting room, equipped with some twenty lounging chairs, tables on which were scattered a number of magazines.

‘Sit down,’ Pedro said, closing the door. He went to a lounging chair and settled himself, then reached for a copy of Penthouse.

I moved over to the big window and looked down the thirty stories onto Paradise Boulevard. People looked like ants; cars like miniature toys. Beyond, was the beach, the palm trees and the sea.

Pedro suddenly released a soft whistle.

‘This doll doesn’t even bother to keep her legs crossed,’ he muttered. ‘Boy! Could I give her a workout!’

I ignored him. My mind was racing. Every time I planned an escape I was frustrated. Suppose I now made a bolt from the room, yelling ‘Murder!’ Suppose . . .

The door opened and Sonia Malcolm stood in the doorway.

The sight of her gave me a surge of relief. Since I had been caught up in this nightmare, she had been the only normal

person I had encountered, but I knew I couldn't involve her. I couldn't attempt to explain to her what a mess I was in. There would be no opportunity and even if there was, she would probably think I was out of my mind.

'Mr. Stevens?' she said, looking at me. 'Will you, please, come this way?'

I saw her nice, serious eyes take in my shabby suit and my scuffed shoes. She must have been used to the immaculate, rich business men who came to the office, but her expression didn't change.

I looked directly at her, but she showed no sign of recognition. Why should she? I wasn't hiding behind John Merrill Ferguson's facade. She only saw Jerry Stevens, the bit-part, unemployed actor.

I followed her out into the corridor.

Muttering, Pedro dropped the magazine, picked up the suitcase and walked behind me as I followed Sonia's graceful back.

As we turned the corner in the corridor, I saw ahead of me the door leading to John Merrill Ferguson's office suite.

Behind the door, I thought, would be Joe Durant with final papers to sign. I braced myself.

Sonia opened the door and stood aside.

'Mr. Stevens, sir.' She motioned me forward.

I walked into the familiar room, expecting to see Durant at the desk.

I stopped short and stared as Sonia closed the door behind me.

Instead of Durant at the desk, where I had sat a couple of days ago, was the man I was impersonating: John Merrill Ferguson!

* * *

The mind moves with the speed of light.

As I stood there, looking at the man at the desk, into my mind came a memory of a drunken, famous film star who had buttonholed me and told me he had had a frightening experience.

'I was asleep, Jerry,' I remembered him saying. 'Then I suddenly woke and I saw myself standing by the bed. It was as if I had stepped out of my body, and I looked at myself, solid, not a mirror reflection, but myself. It was the most frightening, uncanny thing. Me . . . away from my body!'

I knew he was drunk, but I remembered what he had said.

Now, I was looking at a reflection in a mirror. For days, I had stared at myself, disguised as John Merrill Ferguson, telling myself I could be John Merrill Ferguson.

I then understood fully my drunken film star: I was having his experience; a frightening, uncanny thing.

John Merrill Ferguson got to his feet, came around the desk with a wide, friendly smile.

'Mr. Stevens!' he exclaimed, reaching me. 'This is quite a moment, isn't it?' He grasped my hand and shook it with warmth. 'You must be a little bewildered. Come and sit down. Let's talk.'

Still holding my hand, he steered me to a chair.

'Don't look so worried. I have a lot to thank you for.'

The friendly voice was relaxing. 'Sit down. Let's have a drink.'

As I sat down, he went to the liquor cabinet.

He looked over his shoulder and grinned.

'A bit early, but never too early for champagne.'

I just sat there, trying to get on balance while he popped the cork, poured the wine, came over, put my glass on an occasional table, then sat down, facing me.

'You have done a marvelous job, Mr. Stevens,' he said and raised his glass. 'I drink to you.'

This was so unexpected, I couldn't say a word, but, pulling myself together, I picked up my glass with an unsteady hand and we drank.

'I didn't think it possible that any man could impersonate me as brilliantly as you are doing.' He put down his glass. 'I have seen photographs of you, playing tennis, here at my desk, entering our offices. I have kept staring at them. They could be me! I've heard a tape recording of you talking to Walter Bern. Your voice was mine!'

He sounded so friendly and enthusiastic, I, like most actors, responded to this praise. I began to relax.

'Well, sir,' I said, 'I was hired to do the job, and I am glad you are satisfied.'

'Satisfied? That's an understatement!' His smile widened. 'You have saved me a lot of money, Mr. Stevens . . . to hell with calling you Mr. Stevens. Let's be informal. Jerry and John, how's that?'

I gaped at him.

One of the richest and one of the most powerful men in the world offering to be on Christian name terms!

Did this do something for my ego!

'Why, yes, sir,' I said.

He laughed.

'Okay, I'll give you time to relax, Jerry. You have done a fine job. It is unbelievable. You have fooled the press. You have even fooled my old butler. Without you, I couldn't have gone to Peking and pulled off a big deal. All the sharks, including the CIA, imagined I was home.' His face suddenly turned serious. 'I'm talking to you in confidence, Jerry. What I am saying mustn't go beyond these walls. Right?'

'Yes, Mr. Ferguson.'

'I have a proposition for you, but, first, I want to know how you feel about your future as an actor. Do you want to return to that rat race? Be frank with me. If you have an itch to go back, then tell me and I'll understand, but if you are prepared to give it up, I have a proposition for you that will establish you with a big salary and no problems, moneywise for the future.'

My mind flashed to Lu Prentz and to the dreary days of waiting for the telephone bell to ring. I thought of returning to Hollywood, finding some tiny apartment, waiting and hoping. The thought chilled me.

'Let me put the cards on the table, Jerry,' Ferguson said, seeing my hesitation. 'Again, what I say to you is in strict confidence. Your brilliant impersonation has given me ideas. I am offering you a permanent position on my staff. Whenever I want to disappear, you will take my place. You will be my personal assistant. You will have an office of your own. Simple work will be found for you. This will be a front. You will have plenty of time off. Your real job will be to impersonate me when I don't want publicity. You will sign unimportant papers.' He paused and grinned. 'I couldn't believe your marvelous forgeries were my signatures. That's the proposition. Now for the terms. If you accept, I will pay you one hundred thousand dollars a year and provide you with living accommodation and a car. I will give you a seven-year contract with a rise of ten thousand dollars after three years, and you can break the contract any time after giving me six months' notice.' He smiled. 'The fact is, Jerry, you are too valuable to lose. In return for what I am offering, you will take a lot of strain and problems off my back. What do you say?'

I sat there, gaping. I just couldn't believe what he was saying.

'Of course, you will want to think about it. I won't rush you,' Ferguson went on. 'First, I want you to see your office, where you will live, and your car before you make up your mind. If you agree to my proposal, then you will become a member of my staff. You might not have any work to do for a couple of weeks or so, then when I go away, you will take my place. While you are not impersonating me, you will be entirely free to do what you like in this city. If your friends want to know what you do, tell them you are my personal assistant and no member of my Corporation talks about their work. All my staff are loyal, and I would expect you to be loyal too.'

He got up, went to his desk, flicked down a switch on the intercom.

'Miss Malcolm, would you come in, please?' To me, he said, 'Miss Malcolm is my assistant secretary. She will take care of you. She knows about the impersonation. Only Mr. Durant, my secretary, Miss Malcolm and Mazzo know. You can entirely rely on her.'

Sonia came in.

'I'll hand Mr. Stevens over to your care, Miss Malcolm,' Ferguson said, smiling at her. 'You know what to do.'

'Yes, sir.'

In a daze, I got to my feet.

'Think about it, Jerry,' Ferguson said. He shook my hand. 'Will you let me know your decision before six o'clock this evening?'

'Yes, sir,' I said, and followed Sonia out of the room.

My brain was racing. What an offer! One hundred thousand dollars a year, accommodation and a car! Little work! I would be free to explore this wonderful city!

No more Mazzo, Pedro, no more panic about being murdered.

I just couldn't believe it!

Sonia paused outside a door and opened it.

'We'll share an office, Mr. Stevens,' she said, and walked into a large sunny room with two desks, equipped with typewriters, telephones, intercom and with a view onto the distant beach.

'Isn't he wonderful?' she said, smiling at me. 'He really is like God. He just picks people and makes their lives happy. I can't yet believe he picked me.'

'Well, I'm lucky too.'

'I've seen you on television. It must be marvelous to be a star.'

'Don't you believe it.' I was looking at her, liking her. 'I'm glad to be out of it.'

She laughed.

'Oh, no. You must tell me about it. Let's go. You have a wonderful home and your car . . . !'

She led me down the corridor to the elevators, then down into the garage.

'Here it is,' she said, pointing to a pale blue, two-seater, drop head Mercedes. 'Isn't she a beauty?'

I had always wanted a Mercedes. I walked around it, patted it and grinned at her.

'Marvelous!'

She opened the offside door and slid into the seat.

'We must hurry, Mr. Stevens. I've a load of work to do this afternoon.'

I got behind the driving wheel, aware two guards were watching me. I drove to the barrier that lifted.

Man! Was I driving on a cloud!

'You turn right and keep along the boulevard,' Sonia told me. 'I'll tell you when to turn off.'

I drove in a Technicolor dream: a marvelous car! A beautiful girl!

At the end of the boulevard, she told me to turn left to the beach. We drove along the crowded seafront, then she told me to turn right. That brought us to a narrow sandy road.

'This leads to Mr. Ferguson's private beach,' she said.

Ahead of us were high iron gates and a guard who saluted as he swung back the gates. I drove further up the road, came to high hedges and palm trees, then I saw the beach cabin.

I pulled up.

'Is this it?'

'One of them. This is yours.'

'One of them?'

'There are four cabins on the estate, but each one is completely private. Mr. Ferguson doesn't use them anymore.'

I got out of the car and with Sonia, approached the cabin.

A cabin?

It was constructed of pinewood with a big veranda with sun chairs, tables and a bar. It oozed opulence.

Sonia ran up the steps to the veranda, unlocked the door and waved me in.

I walked into a lush, luxuriously furnished living room. There was everything: TV stereo radiogram, bar, lounging chairs, polished pine flooring with Persian rugs, a desk, two telephones and modern art on the walls.

My new home!

I just stood there and gaped.

'There are two bedrooms, two bathrooms and a fully equipped kitchen,' Sonia went on. 'You're lucky, Mr. Stevens! It's paradise!'

She led me to the master bedroom: an enormous bed closets, TV at the foot of the bed. The other bedroom was smaller but equally luxurious.

'Mrs. Swanson looks after the cabins,' Sonia said. 'Right now, you are the only occupant. She will get you breakfast and cook for you. You have only to dial 22 on the green telephone and tell her what you want. I hear she is a great cook. She'll take care of your laundry.'

'Marvelous!'

'The refrigerator is well stocked, but ask for anything you fancy.' Watching my face, she laughed. 'It's marvelous, isn't it? What it is to work for Mr. Ferguson!'

'You can say that again.'

As we moved back into the living room, a car horn sounded.

'That'll be my car, Mr. Stevens. I must run. You'll be all right, won't you?'

'Just one thing. Call me Jerry.'

She gave me a flashing smile.

'Okay, Jerry. 'Bye,' and she ran down to the waiting car. At the wheel sat Pedro, probing his teeth with a matchstick.

The sight of him made me uneasy. He looked such a murderous thug. I went out onto the veranda and Sonia waved as Pedro drove away.

I sat down in one of the sun chairs and stared across the silver sand to the sea.

I had to adjust. This seemed a fantasy. Only last night, I was scared I was going to be murdered, and now this!

You are too valuable to lose.

Thinking about what Ferguson had said, I decided it made sense. Ferguson, watched by rivals, hampered to make important business moves, had found a perfect standin who not only looked like him, but spoke like him and could forge his signature. For this, he was prepared to give me a seven year contract and pay me one hundred thousand dollars a year!

At first thought, this seemed a grossly exaggerated figure, but thinking of Ferguson's empire, his vast wealth, it would be peanuts to him.

I would need to have my head examined not to accept such a proposal!

Having made my decision, I realized it was past lunchtime and I was hungry. I went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. As Sonia had said, there was plenty of cold food. Heaping a plate with cold chicken, ham and salad, I carried the plate to the veranda and sat down at one of the tables.

Man! I thought as I began to eat, this is the life!

* * *

At 17.30, I drove to the Ferguson Electronic & Oil Corporation and entered by the back entrance. The guard recognized me, nodded and lifted the barrier. I took the express elevator to the top floor.

I had spent a wonderful afternoon, making plans. I needed clothes. I couldn't go around in my shabby suit. For clothes I needed money, then remembered I had seven thousand dollars to my credit at the Chase National Bank. I telephoned them and told them to transfer the money to the Paradise City branch. They said they would telex it right away. I then had a swim. As the mile long beach was completely deserted, I swam nude.

Later, I drove to the bank, signed the necessary forms, got a checkbook and drew out one thousand dollars.

Tomorrow, I told myself, I would have a shopping spree.

I felt like a ten foot tall man when I tapped on my office door and walked in.

Sonia was typing. She looked up and smiled at me.

'Everything okay?'

'Couldn't be better,' I said. 'Mr. Ferguson wanted me at six.'

'He's free now.' She flicked down the switch on the intercom.

There was a pause, then Ferguson's voice, the voice I could so faithfully imitate, said, 'Yes, Miss Malcolm?'

'Mr. Stevens is here, sir.'

'Fine. Send him in, please.'

She switched off and smiled at me.

'Go ahead, Jerry.'

'If you have nothing better to do, would you like to have dinner with me tonight?' I asked.

Her smile widened.

'I'd love it, but first, see what Mr. Ferguson wants.'

'I'll be right back and we'll fix something.'

I walked down the corridor to Ferguson's office door, tapped and entered.

Ferguson was at his desk. Sitting in a lounging chair was Joe Durant. The sight of him startled me. He regarded me with cold, steely eyes.

Ferguson got to his feet.

'Come on in, Jerry,' he said with a warm smile, but I saw there was tension in his eyes. 'What's the decision?'

I moved further into the room and shut the door.

'I'll be happy to work for you, sir.'

The tension went out of his eyes.

'Sit down.' He waved to a chair near where Durant was sitting. 'That's good news. You are happy with your office, your car and your accommodation?'

'Who wouldn't be, sir?'

'Right. Joe has the contract. Seven years. You understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You will be paid in advance. Eight thousand, three hundred and thirty three dollars: a month's salary. Miss Malcolm will arrange the tax deduction and for a check to be paid to you.'

As I sat down, Durant took a paper from his briefcase and handed it to me. It was a simple contract, but I read it carefully. It stated the facts: I was to be Ferguson's personal assistant. I was to be paid one hundred thousand dollars a year with a raise of ten thousand dollars after three years. The contract was for seven years and could be terminated with a six months' notice by either side.

Durant thrust a pen at me, so I signed. He then gave me a copy which was signed: 'Joseph Durant, Vice President.'

'You are now a member of my staff,' Ferguson said. 'You will remember my staff do not talk to anyone about what goes on here. You will remember if the press question you, you are my personal assistant, and you say nothing more. Right?'

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Now, I have work for you.’ He smiled. ‘I’m sorry to start you so soon, but it is necessary. I am leaving in an hour. I need to avoid the press and others.’ He waved to the bathroom. ‘You will find your make-up kit and clothes there. Will you change? I want you to leave by the front entrance with Mazzo. You will return to my residence. You will remain there until I return. Probably, I’ll be back in a day or so. As soon as I return, you will be free for maybe a couple of weeks to do what you like.’

I felt a pang of disappointment. I had been looking forward to taking Sonia out to dinner. Then I remembered I was Ferguson’s hired assistant at one hundred thousand dollars a year.

‘Yes, sir.’ I got up and went into the bathroom where I found the suitcase Mazzo had packed. It took me some fifteen minutes to change and put on the mask. I limped to the bathroom door and opened it.

Ferguson had left his desk and was standing by the window. Durant had gone.

At the sound of the door opening, Ferguson turned and looked at me. He stood rooted, staring at me, then he lifted his hand to his face. I lifted my hand to my face. He took a step back. I took a step forward.

‘Good God!’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s uncanny!’

‘Good God!’ I said, imitating his voice. ‘It’s uncanny.’ Then in my voice, I went on, ‘I’m glad, sir, you think so.’

He gave a shaky laugh.

‘You are marvelous, Jerry! Goddamn it, it’s like looking in a mirror.’ He came over and peered closely at me. ‘That’s a remarkable disguise.’ He patted my shoulder. ‘I wouldn’t have believed it possible.’ He laughed again. ‘And the voice.’ He looked at his watch. ‘I have only a few minutes.’ He went to the intercom, flicked down a switch, said, ‘I’m ready for you Mazzo.’

The door opened and Mazzo came in.

‘Take Jerry back home, Mazzo,’ Ferguson said. He turned to me. ‘Please do what Mazzo tells you to do.’ He smiled. ‘You are a damn fine artist.’

‘Let’s go,’ Mazzo said.

I followed him out of the office, down the corridor towards the elevators. As I passed my office door, I hesitated. I wanted to ask Sonia to give me a rain check, but Mazzo gently shoved me on.

The press were waiting, but the guards got me to the Rolls. It was like playing the same old disc once again.

As the Rolls drove away, I heard the plaintive shouts: Mr. Ferguson! One moment, Mr. Ferguson!

‘Those bastards never give up,’ Mazzo growled.

I was thinking, only hours ago, I was planning to steal the Rolls and make a break out. Now, I was a member of Ferguson’s staff, pulling down an unheard of salary.

I relaxed and thought of Sonia. She was my kind of woman. In a few days, I would take her to dinner. I wanted to develop our association: badly wanted to.

Back in Ferguson’s suite, I took off the mask, then returned to where Mazzo was waiting.

‘I’ve got instructions,’ he said. ‘The instructions say you stick around, and I don’t have to bother with you. You’ve got the free run of the place, but don’t go near the gates where someone might spot you. Get it?’

‘You mean I don’t have to stay in this room? I can go anywhere on the estate?’

‘That’s it. You are now one of us, palsy. I told you you were going to survive, didn’t I?’ He pointed to a green telephone on the desk. ‘You want something to eat, you want anything, use that phone.’ He moved to the door. ‘I have a date with a doll.’ He grinned. ‘Man! Am I going to give her a going over! Right now, palsy, you are on your own, but keep clear of the gates.’ Still grinning, he left me.

The time now was 17.05. I went to the rear window and looked down at the swimming pool. It looked marvelously tempting. I found it hard to believe that I was now free to do what I liked as long as I remained on the estate.

I stripped off, put on swimming trunks I found in one of the clothes’ closets, then taking a towel from the bathroom, I went down the stairs to the hall.

As I walked around the terrace to the pool, I saw Mazzo take off in the Jaguar. I gave him a wave, but he didn’t see me.

I spent an hour in the pool. The evening sun was perfect. As I was toweling myself, Jonas appeared.

‘Perhaps a drink, Mr. Stevens?’

‘Why not? A very large, very dry martini.’

‘Certainly, Mr. Stevens,’ and he went over to the bar.

Man! I thought, this is the life!

I settled myself on one of the lounging chairs, catching the last rays of the sun.

Jonas brought the drink.

‘For dinner, Mr. Stevens, I suggest chicken breasts in a lobster sauce,’ he said. ‘Perhaps a prawn cocktail. The prawns

are exceptional.'

'You have a deal,' I said, my mouth watering.

'Would you care to dine in the dining room or would you prefer to dine in your suite?'

I looked at him. The dark, old face was deadpan.

'Mrs. Harriet?'

'She will be dining in her suite.'

'Mrs. Loretta?'

'She will also be dining in her suite.'

'Okay. I'll dine in Mr. Ferguson's suite.'

'Certainly, Mr. Stevens,' and he went away.

I lay there, sipping the drink and watching the sun slowly sink. It was hard to believe this was happening to me. The menace had gone. I was in a fantastic dream world. I thought back on those days when I had sat by the telephone, practically starving, waiting and waiting for the telephone bell to ring. Now this!

I stayed watching the sun sink and the moon climb.

Watching the moon, I remembered what Mrs. Harriet had said: Whenever there is a full moon, she will be confined.

The moon was nearly full: in another three days, the moon would be full.

My mind switched to Loretta. I was sure she was out of her mind. She had to be! But this talk of about a full moon I couldn't accept.

Why should I worry? I told myself. I was now a member of the Ferguson's staff. I was free. I wasn't supervised any longer. John Merrill Ferguson, enormously rich and powerful, was pleased with me.

What more could I want?

Leaving the terrace, I returned to the suite. I took a shower, then put on one of Ferguson's shirts and slacks.

As I moved into the living room, Jonas came in, wheeling the dinner trolley.

The meal was marvelous. When Jonas had served me, he left. I regretted eating alone. How much better it would have been to have had Sonia with me. In a day or so, I told myself, I would fix that, but it wouldn't be here: some quiet restaurant by the sea, lit by the moon and with soft music.

The meal finished, I wandered out onto the big balcony and sat in a lounging chair. I was at peace with the world. I sat there, watching the moon light the lawn and the trees, seeing the guards move around and not caring about them. They no longer had become a problem. How life can alter abruptly, I thought.

Yesterday, I was scared of being murdered, now I was relaxed, without a care in the world.

Around 22.50, I stubbed out my cigarette, got to my feet and decided I would go to bed. I found a paperback among the books Mazzo had brought me.

I turned off the living room lights and went into the bedroom, switching on one of the lamps.

I yawned. It had been some day, and the meal had been excellent. Maybe, I wouldn't read. I would sleep.

Then my body stiffened with shock.

Sitting by the window was Loretta.

chapter eight

How life can alter abruptly, I had thought while sitting on the balcony, contemplating my seven-year contract, feeling secure. I had then been at peace with the world, but when I saw Loretta, my feeling of peace and security vanished.

'Hello, Jerry,' she said, and smiled at me. 'I have been watching you. You look happy.'

My mouth had turned so dry, I couldn't speak. I stared at her like a rabbit confronted by a ferret.

In the dim light of the lamp, she looked beautiful.

She was wearing a pale blue, silk wrap, and her long legs and feet were bare.

Had she come to share my bed? The thought of touching this demented woman horrified me.

'Is something wrong, Jerry?' she asked, her head a little on one side, her eyes quizzing.

'Surprised,' I managed to say, then walked to a chair and sat down. 'I wasn't expecting you.'

'I had to talk to you. Durant is back.'

'Yes.'

'You went to the office?'

'Yes.'

'What did he want?'

'Just papers to sign.'

'Did he say anything about me?'

'No.'

'The will hasn't come, but it must come tomorrow.'

I didn't say anything.

'I'm no longer allowed to see John. I went to his suite this morning. There was a guard at the door. He said John wasn't well enough to see anyone.'

I remembered what Mrs. Harriet had said: *Don't pay attention to what poor Etta says. Be kind to her. Pretend you will do what she asks you to do. During the next few days, she will become more and more imaginative*.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'His room is above mine. I hear him walking up and down, up and down. He sounds like a caged animal,' she went on. 'Up and down. Up and down.' She stared at me, her eyes big and haunted. 'The last time I saw him, the curtains were drawn. He was sitting in semidarkness. He was like a stone man. When I spoke to him, he said nothing. His nurse wouldn't let me near him. Now, I'm not even allowed to see him. I keep wondering: is he going to die?' She suddenly beat her clenched fists together. 'If he dies, what will happen to me? That old bitch will get all his money!'

I listened, feeling the horror of this thing.

'Last night, I tried her door. She locks it now. I have talked to Mazzo.' She lifted her hands in a gesture of despair. 'He is afraid of her.'

I wondered if she had talked to Mazzo. Was this another delusion? My main thought was to persuade her to leave me.

There was a long pause while she continued to stare at me.

'You say nothing, Jerry. I am relying on you. I need your help. I will buy your help! Think! Two million dollars!'

Mrs. Harriet had said: Pretend to do what she asks you to do. There will be a full moon in a few days, and then she will be confined.

'I haven't forgotten,' I said. 'I must think again. I am sure I will find a solution.'

'You must!' Her voice turned strident. 'Think!' She got to her feet. 'They are watching me! I thought I could rely on Mazzo.' She came to me and ran her fingers through my hair. The touch of her fingers sent a cold chill through me. 'Dear Jerry! Think! Help me!'

I got hurriedly to my feet.

'They mustn't know about us. You had better go.'

She put her hand on my arm.

'For God's sake, Jerry, don't believe what that old bitch tells you. Don't believe what Durant tells you. Believe what I am telling you!'

I looked into the haunted despair in her eyes. I thought of Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine.

'Listen to me!' she went on. 'Don't believe what anyone tells you, Jerry. Believe me!'

I moved her to the door.

'Yes. Relax. I am on your side.'

She paused at the door.

‘For your sake, Jerry, remain on my side. Don’t let them persuade you. I’m warning you. That old bitch and Durant are evil, greedy devils. They could murder me, Jerry. They could murder you.’

There was this desperate, wild note in her voice that brought back all my old fears.

‘I’ll find a solution,’ I said and opened the door.

She peered out into the corridor, then whispered, ‘We have so little time, Jerry. I will come tomorrow night. Find the solution,’ then she moved swiftly and silently down the corridor.

Closing the door, I walked out onto the balcony. I stood looking down at the moon lit grounds. Mrs. Harriet had said Loretta was crazy. She had to be! Yet there was that warning! They could murder me! They could murder you!

I forced myself to face the frightening facts. I was sure they had murdered Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine.

Panic gripped me.

I sat down and tried to calm myself.

I thought of John Merrill Ferguson with his warm friendly smile. *You are too valuable to lose*.

I thought of Mrs. Harriet. *The baby boy was miscarried. From that moment, Etta went mentally to pieces. She began having delusions*.

The iron barred windows of the left wing was where Loretta was confined when she had her attacks, but according to her, it was where John Merrill Ferguson, mentally ill, was confined.

His room is above mine. I hear him walking up and down, up and down. He sounds like a caged animal.

Delusions?

I rubbed my sweating face with the back of my hand.

This morning, I had met and talked with John Merrill Ferguson in his office. The footfalls she claimed to have heard must be a delusion. Ferguson was certainly not locked in the left wing suite. Then I thought of Loretta’s haunted, despairing eyes as she told me. Was someone locked up there?

I had to find out!

Getting to my feet, I went into the living room and tried the door. It was still unlocked. Moving silently, I walked down the corridor to the head of the stairs. The light was on, but there was no guard. Mazzo had said that I was one of them now. It looked as if the guards had been removed. I paused for a long moment figuring out how I could reach the left wing. I retraced my way back to the main corridor, then walked down the left hand corridor which was dimly lit. I wished I knew the geography of this immense house. I remembered from seeing the outside, the barred windows were at the far end, so cautiously, moving silently, I kept on.

Ahead of me was a bend in the corridor. I paused and edged myself forward so I could look down the further stretch of corridor. There was no guard. No one was in sight. I moved forward again. There were four doors leading off the corridor: all would be on the front side of the house.

There had been three barred windows. I passed the first door, then edged up to the second door; the first room with barred windows. I gently tried the door handle, but the door was locked. I put my ear against the door panel and stood for a long moment, listening and hearing nothing. I moved further down the corridor to the third door. Again I tried the handle: the door was locked. Once again, I put my ear against the door panel.

What I heard made the short hairs on the nape of my neck bristle: the steady thump-thump sound of pacing footfalls.

Listening intently, I heard a man clear his throat.

There was a pause, then the sound of the footfalls continued.

I stepped away from the door.

Loretta hadn’t been imagining this sound. This was no delusion! There was a man in there, pacing, as she had said, like a caged animal!

It couldn’t be John Merrill Ferguson. I had met him only hours ago, smiling warmly, telling me I was too valuable to lose. So who could it be?

As I moved to the door again to listen, I felt something touch my leg.

The soft feeling against my leg nearly made me launch from the pad.

I jumped away and looked down.

Mrs. Harriet’s poodle sat back on its haunches and waved its paws at me.

* * *

I lay on the bed in the moon lit bedroom, unable to sleep, my mind churning.

Who was the man imprisoned behind the barred windows? One thing I was certain of he wasn’t John Merrill Ferguson as Loretta had claimed him to be.

Hadn't I met Ferguson this morning? Hadn't he given me a seven year contract, and had said I was too valuable to lose.

Who could this prisoner be?

I had returned to my rooms with the poodle following me. I had shut the door in its face. I was scared it would begin yapping, but it didn't.

Now, on the bed, I thought of the man pacing up and down, of Loretta who said she would come again.

My nerves were stretched to breaking point. I tried to reassure myself that Loretta was crazy. I would tell Mrs. Harriet in the morning that Loretta was pestering me. Maybe it was time for her to be confined.

Through the open window I could see the moon was nearly full.

Confined?

I remembered Mrs. Harriet had said that the rooms with the iron bars were for Loretta when she got out of control.

The rooms with the iron bars already held a prisoner!

I got off the bed, knowing I wouldn't sleep and I went into the living room and turned on the desk light.

This house was weighing down on me: I longed to get away. Something evil was going on: something far too complicated for me to solve.

I sat behind the desk.

There was a heavy oppressive silence in the house.

The only sound I could hear was the steady beating of my heart. The moon light made patterns on the carpet.

The desk clock showed 01.50.

I tried to reason with myself. This was no business of mine. I was now a member of the Ferguson staff. I had signed a contract for seven years to impersonate Ferguson when he was away at the staggering salary of one hundred thousand dollars a year.

Consider yourself lucky, I tried to tell myself. Not in your wildest dreams have you ever thought you would get such a job. How Lu Prentz would gape if he knew!

Go to bed! Go to sleep! What goes on here is nothing to do with you. In a few days, John Merrill Ferguson had told me, he would be back, and you would stay at the luxury cabin by the sea. You would take Sonia out to dinner: a few more days!

But the ghosts of Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine seemed close to me. The desperate eyes of Loretta haunted me. Mrs. Harriet and her poodle seemed to be in the room.

So I sat there, in utter silence, scared, feeling the silence pressing in on me.

As I sat there, I suddenly heard a faint sound: a click of metal. In this silence, the sound made a tiny explosion in the room.

I reacted: starting to my feet, I stood motionless, listening. Then I knew what the sound was. I went quickly to the door and turned the handle.

The door was locked.

Someone had turned the key!

I stared at the door, my heart thumping, panic gripping me. What was going on? Why lock me in?

Then the silence was split by a woman's scream.

The sound practically curdled my blood: the terror in the scream made me take quick paces away from the door and set my heart racing.

There was a brief moment of silence, then I heard a scuffling sound, then a thud that seemed to shake the house: the sound a body makes when falling from a height and landing sickeningly on the ground below.

I waited, my face and hands clammy, while I listened.

Then came voices: men's voices.

I went to the door and pressed my ear against the panel.

I heard Mazzo's voice.

'Keep back. Don't touch her.'

A man said something I couldn't hear.

'Get Dr. Weissman,' Mazzo barked.

Then I knew a woman had died.

Mrs. Harriet? Loretta?

I heard Mrs. Harriet's poodle yapping.

That scream of terror, then the thud of a falling body! It was murder!

There was a sudden buzz of voices, then I heard Mrs. Harriet's distinct, calm voice, but it was not loud enough for me to hear what she was saying.

Loretta!

They could murder me, Jerry! They could murder you!

Less than two hours ago, she had said that to me: now they had done it!

My legs unsteady, I went to a chair and sat down.

Faintly from below, I could hear voices. The poodle's yapping had stopped.

After some minutes, there was a click as the lock of my door turned, and the door opened.

Mrs. Harriet stood in the doorway, looking at me.

She was wearing a black silk robe over a white nightdress.

She held the poodle in her arms.

'Jerry, dear,' she said as she came in and shut the door. 'I am so glad you haven't gone to bed. There has been a most unfortunate accident.' Her face was completely without expression, but her little dark eyes were glittering. 'Did you hear? Poor, dear Etta! She was sleepwalking. She fell down the stairs.' She came and sat near me. 'When she gets mentally disturbed, she always walks in her sleep.'

I stared at this ghastly old woman. I said nothing.

'She broke her poor neck,' Mrs. Harriet went on, fondling the poodle's ears. 'My son will be so upset. He loved her so much.'

Bile filled my mouth. I got to my feet, ran into the bathroom and threw up. It took me several minutes to put myself together.

They could murder you too!

I returned slowly to the living room.

'Poor Jerry!' Mrs. Harriet said quietly. 'You artists are so sensitive. Here, drink this,' and she thrust a glass half full of Scotch into my shaking hand.

I drank.

'That's better.' She patted my arm. 'Now, Jerry, you have to help. Dr. Weissman is coming. He will have to call the police.'

I went over to the chair and sat down.

'Jerry!' The snap in her voice made me stiffen. 'You are here to help! Stop acting like a child! Do you hear me?'

They could murder you too!

I finished the Scotch and took hold of myself.

'What do you want me to do?' I asked, not looking at her.

'John is thought to be here. He will be away for at least a week. I am not going to tell him what has happened until he returns. He would come rushing back. The business he is conducting is of vital importance. You must take his place. Are you listening?'

'Yes.'

'Put on the disguise. I will tell Dr. Weissman you are in shock, but the police may want to speak to you. I will see they don't worry you. Understand this: you will tell them that Etta very occasionally walked in her sleep. That's all you need say if they question you, but I don't think they will. John has always looked after the police. There will be an inquest, but you won't be called. John has always looked after the coroner. You will have to attend the funeral. It will be strictly private. Now, go and put on the disguise!'

I had no choice. I was scared witless of this old woman. I was sure she had ordered Loretta's murder as she had ordered the murders of Larry Edwards and Charles Duvine.

In the bathroom, with shaking hands, I put on the mask and completed the disguise.

When the police came, would this be my chance to get away from this nightmare? Should I tear off the mask and tell them the truth.

I thought of John Merrill Ferguson's warm smile. *You are too valuable to lose.*

I thought of my seven year contract. I thought of those awful days when I sat by the telephone, waiting and waiting, practically starving.

This dreadful old woman would return to Frisco when the funeral was over, and I would be rid of her.

I thought of the luxury cabin which had been given to me for my new home. I thought of Sonia. This wasn't my business, I told myself. My business was to earn the money John Merrill Ferguson was paying me.

Maybe the scotch gave me courage. As I adjusted my disguise, I decided, I would remain a member of the Ferguson staff.

* * *

The saying that money is power is an accepted cliché.

In the movie world, I had heard it often enough, but as I never had enough money, the cliché meant little to me.

But, this night, I witnessed the cliché come true with a devastating impact.

Wearing the mask, and dressed in the dark mohair suit, I went out onto the terrace, overlooking the front entrance of the residence.

Floodlights now lit the garden, the lawns and the distant iron gates, guarding the entrance to the estate.

Some ten men stood at the gates in a semi-circle: the tough, squat guards. As I watched, a glittering Caddy drove up to the gates, paused, then the gates were opened and the Caddy drove to the front doors.

I guessed Dr. Weissman had arrived.

I moved quickly from the living room and peered over the banisters.

The lights were on in the hall. Lying on the floor, at the foot of the stairs, still wearing the pale blue silk wrap, her feet and legs bare, was the body of Loretta Merrill Ferguson. By her side, his face expressionless, stood Mazzo.

I looked down on his shaven head.

A karate chop?

She had probably seen him, creeping up on her. She had screamed. Then the chopping blow at the back of her neck: her lifeless body crashing down the stairs.

A tall, fat, imposing looking man with thick white hair was talking to Mrs. Harriet. They spoke in undertones. I could see him clearly. A heavy face with jowls of good eating, dressed in a dark immaculate suit, he exuded authority and arrogant confidence.

Obviously, Dr. Weissman.

He moved to kneel by Loretta, touching her gently, turning her head slightly, lifting an eyelid. Then he stood up.

‘There is nothing to be done, Mrs. Ferguson. The poor lady is dead,’ he said in a rich baritone. ‘Leave this to me. We mustn’t move her. I will telephone Chief of Police Terrell.’

‘I think, dear doctor, we should have a little talk first,’ Mrs. Harriet said. ‘It won’t take long.’ She put her old hand firmly on his arm and drew him into the living room and closed the door.

I rested my arms on the banister rail and waited.

Mazzo began to prowl around the hall. I could see by the expression on his face, he was uneasy.

Ten minutes crawled by, then the living room door opened, and Mrs. Harriet and Dr. Weissman emerged.

‘My son is stricken, doctor,’ Mrs. Harriet said. ‘I don’t want him to be disturbed.’

‘Of course not. Should I see him? Perhaps I could give him a tranquillizer?’

‘He needs to be alone.’

‘I quite understand. Now, Mrs. Ferguson, please go to your room and lie down. Leave everything to me. If it is necessary, I will call you.’

‘I rely on you, doctor.’ She patted his arm. This terrible old woman was good at arm patting. ‘I will be available if you need me.’

As she turned to mount the stairs, I moved quickly back into my living room and shut the door. Then I went out onto the balcony.

The police arrived in two cars within ten minutes.

They were followed by an ambulance.

Dr. Weissman had certainly got action.

I watched two plainclothes detectives and a uniformed sergeant mount the steps.

I went to the living room door and opened it a crack.

Mrs. Harriet was standing where I had been standing, watching in the darkness, her old arms resting on the banister rail.

I heard voices. Dr.’s fruity voice was predominant, but I couldn’t hear what he was saying.

The whole charade was over in less than twenty minutes.

As I stood, peering through the crack of the door, I wondered how much Mrs. Harriet was going to pay Dr. Weissman.

My immediate impression of him was that he was a man who could be bought, always providing the sum was big enough.

I watched Mrs. Harriet leave the banister rail and walk slowly down the stairs. I moved out of my living room and took her place.

Below were the two detectives. The Sergeant stood by the door. Dt. Weissman dominated the scene.

Mrs. Harriet reached the bottom of the stairs.

‘I’m sorry, Madame, to have to ask you questions at this time,’ one of the detectives said.

‘Of course, of course.’ Mrs. Harriet dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. ‘You must understand that my son knows

nothing about this. He mustn't be disturbed. He is in shock as Dr. Weissman will tell you.'

'That's okay, Madame,' the detective said and moved towards the living room door. Harriet followed him with Dr. Weissman.

Two ambulance men entered. They whisked Loretta's body onto a stretcher, covered it with a sheet and carried it out.

The other detective talked softly to Mazzo who kept shrugging his ape-like shoulders.

I returned to the living room and sat down. I sat there, holding my head in my hands, too sick even to think.

The slamming of car doors, the sound of engines being revved up brought me upright. I went onto the balcony to see the police cars, following the ambulance, drive away.

As simple and as easy as that! The power of money!

I returned to the living room as my door opened and Mrs. Harriet came in. She shut the door and stood looking at me.

'Dear Jerry, it has all been arranged. You are not needed.' A tiny smile of triumph moved on her old lips. 'Go to bed. Take a sleeping pill, and remember, for poor Etta, it is a merciful release.' As she turned to the door, she paused, 'You will not have to attend the inquest, Jerry. Dr. Weissman will arrange everything: such a dear, helpful man. You will, of course, have to attend the cremation, but no one will worry you. Good night.'

She waved her fingers at me and left.

The next six days dragged by like six years.

Mazzo brought my meals. He said nothing and I had nothing to say to him. I spent hours on the balcony, reading paperbacks. In the evenings, I watched TV I slept with the aid of pills. I tried to comfort myself that I was Ferguson's hired man at one hundred thousand dollars a year.

But there were too many times when I thought of that scream and that thud; when I thought of Loretta's despairing eyes and remembered what she had said: *For God's sake, Jerry, don't believe what that old bitch tells you. Don't believe what Durant tells you. Believe me*! I also thought of the man pacing up and down in the room with the barred windows.

On the sixth morning, Mazzo, while serving breakfast, said, 'It's all fixed. The inquest went like a dream. Get with the mask. They're burning her this morning at eleven.'

I wanted to smash my fist into his ape-like face. I wanted to yell at him: You killed her! I got up and went into the bedroom.

'Something wrong?' he asked, following me.

'I don't want anything. Get out!'

'I tell you: no problems,' Mazzo said with grin. 'Get with the mask and wear the mohair.'

Mrs. Harriet, her poodle and I were the only mourners. We drove to the crematorium in the Rolls.

There was a car in front and two behind.

The news had leaked, and the press were at the gates of the crematorium: the jackals, the camera men, the TV crews, the lights and the gaping crowd. The guards spilled out from the three cars. They let the Rolls through, then shut off the surge of the jackals.

There was an aged priest, his lined face set in professional sadness. He seemed in awe of Mrs. Harriet and spoke mumbling words of sympathy. He lingered over the service as if anxious to give value for money.

When the coffin began to roll into the furnace, I sank onto my knees. I hadn't said a prayer since I was a kid, but I said a prayer for Loretta.

The poodle began yapping.

As I tried to find words for Loretta, I heard Mrs. Harriet say to the poodle, 'Hush, darling. Show respect.'

* * *

The next two days dragged by.

I ate, sat on the balcony, read and waited.

On the third morning while I was sitting on the balcony after breakfast, I saw the Rolls drive up.

Jonas appeared with luggage which he put in the boot, then Mrs. Harriet appeared, carrying the poodle. She paused to talk to Jonas who bowed, then she got into the car and was driven away.

Was I thankful to see her go!

Mazzo came silently into the room.

'You go to the office this morning,' he said, 'Get with the mask.'

He drove me in the Jaguar to the front entrance of the office where the guards got me through the waiting press. There were the usual plaintive cries and flashlights.

We went up in the elevator and Mazzo led me to Ferguson 's office where I found Joe Durant behind the big desk.

‘Come in, Stevens,’ he said, giving me a tight smile. ‘Sit down.’ He waved me to a chair.

I sat down.

‘I have to thank you for your excellent performance at the funeral,’ Durant said. ‘I realized what an ordeal this must have been for you.’

There didn’t seem anything for me to say to this, so I said nothing.

‘Mr. Ferguson has now returned,’ Durant went on. ‘You are free to do what you like for at least two weeks. You are showing yourself a most valuable member of our staff, and we are more than satisfied with you.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said.

Durant leaned forward and opened a briefcase. He took from it a check.

‘Here is your first month’s salary, Stevens, plus a small bonus.’

I got up and took the check. It was for ten thousand dollars.

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said, putting the check in my wallet.

‘You are free. Get out of that disguise. You will find your clothes in the second bathroom, down the corridor. Make use of the cabin.’ His thin smile lifted the corners of his lips. ‘It is understood you don’t leave the city. You don’t talk to the press. You say nothing about your work.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘All right, Stevens, run along and enjoy yourself.’

I moved to the door, then paused.

‘Would you convey to Mr. Ferguson my sympathy and condolence for the loss of his wife?’

The thin smile went away.

‘All right, Stevens, run along.’

I spent the next three hours buying clothes. There was a man’s store on Paradise Boulevard, and I had myself a ball. Finally, satisfied I had everything I wanted, I packed the carrier bags in the Merc, and drove to the cabin.

The guard at the barrier eyed me, then nodded and lifted the pole.

As I drove to the cabin, it occurred to me that I was exchanging one prison for another. I was still under surveillance, but I didn’t care. I had money! I was out of that evil house, and I was damn well going to enjoy myself!

It was just on noon. As soon as I had unpacked my purchases and put them in the closet, I called The Ferguson Electronic & Oil Corporation. I asked to speak to Miss Sonia Malcolm.

‘This is Jerry Stevens,’ I said when she came on the line. ‘How about that rain check? Could you or would you have dinner with me tonight?’

‘I’d love to,’ she said, and she sounded as if she meant it.

‘Look, Sonia, I am a stranger in this city. Where can we go? Something really nice, preferably by the sea. I’ve just been paid: money is no object.’

She laughed.

‘Well . . .’ A long pause, then she said, ‘There’s The Albatross on Ocean Boulevard. I hear it’s very special but pricey.’

‘Sounds fine. I’ll pick you up. Where do you live?’

‘No, don’t do that. I’ll meet you there. I have a car. My place is difficult to find.’

‘No place is difficult to find a beautiful girl,’ I said. ‘Where is it?’

‘Around eight thirty? I’ll be there,’ and she hung up.

I slowly replaced the receiver. Okay, so she didn’t want me to know where she lived. Maybe she was sharing with another girl. Maybe she wasn’t too happy about her surroundings. Maybe . . . I shrugged.

What really interested me was I was going to take Sonia Malcolm out to dinner. But I was curious. I tried to find her in the telephone book, but she wasn’t in it.

Then I remembered she was a new secretary and might not be listed.

After lunch, I walked to the deserted beach. I swam, sun bathed, swam again.

Lying under the shade of a palm tree, my mind went back to Loretta. I tried not to think of her, but that scream, that sickening thud haunted me. I thought again of the funeral, the priest and the poodle.

I suddenly felt lonely. Was I going to enjoy this luxurious cabin as I had first thought? I looked along the deserted beach. I was used to mixing and talking with people. Now, this sudden loneliness, with only morbid thoughts to keep me company, depressed me.

I walked slowly back to the cabin. Its emptiness also depressed me. I tried to tell myself I should be grateful to have such a place in which to live, but I knew I was kidding myself.

How the scene would change if I had Sonia here to share all this with me!

I realized I had fallen in love with her the moment I had seen her. With her here, I was sure I would be really happy.

I thought of tonight. I wasn't sure of her. She seemed friendly. Could she be more than friendly to me? I was now no longer a bit-part, unemployed actor.

I was Jerry Stevens, the personal assistant to one of the richest men in the world, and holding down a salary of one hundred thousand dollars!

What makes you think she hasn't fallen in love with you? I thought. Man! If she had!

Suddenly anxious to get away from this silent, lonely cabin, I went into the bathroom, took a shower, shaved carefully, then put on the oyster grey suit I had bought, with a matching shirt, a wine red tie and Gucci shoes. Regarding myself in the mirror, I decided I looked pretty good.

I decided I would drive down to Ocean Boulevard, find the Albatross restaurant and book a discreet table where Sonia and I could talk. Having booked the table, I would spend the rest of the afternoon exploring the city.

As I was leaving, the telephone bell rang. The sound startled me as it was so unexpected. I hesitated, then lifted the receiver.

'Yes?'

'Mr. Stevens?' A man's voice.

'Yes. Who is this?'

'Mr. Stevens, I am Jack Macklin, the staff controller of our corporation.' The voice was soft, but confident: a man used to giving orders.

'Oh, yes?' Staff controllers were, to me, a dime a dozen.

'As a new member of our corporation, Mr. Stevens, you may not have had the opportunity of reading the staff regulations and the rules of our corporation.'

'I didn't even know there were staff rules and regulations,' I said in my bored voice.

'Exactly, Mr. Stevens. I am putting a copy of the staff handbook in the mail for you. It should reach you tomorrow morning. I would ask you to study it.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Thanks for calling.'

'Mr. Stevens, to forestall disappointment, I will tell you one of our strictest rules is that members of our staff do not have any personal relationship with each other.'

I felt a sudden rush of blood to my head.

'I'm not with you,' I said.

'I understand you have invited Miss Malcolm to dinner.'

'That's not your business!' I barked.

'Miss Malcolm is also a new member of our staff. She did not know of this strict rule not to have any personal relationship with other members of our staff,' he went on as if I hadn't spoken. 'The rule has now been explained to her as I am explaining it to you.'

I was in such a rage, words wouldn't come. While I was floundering, the quiet voice went on, 'Also Mr. Stevens, only authorized people are allowed on any of Mr. Ferguson's properties. That is to say, you have the use of one of Mr. Ferguson's cabins, but visitors are not allowed.'

'Listen to me!' I almost shouted. 'I am Mr. Ferguson's personal assistant! Staff rules do not apply to me! I do what I damn well like!'

'I understand, Mr. Stevens. You will, of course, ask Mr. Durant about receiving visitors, but Miss Malcolm does what I tell her,' and he hung up.

Seething with rage, I dialed the Corporation.

A girl said in a bright, pleasant voice, 'The Ferguson Electronic & Oil Corporation. Can I help you?'

'Put me through to Miss Sonia Malcolm!' I barked.

'Excuse me, sir, is this a personal call?'

'Never mind! Put me through!'

'Hold it a moment, sir.'

I waited, blood hammering in my temples.

A long pause, then she came back on the line.

'Miss Malcolm isn't available, sir. Can I put you through to our staff controller?'

I slammed down the receiver.

Man! Was I fit to be tied!

chapter nine

The palm trees rustled in the breeze. The sea glittered in the sun. The beach was like a silver carpet.

Who the hell cared?

Frustration, fury and loneliness swamped my mind.

I wanted Sonia! I needed her!

I sat on the veranda, staring at the empty beach. A gull swooped out of the sun and flew away with a plaintive cry.

In my mind, I heard the voice of the staff controller: *Miss Malcolm does what I tell her*.

I forced myself to relax. If this creep imagined he could dictate to me, he was in for a surprise! This was between Sonia and I! To hell with him!

My decision made, I got to my feet and walked to where I had parked the Merc, under the shade of a group of palms. I drove to the barrier. The guard, yet another squat, dark, sinister looking man, gave me a curt nod and lifted the pole.

I drove into the city. The time now was 17.05. I had no idea when the Ferguson Oil & Electronic Corporation released their staff. I hopefully decided when the staff did leave, they would leave by the back entrance.

It was a chance I had to take.

I cut down the side street, leading to the back entrance and the underground garage. I found parking space and maneuvered the Merc, to the curb, then I settled to wait. I was in a good position. I could see the exit of the garage. I could see the guard at the barrier.

Time crawled by. I kept looking at my watch. Just after 18.00, the exodus began. First, cars came from the garage. I looked at the men, driving: all well dressed, executive types. Then, some twenty minutes later, came the flood of secretaries, the clerks, the less important. All of them walking.

I started the engine, leaning forward, my heart thumping. There seemed no end to the stream of men and women: some talking, some pausing for a final word.

Then I saw her. She came up the ramp, wearing a cool looking beige dress, walking purposefully, and by herself.

No one spoke to her: no one waved. She was a new member of the staff.

She set off down the street, heading for the main boulevard. I gave her a good start, then drove slowly after her.

Once on the boulevard, I had trouble. I had to edge my car into the home going traffic, and once in, I was surrounded by slow moving cars. I could see her on the sidewalk, walking briskly. I tried to slow, but an impatient tap on the horn from the car behind me forced me on. I passed her, cursing. There was no parking space ahead of me. As I passed her I wanted to pull up, but again the tap on the horn kept me going. I nearly rammed into the car ahead of me as I watched her in my driving mirror. She kept moving, but I was now leaving her well behind.

The sidewalk was as crowded as the boulevard. If I lost her! I didn't know where she lived! Then ahead of me, I saw a car pull slowly from the curb and edge into the traffic. I swung into the parking slot, didn't wait to lock the car, but ran back down the sidewalk, dodging around people, looking frantically for Sonia.

I caught a glimpse of her as she turned down a side street. I ran, jostling and shoving against the stream of people until I reached the side street. There she was, walking briskly, out of the crowd. I lengthened my stride and came up to her.

'Sonia!'

She whirled around.

There were only a few people on the sidewalk. They pressed on, ignoring us.

She stared at me.

'What do you want?'

This wasn't the Sonia I had been dreaming about.

Her expression was hostile, her eyes frightened.

'Sonia!' I said as I came to a standstill by her side. 'I . . .'

I got no further.

With firm determination, she said, 'Leave me alone! I don't want anything to do with you! Leave me alone!'

'Now listen, you mustn't worry about that jerk, Macklin. I am Mr. Ferguson's personal assistant. I don't have to conform to their stupid rules. If I ask you to dinner, there is no problem. I . . .'

'No problem for you, Mr. Stevens!' she snapped. 'Now you listen to me! I have slaved for this job. I am working as Mr. Ferguson's assistant secretary. Mr. Macklin has told me that if I fraternize with you or any of the other members of the staff, I will be dismissed! Now, go away! I am not giving up this job for any man! If you don't leave me alone, I will complain to Mr. Macklin!'

She turned and walked on, leaving me staring after her.

‘Tough,’ a well-known voice said from behind me.

I swung around to find Mazzo, smiling his ape-like smile.

‘Women are hell,’ he went on, ‘but she’s talking sense. She’s holding down a big job, Jerry, so think of her, and not of yourself.’

I gaped at him. I never expected to hear this shaven headed ape come out with a sentiment of that kind.

‘Let’s go and have a drink,’ he said.

Then I remembered I was looking at the man who had murdered Loretta.

‘Screw you and screw your drink,’ I said, and brushing by him, I walked to where I had parked the Merc. I sat behind the wheel, wrestling with my disappointment. Finally, I came to terms with myself.

Sonia was lost to me. I guessed she was probably as lonely as I was and been happy to accept my dinner invitation. Then Macklin had shown her the red light.

The bitter truth was that I meant nothing to her except a night out.

So what was I going to do with the evening and the night? I knew no one in this opulent city. I thought of the lonely cabin. To go back there and sit on my own was unthinkable. The idea of going to some restaurant and eat on my own was also unthinkable. I thought longingly of the people in Hollywood I could call: people I had had to drop, and who had dropped me because I had run out of money, but who would come flocking if they knew I was now earning one hundred thousand dollars a year.

This mood quickly passed. Those fair weather friends weren’t worth a goddamn.

So I sat there and brooded. Then out of the blue, an idea hit me. I had to find an occupation to keep my loneliness from swamping me. Why not write a detailed story of what I had experienced since Liz Martin, Lu Prentz’s secretary, had telephoned me, telling me Lu had a job for me.

The luxury cabin would no longer be lonely. I would sit at a typewriter and write the frightening story of my impersonation of John Merrill Ferguson, the murders of Larry Edwards, Charles Duvine and Loretta, of Mrs. Harriet and her poodle, Mazzo and Durant. I would write it as a novel with changed names and with changed backgrounds. The only character I would call by his real name would be Lu Prentz. I knew he would love to be featured in a novel.

It seemed to me the story was unique. I might have a big paperback sale! I might even sell the film rights, with me playing the lead!

Writing the book as a novel, using fictionalized names, the Ferguson Corporation couldn’t object. No one would believe such a story could happen, but I would wait until my seven-year contract was up. I wasn’t going to give up one hundred thousand dollars a year. This novel would be an insurance for my old age!

I would have to write it now while all the facts were fresh in my mind.

The cabin would be the perfect place in which to write. No one would interrupt me. I would write all the morning, swim, construct the plot in the afternoon, then write again in the evening.

I started the car engine and drove along Paradise Boulevard until I spotted a cut-price store. The salesman talked me into buying a second-hand IBM electric typewriter. I bought a carton of typing ribbons and a box of typing paper.

I put my purchases in the car, then headed back to the cabin. As I drove, I realized I no longer felt lonely.

I was itching to make a start.

As I entered the cabin, I found a large, smiling black woman, dusting the living room. She told me she was Mrs. Swanson. I remembered Sonia telling me there was a cleaning woman on the beach estate.

‘If there’s anything you want cooked for dinner tonight, just tell me, Mr. Stevens,’ she said.

‘Why yes, thank you. If it’s not too much trouble,’ I said. I didn’t want to go out on my own. ‘Anything will do.’

‘I have a beautiful steak.’

‘That would be fine.’

‘Okay, Mr. Stevens, around eight o’clock, I’ll be in and whip you up a dinner.

As soon as she had gone, I got the typewriter from the Merc., plugged in and practiced with the machine.

Among the many jobs I had done while waiting for a film deal, was addressing envelopes, sending begging letters for a School for the Blind. After an hour, I got back my old speed.

With a big scotch, I went onto the veranda and began to plan the story of my impersonation of John Merrill Ferguson. On a scratch pad, I invented names.

Under each name, I invented a description, completely unlike the people I planned to write about. I invented place names.

By the time I had finished this chore, Mrs. Swanson returned and cooked me a splendid steak with all the trimmings. She said she would be in tomorrow evening with one of her specials: curried chicken. I gave her five dollars. Her wide, beaming smile showed her surprise and pleasure.

When she had gone, and after I had finished the meal, I put the dishes in the kitchen, cleared the table and began the book.

I typed non-stop until 02.00, then collected the pages, locked up and went to bed.

Just before I fell asleep, I thought of Sonia. Rather to my surprise, I found she had sunk into a background that was like one of my old movies: to be remembered, but not quite real. I felt I no longer needed her. She had her career before her: I meant nothing to her. As I settled to sleep I decided she now meant nothing to me: a moment's infatuation.

For six days and most of the nights, I hammered out the Ferguson story. Mrs. Swanson came to clean twice a week. She prepared me a good dinner every evening. I swam in the afternoon. There was no word from the Ferguson Electronic & Oil Corporation, and there was no more feeling of loneliness. I had something to do: something that absorbed my interest, and when so occupied, loneliness, and even women, don't exist.

Then on the sixth night, with the french windows wide open and a big moon lighting the sea, and while I was hammering away at the typewriter, I heard the sound of an approaching car.

Into my mind came a vision of Joe Durant coming to check on me. If he walked in and saw the typewriter and all the typewritten pages, he would want to know what I was doing. This he must not know!

Moving fast, I swept the pages into a drawer, then grabbed up the typewriter and rushed it into my bedroom. I shoved it under the bed. Then I moved to the bedroom door.

I heard footfalls on the veranda. I braced myself and walked into the living room.

Standing in the doorway of the french windows was John Merrill Ferguson.

He was the last person I expected to see.

'Hello, Jerry,' he said, and moved further into the room. 'I hope I'm not disturbing you.'

I drew in a long, slow breath.

'Not at all, sir. I wasn't doing anything. Can I offer you a drink?'

'No, thank you.' He came to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down. 'I wanted to talk to you.'

Bewildered and uneasy, I sat opposite him.

There was a lamp on the table which I used when typing. He reached out and turned it off. That left two side lamps, making the room dimly lit.

'Well, Jerry?' he said. 'How do you find life?'

What the hell is this? I thought. What was one of the richest and most powerful men in the world doing here, asking an unemployed actor how he found life? . . . I became more uneasy.

'Life's fine, sir,' I said. 'Thanks to you. I appreciate what you are doing for me.'

He nodded, moving his hands restlessly.

'What have you been doing with yourself?'

'Oh, things. Swimming. It's marvelous here. Marvelous city.'

He stared at me, his eyes showing tension.

'I want you to do something for me, Jerry.'

That came as no surprise. He wouldn't have come here without a reason.

'That's fine with me, sir.'

'You have your make-up here?'

'Of course, sir.'

'I want you to take my place at my residence tonight.' I was startled.

'That's okay, sir. Anything you say.'

'There will be no problem. My car is outside. Put on the disguise and drive to my residence. The guards will let you in. You will go to my suite and remain there until you hear from me. No one knows that you will be impersonating me. The guards will think you are me. I have already told Jonas to serve meals in the suite and to see I am not disturbed. Do you understand.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. You are very valuable. Now, will you go and put on the disguise?'

Then something horrible and shocking happened.

John Merrill Ferguson's right eyebrow became detached and dropped off. It fell, like an obscene caterpillar, on the table before us.

* * *

A long, explosive silence hung over the dimly lit room and a tension that only deep shock can produce. The man who I

thought was John Merrill Ferguson suddenly released a soft moaning sound, then he kicked back his chair and started to his feet. He looked wildly around, like a panic stricken animal, searching to escape. Then he began a wild dash towards the open french windows.

My reaction was automatic. I thrust out my foot, caught his ankle and brought him down with a thud that shook the cabin. I came down on him, swept aside his flaying arms, pinned them with my knees, holding him helpless.

I stared down at his face, then I plucked the other eyebrow away and the moustache.

'Who the hell are you?' I demanded breathlessly.

He tried to throw me off, but I held him pinned.

'Let me go!' he gasped.

Still leaning my weight on his arms, I felt under his chin, found the join of the latex mask and levered it off his face.

I looked down at him as he stared, with despairing eyes, at me.

Then a shock ran through me: a shock that paralyzed me, and send cold waves down my spine.

I heard in my mind, Mazzo's sneering voice: Jerks like him often have car accidents.

Pinned under my weight was Larry Edwards!

I scrambled off him and stood away, staring at him.

'Larry! Good God! They told me you were dead!' I exclaimed.

He got slowly to his feet. He looked haggard and frightened.

'I've got to get out of here!' he shrilled in an hysterical voice.

'You're not leaving here until you tell me what the hell's going on,' I said. 'Sit down! I'll get you a drink.'

He looked at the open french windows and then at me.

'Don't try it, Larry!' I said. 'I'll break your goddamn arm if you don't sit down and talk.'

He hesitated, then giving a hopeless shrug, he dropped into a lounging chair. Without taking my eyes off him, I moved to the liquor cabinet, poured a stiff scotch and gave it to him. He drank eagerly.

'Why are you here? What's the idea telling me to go to the residence?' I demanded, standing over him.

'I wanted to gain time,' he muttered. 'I'm sorry about that, Jerry. I was only thinking of myself.'

Moving around him, I sat opposite him.

'What do you mean? Look, Larry, let's have it from the beginning. What are you doing, disguised as Ferguson?'

So he talked.

He had the exact experience as I had. Lu Prentz had arranged for him to go to the Plaza hotel. He had met Mrs. Harriet. He had been drugged, waking up in Mrs. Harriet's home. He had been offered the bribe of a thousand dollars a day. He had accepted, and Charles Duvine had worked on him. He had learned to forge Ferguson's signature and imitate his voice. Finally, he had been flown to the Ferguson's residence as I had been.

'Did you meet Loretta?' I asked.

He wiped the sweat from his face.

'I couldn't keep that crazy bitch out of my bed. All that talk about not being married, and some priest. I guess you got the same treatment.'

'She's dead. They murdered her.'

He flinched.

'They told me she was sleepwalking.'

'I was there when it happened. I heard her scream. You don't scream when sleep walking. Mazzo broke her neck.'

'No. Mazzo's not like that. If anyone broke her neck it would have been Pedro. He's Durant's hitman. When he finds I'm not there, he will come after me. I've got to get the hell away from this goddamn city.'

'But why two standins? I don't understand. What have you been doing?'

'I've been in Peking. Ferguson is mentally sick. They had to have you and they had to have me. You fooled the press while I fooled the Peking people. I went with a team. I just signed papers while the team did the talking. All the time, Ferguson was locked up in the residence.'

I thought of the man I had heard pacing up and down. Ferguson!

'So what are you doing here?'

He held out his empty glass.

'Give me a refill.'

This time, I made myself a drink as well.

As we drank, Larry said, 'John Merrill Ferguson died at six o'clock this evening.'

I slopped my drink.

'Died?'

‘Yeah . . . a massive heart attack.’

‘How do you know?’

‘You can say that again. Luck . . . only pure, unadulterated luck. I was in the Ferguson suite doing nothing. There was a sudden commotion: voices, trampling of feet, and I heard the key turn in my door. I was locked in. I kept listening: more voices. Then the telephone bell on the desk gave a tinkle. Luck! I lifted the receiver. They had forgotten to unplug the extension. Mazzo was on the line to Mrs. Harriet. He told her Ferguson had died. That woman! She took the news as if it was a weather forecast. She told Mazzo to do nothing until she arrived. Durant was in Washington. She said she would tell him. Then she said, and I can still hear her flat, cold voice, “Tell Pedro that Edwards and Stevens are now dispensable. Do you understand? Pedro will know what to do.” ’

I stiffened, turning cold.

‘She said that?’

‘I’m telling you! Then Mazzo told her Pedro was in Miami for the night, but he would follow her instructions tomorrow. She wanted to know if I knew her son was dead. Mazzo said I didn’t. I was locked in my room. She said she would be arriving tomorrow and hung up.’

‘You really mean she ordered our murders?’ I couldn’t believe what he was saying.

‘How many more times do I have to tell you!’ Larry shouted. ‘I waited until Mazzo went to bed, put on the mask, pushed the key out of the door onto a piece of paper, drew in the key, unlocked the door and walked out. Although the guards knew you were impersonating Ferguson, they really believed I was Ferguson. I had no trouble taking the Jaguar and driving here. The guard let me in, thinking I was Ferguson.’

‘But why should she want to kill us?’ I still couldn’t believe it.

He made an impatient movement.

‘Use your head! The Peking deal is fixed. Ferguson is dead. You and I could prove we had signed the documents and then all hell would break loose. They have to silence us!’

I stared at him.

‘You told me to go back to the residence.’

His eyes shifted.

‘Yeah, I’m sorry. I was scared crapless. With you back there, they wouldn’t think I had got away. I was trying to gain time.’

I looked at him with sick disgust.

‘You rotten creep! You were sending me back to be murdered while you got away.’

‘Okay, okay, I lost my head! Now, we both have to get out of here! We’re wasting time! When Mazzo brings in the breakfast trolley tomorrow morning and finds me gone, they’ll start a manhunt! Listen, Jerry, I’ve seen the way these people work. They have connections everywhere. I’m going into hiding until they are convinced I won’t talk. If you want to stay alive, you do the same. Whatever you do, don’t tell anyone what’s been going on. You and me could upset their empire, but I’m not crazy in the head to do it! I’ve got money. I’m going to get lost. You’d better look after yourself. We have just eight hours start.’

He jumped to his feet and bolted out into the night.

I made no attempt to stop him. If that eyebrow hadn’t fallen off, I would have gone back to the residence and tomorrow, I would have been dead!

But what he had said made sense. It was time to go!

I paused for a long moment, thinking. I too had money.

Once away from this city, I could instruct my bank to send my money to some other bank.

Where to go?

I had to control a feeling of panic. I went into the bedroom and checked my wallet. I had just under a thousand dollars.

I would drive to Miami, leave the car at the airport, then take a plane to New York. Once in New York, I could get lost.

I packed all my clothes in two suitcases, then I remembered the manuscript. I wasn’t going to leave that behind. Moving fast, I took the pile of typewritten pages and dumped them in one of the suitcases.

The typewriter, sitting on the desk, was a giveaway.

If they found that they would guess I had been making a statement. I lugged the typewriter to the car, put it on the back seat, returned for the suitcases and was ready to go.

I returned to the cabin, made sure I had left nothing belonging to myself behind, then turned off the lights and hurried back to the car.

I drove down to the barrier, wondering if I would have trouble with the guard, but he lifted the pole and gave me a surly nod.

Forcing myself to relax, I drove onto the Overseas Highway. At this hour, there was little traffic, but I was careful to keep within the speed limit, although I was itching to send this powerful car flat out.

The typewriter was nagging me. I would have to dump it somewhere. I knew, sooner or later, the Merc, would be traced, and if they found the typewriter, they would guess I had been making a record of what had happened. The hunt for me would be redoubled.

After a few miles, I came upon a fisherman's lay-by and I pulled in. I waited until there were no signs of traffic, then got out, lugged the typewriter to the rail and dropped it into the sea.

Back in the car with one problem solved, I continued towards Miami. While I drove, I thought of Loretta. I heard her voice saying: She is a ruthless, dangerous old woman. All she thinks about is money. When he dies, she will inherit everything.

John Merrill Ferguson was dead. Mrs. Harriet now inherited everything. She had flicked her ruthless fingers and Charles Duvine, who had made it possible for Larry and me to impersonate her son, had died. She had flicked her fingers and Loretta who could have inherited everything, had died. Now this ruthless old woman was flicking her fingers towards me. The thought brought me out in a cold sweat.

Then I thought of the car I was driving. If it was found at the airport, they would know I had flown somewhere. With their money and their organization, they could trace me to New York.

I abruptly realized that if I was to continue to live, I had better start using my brains. I had dumped the typewriter. I had now to dump the car.

I looked at the clock on the dashboard: 01.05. Time was running out for me. In another seven hours, Mazzo would find Larry gone. There would be a check on the cabin, and they would find I had gone. Then the heat would be on.

I was now approaching Paradise City. Suppose one of Ferguson's guards, off-duty, spotted the car? I drove along Ocean Boulevard. My heart was beginning to thump. Maybe, I had been crazy to have come this way. I could have turned off and headed for the west coast. It was too late now.

I kept looking in my driving mirror, scared that I was being followed. There were cars behind me, but they kept turning off: people going home.

Once away from the city and heading for Fort Lauderdale, I began to relax.

Then an idea dropped into my mind: Give them a red herring. Leave the car at the airport for them to think I had taken off by air, but stay around Miami until the heat cooled. There were dozens of motels on the highway. I would leave the car at the airport, then take a taxi and settle, out of sight, in one of these motels.

Surely a motel, close to Paradise City, would be the last place they would think of looking for me. This is what I did. Having parked the Merc., I took a taxi, being careful not to take one off the rank. The cabby had delivered a passenger from Palm Beach and was returning. He was glad to pick up a fare. I told him I wanted a good motel for the night. He took me to the Welcome Motel.

The sleepy girl at the reception desk, scarcely looked at me as I signed in. I used the name of Warren Higgins. She gave me a key, told me where to find the cabin and went back to dozing.

I shut and locked the cabin door and turned on the light. The place was comfortable. I set down my suitcases and drew in a long breath.

I now felt safe!

Man! Was I tired! My one thought was to sleep.

I undressed, then too tired to take a shower, I fell into bed.

I slept.

* * *

The sound of car engines starting up woke me. Sunlight was streaming into the little bedroom. I heard voices. For a moment, I felt a clutch of fear. Had they found me already?

I threw off the sheet and scrambled out of bed. I went into the living room and peered out from behind the curtains.

The sight I saw was reassuring: people loading their cars with baggage: talking, laughing: people on vacation. I looked at my watch. The time was 09.15. I took a shower, dressed, then walked out into the sunshine. By then most of the people with their cars had gone. There were only three cars parked.

I found my way to the restaurant. The waitress gave me a cheeky smile.

'Mr. Lazybones, huh?' she said. 'What'll you have?'

I ordered eggs on grilled ham and pancakes and asked for a newspaper. She brought me The Paradise Herald. I searched through the paper, but there was no mention of the death of John Merrill Ferguson. It was too soon, but I badly wanted

news.

Breakfast over, I went to the reception desk. The lean, dark man who was the manager, gave me a wide smile.

'I'm Fred Baine,' he said, shaking hands. 'Sleep well, Mr. Higgins? Comfortable?'

'Everything's fine,' I said. 'I'll be staying a while. I'm writing a book.' I gave a modest smirk. 'I don't want to be disturbed.'

'A book?' He looked impressed. 'No problem, Mr. Higgins, you stay as long as you like, and you won't be disturbed.'

'You wouldn't have a typewriter I could rent?'

'Sure. No renting. I have a spare. You're welcome.'

'That's real kind of you. I appreciate it.'

'Now, look, Mr. Higgins, if you don't want to be disturbed, I can have your meals sent over to you. No problem. Just give the girl fifteen minutes a day to fix your bed and room, and you won't be disturbed.'

'I would like that . . . thank you.'

'No problem, Mr. Higgins. Boy! Would I like to be able to write a book.' He sighed. 'All those paperback rights!'

'Yes,' I said and returned to the cabin.

I was determined to finish The Ferguson Story. I would have nothing to do, probably, for the next three weeks. By then, the heat should have cooled. I would then consider what my next move should be.

A black girl came over later with a portable typewriter.

She gave me a toothy grin.

'My brother wants to write a book, but he doesn't know how to start it, Mr. Higgins,' she said as she busied herself with an electric cleaner. 'He has a fine plot, but he doesn't know how to finish it either.'

'Tell him to start in the middle,' I said. 'It'll work out,' and I shut myself in the bathroom. When she had gone, I got out my manuscript and spent the entire morning reading it.

The room was air conditioned, but I longed to get out into the sun. I resisted the temptation. I had to keep out of sight.

The manuscript, to me, read well.

After a lunch of hamburgers and coffee, I settled down at the typewriter.

I hammered away at the typewriter until 18.00, then I paused to make myself a Martini from the well-stocked refrigerator.

I had now reached the moment when Larry Edwards had come into my cabin, disguised as John Merrill Ferguson. I was pleased with the way the story went along: there were no hitches, but I wanted a rest before the big moment when I found Ferguson was impersonated by Larry.

I looked longingly out of the window at the swimming pool. There were a number of men and women and kids enjoying themselves, but I decided to keep out of sight.

Around 19.30, the black girl brought me a steak dinner. I gave her a couple of bucks and she looked in on awe at the table, littered with typewritten pages.

After dinner, I pulled the curtains and continued to write. Finally, around 23.00, I had brought the story up-do-date.

In the story, as in fact, I was in a motel, worried about what my next move should be. I would have to wait and see what happened.

Gathering up the pages, I put them with the rest of the manuscript, then took a shower and went to bed.

I didn't sleep all that well. I kept thinking of my future. Should I return to Los Angeles? That would be the first place they would look for me . . . always providing they were going to look for me.

I had some eight thousand dollars in the bank.

Maybe it would be an idea to buy a car and drive down to Mexico. I could hide out there, taking a tour until it seemed safe to return. Then what would I do? By that time my eight thousand dollars would have slimmed down.

I thought of beginning that dreary life I had known: sitting by the telephone, waiting and waiting.

Maybe the book would jell.

With that thought to comfort me, I finally slept.

The following morning, the black girl brought my breakfast and a copy of The Paradise Herald.

The front page was given up to the death of John Merrill Ferguson.

Dr. Weissman had told the reporters that Ferguson had been working too hard. He had brought off a brilliant deal with the Chinese. He had been shattered by his wife's death. He had suffered a fatal heart attack.

There was a picture of Dr. Weissman looking sad.

There was a picture of Joseph Durant also looking sad.

The paper stated that Durant would now run the great Ferguson Oil & Electronic Corporation. There was a picture of Mrs. Harriet and her poodle. She looked sad and the poodle also looked sad. The paper said Mrs. Harriet Ferguson was now

the major shareholder, and by common consent, she was to become the President of the Corporation.

A secret deal had been made by Ferguson with the Chinese government. The corporation was to build electronic computers and satellites which would put China on an equal footing with the Russians. The deal was worth some two billion dollars.

I read as I ate.

Two billion dollars! Both Larry and I could blow this deal sky-high! The thought made me lose my appetite.

I shoved away the plate, got up and sat in a lounging chair.

If either Larry or I leaked that we had forged Ferguson's signature to the many documents we had had through our hands, the result would be like an atomic bomb explosion. I remembered Larry's last words to me before he took off: *Whatever you do, don't tell anyone what's been going on. You and I could upset an empire, but I'm not that crazy in the head to*

do it!

You can say that again, Larry, I thought. That's the last thing I'd do, then I thought of the manuscript.

Maybe some smart newsman, reading the book if it ever got published, might put two and two together. What if he did? He couldn't prove a thing. The manuscript was an insurance for my old age. I would wait until the dust settled, but I was certainly not going to scrap it.

Then, looking again at the newspaper, a small news item caught my eye. It was tucked away at the foot of the page: *TV STAR DIES – Larry Edwards, known for his Western TV roles . . .*

The newspaper slid out of my fingers. I began to shake.

Larry!

I got unsteadily to my feet and went to the liquor cabinet. I poured a shot of scotch. The glass rattled against my teeth. I lit a cigarette and moved around the cabin, my heart thumping.

Larry . . . dead!

I forced myself to pick up the newspaper and read the skimpy details.

Larry Edwards, the paper stated, driving a Ford rental, had been hit by a hit-and-run truck on the Miami-Naples highway. The Ford had been smashed to pieces and hurled into the forest. The police were on the lookout for a damaged truck. Larry Edwards had been on vacation in Florida.

So they had caught up with him!

Sweat trickled down my face.

He had been smart enough to have dumped the Jaguar, as I had dumped the Merc. He had rented a Ford, and had made a dash for the East Coast: not smart, nor quick enough!

Was I safe here?

I remembered Larry saying: Listen, Jerry, I've seen the way these people work. They have connections everywhere.

Man! Was I in a panic!

I sat down and tried to calm myself. How could they possibly find me in this way-out motel? But they had found Larry! By now, they could have found the Merc.

Would they think I had gone some place by air? Would they check and find no one answering to my description had taken off? Would they then reach the conclusion that I was hiding somewhere close? Now I knew what a fox must feel when he hears the baying of the hounds.

There must be more than three hundred motels and many hotels around Miami. Would they check each one?

I began to calm down. I would not bolt from cover. I would stay put.

Then I thought of the manuscript. This could save my life! I would write to Mrs. Harriet and tell her I had written the whole story from the moment I had met her at the Plaza hotel. I would warn her that if anything happened to me, the manuscript would go to the police. I would give her my word that as long as I was left alone, I would say nothing.

This seemed to me a good idea. I went to the typewriter and wrote the letter.

How was I to get it to her? It would be fatal to mail it from here. The Miami postmark would tell them I was in the district.

I must find someone to mail the letter for me out of the district. I addressed the envelope: Mrs. Harriet, Largo Residence, Paradise City. Whoever it was who mailed the letter mustn't know I was writing to a Ferguson. I put the letter in the envelope and sealed it.

How about the manuscript? I decided to mail it to Lu Prentz, telling him to keep it for me.

Leaving the cabin, I went to the reception desk. Fred Baine beamed at me.

'Hi, Mr. Higgins, how's it coming?'

'Okay. Can you give me some paper and string, please? I want to mail a parcel.'

‘No problem.’ He went to the back of the office and produced brown paper and string. ‘This okay?’

‘Sure, and thanks. Another thing, Mr. Baine, I have a letter I want mailed out of the district. I don’t want anyone to know where I am.’ I produced the letter. ‘Mrs. Harriet is my mother-in-law. If she knew I was in Miami . . .’ I gave him a knowing wink.

He looked a little startled, then nodded.

‘Sure, Mr. Higgins. I guess you authors have to get away sometimes. I have a couple leaving for New York this morning. They’ll mail this for you: a nice couple. Okay?’

‘That would be fine.’ I slid a ten dollar bill towards him. ‘Okay to give them this?’

‘Sure. They would be glad to have it, Mr. Higgins. I’ll fix it for you. No problem.’

I returned to my cabin.

The black girl had been in, made the bed and cleaned.

I was feeling much more relaxed.

I sat down at the typewriter and worked for the next three hours, bringing The Ferguson Story to date.

I now feel confident, I wrote, that I will survive. I intend to pack this manuscript and send it to Lu Prentz for safekeeping. I will have nothing to do except to sit in this cabin until I feel sure that Mrs. Harriet has got my letter. She is smart. I have given her my word not to say anything. I have warned her if anything should happen to me, the story will go to the police. So why should she flick her fingers at me?

In a couple of weeks, I will hire a car and drive to Mexico. In a few months’ time, I will be back in Hollywood, sitting in some shabby room, waiting for telephone bell to ring.

Bad as that is, it is better than being dead

Epilogue

Lu Prentz was in a depressed mood. In the outer office, waiting to see him were four god-awful bums who had long passed the time when any film company would or could use them. He was thinking of his list of nearly four hundred such deadbeats, and he was feeling discouraged. Maybe it was time to retire. He had been in the racket now for twenty-five years. He had plenty stashed away. Why sit in this shabby office, day after day, fobbing off bums who thought they were still valuable merchandise and who were as worthless as a whore's promise?

He looked through the grimy window at the smog that hung over Hollywood and moaned to himself. Yes, he would retire. He would sell up, and take his wife to the Virgin Islands and spend the rest of his days in the sun. To hell with those bums out there, waiting.

His office door opened and Sol Hackenstein breezed in.

Sol was the casting director for a small, but prosperous TV Syndicate which, more by luck than brains, had lately hit the jackpot.

Big, fat, wearing a light blue, well-tailored suit, Sol made an impressive figure.

'Hi, Lu!' he shouted. Sol liked to think of himself as a big personality so he always shouted. 'When the hell are you going to buy yourself a new suit?'

Anticipating possible business, Lu jumped to his feet and offered his hand.

'Sol! How are you, you beauty? You look a million bucks! How are they hanging?'

'Fine, fine. Have a cigar.' Sol produced two cigars, thrust one at Lu, bit off the end of the other cigar and stuck it into his face. He sat down in the client's chair. 'Jesus! Can't you get a better ass rest than this?'

Lu winked at him.

'Gets rid of the dross fast, Sol. What can I do for you?'

'Who are those finks out there?'

'Four of the best character actors in the racket,' Lu said loyally.

'Yeah? They looked like corpses to me,' Sol said. 'Never mind them. They are your headache. I've got a job for one of your bums. He's gotta be cheap. Listen, we set up a deal with International. We're doing a twenty episode half—hour series. It's a great story: The Golden

West. I'm short of a gun-toting fink. I want Jerry Stevens, but he's got to be cheap.'

Lu made a face as if he had a twinge of tooth ache.

'Can't have him, Sol. Now, listen, I've got a bum who's way ahead of Stevens. You'll love him! Big, hair on his chest, rides a nag as if he was in a goddamn circus, fast gun draw, you can't miss with him.' Lu beamed. Shale McGivern. He's heading for the top.'

Sol drew on his cigar.

'I want Jerry Stevens. The boys agree Stevens is the guy.'

'Sorry, Sol. Didn't you know?'

Sol stared at him.

'Know what for God's sake?'

'He's dead.'

'Dead? How can that be? What happened?'

'All I know is what I read in the paper. The bum owed me five hundred and twenty three goddamn dollars.'

'You're lucky to have time to read newspapers. What happened?'

'This stupid bum went for a midnight swim in the pool of some crummy motel outside Miami. They say he hit his stupid head when diving. They found him drowned.'

'Jesus!' Sol grimaced. 'So we can't have him?'

'You can say that again. He's dead and another thing that kills me,' Lu said. 'He wrote a goddamn book. He sent it to me before the accident. That bum! Writing a book!'

Sol's eyes narrowed.

'So, okay: finks write books. What's it about?'

'How the hell do I know? I don't read books. I've got more than I can handle with my bums. I gave it to Liz, she reads books. She liked it, but Liz likes anything. She's got no commercial sense. Now, listen, Sol, how about Shale McGivern? How about a test, huh?'

Sol got to his feet.

'I'll talk to the boys. We wanted Jerry Stevens.'

‘You said that. I told you, he’s dead.’

‘Yeah.’ Sol scattered ash on Lu’s threadbare carpet then he shrugged. ‘Well, they come and they go. We’ll go too, Lu.’ He stood thinking, then shrugged again ‘See you, Lu. You buy yourself a new suit. I’ll talk to the boys.’

Lu watched him go, then he sighed. Reaching out, he pressed the buzzer to alert Liz to send in the first of the bums.

THE END