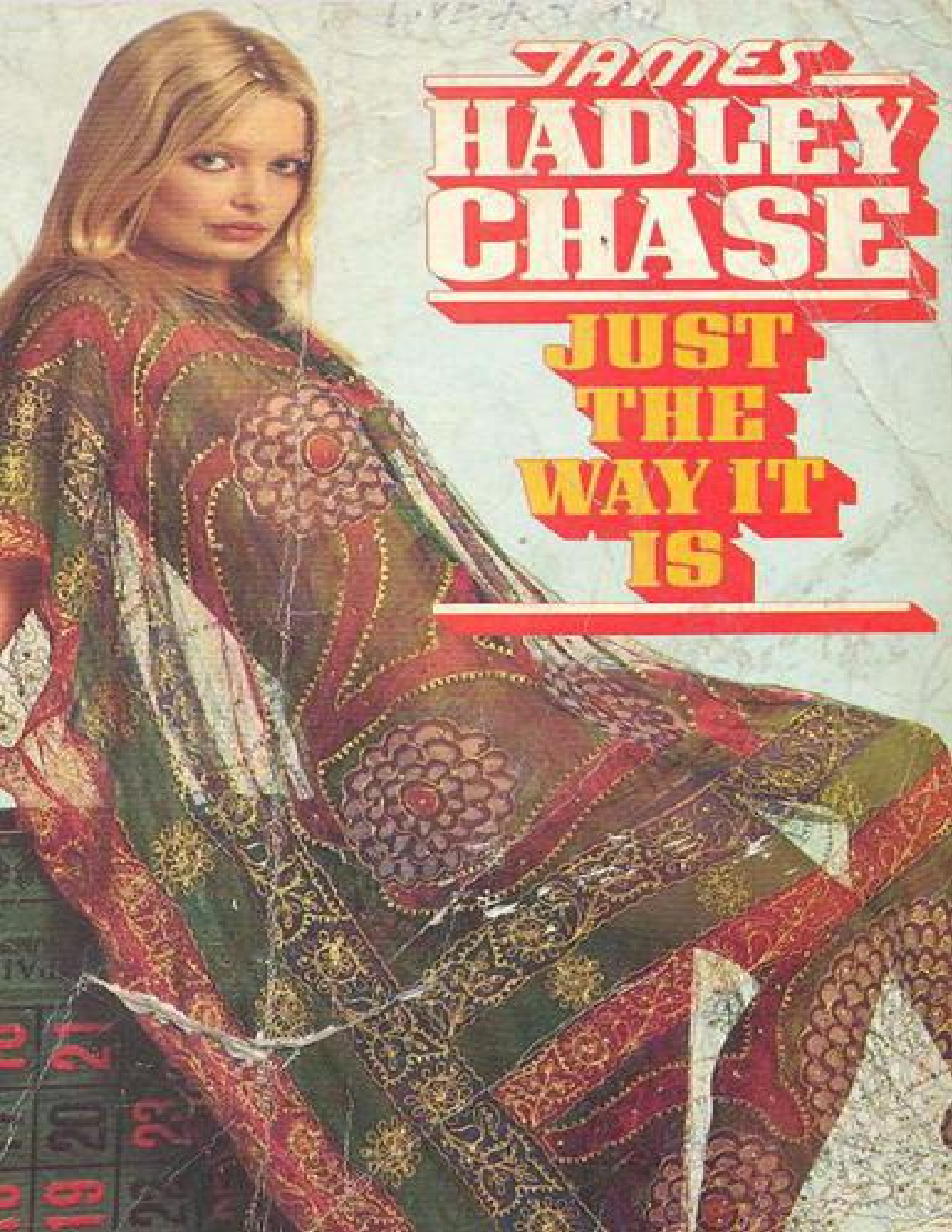




JAMES HADLEY CHASE

JUST
THE
WAY IT
IS

19 20 21
22 23

Table of Contents

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

[FIFTEEN](#)

[SIXTEEN](#)

[SEVENTEEN](#)

[EIGHTEEN](#)

[NINETEEN](#)

[TWENTY](#)

[TWENTY-ONE](#)

[TWENTY-TWO](#)

[TWENTY-THREE](#)

[TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[TWENTY-SIX](#)

[TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[TWENTY-NINE](#)

Just the Way It Is
James Hadley Chase
1944

ONE

Fairview was dying. In the past, it had been a go-ahead, prosperous little town and its two large factories, specializing in hand tools, had been a lucrative source of wealth.

Now, Fairview had had its golden age. Mass production had seen to that. The little town's methods of production could not compete with the modern factories that had sprung up overnight in the neighbouring districts.

Mass production and Bentonville had put paid to Fairview. Bentonville was a rapidly expanding manufacturing town some thirty miles away. It was a mushroom town. A town for the younger generation with brightly painted shops, neat, cheap little bungalows, swift trolley cars and a young, vigorous beating heart of commerce.

The youth of Fairview had gone either to Bentonville or farther north; some even to New York. The more progressive businesses had transferred to Bentonville as soon as the writing appeared on the wall. Only the less enterprising smaller shops were left to carry on as best they could.

Fairview was defeated. You could see it in the shabby houses, the unkept roads and the quality of goods in the shop windows. You could see it in the dignified shabbiness of the small colony of retired business people who had done well in the golden age and were content to live out their days in this sad, stagnating little town. And you could see it particularly in the numbers of unemployed who gathered at street corners, indifferent and apathetic.

But there was still one small spark of life to be found in Fairview. This was not because of enterprise, but through the carelessness of Philip Harman, one time Czar of Fairview, who had long since gone to richer pastures.

Some ten years ago, when Fairview was at the peak of its prosperity, Harman had founded a newspaper for the town. It was an eight-page weekly which endeavoured to influence the citizens of Fairview with Harman's political views, Harman's ethics and Harman's religious opinions.

It was not until Harman left the town and gave the newspaper over to Sam Trench, the editor, with orders to keep it going, that the Clarion became really popular.

Harman, if he remembered the newspaper, would have no doubt

withdrawn his support as the years went on. But he had left a banker's order for a sum of money to be used each month to support the Clarion. As he was immensely rich and busy, he forgot about the banker's order and the Clarion was able to continue its struggle for existence at his expense.

The offices of the newspaper were as unassuming as the newspaper itself. There were three rooms and an outer office. The staff consisted of the editor, Sam Trench; a reporter, Al Barnes; three somewhat inefficient clerks and Clare Russell.

Clare was the mainspring of the Clarion. The office, the staff and the copy revolved round her. She was responsible for the small spark of life that remained in the newspaper.

It was Harman who had invited her to join the staff of the Clarion. Three years ago, she would have laughed at the idea. But then, three years ago, she had been the star reporter on the Kansas City Tribune.

Clare had had a remarkable career. She had begun at seventeen as a stenographer to the editor of the Kansas City Herald. She soon discovered a talent for writing, but the editor had other ideas about women contributing to his paper. That did not deter Clare. She went over to the Tribune where she edited the woman's page with considerable success.

She was a worker and it was not long before she had established a reputation for herself. Eventually she became a star reporter and entered the editorial office.

Her future looked good. She was regarded as a shining example of what a good reporter should be. Consequently, she undertook more work than she could safely manage. That, scrappy meals and irregular hours undermined her stamina. She became ill and for a long time she remained in her little bedroom, an object of interest only to the old doctor who called twice a week to see her.

When she finally began work again, she found that the driving spark had gone. She could no longer keep the long hours or work at the necessary pressure.

The editor sent for her and told her politely that she had better look for less arduous work. She didn't make a scene. She was too old a hand in the newspaper world to complain. She had seen too many other reporters who had burnt themselves out go the same way. So she packed her bag and shook the dust of Kansas City off her feet.

Philip Harman met her in Bentonville and persuaded her to join the staff of his newspaper. He offered her half what she was getting on the Kansas City Tribune, but that was to be expected. For one thing she was a failure and another thing the Clarion was failing.

Clare made up her mind quickly. She began work on the Clarion the following week. She had been on the newspaper for some time now and she had the satisfaction of knowing that the circulation had increased by two thousand copies by her own efforts, in spite of Harman's gloomy prediction that in two years the Clarion would be finished.

When the office staff of the Clarion saw Clare for the first time, they were shaken out of their usual apathy. There were not many attractive girls in Fairview so Clare came as a pleasant and intriguing diversion.

She was dark, with thick wavy hair and her dark eyes were alive with nervous energy. Her smartness and self-possession declared her astonishing efficiency.

The editor, Sam Trench, took to her immediately. Sam Trench had been in the newspaper game all his life. He knew a good reporter from a bad one in one swift, searching glance, in the same way as you could tell a racehorse from a carthorse.

Trench was a sad and disillusioned old man. When Fairview had been prosperous he had been proud of his job and proud of the town. Now, he could see the cracks not only in the structure of the town but also in the structure of his newspaper.

He hated Bentonville. He hated anything anti-social and Bentonville with its poolrooms, its get-rich methods and its little Czars was slowly crushing Fairview out of existence.

Bentonville had grown up so swiftly and had become so rich overnight, that its standards suffered accordingly. Trench knew that its political system was riddled with graft. The police were in the hands of the politicians and the politicians were in the hands of an extensive gambling organization.

There existed in Bentonville hundreds of poolrooms and gambling houses. Practically every shop had two or three crooked automatic machines. Even the children of Bentonville gambled. There was plenty of money in the town and the gambling fever was fanned by the organization, who made an extremely good thing out of it.

The actual work of the organization was done by Tod Korris. He had some

twenty men under him, who supervised the automatic machines, collected protection money from anyone rich enough to require protection and controlled several of the poolrooms.

Trench knew, however, that behind Korris was the real racket boss. Apart from his name, which was Vardis Spade, no one knew who he was, where he lived or even what he looked like.

Spade kept the police on his payroll and allowed the politicians to share in his profits. There was no opposition. Sam Trench did venture once to attack the gambling system in Bentonville but the whole of that issue of the Clarion was seized and destroyed by Korris' mob. So he tried no more.

Clare, when she first came to the Clarion, had wanted to write a series of articles on the men behind the gambling racket, but Sam was very firm with her.

Korris had been quite plain about the Clarion's position. 'Keep your nose out of Bentonville's affairs,' he had said over the telephone, 'and we'll leave you alone. But, write just one line in your rag that we don't like and you'll have a nice fire on your hands.' He had hung up before Sam could assure him there would be no trouble.

Bentonville was news. Fairview was not. Both Clare and Barnes, the other Clarion reporter, would drive over to Bentonville, poke around and come back with an interesting batch of material.

Sam would read their articles and then throw them into the trash-basket. 'Do you want this building to go up in smoke?' was his invariable explanation.

But in the end, the staff of the Clarion were to have their story about the gambling organization and what was more, they were to play an active part in its final defeat. But the incidents that led up to this at first gave no hint of the violence and even sudden death that were to come, before the final curtain was rung down.

If it hadn't been for Lorelli, a waif from the underworld, Harry Duke would never have bothered to interest himself in the affairs of Bellman, the nightclub owner. If it hadn't been for Harry Duke, no one would have known that Timson had been murdered. And if it hadn't been for a chance remark that was overheard, Vardis Spade might still be operating in a big way today.

The small pieces built into larger pieces and the larger pieces completed the jigsaw. The extraordinary thing was that although this gambling

organization had been in existence six years, it only took three days to pull the foundations from under them.

Three days.

This is how the first day began.

TWO

On a hot afternoon in June Clare found Barnes and a thin little man, with hard, shrewd eyes, playing crap in her office.

She had been over to the Municipal Buildings to collect material on a slum clearance scheme which the Clarion had been sponsoring.

She found it particularly exasperating that Barnes should have chosen her office for a crap game.

'I can't have you in here,' she said, pulling off her hat and shaking her hair free, 'I've got work to do.'

'Why, hello, Angel skin,' Barnes said, glancing up as he reached for the dice. His big, rubbery face split into an uneasy smile. 'I didn't think you were coming back.'

She glanced at his companion without interest. 'Take your friend out of here, Al,' she said, 'and play somewhere else.'

'You ain't met Timson, have you?' Barnes said hurriedly. 'Timmy, this is Miss Russell. Thee Miss Russell. She's a great girl once you get to know her. I don't know her yet, but I'm getting acquainted.'

Timson looked at Clare admiringly. She didn't like the glassy expression in his eyes. 'Why, I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Russell. I've read your column and I think it's swell.'

Barnes pushed his hat over his nose. 'When did you learn to read, you old horse thief?' he demanded. 'Don't you listen to him, Clare. He's a married man with two children.'

'You've got me wrong there,' Timson said, trying to be jovial.

'Sorry. I mean he's got two wives and a child neither of them know anything about.'

Timson smiled as if it hurt him. 'He's a great kidder, Miss Russell. You don't believe anything he says, do you?'

'I don't,' Clare replied, tapping with her shoe impatiently. 'Nor anything he writes. Would you gentlemen take your little game somewhere else, please?'

'Why, sure,' Timson said, hurriedly, 'I didn't know this was your office. You'll excuse me.'

‘Wait a minute,’ Barnes said. ‘She’s good, but she ain’t all that good. You leave her to me.’ He patted Clare’s arm. ‘Now, don’t be that way, Angel skin. You wouldn’t come between me and a chance to take a little dough off a stranger, would you? Think what it means to me and besides, this is the only room with an electric fan.’

‘I thought there was something more behind it than just my room,’ Clare said, ‘and where do you think I’m going to work?’

‘Give yourself a vacation. You’re always working. And listen, Timmy’s an important guy around here. He’s in Real Estate. You never know, he might do this town some harm.’

‘Real Estate?’ Clare looked sharply at Timson. ‘You wouldn’t want to buy land around here, would you?’

The little man scratched his nose. He avoided her eyes. ‘Well, I don’t know. If anything was going cheap I might consider it. Land’s not a bad speculation, but I guess any property in Fairview would have to be very cheap before I bought it.’

Barnes winked at Clare. ‘He’s a regular vulture, Clare. Waits until a guy goes bust and then moves in. You know the kind of guy I mean.’

Clare looked contemptuous. ‘You’ll find a lot of land in Fairview if that’s the way you work. But, it won’t do you any good when you’ve got it.’

Timson gave his grimacing smile again. ‘Barnes gives me rather a bad character, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘But, I’m just a plain businessman. I can’t afford sentiment, but then everyone has their own points of view.’ He shrugged. ‘So you don’t think Real Estate is a good proposition around here?’

‘In five years’ time it’ll be just another broken little town, like so many towns in the Middle West belt. It has had its day. If you want to invest in a future desert, you couldn’t hope for a better opportunity. You’ll find plenty of sellers.’

‘Don’t you think these two factories will ever get under way again? I’ve seen it happen before. I’ve seen a lot of strange things, Miss Russell. Dying towns have made good sometimes and the fella who has bought cheap has come home with a packet.’

Barnes looked at Clare. ‘See what the movies do to businessmen,’ he said lightly.

Clare studied Timson for a long minute. ‘I’ll talk to Sam, I think,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t dream of disturbing your game, Al. You’re going to make a lot of

money out of Mr. Timson.'

When she had gone, Timson said : 'Just her way of calling me a sucker, I suppose?' He looked at Barnes with angry eyes.

'You don't have to bother about that dame,' Barnes said hurriedly. 'That's just her way. Come on, pal, we've wasted enough time already. What are you betting?'

Clare walked into Sam Trench's office and kicked the door shut. She wandered over to the large, battered desk that occupied three-quarters of the room.

Sam looked up from his work. He was a wizen little man with a shock of white hair and piercing blue eyes. He put his pen carefully in the inkwell and sat back, folding his small, freckled hands on the blotter.

'Sweet grief!' he complained. 'I never get a moment's peace. That's the trouble with women. No discipline. What do you want?'

Clare sat on the desk and swung her long legs. She smiled at him. She liked Sam. He was sincere and she liked sincere people.

'I want a lot of things,' she said, 'but I won't bother you with them now. Tell me, Samuel, what do you know about this Timson bird?'

'Timson? What should I know about him?' Sam demanded. He hunted for his handkerchief, found it and polished his nose with it vigorously. 'And don't call me Samuel. I don't like it.'

'Don't you know anything about him at all?'

Sam pointed his finger at her. 'I know he's from Bentonville. That's enough for me.'

'Do you think he's going to buy land in Fairview?'

Sam blinked. 'He might do. Mind you, he'd be a fool if he did but there are plenty of fools still being born, so he might.'

He put his handkerchief away and then shot her a sharp look.

'Why?'

'He doesn't look a fool,' Clare said. 'And yet it'd be crazy to invest money in Fairview, unless there was something behind it. I wonder if there is.'

'Now, don't start imagining things. Maybe, he ain't going to buy land. Give the guy a chance. He hasn't had time to look round yet, has he?'

'I'm worried about Pinder's End,' Clare said, after a pause.

'What's the matter there?'

'They're not going ahead with the clearance scheme. Hill told me that

there'd been a hitch.'

'That's funny.' Sam was now very wide awake. 'Did Hill say so?'

'Not in those words. He just said that the clearance scheme which affected Pinder's End was temporarily shelved.'

'But it was all fixed at the last meeting. I wonder what's made them change their minds? I'd better have a word with him.'

'That won't do any good. I've talked to him until I'm tired. You wouldn't let me write a leader about it, I suppose?'

Sam shook his head firmly. 'No. You're too strong when you're crusading, my dear. Much too strong.'

'I was afraid you'd say that. There's no guts in the Clarion, Sam, and you know it.'

'It doesn't want guts. You don't give guts to a dying man; you give him soothing syrup. You get off, my dear. You're looking tired. I suppose you won't come out to my place for supper?'

Clare shook her head. 'I've got a date,' she said. 'Some other night.'

'You're holding back on me,' he said, looking at her with a twinkle in his eye. 'I believe you're in love, Clare.'

'Who, me?' Clare laughed, a little embarrassed. 'Oh no, Sam, I'm married to my work.'

'That's what I said before I married,' Sam returned. 'Who is he, Clare?'

'A young man named Peter Cullen,' Clare said, looking out of the window. Sam enjoyed her embarrassment. 'We met a few months ago and I like him. We have dinner together twice a week and sometimes I let him kiss me. Now are you satisfied?'

'Do you like him?'

'I've just said so, haven't I? If you mean . . . no, I don't think so.'

'Well, you're happy?'

'Very . . . but I must get off. Pinder's End is out then?'

'Leave it with me,' Sam said, scribbling on his blotter. 'I'll look into it.' He watched her move to the door. 'And Clare, watch your step with that young man.'

She laughed. 'If that's all I have to watch, I shan't go far wrong,' and she closed the door behind her.

THREE

Harry Duke sat behind a green-topped table. He tossed red and white dice carelessly in a lean, brown hand. 'There's a story running around town that Bellman's scared,' he said, throwing the dice with a flicking movement on to the table.

Kells looked at the dice sleepily. They rolled, wobbled on their edges, then came to rest with the six white spots uppermost. Kells said, 'Fluke.'

Duke scooped up the dice and flicked them back on to the table. The six spots showed again.

Kells relaxed in his chair. He was medium height, dark, thin and cruel. His slouch hat rested at the back of his head and one of his thumbs was hooked in the armhole of his vest. He explored his teeth thoughtfully with a splinter of wood.

Duke repeated about Bellman.

'Don't tell me you listen to stories,' Kells said, in a bored voice. 'Not you. Maybe, some guy would believe it, but not you.'

Duke picked up the dice again. 'All right, he ain't scared,' he said, rolling the bones once more. 'It's just that he's got jaundice.'

The dice showed six spots.

'Bellman wants you,' Kells said. 'He thinks you and he ought to hook up. You handlin' the wheels while he runs the joint.'

'He opened twelve months ago,' Duke said, reaching inside his coat to bring out a flat cigar case. 'Suddenly he thinks of me. What a man!' He took a thin, green dapple cigar, made motions with the case at Kells, who shook his head.

'Bellman's slow, but he's damn sure,' Kells said, his small eyes restlessly wandering up and down the dirty wall behind Duke. 'Now he's got the eating end of the joint fixed he can look around. The wheels ain't so hot. You gotta knock with that angle. Okay, you come and fix it for him. He ain't going to be tight about it.'

Duke smiled. 'I guess not,' he said. 'I don't work. You know that.'

Kells shifted in his chair. 'You don't have to work,' he pointed out. 'We'd take care of that end. All you gotta do is to show around the joint. That'd tell

‘em the wheels were worth playin’.’

Duke put the cigar between his small, white teeth. ‘Got a match?’ he asked.

Kells put a box on the table. ‘A half a grand a week waiting for you to pick up,’ he said, softly.

Duke lit the cigar and passed the box back. ‘Then he is scared,’ he said, and laughed. ‘Why doesn’t he come into the open? Why doesn’t he say he wants protection?’

Kells got slowly out of his chair. ‘Think about it,’ he returned, buttoning up his vest and straightening his coat. ‘I gotta drift. Come out and see Bellman. Have a look at the joint. It’s a fancy set-up. Plenty of swell looking dames with the right ideas. Plenty to eat and drink. You can have a room to yourself with a telephone and a swell desk. Nobody’s going to worry you. If you want a dame to write or answer the telephone, we’ll fix that. If your blood pressure’s at the wrong level, she could look after that too.’ He wandered to the door. ‘It ain’t a bad proposition.’

Duke began to roll the dice again. ‘I ain’t convinced,’ he said, without looking up. ‘Bellman wants protection. He knows I’ve got a reputation for trouble. He wants to wave that reputation to scare some guy away. It wouldn’t interest me.’

Kells opened the door. ‘Think about it,’ he said again. ‘Don’t make a mistake. Bellman ain’t scared of anything. You know Bellman.’

Duke nodded. ‘Sure,’ he said, ‘I know him. Ain’t he the guy who puts on water wings in his bath?’

Kells frowned, opened his mouth to say something, changed his mind and went out, closing the door behind him.

For five minutes, the dice rolled over the green baize. Duke sat staring at the white spots without seeing them. The cigar between his teeth smoked evenly, and the oily smoke drifted past his face, making him screw up his eyes.

The telephone jangled sharply. He reached out and pulled it towards him. He took the cigar out of his mouth. ‘Yeah?’ he said into the mouthpiece, his eyes on the opposite wall.

‘Duke?’ A woman’s voice.

Duke frowned. ‘What is it?’

‘Are you Harry Duke?’ The voice had a soft, southern accent.

‘Yeah,’ Duke said, impatiently. ‘Who’s talking?’

‘Listen,’ the woman said. ‘Listen carefully. Leave Bellman alone. I’m not telling you this for fun. Leave him alone. Pack a bag and go south — go anywhere, but don’t get mixed up with Bellman. I should be sorry to see you dead.’

The faint click told him that the connection was cut. He put the receiver back on its cradle.

‘Well, well,’ he said, softly, and leaned back in his chair. He picked up the dice again and tossed them into the air, catching them in his hand absently. Then he pushed back the chair, picked up his hat and went out of the room.

In the smoke-laden atmosphere of the outer room, a number of men stood around a large table, shooting crap.

Peter Cullen left the table when he saw Duke and crossed over. Duke stopped for a moment to watch someone roll the bones. Cullen said, ‘Look, Harry, I want you to meet my girl.’

Duke continued to stare at the floodlit table. ‘What girl?’ he asked absently.

‘Wake up, Harry,’ Cullen said, shaking his arm. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten. I’ve been trying to corner you for weeks. This time, I’m damned if I’ll take no for an answer.’

Duke gave himself a little shake and turned with a quick smile that lit his hard, long face. ‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘I wasn’t thinking. So I’m to meet your girl? Swell, Pete, where and when?’

‘She’ll be over around eight o’clock. Come and have dinner with us.’

Duke shook his head. ‘I guess not,’ he said. ‘You two love birds want to be together. Tell me where you’ll be and I’ll join you later.’

‘Don’t talk bull.’ Cullen grinned at him. ‘We ain’t all that far gone. Where’ll we go?’

‘Okay,’ Duke said, making up his mind. ‘Chez Paree — Bellman’s place. How’s that? Bellman’s at eight-thirty.’

Cullen nodded. ‘Fine,’ he said, then he lowered his voice. ‘Was that Kells?’

Duke glanced at him, nodded and fingered his close-clipped moustache. ‘That was Kells.’

Cullen screwed up his face. ‘That guy’s a heel,’ he said. ‘I’d like to catch him up a dark alley.’

Duke smiled. 'I wouldn't,' he said. 'I only chase dames up dark alleys.' Then abruptly, 'Schultz upstairs?'

Cullen nodded.

'I want to talk to him.' Duke turned to the stairs. 'I'll see you then?'

Cullen smiled, nodded and turned back to the tables.

At the top of the stairs, Duke paused to throw away the butt of his cigar, then he crossed the landing and pushed open the frosted panelled door on which was written Paul Schultz, Agent, in faded gilt letters.

Schultz, fat and bald, sat behind a large desk. His small eyes were very hard and restless; his face was creased into a fixed smile. He said, 'Ah, Harry,' and waved a small, fat hand towards a chair. Duke sat down and folded his hands across his flat stomach. He studied Schultz without interest.

Schultz said, 'How are you hitting them?'

'I had a load on Silver Wing and Kishibu. They both came in before the field made the last bend.'

'So you cleaned up?' Schultz pushed a box of thick cigars forward.

'Yeah,' Duke said, ignoring the cigars. 'I cleaned up.' He looked round the room and then back at Schultz.

'Paloza's a hot tip,' Schultz said, producing a black bottle and two small glasses from a cupboard in his desk.

'Not for me,' Duke said. 'That horse's a fugitive from a merry-go-round.'

Schultz filled the glasses with whisky and pushed one of them over to Duke. 'All right,' he said, 'if that's the way you feel about it. What's on your mind?'

Duke eased himself down in the padded chair. 'What's scaring Bellman?'

'Bellman?' Schultz lost his smile. 'What do you know about that guy?'

Duke drummed on the desk with smoke-stained fingers. 'Someone's thrown a scare into him. I thought maybe you'd know who it was.'

Schultz pinched his thick lip between his fingers. His eyes had gone blank. 'Now if you'd asked me about orchids I could have helped you,' he said, softly.

Duke smiled at him. 'I know all about your orchids, Paul,' he said. 'Don't try and sidetrack me, I don't like it.'

Schultz said nothing.

'Would it be Spade?' Duke asked, after a pause.

Schultz shut his eyes. 'Spade?' he said, as if he had never heard the name.

‘I don’t know, Harry. I didn’t even know Bellman was scared.’

‘Never even heard of Spade, have you, Paul?’

Schultz looked at him quickly to make sure that he was serious and then shut his eyes again. ‘Well, I’ve heard of him. Who hasn’t? But, that doesn’t mean . . .’

‘I’ve an idea that this joint belongs to Spade,’ Duke said. ‘But then, I guess I’m wrong, huh?’

Schultz leaned forward, scooped up his glass and drank half the whisky. Duke thought he looked like an octopus with his parrot beak of a mouth and saucer-like eyes.

‘Quite, quite wrong,’ Schultz said, putting his glass down.

‘This is my joint. I bought it five years ago. I wonder what made you . . .’

‘That’s the kind of brain I’ve got,’ Duke said. ‘Always thinking the wrong things. It used to worry my mother when I was a kid.’

‘You’re wrong about Bellman too,’ Schultz said. ‘He ain’t scared of anything. I saw him the other night. He was looking fine.’

‘I think I’ll go over and see him myself,’ Duke finished his whisky and stood up. ‘He wants me to move in to the Chez Paree. He thinks with me around, the suckers will go for his wheel.’

Schultz was just going to pick up his glass when Duke spoke.

His saucer-like eyes went glassy and his hand hovered halfway over his drink. He looked up. ‘A little bird tells me that wouldn’t be a smart thing to do,’ he said.

Duke regarded him. ‘Your little bird wouldn’t be a soft spoken judy with a southern accent, would it?’

Schultz sipped the whisky. For a moment Duke thought he was going to have some kind of a stroke, but he controlled himself with an effort. He shook his head. ‘Nothing like that,’ he said, his mouth closing into a spiteful slit. ‘Who would she be?’

Duke looked frosty. ‘She’s my little bird,’ he said.

‘I’d forget about Bellman. You’ve just picked up a nice slice of dough. Why not take a vacation? I’ll be easy with the rent. You go off. Get yourself some sun and air.’

Duke put his hands on the desk and leaned towards Schultz. ‘Listen, Paul,’ he said, seriously. ‘What’s scaring Bellman? We’ve worked together long enough not to stall, haven’t we?’

Schultz looked blank. 'I tell you, nothing's the matter with him. I wouldn't lie to you, Harry.'

Duke stood away. 'Okay,' he said. 'You wouldn't lie to me. I'll have that put on your tombstone. It'll scare the vultures away,' and he walked out of the room, shutting the door sharply behind him.

Cullen met him at the bottom of the stairs. 'Got time for a drink, Harry?' he asked.

Duke glanced at the big, yellow-faced clock across the room. It showed six-thirty. He shook his head. 'I want to get home,' he said. 'See you tonight at Bellman's.'

Cullen nodded. 'Wash behind your ears, Harry,' he said. 'I've given you a great build up.'

'I'll even put on a clean shirt,' Duke said, smacked Cullen on the back and went into the street.

The light from the evening sun dazzled and hurt his eyes. It was a crazy sort of life he led, he thought as he stood on the kerb waiting for a taxi. Sitting in a smoke-filled room all day, betting, telephoning and playing crap. It was not as if he were broke. He had plenty socked away in the bank. He didn't have to sit in his tiny office all day, but somehow it was a difficult habit to break.

A taxi crowded on brakes as he waved his hand and drew up near him. He gave a downtown address and got in.

He found he was tired and hot. He took off his hat and relaxed back in the taxi, shutting his eyes.

He wished in a way that he hadn't dated himself up with Cullen. He had no great interest to meet his girl but he didn't want to hurt Cullen's feelings.

He found the girls which his friends were crazy about usually bored him. That was the reason why he had so few friends now. Most of them had got married and he had just dropped them.

He was fond of Peter Cullen. They had known each other for a long time. Five years or so ago, they had been in business together. But Duke got restless and wouldn't keep office hours and then he got into trouble with the police and Cullen began to worry. Duke didn't blame him. He knew Cullen was the cautious type and they were not really suited to work together. They split up business and went their different ways, but Duke liked to keep in touch with him. He had a soft spot for Peter Cullen.

Now, Cullen managed two filling stations and seemed to be making a good thing out of them. Anyway, he always seemed to have money to burn and prided himself in being one of the best dressed men in Bentonville. He had forgotten his wild days and had settled down. Duke thought gloomily that he was about set to get married.

Duke would never settle down. He was sure of that. He was in too hard a school. Gambling was all very well as a profession if you were prepared to lose everything and start again, but once you had a wife then you had a hostage to fortune. Duke didn't want any encumbrances.

It was odd how easily he had acquired the reputation as a killer. Ten years ago, he had killed a man. It was enough for Bentonville. He'd shot a man and he was therefore someone to look up to. That's the way the citizens of Bentonville reasoned.

In actual fact, Duke had been forced into the gun battle. It was a question of who drew the faster. Duke beat the other guy by a split second. That was a long time ago and he had nearly forgotten about it except when he had too much to drink, which was extremely rare. Then the man he had killed would sit at the foot of his bed and smile at him and the next morning he'd feel like hell.

It was amusing to think that Bellman should want to work with him. Bellman with all his money, his women and his nightclub wanting protection struck Duke as being particularly funny.

Sitting in the bouncing taxi, amid the smell of leather and stale smoke, he brooded about Schultz. He knew something. He was quite sure of that. Schultz knew who the judy was who had rung him. He'd been very careful about Spade too.

Duke's mouth set in a hard line. Now there was a guy he'd like to unseat. Spade!

Spade must be making a fortune out of Bentonville, Duke thought. He had only to look out of the window to see one of Spade's yellow and blue poolrooms flash by. They were everywhere. Nearly every shop in Bentonville had one of Spade's automatic machines. That guy was smart. Duke had to admit it. And what was more, he kept under cover. If there was trouble, Korris would take the rap. Maybe Spade was trying to force Bellman out of business. If that was it, then it meant the thin end of the wedge. It meant that Spade was trying to take over the whole of Bentonville.

The driver suddenly said, without looking round. 'We've got company, boss.'

Duke glanced through the rear window. He could see a big black tourer about a hundred yards behind. It was equipped with a blue anti-dazzle windscreen so he couldn't see the driver.

'You sure?'

'I guess so,' the driver returned. 'Don't ask me to shake that car. I couldn't do it.'

'Get off the main road and wander round the blocks,' Duke said, turning so that he could watch through the rear window.

The driver swung his wheel over at the next turning and went down a narrow street, leading away from the town. The tourer altered direction and came after them.

Duke's eyes became frosty. He put his hand inside his coat and loosened his gun a trifle in its holster.

'Keep doing that,' he said to the driver, 'I'll give him another couple of chances.'

The driver began to sweat. 'There ain't going to be any shootin', boss?' he asked anxiously. 'I've just had this bus done up.'

Duke gave a snorting laugh. 'You've been seeing too many movies,' he said, cheerfully. 'This ain't Chicago.'

'That sure gives me a lotta confidence,' the driver returned, bitterly, and swung into another street.

The tourer followed.

Duke took a five spot from his pocket and gave it to the driver. 'Next corner, crowd on speed,' he said. 'When you've lost him, brake. I'll jump out.'

'You got that from the movies yourself, boss,' the driver returned. He seemed suddenly much brighter.

They went through the motions without difficulty and Duke ducked into a doorway as the tourer entered the street. It went past swiftly. He still couldn't see the driver, but he made a note of the licence number.

He walked quickly down the street, cut left and after a further two minutes walking came to the main street again.

He turned into a drug store and shut himself in a telephone booth. He telephoned Police Records.

‘This is Harry Duke,’ he said. ‘Is that O’Malley?’

‘H’yah, Harry,’ O’Malley said. ‘What do you think of Destroyer for a place?’

Duke shoved his hat to the back of his head. ‘Forget it,’ he said. ‘That horse’ll come in so late his jock’ll be using a flashlight. Get on to El Nagani.’

O’Malley thanked him. Duke’s tips were the McCoy.

‘Listen,’ Duke went on. ‘Never mind racing for a moment. I want to trace a car.’ He gave O’Malley the licence number. ‘Can you get it fast?’

‘How fast?’ O’Malley asked cautiously.

‘I’ll wait for it.’

Duke heard O’Malley groan and he grinned. ‘What’s the matter? Tired of getting my tips?’ he asked.

‘You hang on. I’ll do it for you, Harry, only — well, you ain’t going to make a practice of this, are you?’

‘Go get it, you lazy Mick, and stop yapping.’

There was a long silence and then O’Malley came back on the line. ‘One of Vardis Spade’s cars. What’s the trouble?’

When O’Malley said ‘Spade’, Duke’s lips pursed into a soundless whistle. ‘No trouble,’ he said. ‘There was a judy driving who caught my eye.’

O’Malley struggled with his feelings. ‘Do you mean to tell me,’ he said, savagely, ‘you got me to turn up that number because of a dame?’

‘She was a nice dish, otherwise I wouldn’t have bothered you,’ Duke returned and hastily hung up.

FOUR

Peter Cullen had just fixed his tie when he heard the stuttering roar of the old Ford engine which died abruptly as Clare switched off the ignition.

He grabbed his coat, touched the sides of his thick hair with a hairbrush and ran to the door.

As he reached the landing, he heard the Ford door slam and a moment later the sound of heels clicking down the passage. He hung over the banisters, anxious for his first glimpse of her.

Clare Russell meant a lot to Peter. It wasn't because of her beauty. He had known a lot of beautiful women in his time and had grown tired of them. He believed that he was in love with her efficiency. She was so unlike the Usual girl in Bentonville or Fairview for that matter.

They had met quite casually when she called in at one of his filling stations for a minor repair to the Ford. He had been checking the books at the time and seeing her wandering up and down while the mechanic was working, he had gone out to her.

He found Clare friendly and he knew that she had liked him immediately she saw him. He was not slow and when she drove away, he had her telephone number in his notebook.

They met fairly regularly after that. He knew she was lonely and he knew too that she felt buried alive in Fairview. It was really easy for him as he took her about, liked the things that amused her and had a common interest in books and the theatre.

Now, Clare would come out every evening after work and they would either go to a movie or to a restaurant to talk.

Looking over the banisters, Peter caught a glimpse of her small glossy head as she came up the stairs.

He whistled softly and she looked up. Her big, dark eyes lit up when she saw him and she smiled, breaking into a run.

'I'm not late, am I?' she asked, coming to an abrupt halt when she reached him.

He looked down at her. 'It's striking eight now,' he said, taking her elbows in his hands and drawing her a little closer to him. 'It's swell to see you. How

are you?’

She raised her face and they kissed. ‘Oh, I’m all right. A little tired perhaps.’ She straightened his tie. ‘And you?’

‘I’m fine,’ he said, leading her into his room. ‘Come in a second. I’m nearly ready.’

She looked round the bright untidy room and rested her head against his shoulder. ‘I like it in here,’ she said. ‘All this is so like you, Peter.’ She glanced up at him, smiled and put his arm gently from her. She walked over to the big armchair and sat down, curling her long legs under her. ‘Sam was kidding me about you this evening,’ she said. ‘He’s found out about you.’

Peter began to put a variety of things into his pockets. ‘Has he?’ He glanced back to her. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Of course not. I’m glad. Sam’s been very good to me, Peter. I don’t know what I should have done without him.’

‘You’ve got me now.’

‘I know. It’s horrible to be lonely . . . especially for a girl. I don’t want any more of that.’

‘If you’ll only be sensible and marry me, you never will have to say that again.’ Peter glanced in the mirror, satisfied himself on his appearance and came over to sit on the arm of Clare’s chair.

‘No!’ Clare held up a long, thin finger. ‘Not tonight, Peter. We went all over that last night. I told you I’m not sure. I’ve been so long on my own. I’ve had to look after myself for so long that. . . well, I just don’t know.’

Peter touched her hair lightly. ‘All right. So long as I know there’s no one else. You know, darling, I could be horribly jealous of you.’

She shook his hand. ‘There won’t be anyone else,’ she said. ‘You mustn’t talk like that. You must be sure of me. I like men who are sure. I don’t like men who feel inferior because I’ve got a nice figure, big brown eyes and a pretty dress.’

Peter grinned down at her. ‘Who said you had a nice figure, anyway?’ he asked.

‘Don’t you think so?’

‘I’m in the motor business. I never pass judgment on something I haven’t seen.’

‘And now, Mr. Cullen, you are becoming worldly.’

‘Certainly not. I’m merely running to type.’

‘In that case, I had better be very cautious and’ sit by the window where I can call for help if necessary.’

‘I’m glad you add if necessary.’ He smiled at her. ‘But, seriously Clare, I wish you’d marry me.’

‘And seriously, Peter, I wish you wouldn’t talk about it just now. Do you mind very much?’ She slipped her hand into his.

For a moment his face showed his disappointment, then he smiled. ‘I’m sorry, Clare. Tell me what you’ve been doing today.’

‘Oh, it’s been thoroughly tiresome from the moment I arrived at the office. I was hoping to get material for an article on the Fairview slums. Do you know Pinder’s End, Peter?’

‘I think so. Isn’t that the place just outside Fairview . . . a few bungalows and a lot of poverty?’

‘Hmm. That describes it very well. It’s a disgrace to the town. I feel so sorry for the people living there. They are almost like those dreadful characters in Tobacco Road. The Town surveyor has been threatening to clear them out for the past year and everything was fixed at the last Municipal session. Now, it has been shelved.’

‘Well, I should imagine the people living there are glad. Where would they have gone?’

‘They would have been looked after. It had all been arranged and worked out. And now, for no apparent reason, they’re not going ahead with the scheme.’

‘Just like the authorities.’ Peter took out his cigarette case and offered it.

‘I wanted to kick up a row in the Clarion about it, but Sam wouldn’t hear of it,’ Clare went on, accepting a light. ‘Sometimes I wonder if Sam isn’t too cautious. Ever since that man Korris threatened him he has laid off all politics and hardly prints anything about Bentonville.’

‘I remember that business. Didn’t Korris threaten to burn the Clarion building or something?’

Clare shrugged. ‘As if that meant anything.’

‘I think you’re wrong there. Korris is powerful in Bentonville. His mob sticks at nothing.’

‘It’s an absolute disgrace. Why don’t the police clear him out?’

‘Now, come, Clare! You know as well as I do the politicians make a good thing out of Korris. They wouldn’t dream of getting rid of him.’

‘Do you think there is such a person as Spade?’ Clare asked abruptly, after a pause.

‘Spade? You mean the racket boss? I suppose so. I really don’t interest myself in that side of the town.’

‘But you should, Peter. If everyone took an interest and brought pressure to bear at election time, this gang would be run out of town.’

‘Or else we’d get our teeth kicked in,’ Peter said, looking serious. ‘These people have got a grip on Bentonville, Clare. They won’t give up in a hurry.’

‘Oh, Peter, I know what I wanted to ask you. Do you know a man called Timson?’

Peter shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. Why?’

‘He’s over at Fairview. Sam says he’s from Bentonville and he’s looking for property. I believe he’s going to buy land out there.’

‘Oh, surely not,’ Peter laughed. ‘There’s nothing in Fairview that would be worthwhile to a refuse man. I can’t believe that. What’s he going to do . . . buy Pinder’s End?’

‘He wouldn’t be so stupid. . .’ Clare stopped and stared at Peter. ‘Oh, but he couldn’t. Surely . . .’

‘Now, what’s the matter?’

Clare slid out of the armchair. ‘Do you mind if I use your telephone?’

Peter looked at her with amused bewilderment. ‘What’s got into that smart little head of yours?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. It’s rather a coincidence that Timson should be in Fairview looking for property and the Pinder’s End scheme should be shelved on the day he arrived,’ Clare returned, dialling.

‘Who are you ringing?’

‘I’m going to ask Hill, the town surveyor.’ She turned back to the telephone. ‘Is that Mr. Hill? This is Clare Russell of the Clarion. I understand, Mr. Hill, that Pinder’s End has been sold. Is that correct?’

There was a startled exclamation at the other end of the line. ‘Sold?’ Hill spluttered. ‘Who said so?’

‘I have information to that effect,’ Clare returned, in her most businesslike manner, ‘I would like confirmation.’

‘I have nothing to give to the Press,’ Hill snapped.

‘Then you don’t deny the story?’ Clare persisted.

‘I tell you I have nothing to say,’ Hill returned, and hung up on her.

Clare put the receiver on its cradle gently and looked at Peter. 'He won't talk. It looks as if Timson's bought Pinder's End.'

'It doesn't seem possible,' Peter said. 'What in the world would anyone want with that dump? I expect Hill's just being obstinate.'

Clare shook her head. 'I don't think so,' she said, and picked up the telephone again. She called Sam and told him, but Sam wouldn't believe it.

'You leave Pinder's End to me,' he said, briskly. 'I'll see Hill first thing tomorrow. Now go and enjoy yourself. You're holding up my dinner,' and he rang off.

Clare shrugged. 'Well, I can't do anything about it tonight,' she said, regretfully. She looked over at Peter. 'What are you going to do with me?'

Peter snapped his fingers. 'I'd almost forgotten, darling. We are going to the Chez Paree and you're going to meet that notorious character, Harry Duke. I've asked him to dinner.'

Clare's eyes lost a little of their sparkle. 'I wanted to spend the evening alone with you,' she protested. 'I don't feel like being nice to your friends.'

'You don't have to be nice to Harry Duke,' Peter said. 'In fact, I should hate you to be.'

'Honesty, Peter, can't we put him off? I'm not in the mood for mixed company.'

Peter gave her a quick look and saw that she was serious. 'Why, I'm sorry, Clare. I suppose I could put him off, but he's been waiting so long to meet you and he *is* my best friend.' He stood looking at her, undecided.

Clare wandered over to the window. 'Don't be sorry, Peter,' she said. 'You weren't to know how I was going to feel.' After a moment's silence, she went on. 'I've heard a lot about Harry Duke. I don't really think I want to meet him. After all, he is one of the Bentonville gamblers, isn't he?'

Peter laughed uneasily. 'You mustn't believe all you hear. Harry's swell. We've known each other a long time and he's been good to me. Of course, he is a little wild, but that doesn't mean anything.'

'He's a gambler, a gunman and a bad citizen.'

'Oh, nonsense,' Peter said, a little sharply. 'He's a gambler, but then so are thousands of other guys.'

'I suppose thousands of other guys are gunmen and bad citizens, which makes Harry Duke just a nice ordinary fellow.'

There was another pause, then Peter said quietly, 'Okay, Clare, I'll put him

off.'

Clare swung round. 'I'm sorry, Peter, I'm being stupid. I'll take a leaf out of your book and I won't pass judgment on someone I haven't seen.'

Peter looked at her searchingly. 'Do you mean that?'

She nodded. 'Of course. Now I come to think about it, I ought to meet Harry Duke. If I don't like him and if I think he is undesirable, I shall do all I can to break up your beautiful friendship.' She smiled, but her dark eyes were serious and worried.

Peter felt that the evening was going cold on him. 'Come on, Clare,' he said, reaching for his hat. 'We talk too much, instead of just enjoying ourselves as everyone else does. We talk, analyse and worry. Life's too hollow to stand up to that kind of treatment. We've just got to accept it, otherwise we'll never get anywhere.'

'I call that muddle philosophy,' Clare returned, going just ahead of him down the stairs. 'But never mind. We won't talk, we won't analyse and we won't worry. Then we'll have a beautiful evening with the bad Mr. Duke.'

Peter opened the car door. 'You won't let your waspish nature off the lead, will you?'

'Have I a waspish nature?' Clare settled herself under the wheel and reached for the ignition switch.

'I think you must have.' Peter smiled down at her.

'Then I'll be very careful and I won't say one word to offend your poor Harry Duke.'

'That's swell. I might as well warn you that Harry's got quite a line in wasps himself. So don't blame me if you get stung.'

Clare engaged the gear and the Ford moved slowly into the centre of the road. 'I can hardly wait for the meeting. It sounds too marvellous. I can see us all sitting round the table, hating and stinging each other and pretending we're having a lovely evening. Anyway, it'll be quite a novelty.'

'If you go on like this, Clare Russell, I'm going to take you home. You want a good shaking.'

'Perhaps Mr. Duke will give it to me.'

'I'll give it to you myself.'

'Then I really will be horrid,' Clare said, edging the Ford into the stream of downtown traffic. 'I think I'd like to be shaken by you.'

Peter raised his hands in mock despair.

FIVE

Harry Duke watched them come in from his corner at the end of the bar. He looked at Clare curiously, then he put his glass down slowly on the polished counter. She was standing in the doorway with Peter just behind her and he saw her face turned at an angle and at the same time he saw the strange thing about her. And as he looked at her he felt a thickness in his throat.

When they saw him and came across, he was careful not to stare at her, although he wanted to. He kept his eyes on Peter, ignoring her until they reached him and then he looked at her, meeting her dark, serious eyes and then looking away.

‘Well, here we are,’ Peter said, looking like a dog with two tails. ‘Harry, this is Clare. I want you two to like each other.’

Clare was startled. She hadn’t expected Duke to be like this at all. She could see now why Peter admired him. It irritated her to find him so untrue to type. The short black hair and close-clipped moustache were unexpected. So were the steady green eyes that looked through her so searchingly. She was offering her hand before she realized her mistake and he had taken it.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘I’ve been waiting a long time to meet you.’

For the first time in her life, she felt shy and awkward. She was furious with herself and a little angry with Peter, although she knew that this was unfair.

She felt Peter’s amused eyes on her and that made her more embarrassed. She must say something. She couldn’t stand there staring at this big broad-shouldered man like a fool.

‘Peter has talked about you so much,’ she said, groping wildly for words. ‘But, I - I didn’t quite expect you to be like – I mean. . .’ she broke off and looked helplessly at Peter.

‘Obviously she’s a little overcome by your beauty,’ Peter said, with a grin.

‘It’s not that,’ Clare said hastily. ‘But. . . well, I’ve heard all sorts of things about you and I was expecting a . . . gangster.’

Harry Duke looked mildly surprised. ‘I hope you’re not disappointed,’ he said. ‘I can understand why Pete hasn’t introduced me before.’ He glanced at

Peter. 'I don't know how you do it. What's the secret of your charm?'

Peter beckoned to the barman. 'She's just a dope,' he said, pleased. 'It's easy with her.'

'The drinks are on me,' Duke said, as the barman came up, 'What'll you have?'

When the drinks had been set up, Peter said, 'This is a pretty nice place. I've never been in here before.'

Duke grunted, 'It's all right. Bellman's been in the game for years. He's got a gambling room upstairs.' He glanced at Clare. 'Would that interest you?'

'No.' Clare held the thin-stemmed glass near her lips and spoke over the amber liquid. 'I don't gamble.'

'Everyone gambles,' Duke said, looking at her with intent eyes. He found she was oddly disconcerting. 'Not always for money, but everyone gambles.'

She looked away. 'Do they?' she said. Her voice had gone a little flat.

'Of course. They gamble for happiness, they gamble for position, for their homes, for their jobs. Surely you believe that?'

Peter said, 'Harry's got a theory, but you mustn't take him seriously.'

She said. 'The people you're talking about have the gamble forced on them. They are not the same as the people upstairs, who deliberately risk their money.'

'You don't approve of gambling?' There was a faint irony in Duke's voice.

She shook her head. 'No.'

'You mustn't forget that Clare is a crusader. Don't you read her column in the *Clarion*?' Peter said, calling for another round of drinks.

Harry Duke shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'What's the matter with the *Clarion*?' He looked at Clare.

Clare lifted her shoulder. 'I'm afraid it's like Fairview. A little tired and scared of a fight.'

'A live newspaper could do a lot for that town,' Duke said. 'I'd like to take the *Clarion* over.'

Clare suddenly felt angry. 'It is already practically controlled by one of your gambling friends,' she said, sharply. 'That's the reason why it doesn't fight.'

Duke laughed. 'You've got me wrong,' he said. 'I'm as keen to clean up Bentonville as you are. You ask Pete, he'll tell you.'

Peter finished his drink. 'He's quite right,' he said. 'Harry's a natural gambler, he doesn't approve of this mass invasion. I shouldn't be surprised if, one of these days, he doesn't start a crusade himself.'

Clare looked a little blank. 'But, why don't you?' she demanded. 'If you feel like that?'

Duke put his glass gently on the polished bar. 'It's not so easy,' he said. 'I've got to find an excuse to start. You know how strong this organization is. It'll want a lot of busting. The only way is to isolate the ringleaders, get rid of them first and then move in on the smaller fry. But, getting the men who count will be a tough job. A lot of guys will get shot before it's done.'

'I believe you could do it by appealing to the people. If you get rid of this political group, the town could be swept clean. Violence will never get you anything except into trouble.'

Duke shrugged. 'I favour my idea,' he said. 'Every election has been rigged up to now and they'll go on rigging it.' He glanced at the wall clock. 'It's getting late. Let's eat!'

When they had found their table and sat down, Clare said, 'Do you know a man called Timson, Mr. Duke?'

Peter broke in, 'Now, for the love of Mike, Clare, call him Harry.'

'Leave her alone,' Duke said, sensing Clare's embarrassment. 'She can call me what she likes.'

Peter groaned. 'Oh, heck! I believe you two hate each other,' he said, in mock despair.

'No, we don't,' Duke returned. 'Do we, Clare?' Again he felt the slight thickening in his throat as he looked at her.

She shook her head, avoiding his eyes.

'You were asking about Timson?' Duke went on. 'He's Bellman's manager. Why? Do you know him?'

'Is he?' Clare looked over at Peter. 'Then if he's bought Pinder's End, it would be for Bellman?'

'But you don't know that he *has* bought it,' Peter pointed out.

Duke shifted forward in his chair, but before he could speak the waiter came for their order. When he had gone away, Duke said, 'What's this about Pinder's End?'

Clare told him briefly.

Duke half closed his eyes. 'That's interesting,' he said. 'Do you know

anything about Fairview's land. I mean there'd be no chance of a silver mine or anything like that?'

Clare looked startled. It was an angle she hadn't thought of. 'I don't think so, but I could find out, of course.'

'I wish you two wouldn't go on as if there's a mystery in this. We don't know that Timson has bought anything yet,' Peter said again.

Duke ignored him. 'Do me a favour, will you?' he said to Clare. 'You're out there. If you hear anything, give me a ring. I'm interested.'

'All right,' Clare said. 'What do you think's going on?'

Duke shook his head. 'I don't know yet, but I've got an angle.' He took out his wallet, found a scrap of paper and scribbled his telephone number on it. 'You'll find me any time at this number.'

She took the scrap of paper, glanced at it and put it in her bag. 'I won't forget,' she said.

Peter watched this with mixed feelings. Then he said without thinking. 'That's pretty smooth. He's given you his telephone number right under my nose. What are you trying to do, Harry? Steal her from me?'

Clare flushed scarlet.

Duke looked at her and then at Peter. His eyes had gone frosty. 'That sounded like a cheap crack, Peter,' he said, gently.

A sudden feeling of jealousy swamped Peter's better judgment. 'Oh, rot!' he said, angrily. 'I was kidding. But, you two needn't look so damned guilty about it.' He gave Clare a sharp look. 'What are you blushing for, anyway?'

Clare pushed back her chair and stood up. 'I won't be a minute,' she said, and left them. She crossed the restaurant and went into the Ladies' room.

Peter stared after her blankly.

'You were flat footed there,' Duke said quietly, toying with his glass.

Peter ran his fingers through his hair. 'What's the matter with the girl? I've never seen her like that before.' He looked at Duke, anger in his eyes. 'I think I've made a mistake introducing...'

'Shut up!' Duke said, curtly. 'That kid's tired. She's nervy and she doesn't want a lot of funny stuff from hick comedians. Look after her, can't you? You've got someone worthwhile.'

'Where do you get all that stuff from?' Peter said, furiously, his temper getting the better of him. 'I've known her a damn sight longer than you. Until you barged in we've never had any trouble.'

‘Take it easy,’ Duke said, with a hard little smile. ‘I didn’t ask to barge in, you know. Just treat her right, will you, and tell her I’ve been called away.’

Peter got hastily to his feet. ‘Now look, Harry, I’m sorry for what I said. I was just rattled. Sit down and forget it.’

Duke shook his head. ‘I’ve got to go. I’ve just remembered a date with Bellman. See you tomorrow, Pete, and watch out.’

He went away before Peter could protest and walked into the lounge. He picked out a short thickset man who was standing at the bottom of the wide staircase that led to the roulette room and went over.

‘Where’s Bellman?’ he said.

The short thickset man eyed him coldly. ‘Who shall I say?’

‘Tell him it’s his mother,’ Duke said.

The short thickset man shrugged and moved up the stairs. Duke followed him and at the end of the corridor the man paused outside a door. ‘Don’t let’s have any funny stuff,’ he said. ‘What name shall I give him?’

Duke put out a hand, took the man by the front of his coat and shoved him against the wall. ‘Go jump down a well,’ he said.

Bellman was sitting behind a big desk. A number of papers were scattered in front of him and he was writing rapidly. He looked up with a frown as Duke kicked the door shut. When he saw who it was, his heavy, florid face lit up and he got to his feet. ‘Well, well,’ he said, holding out his hand. ‘Just the fella I wanted to see.’

Duke ignored the outstretched hand. He pulled a chair towards him with his foot and sat down.

Bellman glanced at his hand with an amused smile, raised his eyebrows and sat down again. He wasn’t as tall as Duke, but he was much heavier built. His hair was dark, parted in the middle and ran back from his forehead in a V. He was handsome in a flashy way.

‘I’ve been thinking about you for some time, Duke,’ he said, picking up a long paper knife and tapping with it on the white blotter. ‘Isn’t it time you and me got together?’

Duke pushed his hat to the back of his head. He stroked his square jaw thoughtfully. ‘Is it?’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t know. From the look of this joint, you ain’t doing too badly. Why worry about me?’

Bellman touched a buzzer. ‘Let’s have something to drink,’ he said. ‘I want to have a straight talk with you.’

The thickset man came into the room quickly. His left hand was hidden in his pocket. A child could see that he was fingering a gun.

Bellman said sharply, 'Have some Scotch sent up.'

When the man had gone, Bellman went on, 'You've got a big reputation as a gambler in the district. Your name stands pretty high. Everyone knows you're lucky. You stake big and you win big. When you lose, which isn't often, you pay up and try again.'

The crowd that comes here are snobs. They like to feel that they've got something that other people haven't got. That's why I want you here. I want to put in lights that Duke, the famous gambler, is right inside, looking after my wheels. You're as free as the air, just look in nights, have a wander round, then if you want to, blow. Do you get the idea?'

Duke reached inside his coat, took out his flat cigar case and selected a cigar. He didn't offer the case to Bellman. 'Go on,' he said.

The thickset man came in with the drinks. Bellman told him to put them down and get out.

When he had gone, Bellman mixed the drinks silently, gave a glass to Duke and lit a cigarette.

'You being here will do my business a lot of good,' he said. 'I'm ready to pay you. What do you say?'

'Kells came in tonight. He said you were offering five hundred bucks. I laughed at him'

Bellman flushed. 'I told the punk you could make your own terms. Listen, Duke, I need you and I'm not going to haggle. The point to be settled is, will you come?'

Duke shook his head. 'I guess not,' he said.

Bellman said, 'We'll split fifty-fifty on the wheels. They're worth about eight grand a week. With you here, they ought to go to twelve. Six thousand dollars a week. Now will you come?'

Duke took a long pull at his glass. His eyes were very intent. 'That's a hell of a lot of dough,' he said.

Bellman drained his glass and immediately refilled it. His hand shook a trifle. 'It's worth that to me,' he said. 'How about it?'

Duke blew dark oily smoke across the room. 'Spade wouldn't like it,' he said, gently.

Bellman dropped the paper knife he was fooling with. His face went livid.

‘Spade?’ he said, leaning forward. ‘What do you mean - Spade?’

‘Suppose you talk. You don’t want me here to bring you trade. You want me here because of my rod. Why are you scared of Spade?’

Bellman kicked back his chair. ‘You’re crazy,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. I ain’t scared of Spade. I’ve offered you a proposition. Will you take it or won’t you?’

Duke was just saying no when the door opened silently and a little guy in a black suit slid into the room. Duke caught a glimpse of a blunt-nose automatic in his hand. It happened so quickly that Bellman didn’t seem to understand what it was all about until it was over.

The little guy began to fire as Duke tossed the contents of his glass in his face. The whisky hit the little guy and got in his eyes.

Two bullets ploughed up the smooth top of Bellman’s desk and brought down plaster from the opposite wall. Then the door slammed again and the little guy was gone.

Duke put his gun back into his holster regretfully. ‘Seemed in a hurry, didn’t he?’ he said, casually, refilling his glass. ‘Was he a friend of yours?’

Bellman looked as if he were going to faint. He sat limply in his chair, his face white and shiny with sweat. ‘No . . . I’ve never seen him before,’ he said, in a low voice.

‘Seemed almost as if he wanted to knock you off,’ Duke said, enjoying Bellman’s shakes. ‘Did you get the same impression?’

Kells came in quickly and shut the door. He seemed surprised to see Bellman alive.

Duke said, ‘Did you see him?’

Kells shook his head. ‘Who was it?’

Bellman was greedily drinking a big whisky. ‘Some crazy guy,’ he stammered. ‘Maybe someone losing on the wheels.’

Duke was watching Kells closely and saw him sneer. ‘I got his car number,’ Kells said and scribbled down the number on the blotter. Duke glanced at it. As he thought, it was the same number as the car that had followed him.

‘That’s Spade’s car,’ he said. ‘It followed me half way here before I shook it. I had the number checked.’

Bellman looked over at Kells. He’d gone a little green. ‘Spade?’ he repeated stupidly. ‘But Spade wouldn’t do a thing like that.’

Kells moved restlessly. 'Well, what do you want me to do?' he said.

'Find out how he got up here,' Bellman snarled, his colour coming back a trifle. 'What the hell do you think I'm paying a bunch of toughs for if they're asleep all the time?'

Kells said, 'Okay,' and went to the door. 'You stickin'?' he asked Duke as he was leaving.

'I don't think it's safe,' Duke said, and laughed.

Kells went away.

Bellman poured more whisky into his glass. 'You saved my life,' he said, soberly. 'That was the smartest thing I've ever seen. You didn't let him rattle you, did you?'

'Why should he rattle me? You were the guy he was after.' Duke finished his whisky and stood up. 'Well, I'll come to your funeral,' he said, lightly. 'The proposition doesn't interest me. I like a more peaceful life.'

Bellman said, 'Wait, you don't know what you're turning down.'

Duke smiled at him. 'I do,' he said. 'I don't beat up trouble. If I've got to fight, I'll fight for myself, not for anyone else. I don't like you, Bellman, and I wouldn't try very hard. It'd be a bad bargain.' He went to the door. 'So long,' he said, and went

out.

He met Kells in the hall. 'Let me know when he's killed,' he said. 'I'd like him to have a wreath of buttercups.'

Kells grinned. 'So you're not interested?' He said it as if he had expected it.

Duke shook his head. 'He wouldn't talk,' he said. 'I like to know where I am.'

'So do I.'

They exchanged glances.

'It's Spade, of course - but why?' Duke asked.

Kells shook his head. 'He's after Bellman. Maybe he doesn't like him or something.'

Duke nodded. 'I hadn't thought of that. Yeah, maybe he doesn't like him,' and he went out into the dark, stifling street.

SIX

Schultz was putting on his hat when the telephone rang. He frowned, looked at the time, then pulled the telephone towards him. 'Who is it?' he asked, then his face showed interest. He sat down. 'When? Tonight, eh? Is he dead?' He frowned and squirmed his bulk further into his car. 'Who shot him?' he barked, suddenly. He listened to the rasping voice at the other end of the line, then interrupted the flow, 'Okay, okay, you keep it until you see me. Come over to my place right away,' and he hung up.

He sat for some minutes brooding, then he got up, turned out the light and left the office.

Downstairs they were still playing crap. He went past the table into the street.

A long black car slid up to him and he climbed into the back seat. The boy at the wheel didn't look at him. He sat like a stone statue, staring ahead. He was very slight with angular shoulders and his peak cap, which was broken into a V, hid his face.

'Home, Joe,' Schultz whispered through the speaking tube and he groped for a cigar.

He sat in a heap, smoking, and staring with blank, hooded eyes at the street lights as they flashed past. His mind groped, made decisions, discarded them, groped some more and gave up. It was no use making plans until Cubitt had told him everything.

The car stopped outside Schultz's small house and even before he got out of the car, he could smell the heavy scent of the flowers from his garden.

Schultz believed all men should have hobbies. He believed that it provided them with an antidote to boredom when they couldn't go to business anymore. He had been a horticulturist all his life and his speciality was orchids. In a small, stuffy little glasshouse at the back of his house, he reared some of the finest specimens seen in the country. Besides the orchids, he grew every known flower in a mass of blazing colour that was the envy of his neighbours.

He stepped out of the car and sniffed. 'Smells good, doesn't it, Joe?' he said, smiling in the darkness.

The boy grunted. He had heard Schultz say the same thing every time he drove him home. He had no interest in flowers. He thought they were a waste of money.

‘Leave the car, Joe,’ Schultz said. ‘I may need it again tonight.’ He went up the path and sank his key. There was a light in the big sitting room.

Across the room, half lying, half sitting on the divan, Lorelli displayed her black silk legs. She glanced up as Schultz came in and her full lips curled into a smile.

Schultz stood just in the doorway and looked at her.

Lorelli was running to fat. Not too much, but just enough to give her figure a soft, full outline. She was not tall and most of her weight ran to her hips. Her face was heart-shaped and a little heavy. Her complexion was creamy with no colour, making her full, scarlet lips and heavy black eyebrows startling. She was still very young. Schultz had no idea how old she was, but he guessed she couldn’t be more than twenty. He thought regretfully that she would lose her attractions before she was thirty. She was developing too fast.

She looked back at him with her smiling mouth and her gleaming white teeth, seeing his gross body and hard little eyes and wondered how much longer she could stomach him.

‘Maestro,’ she said, holding out her small plump hand. ‘Come in because there’s a draught and you are not beautiful enough for a delayed entry.’

Schultz closed the door. ‘I don’t have to be beautiful,’ he said, evenly, moving over to her. ‘I have other things of value.’ He tapped his great dome of a head. Things in here, my pigeon, but you. . .’ he put his great perspiring hand on her thick hair. ‘You have nothing in there so you must be beautiful to live.’

She wriggled from under his hand. Her blue-black eyes were full of questions. ‘You don’t sound happy, Maestro. Has anything gone wrong?’

He almost struck her, but controlled himself. His slit of a mouth pursed and his saucer-like eyes were like granite. What could go wrong?’ he asked, putting his hand on her chin. He raised her face. They looked at each other. She saw the snarling anger in his eyes and flinched away, but his giant fingers crushed her chin.

Sneering at her, he lowered his great face down and crushed his lips over hers. He held her like that, bruising her chin, hurting her mouth.

A dry sound came from behind him. A sound like a piece of wood being

broken. He jerked away from her and looked over his shoulder.

Joe had come in and had coughed. He stood looking at Schultz with blank, stony eyes.

Schultz gave a little giggle. He walked back to the centre of the room. 'Get some drinks, Joe. Cubitt's coming.'

'Him?' The boy sounded contemptuous. 'What's he want?'

'Get the drinks, Joe, and don't talk so much.'

Lorelli lay back on the divan, her eyes smouldering and her fingers gently touching her chin. 'Maestro is rough tonight. He hurt me.'

'Great lovers often hurt those they love,' Schultz said. 'I read it somewhere, so it must be true.' He went over to a large vase of flowers and began to caress the petals of a rose.

There was a long, heavy silence. Lorelli watched Schultz closely. 'There is something wrong,' she said. 'I feel you are angry.'

'When Cubitt has gone,' he said, looking at her across the scent of the rose. The front door bell rang insistently.

'That'll be Cubitt,' Schultz said. 'Let him in, will you, my pigeon?'

'I'll go,' Joe said, putting down the glasses he had just brought in.

'You stay here.' Schultz looked at Lorelli. 'Let him in.'

She shrugged, pulled her skimpy dress over her knees and got up. Schultz watched her walk across the room and through the door.

Lorelli opened the front door.

The short, thickset man from the Chez Paree was standing on the step. He tipped his hat when he saw her. 'Hello,' he said, looking with X-ray eyes. 'Schultz in?'

Lorelli stood aside. 'Come in. Wipe your boots, and don't forget to keep your hands to yourself.'

Cubitt grinned. 'I don't play with dynamite,' he said, stepping round her cautiously. The last time he had tried to make a pass at her, he had nearly lost an eye. 'I'm here on business.'

'Well, go in. He's waiting. I don't care why you're here so long as I'm not mixed up in it.'

Cubitt walked into the sitting room and nodded to Schultz. 'Here I am, boss,' he said.

Lorelli slid into the room, went over to the divan and sat down.

Cubitt looked at her knees and wiped his nose with his forefinger. It beat

him why Lorelli stood Schultz.

‘Have a drink, Cubitt?’ Schultz said, seeing his interest in Lorelli and liking it. He knew he wouldn’t get anywhere with Lorelli and it tickled his vanity.

Cubitt went over and mixed himself a highball. He glanced over at the other two. ‘Ain’t you drinking?’ Schultz shook his head. ‘Not just yet,’ he said. ‘So Bellman had a scare?’

Cubitt nodded. ‘It was Korris. He nearly got him.’

‘Korris,’ Schultz repeated. ‘Are you sure?’

Cubitt nodded. ‘He came in the back way and asked if Duke was with Bellman. When I said he was . . .’

‘Duke?’ Schultz leaned forward. ‘What do you mean?’

Cubitt frowned. ‘I’m telling you, ain’t I?’ he said, a little impatiently. ‘Duke was with Bellman.’

‘Why didn’t you say so before? What did he want?’

Cubitt shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I tried to listen but Bellman didn’t give me a chance.’

While they were talking, Lorelli sat still. Her eyes were anxious. Joe, who leaned against the wall, his eyes on Cubitt, looked bored. He hadn’t moved or spoken since Cubitt came in.

‘Go on,’ Schultz said, in a flat voice.

‘When I told Korris that Duke was with Bellman he went straight up. I heard a couple of shots and then Korris comes running down with whisky over his front, and dripping off his spectacles. He shot past me into the street and drove off like a bat out of hell.’

‘Bellman?’

Cubitt shook his head. ‘He’s all right,’ he said, regretfully. ‘Duke spoilt Korris’s aim. They know who did it. Kells got the number of Korris’s car.’

Schultz closed his eyes. ‘I want to think,’ he said, and a long silence fell on the room.

Cubitt stood watching Schultz uneasily, shifting his eyes to Lorelli and Joe and then back to Schultz.

Lorelli and Joe might have been dead. They remained still, hardly seeming to breathe.

Then Schultz sighed and opened his eyes. ‘Okay, Cubitt,’ he said, fumbling in his pocket. ‘Keep your peepers open. I want to hear everything

that goes on up there.' He pulled out a roll of greenbacks and peeled off several. He gave them to Cubitt who grinned at him.

'I'll watch it, boss,' he said, tipping his hat. 'Anything else I can do?'

Schultz waved him away. 'No, but watch out. Don't talk, just watch out and phone me if anything happens.'

'I'll do that,' Cubitt returned. 'Good night, boss.'

'Wait,' Schultz pointed at Joe, 'he'll drive you back.'

Cubitt stared. 'Me?' he said, as if he could hardly believe his ears.

Schultz nodded. 'Something may have happened while you've been over here. Check up and tell Joe.' He looked at Joe sleepily. 'Go with him. Hang around until he's had a chance to look round and then come back.'

Joe said sullenly, 'It's late.'

'It'll be later still when you come back,' Schultz returned. 'Beat it.'

Cubitt and Joe went out of the room.

Lorelli fussed her curly, blue-black hair with her finger ends. 'What did Korris want to shoot at Bellman for?'

Schultz didn't say anything. He sat with his head on one side listening for the sound of the car. He didn't move or say anything until the engine started, the gears engaged and the roar of acceleration had died away. Then he looked over at Lorelli and smiled.

Lorelli had never seen him look quite like this before. He frightened her. She stood up and stretched. 'I think I'll go to bed,' she said, patting her mouth to conceal a nervous yawn. 'Is Maestro sitting up?'

'So Harry Duke went to see Bellman,' Schultz said, taking his glass and moving to the sideboard. He began to mix himself a stiff drink.

Lorelli watched him and edged towards the door.

'I think I'm angry with you,' Schultz said, softly. He squirted soda into his glass. 'I think I'm very angry with you.'

'What have I done?' Lorelli asked, her hand on the door handle.

Schultz sipped his whisky and looked at her. His eyes rested on her face for a second and then shifted to her hand. He beckoned to her. 'Come here,' he said, gently. 'I want you.'

Lorelli remained where she was. Her hand turned the handle and the door opened an inch. She was ready for flight.

Schultz laughed. It was a low rumble of sound like thunder in his belly.

‘All right. Stay where you are.’ He waddled over to his armchair and sat down. ‘But I want to talk to you.’ He drank half the whisky and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘You telephoned Harry Duke, didn’t you?’

Her eyes opened. ‘I did?’ she repeated. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘You’re a pretty little liar.’ Schultz seemed to have recovered his good humour. ‘But you see Duke told me.’

Lorelli said, ‘Why should I telephone him and about what?’

‘You’ve made things awkward for me,’ Schultz went on, as if she hadn’t spoken. ‘You’ve made Duke curious. That’s bad. Duke can’t keep out of anything. He never could.’ He finished his whisky and sat holding the glass, smiling at her. Then he pushed his great legs out and sat lower in the chair. ‘Duke’s the kind of fella a girl like you would fall for. I don’t know why, but there it is. Some people might think it odd a guy like me should bother with orchids. It’s just the way it is. You should never have spoken to Duke. Of course, I’m to blame, I shouldn’t have told you about Bellman, but then I was crazy to trust you.’ He sat forward abruptly. ‘Why did you tip him off, you little fool?’ he snarled, his rage burning in his eyes. ‘I could have got his mind off Bellman.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Lorelli said, with a kind of childlike obstinacy. ‘I don’t remember what you said about Bellman. You’re just trying to frighten me.’

Schultz forced the anger out of his eyes. He wanted to take her by her thick curls and smash her head against the wall. But he had to make sure.

‘I was forgetting,’ he said, slowly, turning the glass idly in his hand, ‘you don’t listen to what I say, do you?’ He shook his head and eased himself forward slowly in his chair.

Lorelli watched him nervously. ‘I don’t like your mood tonight, Maestro. I’m going to bed.’ She jerked the door wide.

‘Yes,’ Schultz returned, his body moving forward in his chair. ‘You’ll sleep well too, my pigeon,’ and he threw his glass at her viciously.

She saw the flash as the glass caught the light and she ducked. But Schultz had acted too fast. The glass caught her between the eyes and she stumbled, a high-pitched scream of fear in her throat. Then she found herself on her hands and knees with lights exploding inside her head.

Schultz heaved himself out of his chair with incredible swiftness and

reached her before she could clear her head. She was still on her hands and knees, her head hanging low, as he came up.

She felt him close to her and she whimpered; dragging at her fluttering muscles, she tried to get away from him.

He knelt down beside her and taking her by the scruff of her neck he shook her until her teeth rattled. 'Why did you telephone Duke?' he snarled.

'I wanted to keep him out of this,' she whimpered, trying to get away. 'Let me go, you're hurting.'

He shook her again. 'You little fool! That's the way to push him into it and I believe you knew it! You wanted Duke in this, didn't you? You wanted to make things difficult for me?'

'No . . . no!' she wailed. 'Let me go! I didn't mean anything! You said that you'd kill him if he interfered and I thought I'd stop it by phoning him.'

Schultz's face set in furious, vindictive mask. He hit her on the back of her neck with the side of his hand. It was a violent, chopping blow that drove her to the floor senseless.

Schultz stood over her, trembling with rage. He moved his great foot as if he wanted to kick her, then he drew back. He took his handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face and hands.

Walking a little unsteadily, he crossed the room, collected his glass and poured himself out a stiff drink. Then he stood thinking.

Lorelli had been living with him for six months now. She amused him and he would miss her. But there was too much on the ball to bother with that. It was a pity, but he knew that he'd have to make more sacrifices before he got what he finally wanted. Lorelli was only the beginning.

He decided to get rid of her before Joe came back. He wasn't sure of the boy. He didn't know whether he and Lorelli meant anything to each other. That was the worst of being old and fat. He never knew whether Lorelli was cheating or not.

He went into the kitchen and selected a short length of rope. He made a running loop in the rope and waddled back again. He didn't like doing this job, but there was nothing else he could do. She was becoming dangerous and if he didn't do something, he'd only be running into trouble himself.

She still lay flat on the floor and he knelt down stiffly beside her. He felt the sweat running down his back and his breath was coming in great labouring gasps. He tried to control himself, but in his way, he was fond of

her. It shocked him to think that he was going to do this without giving her any chance.

He slipped the noose round her neck and gently pulled it tight. Then he placed his fat knee squarely on her shoulders and gathered the loose end of the rope in his hands.

Harry Duke, sitting on the window sill, cleared his throat. 'I say, Paul,' he said, 'be careful what you're doing. If you want to alter the shape of her neck, why not send her to a plastic surgeon?'

Schultz knelt there staring at him. His saucer-like eyes were flecked with red.

SEVEN

It was almost twenty minutes before Clare came out of the Ladies' room.

Peter had begun to wonder if she had slipped out without him seeing her and had gone home.

The waiter had hovered around looking worried, seeing first Clare go and then Duke. Peter beckoned him and cancelled one of the dinners.

'Will the lady be coming back, sir?' the waiter asked.

'Yes. Just wait until you see her, then bring the order quickly. Don't keep us hanging around, we may want to leave in a hurry.'

The waiter looked at him, considered he didn't look crazy and went away.

Just then Peter saw Clare come out and look over. She wasn't looking too happy, Peter thought uneasily. He didn't like the way her lips compressed when she saw he was alone. Somehow, he felt the evening wasn't going to be a success.

She came over and sat down.

'Harry had to go. He remembered a date. That's like Harry. Always forgetting something or other,' Peter said, smiling at her anxiously.

'Oh,' she said, and looked past him at the four-piece band that was playing across the room.

The waiter came up just then with a loaded tray and began to serve their dinner.

'What shall we drink, Clare?' Peter said, picking up the wine list.

She hesitated, then she said, 'No, nothing. I've got a bit of a headache.'

The waiter grimaced to himself. Women were always the same. They'd either ask for some brand of champagne he didn't keep or else would go on the waggon.

'Come on, Clare, it'll cheer you up,' Peter said. 'Let's have some white wine. It'll take your headache away.'

'I can recommend the 156,' the waiter said, hopefully, pointing with his pencil.

Clare shook her head. An obstinate look came into her eyes. 'No. I don't want any, thank you. And I don't want cheering up either.'

Peter took one quick look at her tired, unhappy face and he waved the

waiter away. 'Okay, sweetheart,' he said. 'Let's eat. I know how you feel.'

'Do you?' Clare said, sharply. 'I don't think you do, Peter.'

He put his knife and fork down and stared at her. 'What's the matter, Clare?' he said. 'Have I annoyed you?'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Peter, I'm tired and I just don't feel like all this. I'm sorry I'm such a bore.' She looked as if she were going to cry.

'But Clare. . .' he began.

Her mouth twitched suddenly, then she jumped up and went quickly out of the restaurant.

Peter was so astonished that he sat gaping after her, unconscious of the curious looks that came from all parts of the room.

The waiter was at his elbow with the check. 'Something wrong with the dinner?' he asked in an injured voice.

Peter became aware of the people staring and the waiter. 'Here, let me get out of this,' he said, shoving some money into the waiter's hand. 'I guess my friend isn't well.'

He went out and stood looking up and down the street, completely bewildered.

The commissionaire touched his cap. 'Your car's over the way, sir,' he said. 'The lady's just gone over.'

Peter gave him some small change and then crossed the street.

He found Clare curled up in the far seat, crying. He stood hesitating, feeling that he wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but scared that he might make things worse. He lit a cigarette and stood near the car, feeling low.

'It's all right, Peter,' Clare said, trying to steady her voice. 'What's the matter, darling?' He opened the car door and got in beside her.

'I feel so low I don't know what to do.'

'You're tired. I'll take you home. A good sleep's what you want.' He wanted to put his arm round her, but he still wasn't sure.

She held her handkerchief to her eyes and shook her head. 'Let's drive somewhere, Peter,' she said. 'I want to feel the air on my face. It's so hot. Let the windscreen down, will you?'

He fixed the windscreen and started the engine. 'Where shall we go?' he said.

'Oh, I don't care - anywhere.'

He couldn't understand why she was like this, but he turned the car and began to drive towards Fairview. She didn't say anything for a long time. She had stopped crying and she sat away from him with the hot wind in her hair, staring at the dancing pools of light from the headlamps.

Peter had never seen her in a mood like this before. It made him uneasy. Usually, she was so self-possessed and confident.

'I'm sorry about tonight, Peter,' she said, suddenly. 'It's just that I'm nervy and the heat. Do you mind most awfully?'

'That's all right,' he said, dropping one hand from the wheel and squeezing hers gently. There was an answering pressure. 'I get low myself sometimes. Only, it's not a bit like you, is it?'

'I'm afraid it is,' she said, 'only this is the first time I've let myself go in public. I suppose I'm not right yet after my illness.'

'You work too hard.' He eased up on the accelerator and pressed on the brake. The car stopped by the side of the road. He turned in his seat. 'Listen, Clare, why don't you do the sensible thing? Give all this up and let's get married.' He took her in his arms and kissed her. She didn't resist, but her lips were cold and impersonal and his kiss didn't mean a thing. 'Darling, I do love you so,' he said, stroking her hair. 'Can't you make up your mind? I'll make you happy. I'll do anything for you.'

She pushed him gently away. 'It's no good, Peter,' she said, 'I'm not in the mood tonight. Will you go on?'

'What do you mean?' he demanded, making no effort to stem his rising anger. 'In the mood? I'm not flirting with you, Clare. I'm asking you to marry me. You don't have to be in the mood for that. You either love me or you don't.'

She suddenly put her hands on his arms and gripped his muscles tightly. Her strong fingers hurt.

'Please don't, Peter,' she said, in a desperate sort of way. 'I couldn't bear to quarrel with you. You don't understand. You don't know how unsure I am.'

He still felt a flicker of anger and he took her hands away. 'I can't go on like this,' he said, stubbornly. 'I've been waiting and waiting and I never seem to get anywhere. You either love me or you don't. If you don't, then perhaps we'd better not meet anymore.'

'Of course, I love you,' Clare said. 'I think you're a kind, lovely person

and please don't talk about not meeting anymore.'

'Then if you love me, why can't we be married?' he persisted, frowning at her.

'Don't look like that, Peter. In another minute we'll be strangers.' She slid into his arms and held him tightly. 'Oh, Peter, I do love you, but don't rush me. I'm so unsound. I don't know where I am going and I don't ever want to hurt you. Don't you see? It's because I don't ever want to hurt you that I hesitate.'

They held each other for a long time. Distant houses were now black silhouettes as the lights were turned out and the people went to bed.

He said at last, 'All right, Clare, we won't talk about it for a while. I'm not going to worry you. I wish we could go away together. I wish we could take this old car and a couple of suitcases and go south for a month. It'd do you good.'

She twisted in the seat, so that her shoulder and head were against him. 'Perhaps one day,' she said. 'It would be fun, wouldn't it?' There was a pause, and then she said, 'Tell me about Harry Duke. How long have you known him?'

The thought entered his head that Harry Duke meant something to her. He remembered how quiet she had been when they first met. He remembered her embarrassment when he had teased her about the telephone number. He remembered her disappointment when she saw that Harry had gone away. And remembering all these little points and knowing the strength of Harry Duke, his heart sank suddenly.

When he came to think of it, he could see Clare with Harry. They'd look right. They were both determined, both good at their jobs, both ambitious.

He said, 'You liked Harry, didn't you?'

'I don't know,' she said guardedly. 'I hardly spoke to him.'

'Are you glad you met him?'

'Well, he is a little unusual, isn't he? But, I suppose he knows lots of girls.'

Peter took out his cigarette case and lit a cigarette miserably. 'He doesn't have a regular,' he said, trying to be casual. 'Girls fall for him all right. Sometimes he takes them up, sometimes he doesn't. But if he does, he drops them again after a while. I'm sorry for the girl who falls for Harry.'

There was a long silence, then Clare patted his hand, 'You think I might be one of those girls, don't you, Peter?'

‘Why, of course not,’ Peter said, feeling blood mounting to his face. ‘What on earth do you mean?’

She laughed quietly. ‘Oh, I know you better than you know yourself,’ she returned. ‘But, you don’t have to worry. Harry Duke wouldn’t do for me and I wouldn’t do for Harry Duke. You see, Peter, I’ve lived too long among men like that. Newspapermen, gamblers and businessmen. I’m so sick of their hardness. I’m so tired of their eternal quest for money, their willingness to sacrifice everything to get what they want. One time, I could have fallen for Harry Duke, but not now. I’m like Fairview. All I want is to be left alone to stagnate in the little happiness that’s left to me.’

Peter pulled her closer to him. ‘But you don’t know Harry,’ he said. ‘He’s not like that. He’d be swell to you as he’s been swell to me. Oh, I know he’s tough and hard and wild, but not when he’s fond of someone. He’s not like that then.’

‘Are you afraid he’d take me away?’ Clare looked up at him and smiled, but her eyes were worried.

‘I don’t know, but I’ll find out,’ Peter said. ‘I’ll know if he’s interested in you or not.’

She gave a little shiver. ‘Let’s go home now, Peter. Will you forgive me for spoiling your evening?’

‘You haven’t.’ He started the engine. ‘You’ve made me happy. Haven’t you told me that you love me?’

‘You do believe me, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do. I’m beginning to think you’re a bit of a problem for all that.’

‘Do you mind?’

‘No, I suppose not. Life would be very dull if I could get everything I wanted. But I want you, darling, when you feel less low, I’m going to begin a siege. Now I know how you feel about me, I’m going to pester you until you do marry me.’

When they reached Clare’s little bungalow, Peter switched off the engine and looked down at her. ‘Well, here we are. What shall I do - walk home or bring the car over tomorrow night?’

‘You’d better come in, Peter.’ There was something in her voice that suddenly stirred his blood.

‘It’s late,’ he said. ‘I’ve got a full day tomorrow. I’ll get back, I think.’

‘I mean you needn’t go back tonight,’ she said, in a small voice.

He put his hand on hers. ‘You don’t really mean that, do you?’ he said, feeling his heart beating unevenly.

‘Of course,’ she slid her arms round him, ‘I can’t give you much, Peter, and you’ve been so patient.’

Just for a brief second, it had sounded so marvellous, then when she said about being patient it all dissolved into ashes.

He shook his head. ‘No, Clare,’ he said, ‘go in and get yourself some sleep. You’re a darling and I love you, but I’m waiting.’

She slid quickly out of the car. ‘Good night, Peter,’ she said. ‘I didn’t want to make things difficult. You’re right, of course. I think you’re always right, my dear.’

She ran up the little path and disappeared into the shadow of the house. He heard her open the door and then close it sharply behind her.

EIGHT

Without taking his eyes off Schultz, Harry Duke slid into the room. He put his hand behind him and pushed down the window and adjusted the blind.

Schultz seemed paralysed. He knelt there, his knee still pinning Lorelli flat on the floor, and slack rope still in his thick fingers. Only his eyes were alive and they regarded Duke murderously.

Duke had opened his coat so that Schultz could see the leather gun holster that was strapped under his arm. He was careful not to take his eyes off Schultz. He knew that the fat man could move very quickly when he wanted to.

‘I hope I ain’t in the way,’ he said, leaning against the wall. ‘Anyone but me would think you were going to kill that girl.’

Schultz still knelt there blinking at him without saying anything.

Duke said softly, ‘Get away from her, will you?’

Schultz suddenly expelled a little hiss of breath through his teeth and let the rope slip out of his fingers. He stood up slowly and passed his hand over his fat, sweating face. ‘Hello, Harry,’ he said, in a strangled voice. ‘You quite startled me.’

‘Sorry about that,’ Duke returned, still watching him closely. ‘The next time I’ll give you a ring and let you know I’m coming.’

Schultz waddled unsteadily across the room and refilled his glass. He drank the whisky greedily, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then sank down slowly in his armchair. He sat looking at Duke, his hands shaking and his saucer-like eyes blinking.

Duke moved farther into the room. ‘Look, Paul,’ he said. ‘Don’t do anything dumb. I mean, don’t try and pull a gun or start anything. I’ve had more practice than you and it wouldn’t mean a great deal if I killed you.’

Schultz’s face grimaced into a lopsided grin. ‘I ain’t tired of life yet,’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t start anything.’

‘Just thought I’d tell you,’ Duke said. ‘You were being dumb just now,’ and he looked down at Lorelli. ‘You were being very dumb. What did she do to annoy you?’

The fat man shifted his eyes and said nothing.

Lorelli gave a little sigh and moved uneasily.

‘Maybe I’d better take that necktie off before she wakes up,’ Duke said, kneeling down beside her. ‘It’d be a shock for her if she found she had so nearly handed in her pail.’

‘I wasn’t going to kill her,’ Schultz said, hastily, ‘I just wanted to scare her.’

‘You’re a thorough sort of guy, Paul. Nice ideas you’ve got locked up in that skull of yours.’ Duke gently levered the noose loose from Lorelli’s neck and then slipped it over her head. He worked with his left hand only. His right hand rested on his knee.

He tossed the rope across the room and then turned Lorelli gently over on her back. As he was doing this, Schultz’s hand suddenly jerked behind him. His heavy automatic was halfway from his hip pocket when he found himself staring down the barrel of a .38 which Duke produced from nowhere.

‘More practice, Paul,’ Harry Duke said, evenly. ‘Take your hand from behind you very slowly and drop that gun.’

Schultz snarled at him, but the automatic fell on the floor with a little thud.

‘Kick it over here,’ Duke went on, ‘I’ve a good mind to smack you for that, Paul. What’s the matter with you? Gone crazy or are you just tired of life?’

He picked up Schultz’s automatic as it slid over to him and put it in his pocket.

Schultz suddenly relaxed in his chair with a little shrug. ‘It’s a pity you interfered Harry,’ he said. ‘You’re going to upset a lot of people and in the end you’ll be sorry. You’ve only won the first round. There’s a lot of rounds left.’

Duke was looking down at Lorelli curiously. ‘Now, where have I seen her before?’ he asked. ‘Quite a looker, ain’t she? Well, I’m glad I came along when I did. You shouldn’t waste women like this, Paul. There are other guys who could do with ‘em, you know.’

Lorelli gave a little whimper, opened her eyes and put her hand to the back of her neck with a grimace of pain. Then she saw Harry Duke and she sat up on her elbow, her smoky, black eyes opened wide.

‘Take it easy,’ Duke said. ‘We’re all friends together and there’s nothing to be scared about.’

Lorelli looked from him to Schultz and her eyes snapped furiously. She got

unsteadily to her feet, holding her bruised forehead. Then she began calling Schultz names. The range of her language shocked Duke.

He said, 'Don't get your suspenders in a knot, sister. Paul only meant to scare you. He told me so.'

'If I had a gun, I'd make a hole in the fat swab,' Lorelli screamed. 'He threw a glass at me. He never gave me a chance.' She ran over to Schultz and stood over him. 'You'll pay for this. You'll be sorry you started something with me, you this and that and so and so.'

Harry Duke looked pained. 'I hope you didn't teach her those names, Paul,' he said. 'She's embarrassing me.'

Schultz suddenly moved and smacked Lorelli's face with the flat of his hand. She reeled back, screaming in a high-pitched wail.

The door burst open and Joe rushed in. He came to a full stop when he saw Duke and threw up his hands. His face went the colour of old ivory.

'It's all right, Joe,' Duke said, amiably. 'Don't stand on ceremony. This can be any one's fight by the look of it.'

Joe lowered his hands slowly and then looked across at Schultz who sat in a heap like a malevolent toad.

Lorelli picked up the poker from the fireplace and suddenly rushed at Schultz. There was a look of vicious fury on her face. As she swept past Duke, he kicked her legs from under her and she went over with a thud that shook the room.

Duke nodded to the poker and Joe hastily picked it up. Lorelli sat up, sobbing with rage.

'We'd better break this party up,' Duke said. 'Otherwise someone's going to get hurt.' He grabbed at Lorelli as she scrambled to her feet and frustrated another attack on Schultz. He held her tightly against his side, with his arm round her, holding her wrist. 'Now, you've got to behave,' he said, 'or I'll leave you and then you might get into an awful lot of trouble.'

She struggled for a moment, then began to calm down.

Still holding her, Duke looked at Schultz. 'Well, Paul,' he said, 'I guess I'll drift. You won't miss this little girl, will you? For your own safety I think I'd better take her along with me.'

A look of alarm sprang into Schultz's eyes. 'Wait,' he said, sitting forward in his chair. 'She doesn't want to leave me.'

'Doesn't she?' Duke was amused. He looked down at Lorelli. 'What do

you say about that?’

Before she could answer, Schultz went on quickly, ‘Let me talk to her alone, Harry. She’s only a child. She doesn’t understand.’

‘They certainly rear tough children in this district,’ Duke said. ‘And I don’t think you’d better see her alone, Paul. You might start trying on neckties again.’

Lorelli said, ‘I’m through with you, you fat heel. I hope the next time I see you, you’ll be filling a hole in the ground.’

‘Well, there can’t be any mistake about that, Paul,’ Duke said. ‘Will you come along with me, or do you want to go someplace on your own?’ he went on to Lorelli.

She glanced up at him, chewing her full underlip, her eyes still bright with anger. ‘I’ll come with you,’ she said, without hesitation.

‘You certainly know how to make up your mind,’ Duke returned, releasing her. ‘Sorry, Paul, but I always do what I’m told when I’m told by a telling looking tootz.’

Schultz gripped the arms of his chair. ‘Don’t be a fool, Lorelli,’ he said. ‘You’re only heading for trouble. You stay here. I’ll see you right. You know what I mean.’

Lorelli sneered at him. ‘Go bowl a hoop,’ she said, then to Duke, ‘Well, what are we waiting for?’

Duke moved towards the door, circling so that he could watch Schultz and Joe all the time.

Schultz seemed suddenly to lose control of himself. He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes snapping fire, and his great face turning mauve with fury. ‘You talk and you’ll be sorry,’ he shouted at Lorelli. ‘Do you hear? That’s all he wants you for . . . to make you talk. I know Duke. He picks up women and drops them when he’s through with them. You silly little fool! You’re throwing away any chance you’ve got of making money by going with him.’

‘Watch your blood pressure, Paul,’ Duke advised. ‘There’s no need for us to fall out. I’m just taking the girl some place where you can’t worry her. I’ll see you in the morning and we’ll talk it over. So long, Paul.’

Schultz took no notice of him. He shook a quivering finger at Lorelli. ‘If you open your trap, I’ll find you. I don’t care where you hide, I’ll find you and I’ll fix you and you’ll be sorry.’

Lorelli laughed in his face. ‘You can’t scare me,’ she said. ‘Look at my

protection,' and linking her arm in Duke's, she went out of the room.

The moment they were outside in the street, Duke broke into a run. 'Come on, baby,' he said, 'I don't want Paul to help me on my way with a shotgun.'

'Fancy being scared of him,' Lorelli said, contemptuously, running with difficulty because of her tight dress. 'Hey, wait a moment, will you?'

Duke put his hand under her arm and forced her on. There came a faint phut behind them and a bullet whined past their heads, flattening against a lamp post.

Lorelli gave a little squeal, jerked up her skirts and leapt forward like a deer. She outpaced Duke, who began to laugh.

'Who's scared now?' he panted. He increased his length, caught up with her and grabbed her arm. 'Over this way.'

Another phut sounded and this time the bullet zipped between their heads. Lorelli caught her breath in a sob and covered the next ten yards in two jumps.

'I didn't think Paul could shoot so well,' Duke said, bundling Lorelli head first into his car. He scrambled in beside her, started the engine and accelerated violently. An angry wasp sang past the windscreen as the car gathered speed. In another second, the houses on each side of the street changed into a blurred ribbon as the needle of the speedometer flicked to sixty miles an hour.

'That's done me a power of good,' Duke said, leaning back, with his hands resting lightly on the wheel. 'My liver wanted a little jolt and, by golly, it got it.'

Lorelli was examining her stockings under the light from the dashboard. She muttered angrily when she saw that she had driven her knees through both of them.

'I bet this is the first shooting Bentonville's ever had,' Duke said, keeping the car travelling at a high speed. 'I don't think Paul likes us anymore.'

Lorelli snorted. She sat still for a few minutes and then she said, 'So you're Harry Duke?'

'Mrs. Duke's one and only son. And while we're on the subject where have I seen you before?'

'Oh, I get around,' Lorelli said, airily. 'My name is Lorelli. Just Lorelli. Not Lorelli Montgomery or Lorelli Spewack. Just Lorelli.'

'I see,' he said, gravely. 'Any particular reason, or isn't it my business?'

‘There are plenty of reasons,’ Lorelli returned. ‘One of them is that I didn’t have any parents.’

‘That’s interesting,’ Duke said, swinging the car on to the main road. ‘You came out of an egg, I suppose?’

‘Something like that,’ Lorelli admitted. ‘I can’t remember the exact details, but it was on those lines.’

‘How would you like a nice cup of coffee and a chicken sandwich?’

‘What, now?’

‘This very second,’ Duke returned, crowding on brakes and stopping the car outside an all-night drug store.

‘I’d like that very much,’ Lorelli returned, climbing out of the car. ‘Do you mind if I have a ryvita instead of a sandwich? I’ve got to watch my figure.’

‘I should have thought that wasn’t necessary. You could get lots of guys to watch it for you.’

They went into the drug store which was deserted except for a sleepy assistant who was dozing at the end of the counter. He looked up with a start and then smiled. ‘You’re late, Mr. Duke,’ he said, chattily, then he glanced at Lorelli and admiration

came into his eyes. ‘What’ll you have?’

Duke waved to Lorelli who ordered a ryvita with tomatoes and a coffee. Duke ordered a club sandwich.

While they waited, Lorelli again muttered over her stockings. ‘What am I going to do?’ she demanded, fiercely. ‘I can’t go around in these.’

‘That’s all you women think about,’ Duke said, yawning. He was beginning to feel tired. ‘Hey, Jos, can you sell the lady a pair of silk stockings?’

The assistant brought the sandwiches. ‘Sure, I’ll sell her anything.’

‘She doesn’t want anything, she just wants a pair of silk stockings.’

The assistant nodded. ‘What size, lady?’

Lorelli told him and he came back with a box of assorted shades. ‘Help yourself, lady,’ he said, putting the box on the counter.

‘Okay, Jos, leave ‘em there,’ Duke said. ‘And scram. I’m in conference with this young woman.’

Jos gave what he thought was a leer and took himself off to the far end of the bar.

Lorelli poked at the stockings with one finger while she devoured the

ryvita. She kept moving her head, frowning as she felt the muscles in her neck stiffening.

‘Can we pursue your autobiography?’ Duke said, with his mouth full.

Lorelli shook her head. ‘I’m not talking about myself,’ she said. ‘Anyway, not tonight. In the morning, I might consider revealing my past, but tonight I’m the mystery woman.’

Duke stirred his coffee thoughtfully. ‘Well, all right,’ he said, ‘you’ll have to be a little more helpful tomorrow. That is, if you want me to help *you*. Haven’t I seen you in Paul’s office sometime?’

She nodded. ‘Several times,’ she said. ‘I suppose your mind’s full of business. Otherwise you’d remember me.’

Duke shook his head. ‘It isn’t that,’ he said. ‘I make it a rule not to be interested in another guy’s girl. What did you pick on Paul for?’

Lorelli’s face clouded. ‘That’s all for tonight. Station X closing down,’ and she busied herself with the sliced tomatoes. Then she said, ‘I want somewhere to sleep.’

‘You have no money, no clothes and a figure that wants watching. Quite a problem, ain’t you?’

‘I’ll take care of my figure, you can take care of the other things.’

Duke thanked her.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was just after two o’clock.

‘Listen,’ Duke said, gently. ‘Didn’t you telephone me this evening and tell me to leave Bellman alone?’

‘Did I?’ Her big, black eyes went suddenly blank. ‘I might have. I telephone so many people.’

‘Bellman interests me,’ Duke went on, sipping his coffee. ‘Not that I like the guy. I wouldn’t like you to think he means anything to me. He just interests me. Maybe you know something about him.’

Lorelli nodded. She wiped her fingers on the skirt of her dress and began to turn the stockings over carefully. ‘I know lots of things,’ she said.

‘Tell me,’ Duke urged. ‘Let me be your father confessor.’

‘I never had a father,’ she returned, pulling out a pair of flesh coloured stockings and examining them for flaws, ‘I wouldn’t know what to do with one now.’

‘You don’t have to do anything. I’d do all that’s necessary.’

‘I believe you would,’ she returned, slipping the catches on her suspenders

and unpeeling the torn stockings.

He glanced away and concentrated on his coffee. The assistant, however, leaned over the counter to watch Lorelli with simple interest.

She glanced up and caught him at it. 'Take your eyes off me,' she said, 'or I'll cut your lights out.'

The assistant jerked back so quickly he upset a jar of molasses.

'What a simple child of nature you are,' Duke said with a grim little smile. 'Never mind, Jos,' he went on to the assistant, 'rub it in your hair. From the look of it, it'd make a swell dressing.'

When Lorelli had changed her stockings, she stretched and yawned. 'I could do with a bed,' she said. 'I've got a pain in the neck and a head like hell. Haven't you got any heart?'

'Sure,' Duke returned, 'but I'm rather at loss to know what to do with you. I don't want to take you to my apartment. That would lead to one thing and another which I want to avoid.'

She looked surprised. 'Do you?' she said. 'You don't have to worry about me. You won't find me fussy.'

'I didn't think you would be for one moment,' Duke returned. 'But, odd as it may seem, I am extraordinarily fussy myself.'

She glared at him. 'I like your nerve,' she said, suddenly becoming angry. 'If you don't think I'm good enough for you. . .'

'It is not that at all,' Duke said, hastily. 'It's whether you're bad enough for me.'

Lorelli was so surprised, she didn't know what to say.

'On the other hand, I think Paul might try to find you and I wouldn't like to think of you alone and unprotected. So, I think we'll wake up my old friend Peter Cullen and get him to chaperon us.'

'Do you think that would be a good idea?' she asked, her face falling. 'I thought it might be nice to go off alone and get acquainted.'

Duke shook his head. 'I've been very strictly brought up,' he said, and went over and shut himself in with a telephone.

While she waited, Lorelli ordered another cup of coffee. She smiled at Jos when he brought it to her, but he wasn't interested anymore. A jar of molasses can be a headache when it spreads itself over a floor. She had given him quite enough work for one evening. He slapped down the coffee, took away the box of stockings and went back to his cleaning.

Duke came back, 'It's all fixed,' he said. 'Finish your coffee and let's go.'

Lorelli touched her neck tenderly. 'I'm going to have a stiff neck tomorrow,' she said. 'The fat beast hit me.'

'Well, don't bear malice,' Duke said. 'Maybe you aggravated him.'

She finished her coffee and slid off the stool. 'You'll have to stake me,' she said, 'I've no money.'

'That's all right,' he said, taking out some small change. 'Whenever I run into a dame I begin spending money. That's what keeps trade on the move.'

Out in the street, they got into the car and drove rapidly to Peter Cullen's apartment.

They found him still dressed, looking a little heavy eyed.

'Come in,' he said, looking at Lorelli curiously.

'This is Pete Cullen,' Duke said to Lorelli. 'He's a nice guy, so don't say anything that'd shock him. Pete, this is Lorelli. Not Lorelli Montgomery, nor Lorelli Spewack, but just Lorelli. She was hatched out of an egg.'

Peter blinked, smiled at Lorelli and stood staring, a trifle embarrassed.

'The idea, Pete,' Duke said, smoothly, 'is for this young woman to have your bed and you and me to sleep in chairs. Not perhaps a good arrangement, but in the long run, you'll be glad that you cooperated.'

'I don't want to take this guy's bed,' Lorelli protested, 'I can sleep on the floor.'

Duke took her firmly by her arm and pushed her into Peter's bedroom. 'Go to bed,' he said. 'Tomorrow we'll have a nice little chat all about what you want and what you don't want.' He closed the door behind her.

Peter sank wearily into an armchair. 'I suppose you know what you're doing,' he said. 'I'm hanged if I do, but if one of us knows, I suppose it's all right.'

Duke took the other armchair. He stretched out and yawned. 'I'll tell you all about it tomorrow morning,' he said. 'Do you mind if I have a little sleep? I've had a rather strenuous day.'

'What a crust you've got,' Peter said, in disgust. 'You come in here with a strange girl, give her my bed and make no attempt to explain. What am I? A sucker or something?'

'You're a pal,' Duke said, sinking lower in his chair. 'A greathearted pal and I love you.'

'That won't get me very far,' Peter snorted. 'Is that all you're going to tell

me?’

Duke opened one eye and frowned at him. ‘What else do you want to know that I can tell you? Who she is? I’ve no idea. What’s she going to do? I’ve no idea. I tell you I just picked her up; she wants a home and money and I want some peace. It’s easy once you know how,’ and he closed his eyes again.

‘What did you think of Clare?’ Peter asked, watching him closely.

Duke grunted. ‘She’s a nice girl,’ he said. ‘Too good for a dumb heel like you. If you ain’t careful. I’ll steal her from you.’

Peter’s lips tightened. ‘I’ll be awfully careful,’ he said, with such a rasp in his voice that Duke sat up and gaped at him.

‘That sounded as if I’d annoyed you. Don’t you know when I’m kidding?’

‘I know,’ Peter said. ‘All the same I’m going to be careful.’

Duke waved his hands feebly. ‘The guy’s crazy,’ he said. ‘As crazy as a bug,’ and went to sleep immediately.

That was the end of the first day.

The second day went like this.

NINE

Clare Russell came into the Clarion office on the following morning, feeling tired and depressed. She went straight to her room, took off her hat, touched her face with a powder puff and sat down at her desk.

Her mail was spread out neatly, her blotter was snowy and her inkwell was filled. But she didn't feel like work. She pushed the mail away and stared out of the window. The sun was already hot and the streets looked dusty. Fairview wanted rain badly. There was a burnt up, frowsy look about the small, straggly town.

Sitting there, she thought about Harry Duke. Most of the night, she had thought about him. Harry Duke and Peter. Peter and Harry Duke. She had tossed about in the narrow bed, staring into the darkness, remembering all the small details of what had happened. She could see Harry Duke very clearly. She could see his big powerful shoulders, his narrow, dark head and his close-clipped moustache. She could almost feel the power in him.

He would only have to stretch out his hand and she would put hers in his willingly. And she knew that he knew it. That frightened her. She knew that the moment of meeting had done something to both of them. A second before they had been polite strangers but when he had taken her hand, the power in him had gone into her and it was as if they'd known each other for a long time.

It had never happened to her before. She had been in love several times. She had been unhappily in love. She had thought that she was in love with Peter until Harry Duke had taken her hand. She knew she was not in love with Harry Duke, but at the same time, she knew that no other man mattered or would do for her.

So it was all confusing and wretched. Peter was such a nice person; so easily hurt, so willing and generous with his love, offering it to her, like a small boy will offer his last sweet to his favourite friend. She couldn't bear to hurt him, but she knew that if Harry Duke wanted her, there was not much she could do about it, unless she went away. She might do that. It might save a lot of trouble and sadness. But when she seriously thought of leaving Fairview, making new friends, finding new work, the vastness of the

undertaking appalled her. She couldn't do that kind of thing anymore. You had to be young and strong and carefree to throw over your props and start something entirely new.

She remembered what Peter had said about Harry Duke. 'Oh, he's not like that. He'd be swell to you as he's been swell to me. Oh, I know he's tough and hard and wild, but not when he's fond of someone. He's not like that then.'

She believed he would be loyal and that helped her fears. Men were like that if they had a friend who meant something to them. They would leave their women alone. Perhaps that was how it would work out. Harry Duke wouldn't call her. He'd be swell to Peter instead.

The little buzzer on her desk pinged sharply. That meant Sam Trench wanted her. She got up hastily, looked at herself in the mirror, frowned at the blue smudges under her eyes and went into his office.

Sam was lying back in his swivelled chair, his hands resting on a blotter covered with scribbling and telephone numbers. He was smoking his inevitable battered pipe.

'Good morning, Sam,' she said, sitting on the windowsill so that her back was to the light.

Sam looked at her sharply. The move was not lost on him, 'Been on the tiles?' he said, abruptly. 'You're looking done up, my girl. Got to take care of yourself, you know. Time you took a vacation.'

'Oh, I'm all right,' Clare said, shrugging. 'What's the trouble?'

'You were right.' Sam pulled out his handkerchief and began polishing his glasses. 'Timson did buy Pinder's End. I talked to Hill last night and he came clean after persuasion.'

'Timson?' Clare repeated. 'But he was acting for someone, surely?'

'Yes, yes, of course. Some syndicate . . . the Bentonville Land Corporation or some such name. Bellman's behind it. I've checked up. They gave a good price. Quick work, isn't it? Timson had only been in town two or three days.'

'What are they going to do with it now they've got it?' she asked.

'I don't know.' Sam opened a drawer in his desk and rummaged, then he produced a blueprint and spread it on the table. 'Here you are. Pinder's End. It lies on the west side of Fairview, a couple of miles from the centre of the town. Four miles from the factory district. The land is barren, the ten small bungalows are likely to fall down the next time it blows hard, the tenants are

broke, there ain't any drainage and the electricity

doesn't go out there. A first class buy, I should say. Mind you, they've bought it cheap, but I could find a lot of better things to lay the money out on if I had been Timson.'

She walked over to the window and stared down at the busy street below. 'But, why, Sam? Why do they want Pinder's End?'

The old man knocked out his pipe and ran his fingers through his thick hair. 'That imagination of yours is getting to work again,' he said, grinning at her. 'You smell a story, don't you?'

'I do.' Clare swung round.

Sam cocked his head on one side. 'What are you up to?' he demanded. 'You've got something going on in that head of yours and don't you deny it.'

Clare smiled. 'Well, I won't, but it's nothing to do with you.'

'Now don't start anything that'll cause trouble, will you?' he pleaded. 'There's too much trouble these days without looking for it.'

'I'll try very hard,' she said, and slipped out of the room.

She ran into Barnes who was putting on his hat, preparing to go out. 'Heard about Pinder's End?' he asked, pausing. 'To think that double crosser had bought the site and never said a word. I'll cut his heart out when I see him.'

'Where are you going, Al?'

'I'm taking a look at the place. Do you want to come?'

She shook her head. 'No, I've got a phone call to make. While you're out there, take a good look, Al. Have a look at the soil. See if anyone's been digging there recently.'

'What's the idea?' Barnes said, looking puzzled.

'I think I know who has bought the place. They wouldn't sink good money into wasteland. There might be a silver mine or oil or something like that.'

Listen, Angel Skin, you're dreaming. The land around here's been dug over until it's dizzy. There's never been the slightest thing of value found in the soil or anywhere else in the town, come to that.'

She stamped her foot. 'Then why are they buying the place?' she demanded.

Barnes scratched his head. 'Search me, maybe they want someplace to be buried in.'

She gave him a little push. 'Well, go out there and look the place over.'

Find out casually if the tenants have got their notices to quit.’

Barnes went off in a hurry.

Clare shut herself in her office. She opened her bag, hunted through various bills and letters and found the scrap of paper on which Harry Duke had written his telephone number.

As she reached for the telephone she felt her heart beating violently. It was odd that this should be happening, she thought. She was pleased to be able to call him so soon after they had met and she was glad that he had given her his telephone number.

She sat with the telephone receiver against her ear, listening to the burr-burr of the bell, ringing somewhere in a room he used. She tried to visualize the room, but she could only think of steel and leather furniture and glass. She couldn’t see him against any other furniture.

After a delay, she heard the receiver being lifted with a jerk. ‘Yes?’ someone said, abruptly.

‘Is that Mr. Duke?’ she asked.

‘He ain’t in,’ the voice said and rung off.

She sat looking at the telephone, feeling quite sick. She realized then how badly she had wanted to hear Harry Duke’s voice.

TEN

Peter Cullen opened his eyes and blinked round his sitting room. He became aware of stiff muscles and a throbbing headache and he groaned dismally as he sat up.

Harry Duke stirred and blinked at him. 'Hell, ain't it?' he said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. 'What a guy will do for a woman. With all that upholstery on her, we ought to have taken the bed and made her sleep on the floor.'

Peter began taking off his coat and vest. 'Well, she did offer, if you remember,' he said, stretching carefully.

Duke nodded. 'So she did. Now what made me dissuade her? Pete, old son, I'm slipping. I'm getting woman conscious.'

'Toss you for the first bath,' Peter said producing a nickel.

Duke lost. 'Well, get on with it,' he said. 'I'll get some breakfast. I wonder if the chicken's awake yet.' He put his head round the door and stared into the darkness. 'Wake up,' he called. 'I'm getting breakfast and you're last in the bathroom'

There was no answer.

'A heavy sleeper,' Duke said, over his shoulder to Peter. 'That's a thing I never like in a woman. I like 'em to sleep light.'

'What on earth for?' Peter demanded, stripping down to his underwear.

'Who's going to scare burglars away? I sleep heavy myself.'

'Well, go and shake her. Maybe she can cook.'

'Now you *have* said something. I thought that was just gristle between your ears.' Duke fumbled for the switch and turned on the light. 'Wake up, sleepy head,' he called. 'We want some breakfast.' Then he stopped and took a hasty step forward.

Timson was sprawled across the bed, his head thrown back and his hands clenched. He had a big throat wound which glistened in the hard light. The sheets were red and there was blood on the wall, at the head of the bed and on the carpet.

Duke took a deep breath, feeling his skin prickling and his stomach flutter. He walked very cautiously to the bed and touched Timson's hand. It was cold

and clammy like damp clay. Duke guessed he'd been dead for some time.

Treading with care, he went round the room, but could find nothing to catch his attention. There was no sign of Lorelli. Somehow, that didn't surprise him. With Timson dominating the room, it seemed as if Duke had come suddenly into another house, into another world for that matter.

He looked rather hopefully for a weapon but didn't find one. This upset him more than finding Timson. It meant murder. It meant all sorts of complications and, worse, it meant the police.

He stepped to the door again, examined his clothes and shoes carefully for bloodstains, didn't find any, turned out the light and backed into the sitting room. He closed the bedroom door carefully as if it were made of egg shells.

'Why don't you chuck her out of bed?' Peter yelled from the bathroom. 'You ain't scared of her, are you?'

Duke poured himself out a large whisky and drank it slowly. He felt he needed it. Then he wandered into the bathroom.

Peter was under the shower. 'This is terrific,' he said. 'Come on in.'

'I'm coming,' Duke said, feeling the whisky mounting to his head. He began to undress slowly.

Peter climbed out of the bath and dried himself vigorously with a towel. 'I smell whisky,' he said, sniffing. 'Don't tell me you've been drinking already?'

'I was wondering who it was,' Duke said, pulling his shirt over his head. 'I smelt it too.'

Peter stared at him. 'What's the matter? Don't you feel well?'

Duke stepped under the shower. 'I'll tell you in a minute,' he said, turning on the cold tap. He let the icy water run over him, pricking his skin and clearing his head. He stayed there for several minutes and then turned off the shower. He began to towel himself as Peter began to shave.

'We've got a corpse on our hands, Pete,' he said, gloomily. 'A corpse with a nice throat wound.'

Peter nearly cut his own throat. He put his razor down hurriedly. 'I didn't get that,' he said, staring at Duke with startled eyes. 'You know it sounded just like you said we'd got a corpse on our hands.'

'That's funny,' Duke returned, beginning to lather his face. 'That's exactly what I did say.'

Peter laughed uneasily. 'Oh, well, what's a corpse between friends?' He

picked up his razor, then looked at Duke suspiciously. 'But I wish you wouldn't fool so early in the morning.'

'Wouldn't I like to be fooling,' Duke said, running his razor over his face carefully. 'I must be pretty tough. My hand's as steady as a rock.'

Peter stood still. 'What are you talking about?'

Duke looked over at him. 'Sorry, Pete,' he said. 'But, it gave me a bit of a shock. You remember Timson? He's in there with his throat cut.'

'Timson . . . with his throat cut?' Peter hastily grabbed his dressing gown. 'You're crazy. We left your girlfriend in there last night, not Timson.'

'Don't rush in there,' Duke said, hurriedly. 'It ain't anything like as nice as it sounds. What the hell are we going to do?'

Peter left him and Duke heard him cross the sitting room, go into the bedroom and turn on the light. He shrugged and washed the soap off his face. Then he put on his shirt, slipped into his trousers as Peter came back. His face was the colour of cold mutton fat.

'Don't say I didn't warn you,' Duke said. 'There's some whisky in the other room.'

'This gets me,' Peter said, following him into the sitting room. 'I think I want to be sick.'

'Don't be a dope,' Duke said, sharply. 'There's nothing to be sick about.'

Peter sat down slowly and reached for the whisky. 'Who did it?' he asked. 'And where's the girl?'

'That's what the cops'll want to know. You don't have to anticipate them,' Duke said, lighting a cigarette. 'I suppose you wouldn't like to make some coffee. I've got some thinking to do.'

'Coffee?' Peter repeated, taking another pull at the whisky. 'It'd choke me.'

'I wasn't asking you to have any, I was asking you to make some,' Duke said shortly. 'Get a move on, Pete, it'll give you something to do.'

Peter felt better when he'd finished his drink. He got up and plugged in the electric kettle. While he put cups and saucers out and hunted up the milk, Duke lolled back in his armchair and stared out of the window. His mind was very active.

He didn't say anything until Peter had made the coffee, then he sat up, reached for a cigarette and lit it. 'We'll have to call the cops pretty soon,' he said. 'But before we do, we've got to get our story straight.'

‘Are you talking for both of us or is that an editorial “we” you’re using?’ Peter asked.

Duke grinned at him. ‘I’m sorry, Pete, but you’re in this up to your neck.’

‘I was afraid of that. Oh well, so long as I know, but you might tell me what it’s all about.’

‘I wish I could. I’ve only got part of the story.’ Duke finished his coffee, heaved a satisfied sigh and poured himself out another cup. ‘It goes well with the whisky, doesn’t it? I’ve invented another ten second breakfast by the look of it.’

‘I wish you’d get down to business,’ Peter said, irritated. ‘This is serious, you know.’

‘Okay, okay, don’t get flustered. It’ll work out. It always does. Let me put you wise. Maybe you’ll be able to see something that I’ve missed,’ Duke returned, putting his empty coffee cup down and lying back in the chair. ‘It began by Kells coming to see me.

Remember? Kells told me that Bellman wanted me to throw in with him. Some bull about my reputation as a gambler being good for his club. He was offering big money. The way I saw it was that Bellman was being threatened by someone and he wanted me in with him so that if trouble started I could look after it.

‘I’ve had enough trouble in the past, so I didn’t go for the proposition. I dusted Kells off and when he had gone, I got a telephone call. It was from a woman. I found out later it was the kid I brought here last night.’

‘Who is she?’ Peter demanded.

‘I caught Schultz trying to wring her neck - so I suppose she’s a friend of his. Apart from that I have no idea,’ Duke said. ‘Anyway, we may find out some more about her as we go on. It’s an angle that wants looking into. Well, she telephones me and advises me to leave Bellman alone. “I’d hate to see you dead” is the way she put it. All right, that sort of talk never worries me. I decided that perhaps I ought to talk with Bellman. Before I do, I dropped in to see Schultz.

‘Schultz, as you know, runs a gambling joint and rents me a room where I work. I’ve known him for a while and I’ve thought he was pretty smart, until a few hours ago. He’s in with everyone, knows everything about Bentonville and was one of the first to move into the town when it began to get prosperous. I didn’t know it was Lorelli who telephoned me and I didn’t

know that he knew Lorelli. I wouldn't have mentioned the call if I had known, but I didn't and I had to shoot off my big mouth. I get nothing out of Schultz except that Bellman might be scared of Spade. It's a funny thing, Pete, but everything in Bentonville finally comes down to Spade. He's a guy I've got to investigate. He might be interesting. All the same, I feel that Schultz knows more than he tells me and probably what he does tell me is a lie.

'Well, I see Bellman and while I'm talking to him a little guy bursts in and takes a couple of sneaks at Bellman with a popgun. I was so scared that I upset my whisky and it gets in the little guy's face. So Bellman is still on his feet, when the little guy remembers an appointment and beats it.

'No more from Bellman except a nice shade of yellow. He isn't going to open up, so I leave him. I think a word with Schultz might be an idea, so I go over and look in his window. I'm glad I took the precaution, because there's Schultz kneeling on this kid Lorelli with a nice thick rope round her neck.

'I open the window quietly and stop him doing anything foolish. Lorelli has only to open her mouth and I spot she's the one who telephoned me about leaving Bellman alone, so I think I ought to take care of her and I bring her away. Schultz doesn't seem to like this, because he opens up with a lot of fancy shooting and very nearly gives me a heart attack.

'I bring her along to you and that's as far as we go. Except that she wouldn't talk. She knows something because Schultz warned her if she opened her mouth he'd come after her. Now, you know as much about it as I do.'

Peter screwed up his eyes. 'Where does Timson come in?' he asked. 'You haven't mentioned him.'

'It wasn't until last night when your girl mentioned his name that I remembered him. He used to manage the Chez Paree and I've always looked on him as a kind of stooge. What he's doing in there I don't know.'

'On the face of it,' Peter said, uneasily. 'This Lorelli girl could have killed him. Do you think Timson came to get her back and she knocked him off and bolted?'

'Why Timson? He's nothing to do with Schultz. It would add up if Joe was lying in there with his throat cut.'

'Joe? Who's Joe?' Peter asked, bewildered.

'Oh, he's just a kid Schultz has to drive his car.'

‘We can’t sit here all day making problems,’ Peter said. ‘We ought to tell the police.’

‘Sure, we’ve got to do that, but how much are we going to tell them? Do we bring in Schultz and Lorelli?’

‘We’ll have to. Otherwise they’d want to know why I didn’t sleep in my bed.’

Duke went over to the telephone. ‘I think a word with Paul might clear the air,’ he said, and dialled.

Peter lit another cigarette and began to pace up and down.

Duke watched him thoughtfully and then shifted his attention when Schultz’s voice floated over the line.

‘Paul?’ Duke said. ‘This is Harry.’

There was a pause, then Schultz said, ‘What do you want?’ His voice had a rasp in it.

‘Do you know where Lorelli is?’

‘What’s that to you?’

‘Don’t act like a dope. This is serious. I brought her to Pete Cullen’s place last night and now she’s disappeared.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ There was a sneering laugh in Schultz’s voice. ‘You must have been pretty drunk last night, Harry.’

Duke’s face hardened. ‘Okay, so I was pretty drunk. What makes you so sure?’

‘You were either drunk or you’ve gone crazy,’ Schultz went on. ‘Lorelli never left my side all last evening and all last night. She’s right here beside me. If you don’t believe me, ask Joe. He’ll tell you.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Duke said, feeling that Schultz was going to hang up, ‘I don’t want to talk to Joe, I want a word with Lorelli.’

‘I don’t think she wants to talk to you, but I’ll ask her,’ Schultz said.

Duke heard him say, ‘Harry Duke’s on the line. He wants to speak to you.’

There was a pause, then Lorelli’s voice came to him. ‘Yes?’ It was cool and impersonal.

‘What’s the idea?’ Duke said, ‘Schultz says you were with him all the evening. You’re not letting him get away with that, are you?’

‘Why not? Where else do you think I was?’

‘You’re a dope, sister,’ Duke said, suddenly angry. ‘When I looked in last night, your fat friend was putting a rope round your nice little neck. If I

hadn't stopped him, he'd have killed you. It'll pay you to play with me. Where did you get to last night?'

He heard her say to Schultz, 'Here you speak to him. He's crazy.'

Before Schultz could get back on the line, Duke hung up. He looked at Peter with cold intent eyes.

'She's back with Schultz,' he said, briefly. 'Her story is she never left his side all night. Joe's their witness. We've got to think up something fast, Pete, or we might get nailed by the cops.'

Peter went a little white. 'Why, that's ridiculous. They can't get away with that.'

Duke stretched. 'I'm afraid they can,' he said. 'If we can't explain Timson away, we might even burn for this. The cops would be glad of a chance to pin something on me.'

'What the hell can we do?' Peter said, running his fingers through his hair.

'Wait here a second,' Duke said, and went into the bedroom.

After a few minutes he came out again. 'It's going to be suicide, Peter. The stage is set for it and all we've got to do is to plant a razor in there.'

'Good grief! You can't do that! If they find out, we won't have a chance to beat a rap.'

'By the time they find out,' Duke said, grimly, 'I'll have my hands on the guy who *did* kill Timson. But, who says they will find out?' He went into the bathroom and came back with Peter's razor. 'Shan't be a second,' he said and went back into the

bedroom again.

Peter poured himself out another whisky. He felt he needed it.

Duke came out and shut the door. He made a little grimace as he sat down. 'It's all set and it looks convincing,' he said. 'Now, listen, Pete, this is our story. You, Clare and I met last night. You saw her home and joined me at my apartment. We had a few drinks, then we went out to get some air. We ran into Timson who was tight as a tick. He'd got a bottle of Scotch and we, being a little high ourselves, helped him finish it. Timson passed out and we brought him back here. We left him on the bed and went to sleep in this room. In the morning we missed your razor, checked up and found Timson. We'll let the cops work out why he did it.'

Peter stared at him. 'Why, it's crazy! You don't know what Timson was doing all the evening. He might have been with someone.'

‘It doesn’t matter who he was with if we make it late enough. He came here between three and four in the morning. Okay, that’s when we met him. If you keep your head, we can bluff it out. I can’t see any other way out.’

‘You’re a crazy devil, Harry,’ Peter said, miserably. ‘Whenever I get mixed up with you, there’s trouble.’

‘Skip it,’ Duke said, roughly. ‘We’re in a jam and we’re going to get out of it.’

The telephone began to ring. Peter went over.

‘Oh, Peter,’ Clare said. ‘Do you know where I can get hold of Harry Duke?’

Peter stared at the telephone, a sudden surge of jealousy going through him. ‘What do you want with him?’ he asked, trying to keep his bitterness out of his voice.

‘Don’t be angry,’ Clare pleaded. ‘It’s about Timson.’

‘Timson? What about him?’

‘You remember Harry Duke asked me to telephone him if I heard anything about Timson buying property? Well, he has, He has bought Pinder’s End.’

Peter said, ‘Hold on a second, Clare.’ He looked at Duke, ‘Timson’s bought Pinder’s End,’ he said.

Duke blew out his cheeks. ‘That could mean anything,’ he said. ‘May I speak to her?’

Peter thrust the telephone into his hands and stood away. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘It’s a free country, ain’t it?’

‘That would seem to be the idea at first glance,’ Duke returned, dryly. ‘This is Harry Duke,’ he said to the telephone. He heard Clare catch her breath sharply and he felt again the sudden thickening in his throat.

‘Oh, Mr. Duke, I’ve been trying to get you,’ she said.

‘It’s about Timson, isn’t it?’ he asked. ‘You say he’s bought Pinder’s End?’

‘Yes, the deal went through yesterday. He’s buying for the Bentonville Land Corporation. No one has ever heard of them.’

‘Thanks,’ Duke returned. ‘Maybe I can find out something. Not that it’s done Timson any good. We ran into Timson last night and we all got a little drunk. He slept in Pete’s bed and we found him this morning dead. He cut his throat.’

Peter snapped his fingers impatiently. ‘She’ll never believe a yam like

that,' he said,

Duke waved him to be quiet.

'You say he's dead?' Clare asked. 'Suicide?'

'Yep. He seemed sorta depressed last night, but we thought nothing of it. We've only just found him. I'll call the cops now.'

'I'll come out,' Clare said. Her voice had gone flat. 'I – I suppose Peter's mixed up in this.'

Duke's mouth tightened into a thin line. 'We're both in it. But it don't mean anything except a little publicity. That won't hurt Pete.'

'No . . . I'll come out,' and she hung up.

Duke put the receiver back on its cradle with care. 'I suppose she's sore that you've got into a jam,' he said to Peter. 'Anyway that's how she sounded.'

'Well, it can't be helped,' Peter returned, not meeting his glance. 'I suppose I'd better put through a call to the office.'

Duke picked up the telephone again. 'Before you do, I'll have a talk with the cops. You've got to keep your head, Pete. They'll try and shake you, you know.'

'That'll be all right,' Peter returned. He stood close to Duke as he dialled police headquarters.

ELEVEN

A few hours later there was a council of war held in Sam Trench's office.

Mainly out of courtesy to his age, Sam presided in the chair. He was a trifle bewildered. Clare sat near him, smoking and throwing worried glances at Peter who lounged in the window recess. Harry Duke paced slowly up and down in front of Sam's desk, a dead cigar clenched in his white teeth.

'Fairview's waking up,' Duke said pleasantly. 'It's a pity you don't turn your paper into a daily. Something tells me that you'll be needing a daily pretty soon.'

'But what happened?' Clare demanded, flicking ash on to the threadbare carpet. 'What did the police say?'

'Not much.' Duke smiled over at Peter. 'They didn't like the set-up, but I reckon this is the first death by violence that's happened in this burg and they were up the creek without a paddle.'

'You mean they accepted the suicide theory?'

Duke shot her a sharp look. 'Why not? It was suicide, wasn't it?'

'Now, look, Clare, don't complicate things, will you?' Peter broke in.

She looked from Duke to Peter and back again. 'I can't see Timson committing suicide,' she said, flatly.

'Look, the guy cut his throat with a razor. Maybe it wasn't suicide, maybe he was just having a dry shave and his hand slipped. Whatever happened, he's dead. That's all you've got to worry about,' Duke said, gently.

Sam scratched up his hair with both hands. 'But why all the fuss?' he demanded. 'I could understand it if Timson was from Fairview, but he isn't. He didn't even die in Fairview, so what's it got to do with us?'

'He died in Peter's bed, didn't he?' Clare said, quietly.

Sam scowled over at Peter. 'Are you the young fella she's been running around kind of regular with?'

'Now please, Sam, that's beside the point.'

'No, it isn't,' Peter put in quickly. 'Why shouldn't he know? He's been pretty decent to you, hasn't he? I want to marry Clare, Mr. Trench, only she just won't make up her mind.'

Old Sam gave him a searching look and then fumbled for his pipe. 'Well,

if she isn't sure, don't you worry her, young man. The fella who's lucky enough to get her, has got to be worth his salt.'

Duke glanced at Clare with a hard, amused little smile in his eyes. She was looking embarrassed and angry.

'Will you shut up, Sam?' she said, sharply.

Sam snorted. 'What a way to talk to an old man,' he complained. 'Get a few grey hairs and what happens? Anybody's football to kick around.'

'The point is, why did Timson buy Pinder's End?' Duke said, bringing some point into the conversation. 'Can anyone tell me that?'

Clare shook her head. 'One of our staff was out there this morning. There's nothing on the land except a few broken down bungalows. The tenants have been ordered to quit by the end of the week.'

Peter Suddenly said, 'It's no good, Harry, I'm going to tell them.'

Duke's face stiffened for a second, then he shrugged. 'If you feel like that about it,' he said, and sat down, pushing his hat over his eyes.

Peter looked at the other two. 'We won't get anywhere unless you know the truth,' he said. 'Timson was murdered. We made it look like a suicide.'

Clare caught her breath. 'Oh, Peter!' she exclaimed. 'I knew there was something wrong. Oh, why did you. . .?' she stopped and bit her lip angrily.

'Go on, why don't you say it?' Duke said, quietly. 'Why did he have to hook up with me? That's what you wanted to say, wasn't it? If he'd kept clear of me, he'd be out of this jam.'

'Shut up, Harry,' Peter said, quickly.

'But, it's true,' Clare said, jumping to her feet. 'I warned Peter all along to leave you alone. This is the kind of thing you like. Murder, gambling, violence! Why don't you leave Peter alone?'

Duke pushed back his hat and looked at her. 'I didn't get Peter into this,' he said, patiently. 'Timson came to Peter's room without anyone asking him to. Don't you see? It was nothing to do with either of us.'

Clare turned away. She appealed to Peter. 'Why did you lie to the police?' she demanded. 'Why didn't you tell them the truth?'

'Why, I guess the truth would have sounded a little dumb and besides, Harry wanted. . . ' he stopped.

'Of course, Harry wanted it that way.' She whirled round on Duke. 'And you say you've nothing to do with it? But you've dragged Peter into a mess for all that!'

Duke lifted frosty eyes to hers. 'What's the idea?' he asked. 'Are you trying to make out that Pete can't look after himself?'

Peter heaved himself away from the window and came over. He put his hand gently on Clare's arm. 'You're not helping, sweetheart,' he said, quietly. 'What's done is done. If we're going to get out of this, we've got to use our heads.'

Clare hesitated and then lifted her shoulders wearily. 'Well, what are you going to do? What is there to do?' When you've finished with your private quarrels,' Sam said,

in a piping voice. 'Perhaps you'll realize that you've made me an accessory to murder. What are you going to do about that?'

'Don't get your dickie on the boil,' Duke said, striking a match on his shoe and relighting his cigar. 'We ain't done that. We don't know *who* the murderer is. All we know is that it wasn't suicide, because there was no weapon. Suspect number one is Lorelli, a dame I picked up from Schultz last night and brought round to Pete's place. She had Pete's room and in the morning she had gone and Timson had taken her place. So she's number one. The next point to be considered is where Bellman comes into this. Timson was his manager. I think Timson bought Pinder's End on Bellman's instructions. I think, too, that Bellman didn't want Spade to know about the transaction. He guessed that if Spade knew what he was up to, Spade would knock him off. Maybe Spade killed Timson. So let's make him suspect number two. Then why did Timson come to see Pete?'

How did he get into Pete's bedroom and what happened to Lorelli? Did she see the murder or had she gone before Timson arrived? It was easy for anyone to slip out of Pete's bedroom window and beat it across the fields. So you see, we've got a few problems to solve.'

Sam prodded his blotter with his pen. He looked at Clare who stood staring out of the window and he shook his head, 'Well,' he said, 'this is certainly a new one on me. I didn't think I'd like to be mixed up in a business like this. It ain't like Fairview at all.'

'Listen, dad,' Duke said, abruptly. 'Suppose you cut out this Rip van Winkle stuff and use your head. We want ideas, not autobiographies.'

Sam grinned at him. 'You're a hard nut,' he said. 'But I like you. You remind me of a guy who used to work with me when I was on the *Tribune*. A real go-getter, he was. Well, you'll be about the same when you've cut your

teeth and got into long pants.'

Duke laughed. 'Well, come on, you old fox, what do you think?'

'Who's got the title deeds to Pinder's End?' Sam demanded, smacking his hand on the desk and then grinned round with obvious delight.

Duke gaped at him. 'Well, for cryin' out loud! We never thought of that! There's your motive for Timson's killing. He must have had the title deeds on him. The cops searched him and found nothing. The guy who cut Timson's throat did it to get the deeds. That must be it! Now we *are* getting somewhere.'

'I don't see that,' Peter said. 'We can't search everyone in Fairview or Bentonville.'

'No, but we can call on Bellman and find out if he knows anything. I guess we'll get over there right away.'

'Wait a minute,' Sam said, hastily. 'Don't be in too much of a rush. Maybe Bellman doesn't know that the title deeds are missing. Maybe lots of people think the cops have got them. Is it a good thing to spread the news?'

Duke sat back. 'You're a bit of a knockout, ain't you?' he said. 'Do you always let your brain work as hard as this?'

Sam grinned modestly. 'Well, I eat an awful lot of fish,' he said, polishing his nose vigorously with his silk handkerchief. 'And besides, I'm a lot older than you young people.'

'All right, so what do we do?'

'Well, if I was running the show,' Sam said, obviously delighting in the attention he had aroused, 'I'd move very carefully so as not to scare anyone unnecessarily. First, I'd find out who is behind the Bentonville Land Corporation. Then I'd find out if they've got the deeds and if they haven't, then the murderer must have 'em. I'd check on Spade. I'd check on this Lorelli girl and I'd check on Bellman. I'd get as much information as I could and I'd come in here when I've got it and I'd lay it before the editor of the Clarion and let him put in a little brain work fitting the pieces together. That's what I'd do, but then you must please yourself.'

Harry Duke nodded. 'Well, I don't think that's bad,' he returned. 'I think I'll make a start.' He looked over at Peter. 'You've got a job to do, Pete, I can't expect you to worry with this. I can manage on my own.'

Peter looked uncomfortable. 'I'm in this with you, Harry,' he said, 'You know that. But, it's not easy to get away from the job until the evenings. I can

give you a hand after work.'

Harry Duke looked at him searchingly. He thought what a hell of a difference a woman could make to a man. A couple of years back, Pete would have thrown his job aside to get into a mess like this. Now, he was playing for safety. Not that Duke blamed him, but all the same he felt a pang of disappointment.

'That's swell,' he said, casually. 'I don't suppose I'll need any help. I can take care of this kind of thing in my sleep.'

Sam shot a quick look at Peter and then at Harry Duke. His bright blue eyes softened a little when he regarded Duke. This was the kind of guy that he'd have been proud to have as a son, A hard, tough, go-getter without any women's apron strings hanging to him. He waved them to the door.

'Go and argue outside,' he said, 'I've got a newspaper to print.'

As they moved away, he swung round in his swivelled chair, 'And don't you keep me out of this, Mr. Harry Duke,' he shrilled. 'I want all the credit. . and don't you forget it.'

Outside, Duke said, 'That's a spunky little cuss. I believe he's looking for a fight.'

There was a short, awkward pause, then Peter said, 'Well, I'd better get back. Can I give you a lift, Harry?'

Duke shook his head. 'I'm going out to Pinder's End,' he returned. 'Might as well take a look at it.'

'Okay,' Peter said, 'I'll be seeing you.' He took Clare's hand. 'Don't worry, sweetheart,' he said. 'We'll get out of this okay. I'll come in tonight and take you out some place,'

He glanced at Duke, saw that he wasn't going, hesitated, and then drew Clare aside.

'Goodbye, darling, you won't worry, will you?' He lifted her chin and kissed her.

Clare said, 'Do be careful, Peter,' and watched him run down the stone stairs that led to the street.

Duke said, 'I'm sorry you're sore with me, Clare. I was hoping we'd be friends.'

She stood very still, holding on to the banister rail and not looking at him. She felt weak and her heart hammered against her ribs. 'I don't want to talk about it,' she said, stubbornly.

‘That won’t get us anywhere,’ he returned, watching her and feeling the thickness in his throat again. ‘I’d do anything for Pete. He’s about the one friend I’ve got in the world.’

She spun round. ‘Then why don’t you let him alone?’ she said, bitterly. ‘Oh, I know what you’re thinking. But he’s not like you. And he’s not a coward nor is he hiding behind me. He’s got his job to think about.’

Duke tossed his cigar butt away. ‘He isn’t a coward,’ he said, quietly. ‘You’re wrong to think I’d call him that. But you’re making a great mistake if you think he can’t look after himself. I’ve known him much longer than you, Clare. Pete’s nobody’s fool and you’re not getting anywhere taking this attitude.’

Colour came into her face. ‘It suits you to talk like that. doesn’t it?’ she said, fiercely. ‘Why don’t you let him alone? You’ll get him into more trouble. I’ve seen this coming from the start. He doesn’t belong to your world. None of us do. You’re hard and reckless and you don’t care what happens. Oh, I hate you for getting him into this!’

He stepped up to her and took her arms in his hands. ‘You’re a stupid, stubborn little fool,’ he said, curtly. ‘You won’t see that this has nothing to do with me. Timson came to see Pete. He didn’t come to see me. But you won’t see it that way because it doesn’t suit you.’

She struggled away, her face on fire. ‘Don’t speak to me!’ she said, and turning, she ran into her room. The door slammed violently behind her.

TWELVE

Pinder's End lay on the outskirts of the town. It was famished, and desolate.

Harry Duke had never seen the place. He drove the odd miles through Fairview without paying a great deal of attention to the surroundings. His mind was occupied with Clare. A hard little smile came to his lips. He was bored with the easy type of woman. In Bentonville, the girls were spoilt or without character. They ran to type. Every girl he took out was just like the last one. He knew every move of the game, what she was going to say, how long she would hold off and just when she'd give in. It was like a monotonous game of checkers with every move prearranged.

Clare was different. He pulled his long nose irritably. What was the good? She wasn't for him, so he'd better forget her.

Pinder's End lay off the concrete highway and he saw the turning ahead of him. He slowed down and turned the car on to the dirt road.

On each side of the road was a mat of tangled, broken grass, burnt yellow by the hot sun. Flour-like dust spurted up under the wheels of the car, leaving a kind of smoke screen behind him, blotting out the highway.

He drove slowly, feeling the dust settling on him, drying his throat and filling his nostrils with fine powder. He thought it was extraordinary that in a few miles he should leave a clean, fresh town and find himself in a desert.

The dirt road climbed steeply. It was broken by old wheel tracks and his car began to lurch and jolt. Once, hitting a bad pothole, he felt the chassis bang down on the springs and he wondered if the springs had gone.

At the top of the hill, he stopped and stood up in the car.

Away over to his right, he could see Fairview lying in the valley. He could see the tall factory chimneys, the main road running through the orderly building like a dividing river and the squat, ugly Clarion building. Somewhere in that building Clare was working. He wondered if she was thinking about him or whether she had already dismissed him from her mind.

In front of him, off the road, was a line of wire fence strung out across the dusty, barren fields. On the far side of the field, he could see a little cluster of buildings.

He climbed out of the car and leaving it by the side of the road, he jumped the wire fence and set out across the field.

The sun was hot and although he didn't hurry, he was soon sweating. The dust bothered him too, spurting up over his shoes and filling the cuffs of his trousers.

Three-quarters of the way across the field, he could see the line of wooden shacks quite plainly. There were six of them. Five bungalows and a two-storied house. All the buildings were bleached white by the sun and rain and they seemed to sag like weary old men too tired to stand straight and too indifferent to lie down.

He was aware that there were people standing in the various doorways, watching him uneasily. He could feel their hostile, nervous looks even before he reached the shacks.

In the open doors, the women stood watching him. Behind them, children, who peered round their mothers' skirts, stared at him with black intent eyes.

The men lounged by the broken gates of the shacks, like advance guards, prepared to take the first shock before an attack could reach their doors. They were a motley crew, dirty, bad and suspicious.

The one man who paid him no attention sat on the porch of the two-storied house. He was dressed in a dirty, torn overall and a dark shirt, an old battered hat rested on the back of his head. It was difficult to guess his age. Duke thought maybe he was forty or maybe he was sixty. He couldn't tell. But, he was big and powerful, with tremendous shoulders and a big chestnut coloured beard.

He sat in the shade, whittling a piece of wood with a long thin knife.

Duke looked at the other men and decided that this fella would be the boss, if they had such a person in a dump like this. He walked up to the rotten gate, lifted the latch and eased it tenderly back. One of the hinges had broken and the other was hanging by a screw.

He walked up the flat mud path, feeling the eyes of the others on him, making him a little uncomfortable.

The big bearded man didn't look up. He went on whittling at the wood.

'Mornin,' Duke said. 'Are you the headman of this outfit?'

'Suppose I am?' the big fellow returned, without looking up. 'Would that be any of your business, mister?'

'Depends what sort of headman you are,' Duke returned, resting his foot

on the porch and pushing his hat to the back of his head. 'Maybe you and I can do a little business.'

The big man looked up sharply. 'Listen, mister,' he said, coldly. 'You're wasting your time. I've had a dozen guys out here in the last two weeks talking business. I ain't interested in business. All I'm interested in is keeping Pinder's End for these folks here.' He jerked his thumb to the tenants who stayed just out of hearing, watching with dumb, cold attention.

'I'm Harry Duke,' Duke said. 'Maybe you've heard of me.'

The big man showed interest. 'From Bentonville, huh?' he said. 'What do you want out here?'

Duke lowered himself carefully on to the dusty porch. 'I'm interested in Pinder's End,' he said, slowly. 'Like a lot of people, but not in the same way. I heard the place's been sold and you've all got notice to quit.'

'That's right,' the big man said. 'What's it to you?'

'Are you going?' Duke asked.

The big man scratched his head. He put his hat on again carefully and shrugged. 'I guess so,' he said. 'They've been trying to get us out for the last year. Well, it looks like we'll have to go this time. So long as no one bought the place we were safe enough. We paid the rent and they couldn't get us out. Now, it's bought. I guess there ain't anything we can do but get out.'

Duke lit a cigarette. 'The guy who bought Pinder's End cut his throat last night,' he said, watching the big man closely. 'The title deeds of this place are floating around and haven't turned up yet. It'd pay you to stick until they're found.'

'What's the game, mister?' The big man looked at him with interest. 'What are you getting out of this?'

Duke shook his head. 'Nothing,' he said. 'At least, I don't think so. You see Timson, the fella who bought Pinder's End, was murdered. I want to find the guy who killed him. If you stick and refuse to move, they'll have to bring an action to get you out. The title deeds will be asked for and the fella who produces them is the fella who killed Timson.'

The big man got to his feet. 'Come inside,' he said. 'This wants thinking about.'

Duke followed him into the dark house. The wallpaper was peeling off and hanging in long strips from the wall. There was a damp smell in the place and the boards creaked under his feet. Most of the windows were boarded up and

he couldn't see at all after the blinding sunlight on the porch. He had to follow the big man by sound.

'Casy's the name,' the big man said, leading him into a small room at the back of the house. It was roughly furnished but clean and Casy waved him to an old rocking chair while he took from a cupboard an earthenware jar and two mugs.

'Applejack any good to you?' he asked.

'Sure,' Duke said, relaxing in the rocking chair and flicking his ash into the empty fireplace. 'You guys are living the hard way, ain't you?'

Casy shrugged. 'One time it was all right,' he said. 'That was five years ago. We all had farms and we didn't do too badly. Now, Fairview, I guess, is on the skids. The ground out here's no good anymore. It's just the way things go. Maybe, if we did leave, we'd do a lot better, but the women and the kids don't like changes.'

Duke found the applejack very strong. He controlled a coughing spasm only by an effort of will. 'All I want you guys to do is to stick. I'll look after the law end of it. I'll get the best lawyer in Bentonville to fight for you and I'll pay for it,' he said, putting the mug down on the floor beside him. 'Someone wants Pinder's End badly. Another party wants it too. The second party wants it badly enough to do murder. I want to find out why. Have you any ideas?'

Casy laughed. 'Look at the place,' he said. 'You go out and look at it. Even we don't want it.'

'I wouldn't know,' Duke said, 'I don't know anything about soil, or buildings, but from first glance, this place is just a desert, but someone knows different and I want to find out why. There couldn't be a mine around here, I suppose?'

Casy laughed. 'You're right,' he said. 'There couldn't be. No, mister, this place is finished. It's not worth a damn.'

Duke finished his applejack with a little grimace. 'Well, all right,' he said, 'there must be a reason for buying it. I've got to find that out. All I want you to do is to stick tight. Will you do that?'

Casy scratched his beard. 'We've got orders to quit,' he said, uneasily. 'What do I do with them?'

'Let me have 'em,' Duke said, 'I'll turn 'em over to a smart lawyer and he'll fight it for you. You don't have to do anything else. Just dig your toes in

and let me do the fighting. Will you do that?’

Casy thought about it, then he said, ‘Well, I guess so. I’ve heard about you. You’ve got a tough reputation and I’ve heard that you keep your word. You play with us and I’ll see that the rest of the folks around here play with you.’

Duke got to his feet. ‘Get me these orders and I’ll fix things,’ he said.

Casy nodded. ‘You wait here, mister,’ he returned, ‘I won’t be long,’ and he went out, leaving the door open.

Duke sat down in the rocking chair again and lit another cigarette. His mind was busy. Berhman would look after the law end of it. There was no smarter lawyer in Bentonville. It was just the kind of fight Berhman loved.

When he had got Berhman on the job, he’d go over to see Bellman. He was sure that Bellman had started all this. Then there was this guy Spade. Spade the mystery man. He scowled at his cigarette. After cigars, cigarettes were just punk, he thought.

This fella Casy looked as if he might be a help. He was a fighter. A blind man could see that. If he could keep all these other punks tight in Pinder’s End, Duke felt he would be doing something. At least, whatever Bellman or Spade or even Schultz wanted to do, couldn’t be done with that mob sitting on Pinder’s End.

What the hell did they want to do? If he knew that he’d know everything. What could be at the bottom of this dump? It must be something big, Duke was sure of that. If it wasn’t a mine, what could it be?

He stroked his nose thoughtfully. This house was old, he thought, every movement made by the wind sounded like a giant’s tread. He listened to the creaking boards and thought he wouldn’t like to live here on his own.

Sitting there, in the dimly lit room, he suddenly became uneasy. He didn’t know why. Perhaps it was because he was used to bright lights and the sound of voices that always drifted up from the poolroom. Here, there were only the creaking of old boards and the soft whimpering of the hot wind that blew against the dry, bleached sides of the house.

He sat listening to the sounds. Then, quite suddenly, he felt the hairs on his neck bristle. Just above him upstairs, someone coughed. It was a quiet strangled cough as if the someone was anxious that no one should hear him.

Duke sat forward in his chair, his ears straining and his eyes intent. He could hear nothing except for the creaking of the house and he wondered if he was imagining things. Then a sound of a soft footfall came to his straining

ears. Someone was walking very quietly above his head.

He stood up and tiptoed across the room. He stood listening at the door. Footfalls came distinctly as if someone was moving about upstairs, but moving with extreme caution.

It was pitch dark in the passage. The broken window in the hall had been boarded up and it let in no light.

Duke felt a trickle of sweat run down behind his ears, but he paid no attention. It was hot and still in the house. Faintly, he could hear the children playing outside and fainter still, he could hear the footfalls above him.

His eyes brightened as he felt for his gun. The smooth butt felt good in his hand. He pushed the door open gently, but it creaked. The sound seemed to echo through the house and he paused, his head on one side, his hand on his gun.

There was an abrupt silence in the house. He stood listening, but nothing moved. Whoever it was up there was listening too. It might be Casy's wife, of course, he reasoned. It might be someone Casy was boarding. In which case, he'd look a prize

fool, but he wasn't taking any chances.

Something told him that whoever it was had nothing to do with Casy. It might even be Spade. A hard little grin came to his lips. Well, if it was Spade, then he'd get a hell of a shock.

He took two swift steps into the passage. The old boards creaked under his weight. He cursed the house under his breath. It was impossible to move without telegraphing his actions.

He stood in the pitch-black hall, trying to remember where the stairs were. He had caught a glimpse of them as he had come in when the front door was open. Could he get up the stairs without warning whoever it was up there? He doubted it and if he was the kind of guy Duke thought he was, he'd start shooting.

To be caught on a staircase wasn't Duke's idea of a picnic. All the same, he was going up and no one would stop him.

He levered his gun out of the holster and took another step forward. It was like being a blind man, groping after another blind man. He touched his pocket and felt for a match, then decided against it. By the time the match had flared up, he would be picking hot lead out of his guts.

He didn't know if the stairs went straight up or whether they curved. He

didn't know even if they were steep. Whoever it was up there probably knew the run of the house and that was an advantage.

His groping foot touched the first stair and very cautiously he put his weight on it. It was solid and he mounted to the next stair. It was groping all the time in thick, hot darkness. His hand found the wall and touched the hanging wallpaper. It rushed under his touch and he took his hand away quickly.

He groped with his other hand and felt the banister rail. It moved when he took hold of it. He guessed it would come away from the wall if he put any weight on it. That was no use, so he lowered his hands to the stairs and went up very slowly on his hands and knees.

When his hands felt the top stair, he remained still, listening. Out in the yard he heard a child calling, 'Chrissie,' impatiently and shrilly. He hoped it would find Chrissie and shut up. The thin piping voice blotted out the sounds he was listening for. Then as if the child had decided to be on his side, it stopped calling and the house fell silent again.

Still he didn't move. He remained crouched at the head of the stairs, the .38 in his right hand and his left hand steadying himself. He stared into the thick curtain of darkness, looking for a crack of light which might lead him to a room without a boarded window, but either the doors were light-tight or else the upstairs windows were all boarded up, because there was not a glimmer of light anywhere.

The smell of damp, the rustling of the ribbons of wallpaper in the draught, the whispering sound of the wind gave him an eerie feeling. A board creaked sharply quite near him, making him start. He looked into the darkness wondering if his eyes were playing him tricks. It seemed as if one part of the wall was much blacker than the surrounding darkness. Almost, he argued, as if someone was standing there within five feet of him.

He was in a jam because he didn't dare shoot in case it was one of Casy's friends. He didn't want to speak because, if it was someone after him, it would be inviting a shot. So he remained crouched there, sweating freely and trying to penetrate the darkness.

While he crouched, his ears strained towards the black patch. At first he could hear nothing, then very softly a sound came to him. He had to listen for several seconds before he identified it. Not far from him, someone was breathing.

It was an unpleasant sound and Duke again felt the hair on his neck bristle. He lowered himself further down on the stairs, moving inch by inch and making no noise, then pushing out his .38 towards the dark patch against the wall, he said in a cold, hard voice, 'Stay where you are, or I'll blast hell out of you.'

There was a quick movement, two heavy thuds as someone moved forward and a man caught his breath sharply. The sound came from the right and not in front of Duke. This upset his calculations and although he swivelled round fast, his finger tightening on the trigger, a heavy boot whistled out of the darkness and caught him on the top of his head.

He felt his fingers relaxing on the gun and his body began to slide back, then another violent kick caught him on the side of his head and a light exploded before his eyes.

THIRTEEN

Schultz, grinning broadly, waddled out of his dressing room. He went over to the mirror and adjusted his necktie. Behind him, in the mirror he could see Lorelli lying in bed. She was smoking, a breakfast tray across her knees.

‘My pigeon,’ he said, without turning round, ‘that’s a disgusting habit. You should never smoke and eat at the same time. There’s a time and place for everything.’

‘Oh, let me be,’ she said, irritably.

He patted his hair with the brush carefully, observed the effect, then turned. ‘I’m glad you had the sense to come back,’ he said, abruptly. ‘Very glad.’

She buttered some toast without looking up. ‘I must have been crazy,’ she said. ‘He’d’ve been nicer to me than you.’

‘I wonder why you did come back?’ He stood over her, his mouth smiling, but his eyes were granite question marks.

She shrugged, nibbling at the toast and staring out of the window indifferently. ‘You’re a habit, I suppose,’ she said. ‘Where are you going now?’

‘You didn’t tell him anything?’

‘I don’t talk,’ she said, shortly. ‘You were mad with me last night, so I let you cool off. I never intended to stay.’

He wasn’t convinced, but he couldn’t waste any more time. He had things to do. ‘You’d better not go out for a day or so, my pigeon; not until I’ve seen Duke. He may be difficult. Joe will be around.’

Lorelli poured coffee into her cup. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘I’ve nowhere to go.’

Schultz smiled at her, but his eyes were still watchful. ‘I don’t want Joe in here. He’s very young. We don’t want him getting ideas, do we?’

‘I wish you’d stop talking about Joe,’ Lorelli snapped. ‘What do you think I am? He’s no use to me.’

‘I wonder,’ Schultz pulled at his underlip, ‘I think sometimes he might be.’

‘I can’t help what you think,’ Lorelli replied crossly. ‘He hasn’t a dime and besides he’s only a kid.’

Schultz nodded. 'That ought to set my mind at rest, but it doesn't,' he said, 'Joe's killed two men. Did you know that?'

Lorelli's eyes opened. This was news to her. 'Killed two men?' she repeated. 'Well, that's nice. That's like you to leave me with a thug for protection.'

'Don't be silly. Joe's very good protection.' Schultz looked out of the window. 'Well, I must go. The garden looks nice, doesn't it? Perhaps I'll get back early. I'd like an hour or so in the garden.' He moved towards her, but she raised a book that was lying on the bed.

'No,' she said. 'That's out. I've had enough of your sloppy kisses.'

'I was forgetting,' the hooded eyes half closed, 'I suppose you really mean that?'

'I mean it all right,' Lorelli said.

'Well, so long as it's out with everyone else,' Schultz said, his voice suddenly harsh.

'You don't have to worry about my love life. I'll sublimate with Krafft-Ebing.'

He hesitated, then with an effort, he smiled again. 'Well, I mustn't waste time. I'll see you tonight.'

'Goodbye now,' she said, and half turned in the bed, so that she could watch every move he made. As he reached the door, she said, 'Paul. . .'

He looked back sharply. There was a note in her voice that brought him up short. 'Yes?'

'Harry Duke said that he found you putting a rope round my neck . . .'

Schultz laughed. He began to wobble with mirth, slapping his great thighs and shaking his head. 'The sly dog. He said that? You can see his game, my pigeon? He wants to drive a wedge between us.'

Lorelli's face remained cold and suspicious. 'So he was just telling a story?'

'Harry's a great kidder. I like that guy. He gets in the way, of course, and he'll have to go, but he's fun. Especially his stories.' The hard little eyes shifted over her face, trying to read what was going on in her mind.

'I'd stand you beating me,' Lorelli said, 'I'd stand having glasses thrown at me, but I don't like murder . . . especially my murder. If I thought you'd tried that, I'd cut your lights out, Paul.'

Schultz's parrot-like mouth fell open. Her unexpected viciousness startled

him. 'Now don't get excited, my precious,' he said. 'Don't you believe anything Harry Duke tells you. Besides, I wouldn't kill you with a rope.' He moved towards her, smiling, his round eyes like black marbles. 'If I was going to kill you, I'd poison you. I'd see that it'd take a long time. You'd waste away and lose all that pretty fat and you'd die ugly enough to turn the stomach of the mortician.'

Lorelli sat up in bed. 'Get out!' she said, fiercely. 'I don't want to hear your beastly talk. Get out!'

He was immediately in an excellent humour. He saw that at last he had frightened her. It occurred to him that it might be amusing to poison her. She would die very ungracefully.

'I'm a great kidder, too,' he said. 'So you mustn't believe what I or Harry Duke have to say about violent death.' He waved his fat hand and went out of the room.

Lorelli sank back on the pillows feeling a little sick. Poison was just the kind of trick a heel like Schultz would think up. He could slip it in her food any time he felt like it. Her hand touched her throat uneasily. Had he put the rope round her neck? She wouldn't have stayed in the house one second if she thought that he had really done so.

She heard him drive away and slipping out of bed, she ran over to the window and watched the big black car disappear down the street.

It was going to be another hot day. The sun penetrated the thin silk of her gaily coloured pyjamas and looking down into the street, she felt irritated that she had to stay indoors.

She wandered back to her bed, a sulky expression in her eyes. At the back of her mind the poison threat still lingered. It was an unpleasant and unnerving thought.

She slid her small feet into slippers and reached for a wrap. She didn't want to stay in bed all day. It was too hot and besides, she felt restless. She wanted action of some kind.

Lighting a cigarette, she went once more to the window and leaning against the wall, she watched the line of cars moving towards Bentonville.

As she stood there, her mind half on the street and half on vague shadowy thoughts of Schultz, the door opened and Joe came in.

Like Lorelli, Joe didn't have any other name. Schultz specialized in finding orphans, people without attachments, or waifs who came from nowhere and

could return to nowhere when he had finished with them.

Joe was young in years but old in experience. As far as he could remember he was either eighteen or nineteen years of age. He didn't know when he had a birthday. That kind of thing never interested him. Even when he was a child living in a charitable institute, he had kept to himself. He had run away from the institute when he felt that he could look after himself.

Schultz had found him a year later and had given him a job as his chauffeur. He had repaid Schultz in many ways and although Schultz was never quite sure whether to trust him or not, he was glad to have the boy around the house.

Joe was slight, small-boned and thin. He always wore the same dirty flannel trousers and soft leather jerkin that zipped down the front. He wore a black and white cloth scarf round his neck and his thick black hair looked like a piece of sealskin draped over his head. It was short, and very thick. Joe cut it himself, hacking off pieces so that it was always uneven and ragged.

His small boned face was pale. His best features were his eyes. They were large and dark with thick eyelashes.

He stood in the doorway, looking at Lorelli with expressionless eyes, then he came into the room, quietly closing the door with his heel.

Lorelli glanced over her shoulder and then turned back to the window.

Joe wandered over to the dressing table and began to fiddle with her cosmetics. He picked up each jar, unscrewed the top and sniffed, then he put the top on again, returned the jar to the place where he had found it and picked up another.

Lorelli said, 'Fatty was talking about you and me.'

'I know,' Joe said, sniffing at a cut-glass scent bottle. The perfume pleased him and he tilted the bottle so that a drop touched his fingers. He put the stopper back and then rubbed the scent on the palms of his hands, cupping them, he covered his nose and mouth and breathed in deeply.

Lorelli turned from the window and lay on the bed again. 'He's beginning to scare me,' she said.

Joe laughed. It was a flat, mirthless noise, the nearest he ever came to showing that he was amused. 'Him?' he said, and laughed again.

'Harry Duke told me he caught Paul putting a rope round my neck. Do you think he was going to kill me?'

Joe picked up Lorelli's scissors and began to trim the hair over his ears.

‘Don’t you?’ he asked, casually.

‘Paul says Duke’s lying.’

Joe went on snipping his hair. ‘I wonder what he’d’ve done with your body?’ he asked, suddenly.

‘Don’t, Joe!’ Lorelli shivered.

He glanced across at her. When she saw the glow in his eyes, she relaxed. ‘I’m scared, Joe,’ she said.

‘What else did he say?’ He put the scissors down.

Lorelli turned on her side, swinging one leg up and down nervously. The flash of the red silk fascinated Joe. ‘He talked about poison.’

Joe laughed again. ‘He just wanted to scare you. What’s he know about poison?’

‘He said you killed two men. Was that supposed to scare me too?’

‘Does it?’

‘No.’ Lorelli was a little angry at his indifference. ‘But, you never told me. Who were they? Why did you do it?’

‘Does it matter?’ Joe was bored with this. ‘I forget. Anyway, we’re wasting an awful lot of time.’

She knew she would get nothing out of him. ‘We’ve got all day,’ she said, crossly. ‘He won’t be back until tonight.’

‘Did he tell you that? Maybe he’s just taken a turn round the block.’

‘Don’t tell me you’re scared of him too?’

Joe laughed.

Looking at him, Lorelli felt reassured. There was no weakness in that stony white face that stared at her out of the mirror.

There was a pause, then Joe said, ‘Tell me what happened. That’s why I’m here.’

‘No other reason?’ Lorelli looked sulky.

‘Later, perhaps. But I want to know. Why did you go with Duke?’

‘Paul scared me. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t bring you into it. You know that. When Duke gave me the chance of going with him, I grabbed at it.’

Joe watched her. ‘I don’t know why you lie to me,’ he said, fiddling with the scent again. ‘I saw how you looked at Duke. You phoned him about Bellman. I heard you. So why lie?’

‘Oh, damn you, Joe.’ Lorelli rolled on her back.

‘Why didn’t you stay with him? You could have.’

‘It wasn’t because of you,’ she jeered. ‘I was going to, Joe. He’s a man. You know that.’

‘I know.’ Joe tried lipstick on the back of his hand. ‘I thought I’d seen the last of you. Why did you come back?’ There was no bitterness in his voice. He just stated a fact.

‘You’re a funny kid.’ Lorelli drew up her knees and hugged them against her chin. ‘Wouldn’t you have missed me?’

‘I suppose so.’ Joe didn’t sound as if he cared much. ‘I’d have got used to it. Why didn’t you stay?’

‘I was frightened. Something happened.’

Joe glanced over at her. ‘What’s the matter with you? You losing your nerve or something?’

‘He wouldn’t take me to his rooms. He took me to a friend of his. They let me have the bed and they used the other room.’ Lorelli rocked up and down on the bed, staring at the ceiling. ‘All the time I was in the room, I felt that I wasn’t alone. Have you ever felt like that?’

‘Me?’ Joe shook his head. ‘Why should I?’

‘In the end I got scared. There was a big cupboard and I felt someone was in it. I didn’t look and see. I pushed up the window and dropped into the street. I came back here.’

Joe came over and sat on the bed beside her. ‘It’s in the paper this morning,’ he said, quietly. ‘Timson was found in Cullen’s room with his throat cut.’

Lorelli unwound her arms from her knees and sat up. She clutched Joe’s arm ‘Let me see,’ she said. ‘I’m not in it, am I?’

Joe shook his head. ‘Don’t get excited,’ he said. ‘Maybe Timson was in the cupboard all the time, watching you. Maybe, he was in there cutting his throat. They say he committed suicide.’

Lorelli took his small, warm hand in hers. ‘I’m scared, Joe,’ she said. ‘I wish we could get away. I don’t like this. I don’t like Paul anymore.’

Joe pushed her back on the bed. He looked down at her. A muscle in his cheek began to twitch. ‘I’ll take care of him,’ he said, softly. He touched her throat very gently with his fingers.

She flinched staring up at him.

‘Why do you do that?’

‘I was just thinking. So he put a rope round your neck, did he?’ His small spidery fingers continued to caress her throat. ‘He shouldn’t have done that.’

The look in his eyes chilled her and she pulled herself close to him, burying her face against the soft leather of his jerkin.

Still smiling, his eyes on the opposite wall, Joe continued to caress her throat.

FOURTEEN

Harry Duke heard someone say, 'Maybe I'd better throw water over him.'

He opened his eyes and blinked up at Casy's anxious face. Behind Casy was another guy. Duke couldn't see him clearly in the dim light. He sat up slowly. 'Don't you throw water at me,' he said, 'I wash once a day and that's quite enough.'

'You all right, mister?' Casy asked, a look of relief coming into his face.

'Well, I don't know about being all right,' Duke said, feeling his head with gentle fingers. There was a slight swelling in his hair and another just above the bridge of his nose. He swore softly as pain darted through his head.

'Did you fall downstairs, or something?' Casy asked. 'Let me get you a drink.'

'Now you're talking,' Duke said, levering himself to his feet. He shook his head and the pain became localized, hammering his temples.

He walked slowly back into Casy's sitting room and took the mug of applejack that Casy held out to him.

He felt a lot better when the strong spirit hit his stomach. 'That's better' he said, and sat down in the rocking chair.

Casy said, 'This is Jetkin. He owns the shack next door.'

Duke looked at the thin, towering giant and nodded. 'I'm not feeling my best,' he said. 'You'll excuse me.'

Jetkin gaped at him and moved his large feet uncomfortably. 'Sure,' he said. He was chewing steadily and every now and then he would swallow, making a fierce little grimace.

Duke hoped he wasn't chewing tobacco.

'What happened to you, mister?' Casy asked. 'I found you lying at the bottom of the stairs. It gave me a proper fright. Did you fall or something?'

Duke looked at him and shook his head. 'I heard someone upstairs, Casy,' he said. 'So I went up and ran into a kick in the face. One of your friends?'

'I live here alone,' Casy said. 'Are you sure?'

Duke touched his forehead. 'Think I'm dreaming?' he said, dryly.

'Someone upstairs?' Casy and Jetkin exchanged glances.

Duke got up. 'Come on, you two,' he said. 'We'll have a look round.'

He went out of the room, opened the front door to let the sunlight in and walked stiffly upstairs. Casy and Jetkin followed him.

When he reached the landing, he paused. 'Where do we go from here?' he asked.

Casy pushed past him and threw open a door. 'There ain't nothing up here,' he said. 'I only use the downstairs.'

Duke peered into the small empty room and saw nothing. The windows were boarded up, but the light from the hall was enough for him to see that the room was unfurnished.

He shook his head and backed out of the room.

Casy went a little farther down the passage and opened another door. 'This is the only other room up here,' he said.

It was dark and Duke couldn't see anything. 'Can't we have a light?' he asked, impatiently.

Casy went over to the window and pulled a board away. It made a sharp screeching noise as the nails were ripped from the wall.

Sunlight entered the room which seemed full of broken furniture and other junk.

Duke stood looking round. He looked at the dust covered floor. Someone had been up there. Blurred footprints showed on the dusty boards.

'There's where he was,' Jetkin said, pointing to the smudges in the dust.

Duke glanced over at Casy. 'Any idea who it could have been?' he asked, feeling a sudden rage boiling up inside him. He knew he had been very near to solving the mystery of Pinder's End.

Casy shook his head. 'I guess not,' he said. 'What would anyone want up here?'

Duke began to wander round the room. He examined the damp marks on the walls, the fireplace, the boards and the ceiling. He found nothing.

'I wish I knew,' he said, in disgust. 'But someone was up here, after something.' He stood back and scratched his head. 'How long have you lived in this joint?'

Casy thought for a moment. 'Must be getting on for six years,' he said. 'That was when my wife was alive. We used the whole of the house then. This was our bedroom. When she went, I gave up these rooms and lived downstairs.'

Duke wandered round the room again.

Jetkin and Casy watched him with interest.

‘There’s nothing here,’ Casy said, as if reading his thoughts. ‘There’s nothing anyone would want.’

Duke faced him. ‘There must be,’ he said shortly. ‘I’m as sure of that as I’m sure you two guys are standing here.’ He went over to the mantelpiece and ran his fingers over the dust. ‘What’s this?’ he asked, suddenly.

Casy peered over his shoulder.

On the mantelpiece, carved on the wood were the initials F.N.

‘Oh, that?’ Casy shrugged his shoulder indifferently. ‘That was there, when we came. I reckon the last owner did it.’

Harry Duke wiped more dust away. The carving had been done a long time ago.

‘Yeah,’ Duke said. ‘It looks old.’ His fingers traced over the carving thoughtfully. ‘F.N., I wonder what that’d stand for?’

‘This house has been up over a hundred years,’ Casy said. ‘Anyone could have put it there.’

‘A hundred years, huh?’ Duke shook his head. ‘Makes you think.’ He took out his penknife and opened the blade. ‘Mind if I put my initials alongside that?’

Casy and Jetkin exchanged glances. ‘That’s okay,’ Casy said, ‘if you want to.’

After a few minutes work, Duke compared the initials. His stood out clearly, showing a new scar. He could see that the other initials had been done a long time ago and he was satisfied.

‘Oh well,’ he said. ‘There don’t seem anything.’ He walked across the floor testing the boards with his toe. They all seemed solid enough. ‘Ever looked under this lot?’ he asked, abruptly.

Casy shook his head. ‘Nothing under there, mister,’ he said.

‘All the same we’ll have a look now we’re up here.’

Jetkin pointed to a board in the window corner. ‘Looks like someone’s had a look already.’

Duke crossed over and knelt in the dust. The board had been levered up recently. He could see the fresh scars where a crowbar had been inserted. He trod on the board which lifted and then he got his fingers under it and pulled it up. There was only plaster and laths of the ceiling below.

He struck a match and peered under the floor. He could see nothing except

dirt and a few spiders. He put the board back and stood up, dusting his trousers.

‘Well, there it is,’ he said, and shrugged.

The other two watched him with interest. ‘What are you looking for, mister?’ Jetkin asked.

Duke smiled mirthlessly. ‘No idea, pal,’ he said. ‘I always go on like this in a strange house.’

Again Casy and Jetkin exchanged glances.

Duke pulled out his .38. ‘Know how to use this?’ he asked Casy.

Casy took it from him. ‘Sure,’ he said, ‘I used to own one years ago.’

‘Well, keep it by you,’ Duke said, looking at him intently. ‘Don’t let anyone get in this dump. Do you understand? There’s something in here that someone wants and it’s up to you to see he doesn’t get it.’ He felt in his pocket and pulled out a roll of money.

Jetkin caught his breath sharply.

‘I’d like to put you guys on my payroll,’ Duke went on. ‘Here’s a hundred bucks. Just keep anyone out of here.’

Casy’s serious eyes became a little hostile. ‘Listen mister,’ he said. ‘This is my home. I don’t need money to keep guys out of my home.’

Duke stared at him. He hadn’t expected that kind of reaction. ‘You’ll excuse me,’ he said, ‘I wasn’t thinking.’

‘You ain’t going to turn all the dough away, are you, Tim?’ Jetkin gasped.

Casy frowned at him. ‘You shut up, Jetkin,’ he said. ‘This ain’t anything to do with you.’

‘All right, boys,’ Duke said. ‘Give me those notices to quit and I’ll get ‘em fixed up. Then I’ll come out tomorrow and we’ll have another talk.’

Casy produced a bundle of papers and Duke stuffed them into his pocket. ‘Now, there’s nothing for you to worry about. Stick tight, keep anyone from messing around and leave everything to me.’

Casy offered his hand. ‘It’s a good thing you looked in, mister,’ he said. ‘I think you’ll get us out of this mess.’

‘That’s the idea,’ Duke returned, and they went down the stairs together.

It was growing dusk and the sun was sinking behind the hills lighting up Fairview in a red glow.

‘You’ve got a nice view from here,’ Duke said, as he paused on the step.

‘That’s about all there is,’ Casy said, bitterly. ‘You kind of get used to it.’

‘Yeah, I suppose you would.’

Jetkin said, ‘I’ll see you to your car, mister.’ But Casy jerked him back.

‘Lay off, Jetkin,’ he snarled. ‘You leave that guy’s money alone. We don’t take money from anyone unless we earn it.’

‘But, Tim,’ Jetkin pleaded, ‘the kids want shoes and the old lady ain’t had a bit of meat in six weeks.’

‘You shut up!’ Casy snapped. ‘Listen, if you don’t like it, get over to Bentonville and start earning money. There’s plenty of work for guys who want shoes and meat. Go out there and work for it. No one at Pinder’s End’s going to take charity.’

Jetkin took a step back. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘But this guy is rich. He wouldn’t miss it. We could buy a lot of things with a hundred bucks.’

Casy spat in the dust. ‘Beat it,’ he said. ‘And tell your old lady that if she wants meat, you’ll earn her some.’

Jetkin shrugged and walked away.

Duke listened to this in amazement. ‘Head man, huh?’ he said.

Casy looked at him steadily. ‘Listen, mister,’ he said, ‘this place has been happy for a long time. Maybe we are living the hard way, but we don’t care. We like it. Most of us could clear out and make money in Bentonville, but we live the way we live because we like it. We don’t like strangers coming around flashing their rolls. It kinda upsets the weak ones.’

Duke nodded. ‘A new kind of philosophy,’ he said, puzzled. ‘Okay, I’ll remember next time.’

‘You remember next time,’ Casy repeated, looking cautiously outside. He stepped back into the house and beckoned Duke, ‘You like that applejack, huh?’ he said, showing his strong, white teeth.

‘Sure, it’s great stuff. But I don’t want any more now. It’s still burning holes in my belly.’

Casy lowered his voice. ‘I’ll sell you that jar, mister,’ he said, with a wink. ‘You just wait here.’

He was back in a moment, carrying the jar. Duke took it from him, looked at him thoughtfully and then brought his roll out again. He selected five twenty-dollar bills and handed them over. ‘It’s expensive, ain’t it?’

The money disappeared into Casy’s pocket. ‘But it’ll last you a long time,’ he said. ‘Besides, mister, I’m including service as well,’ and he slapped the .38 in his hip pocket.

‘I was forgetting that,’ Duke returned. ‘Look after the service end and I’ll do more than drink your health.’

Casy’s eyes gleamed. ‘No one’s getting into this house after tonight,’ he said. ‘You can bet on that.’

Duke waved to him. ‘Well, so long,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you in the morning,’ and he walked down the path, across the field to his car.

FIFTEEN

Clare was just putting her hat on when Sam Trench came into her office.

‘Going home?’ he asked, propping himself up against the wall and fumbling for his matches.

‘I was, Sam, then I’d arranged to meet Peter for dinner.’

Sam lit his pipe. He released a long stream of tobacco smoke and sighed. ‘This young fella, Peter Cullen. You serious about him?’

‘Now, Sam, it isn’t your business whom I’m serious about,’ Clare said, smiling at him. ‘So don’t be nosy.’

‘Clare,’ Sam said, seriously, ‘I’ve always looked on you as my daughter. I want you to be happy.’

She went over to him and patted his arm. ‘Oh, I’ll be happy,’ she assured him. ‘You don’t have to worry.’

‘But, I do,’ he insisted. ‘Still, I suppose you know what you are doing. I thought he looked a nice lad. Has he a good job?’

‘Really, Sam!’ Clare said, trying to be angry. ‘You’re quite impossible. I won’t have you interfering with my young man. If you must know, Peter’s doing very well and one of these days he hopes to have his own business.’

‘Not the same as having it,’ Sam said, shaking his head. ‘I’ve heard a lot about what these young fellas hope to have. The point is, is he a worker?’

‘Now, that really is quite enough from you,’ Clare returned. ‘If you haven’t anything better to do than to criticize my boyfriends, then we both had better get off home.’

‘I just want to make sure that you’ve got the right one,’ Sam said, hastily. ‘Not that I’ve got anything against the lad.’ He scratched his bristly cheek with his pipe stem. ‘Now, that Harry Duke . . . there’re no flies on him. . .’

Clare walked over to her desk and began to slide her papers into her drawer. A slight flush mounted to her face. ‘I don’t see why you should mention Harry Duke and Peter in the same breath,’ she said, a little coldly.

‘He just came into my mind,’ Sam said, enjoying her embarrassment. ‘That fella’s going to go far.’

‘If he doesn’t get into trouble first,’ Clare returned. ‘You know, Sam, I wish Peter didn’t think so highly of him. It worries me. Harry Duke’s such a

reckless person. He just doesn't care what happens and I feel that he'll get Peter into an awful mess before long. Look at this business with Timson. He tried to make out that he'd committed suicide. He doesn't seem capable of telling the truth.'

Sam found that his pipe had gone out and struck another match. 'I suppose it didn't occur to you that Duke was protecting young Cullen?'

Clare looked at him sharply. 'Protecting him? What do you mean?'

'Just that. After all, my dear, this fella Timson must have come to see young Cullen, otherwise how did he get into Cullen's room? On the face of it, Harry Duke could have walked out and left Pete Cullen to it, if he wanted to.'

'Are you trying to tell me that you think Peter had something to do with the murder?' Clare said, coldly.

'Now, don't be silly, my dear,' Sam said, puffing at his pipe, 'I'm just saying that Duke is less mixed up in this than young Cullen. But, Duke is doing all the work. I notice that young Cullen was quite willing to let him do it too.'

'I think you're a horrid old man, but you won't make me quarrel with you. You're being unfair and you know it. Peter's got his job to do and he can't neglect it. After all, Harry Duke's got nothing better to do and this kind of thing amuses him'

'I was thinking, my dear,' Sam said, not listening to her, 'that if Cullen's too busy to help Harry Duke, perhaps we might do something.'

Clare nodded. 'Well, of course,' she said. 'But what can we do?'

Sam tapped out his pipe into Clare's trash basket and took out his worn tobacco pouch. 'Isn't Bellman tied up in this business?' he said. 'Well, we might take a look at him. At least we could talk to him and see if he's got any ideas about Timson.'

Clare picked up her bag. 'I'll go and see him now,' she said. 'I can tell him that I've come from the Clarion. He might have something to say.'

'Don't be in such a rush, my dear,' Sam went on. 'We'd better wait for Harry Duke. He may have other ideas.'

'I'm not going to wait for anyone,' Clare said, firmly, 'I promised to meet Peter at Bentonville at eight o'clock. I'll just have time to get over there and see Bellman and keep my date. I won't give anything away and I might find out something.'

‘Yes,’ Sam said, ‘then maybe we’ll all get together tomorrow for another talk. All right, Clare, then you get off.’

As he turned to the door, she paused. ‘Don’t think Peter’s not going to help,’ she said. ‘Because he will. I know he will.’

‘All right, all right.’ Sam waved her away. ‘You have a talk with him. I’ll hang on here a little longer. Maybe Harry Duke will look in.’

When she had gone, Sam went back to his office and began work again. He became so engrossed in his editorial he lost track of time and suddenly glancing up, he was surprised to see that it was past eight o’clock. He got to his feet and began to put his papers away. Then he heard someone come in the outer office.

He went to the door and glanced outside. Harry Duke was standing there looking round the empty office.

‘There you are,’ Sam said. ‘Come in. I’ve been waiting for you.’

Duke followed him into his office. ‘Everyone gone home?’ he asked, sitting on the desk and feeling for a cigar.

Sam looked at him sharply. ‘What have you done to your face?’ he asked.

Duke smiled grimly. ‘Picked that up at Pinder’s End. They hand out applejack and a kick in the face as part of their hospitality. Quite a place, ain’t it?’

‘What’s been going on?’

Duke shook his head. ‘Something’s up out there,’ he said. ‘I reckon Pinder’s End is at the bottom of the whole business. Know a guy called Casy?’

Sam nodded. ‘Yep,’ he returned, ‘I’ve known Casy off and on for years. He’s a good guy. One time he had a pretty fine farm out there, but things went wrong. All the same he’s kept that little colony together. Have you met him?’

‘I bought some applejack off him. Like a shot?’

Sam’s face brightened. ‘I know Casy’s hooch. Got it with you?’

‘It’s in the car,’ Duke said, getting to his feet.

When he came back, Sam had put out a couple of glasses and took the jar from Duke. He pulled the cork with his teeth and sniffed at the jar. ‘I’d know this stuff blindfolded,’ he said, pouring two shots into the glasses. ‘I’ve got to be careful my missus don’t smell my breath. She’s a rare one against spirits.’

They touched glasses.

‘How’s the progress, son?’ Sam asked, sipping the applejack with a benign expression on his face.

‘I’m getting Berhman to contest the orders to quit,’ Duke said. ‘That’s one point. Someone wants those folk out of Pinder’s End and I want ‘em to stay a while. So long as they’re there, there won’t be any strangers around the place.’

Sam finished his drink. ‘What are you going to do next?’ he asked.

Duke scratched his head. ‘Tomorrow,’ he said, ‘I’m going over to Casy’s house and really take the joint to pieces. I shouldn’t be surprised if there was something hidden in that house. Have you done anything today?’

‘I’ve been checking on Spade,’ Sam returned. ‘Now, that guy interests me. Everyone’s heard of him. He owns a number of houses in Bentonville. He runs the pin table organization, and he’s a regular subscriber to the Police Sports Fund. You know

what that means. But no one’s ever set eyes on him.’

Duke pulled his nose thoughtfully. ‘I’ve been in Bentonville for the last couple of years and I’ve never seen him,’ he said.

‘He ain’t been operating long. Korris does all the work and Spade gets all the credit. Interesting, don’t you think?’

‘Maybe I’d better see Korris,’ Duke returned. ‘But I’ve got to see Bellman first.’

‘I was forgetting. Clare’s seeing Bellman tonight.’

Duke stared at him. ‘What’s the idea?’ he asked, sharply.

‘It’s all right,’ Sam said, hastily, seeing Duke’s eyes becoming cold. ‘She’s only interviewing him for the Clarion. Maybe she’ll get something out of him’

Duke kicked back his chair and stood up. ‘I don’t like this,’ he said. ‘Bellman’s a tricky customer. He might easily get more from her than she’d get from him. When she seeing him?’

‘She went off about an hour ago,’ Sam said. ‘She’s got a date with Cullen at eight, so she’ll have seen Bellman by now.’

Duke jerked his hat over his eyes. ‘I’ll get over there,’ he said. ‘You don’t know where Pete’s meeting her, do you?’

Sam shook his head. ‘She didn’t say.’

‘Well, I’ll look Bellman up,’ Duke returned. ‘I hope she hasn’t told him anything.’

‘Clare’s smart,’ Sam said, with a confident nod. ‘She’s been in the newspaper game too long to give anything away.’

As Duke was turning to the door, the telephone bell rang. Sam picked up the receiver.

‘This is Cullen,’ Peter said. ‘Is that you, Mr. Trench?’

‘Yeah,’ Sam said. ‘You’re lucky to find me in.’

‘Look, Mr. Trench, what’s keeping Clare? I’ve been waiting some time for her. Is she on her way?’

Sam’s blue eyes popped. ‘Why, she left an hour and a half ago.’

Duke leaned over the desk and snatched the telephone out of his hands. ‘This is Harry,’ he said, into the mouthpiece. ‘Where are you, Pete?’

‘I’m in my apartment. Is anything wrong?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. Stick where you are, Pete. I’m coming right over,’ and Duke slammed down the receiver.

Sam said, ‘Well, you young fellows certainly kick an old man around.’

Duke stood over him. ‘If anything’s happened to that girl,’ he said, coldly, ‘you’ll get kicked around. So she can look after herself, can she? She’s been in the newspaper game so long she won’t give anything away, huh? Okay, we’ll see,’ and he went out of the room at a run.

SIXTEEN

Duke reached Bentonville in less than twenty-five minutes, having travelled most of the way at seventy miles an hour. The road was straight and almost deserted and he was lucky not to run into any police patrol.

He didn't bother to go to Peter's place, but made straight for Chez Paree.

Leaving his car in a side turning, he walked down the block until he saw the neon lights of the club and then turned down a side street that brought him to the back of the building.

Immediately behind the Chez Paree was a high wall. He could see the building looming above him, silhouetted against the starlit sky. Taking a few steps back, he ran forward, jumped and grabbed the top of the wall. He hung by his fingers for a second and then levered himself up. He was up and over all in one movement. The drop on the other side shook him a little, but he had made no noise. He found he was a little short of breath and he wondered if he were getting too fat.

He stayed by the wall for several minutes until his eyes got used to the darkness, then as the low buildings began to take shape against the sky, he walked carefully to where he could see a raised fire escape. This was a lot harder to get on to, but he managed to hook it down with a long stick he found in the yard. As soon as he got his fingers on to it, it swung down quite easily.

Before he mounted the escape, he stood listening, but there was no sound except the passing traffic on the main road and the faint rhythmic beat of the drums in the dance hall. Pulling his gun from its holster, he moved slowly up the iron steps. The cold butt of the gun felt good in his hand.

The first platform he came to was opposite a window and he pressed his ear against the glass, listening for any sound. He could hear nothing. He took out his knife and levered the window up softly. When he had got it up an inch, he hooked his fingers under the frame and pushed up gently. The window opened without any noise. Heavy curtains obscured his view and he pushed them aside, peering into darkness. He slid in, closing the window behind him, then he struck a match.

From the flickering light, he decided that the room must be the waiter's

rest room. Hats and coats lay together on a table and there were a number of soiled aprons hanging from hooks on the wall.

He walked over to the door and opened it. The passage outside was in darkness. Faintly, he could hear people talking downstairs. He stood still and tried to remember where Bellman's room was. He knew it was in the front of the building, so he walked the length of the long passage and decided that he was now out front.

The passage turned at right angles at the end and he could see a faint light just before he turned the corner.

He went round the corner very cautiously, but there was no one about. A small pilot light in the ceiling accounted for the light. Farther down the corridor he saw the double doors of the gambling hall. He knew he was close to Bellman's room.

A man and woman came out of the gambling hall and walked down the passage away from him. They were laughing at something the man was holding in his hand. They disappeared down the stairs.

Duke stepped round the corner of the passage and walked quickly towards Bellman's office. As he reached the door a man in evening dress came up the stairs, glanced at him and then went into the gambling hall, closing the door behind him.

Duke opened Bellman's door and stepped quickly into the room. It was in complete darkness. This brought him up short as he expected to find a lighted room and to see Bellman at his desk. He wondered if Bellman had gone home or was just downstairs and would be back.

He closed the door and stood peering into the darkness trying to remember where the electric light switch was. He groped each side of the wall, but found nothing. So he reached for his matches. As he did so he suddenly sensed something that convinced him that he wasn't alone in the room. He stood motionless, listening, but he could hear nothing.

He tried to remember the details of the room. There should be a large armchair on the left. Right ahead would be Bellman's desk. The rest of the room was more or less free of obstacles. He couldn't remember anything that he was likely to fall over. He took a few silent steps forward and stopped again to listen. Still no sound. He moved forward again, very tense, ready to drop on his knees. As he moved, he thumbed back the safety catch on his gun. He wished he had a silencer on it. His left hand, outstretched, touched

the top of Bellman's desk. He remained still. Nothing happened. Yet he was certain there was someone in the room. He wondered grimly if it was the same person who attacked him in Casy's house. Would it be Bellman? He thought not. Bellman's nerves were not tough enough to play hide and seek in the dark.

He moved a little to the right, trying to make up his mind to strike a match. Then things happened. There was a faint sound close to him. He bent his knees automatically. Something swished very viciously by his head. It made a cooling draught by his face.

He shoved his gun into his hip pocket and dived for the sound, all in one movement. His shoulder hit someone and they went down together on the thick carpet.

His hands groped, came in contact with silk and a woman's body and he said into the darkness, 'Well, for suffering in silence!'

He collected a punch in the jaw that made his teeth rattle and then a hard little knee jerked into his stomach, curling him up. He felt the woman slide out of his hands.

He grabbed out into the darkness and his hands found her skirt. This pulled her up for a second and he heard her catch her breath in terror. A sharp pointed shoe whizzed out of the darkness and caught him in his neck. He hung on, thinking that getting kicked around was becoming quite a habit that day. Then he jerked her back, shifted his grip and grabbed at where he guessed her legs would be.

She came down on the floor with a bang and went limp.

Still holding her, he groped in his pocket and found his matches. The feeble flame flared up and he peered at her with interest.

Lorelli lay flat on her back, her big, black eyes glaring at him, and her breath coming from her mouth in strangled gasps.

'I'll fix you up with Strangler Lewis,' Duke said, as he got to his feet. 'You don't even want any training.'

He went over to the door, found the electric light switch and turned it on.

Lorelli blinked at him and sat up slowly, making a little face. 'I might have known it would be you,' she said, scowling. 'Do you *have* to follow me around?'

He went quickly to the door, opened it and stood listening. No one seemed to have heard Lorelli's fall. He closed the door and went over to her.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked, kneeling down beside her.

‘What are you doing, for that matter?’ she returned, tucking her legs under her. ‘Ouch! I believe you’ve dislocated my spine!’

He took her arm in his hand and shook her gently. ‘That’s nothing to what I’ll do to you if you don’t talk,’ he said. ‘What are you doing in here?’

She tried to free her arm, but his grip tightened. His fingers dug into her soft muscles and she squirmed. ‘Let me go, you heel!’ and she swung at him with her right hand.

He caught the flying wrist and held it. ‘Come on,’ he said, roughly. ‘What’s Bellman to you?’

She was just opening her mouth to swear at him, when her eyes wandered past him and saw something that drove the blood from her face. Her mouth circled into a large O and Duke slapped his hand over her mouth in time to cut her scream.

Holding her like that, he glanced over his shoulder and followed the direction of her staring eyes.

From behind Bellman’s massive desk protruded a hand.

Duke sucked in a quick breath. ‘Who is it?’ he said, speaking low.

Lorelli shook her head frantically and he gently took his hand off her mouth.

‘Don’t scream,’ he warned.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, quivering against him. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘Stay where you are.’ He left her and walked round the desk.

Bellman was lying on his side. His white face was turned towards Duke in a snarl of fear. The front of his dress shirt was red and the handle of a black paperknife grew out of his chest. He was dead.

Lorelli scrambled to her knees, watched Duke, her clenched fists against her face.

‘Bellman,’ Duke whispered. ‘Knifed.’

Lorelli looked as if she was going to scream again, then she controlled herself. ‘I’m going,’ she said, getting to her feet.

Duke stepped round the desk and grabbed her. ‘You’ll do as I tell you,’ he said, coldly, and shoved her into the armchair. ‘Sit there and shut up.’

He went back to Bellman and touched his hand. It was just beginning to turn cold. He moved the body cautiously, rolling it on its back. Under the body was a small silver cigarette case.

Duke examined it without touching it, then his heart beat a little faster. He had seen it before, but he couldn't remember who had been using it. Taking out his handkerchief, he picked up the case and opened it. He remembered then. Inscribed inside

the case was: *To Clare with love from Peter.*

Without letting Lorelli see the case, he wrapped it in his handkerchief and slipped it in his pocket. Then he stood away and glanced round the floor.

Near the foot of the desk something glittered. He looked closer and picked up a small pearl earring set in gold. He remembered seeing Clare wear it the previous night. He found that he was sweating and he glanced at Lorelli who was watching him uneasily.

'How long are you going to stick around here, you dope?' she demanded. 'Anyone could come in and then what'd we do?'

He thought there was some sense in that and he crossed the room, turning the key in the lock. Then he went back to the desk, searched it and the floor around it carefully, but he didn't find anything else.

'I suppose you're going to tell me you didn't kill him?' he said, glancing across at Lorelli.

Lorelli jerked upright. 'What are you talking about?' she demanded fiercely. 'I've only just got here.'

'You were here when I arrived,' Duke said. 'Alone here in the dark. How do I know you hadn't just killed Bellman and you were getting out when I surprised you?'

'What about yourself?' Lorelli had gone white. 'You can't pin this on me!'

'I could,' Duke said. 'And what's more, I'm going to if you don't talk. Get the set-up. Ever heard of a guy called Kells? He's Bellman's sidekick. He and I are like this,' Duke crossed his fingers. 'He'd tell the cops that Bellman was expecting me. I bust into this room and found you trying to escape after stabbing Bellman, Now, how do you like it?'

'You dirty heel!' Lorelli exploded. 'You wouldn't do a thing like that. . . to me!'

'I would and what's more I'm going to. You can talk yourself out of the mess with the cops. Either that or talk.'

'If I do talk, you won't get anywhere,' she said. 'No one's getting anywhere and with Bellman dead, it looks like we never shall.'

Duke half sat on the desk. 'It's to do with Pinder's End, isn't it?'

She hesitated then said, 'Yes.'

'Well, go on and be quick about it. Where do you come into this?'

'I don't,' she said. 'But I'm trying to. It was something I overheard Schultz say.'

'So Paul knows all about it, does he?'

'I suppose so. Schultz and Spade.'

'Spade again,' Duke thought. 'Who's Spade?'

Lorelli shook her head. 'Some guy that Schultz works for.'

News. So Schultz worked for Spade. Duke felt he was getting somewhere.

'What's all this about Pinder's End?'

'I tell you I don't know.'

'Come on . . . open up. I'll throw you to the cops. I ain't fooling.'

'But I don't. I heard Schultz say that there was a lot of money out there. He was talking to Spade on the phone, and I was listening outside the window. I couldn't hear much, but he said the money was hidden in a house and Bellman had got a plan where it was hidden. He said that Bellman had bought Pinder's End and that he wanted to get hold of the title deeds. Then he stopped talking and I wondered if I'd made a noise, so I beat it. I don't know anything else.'

'Did you kill Timson?'

Lorelli flinched. 'I don't know anything about Timson,' she said, a little wildly. 'When you took me away from Schultz, I thought I'd better go back. So, when you were both asleep I slipped out of the window and went back.'

'I see.' Duke pulled his long nose. 'And then Timson passed, climbed in the window and lay down on Pete's bed. What a yarn!'

'But you must believe me!' Lorelli exclaimed. 'I didn't kill him . . . I swear I didn't!'

'Tell me more about Spade.'

'I don't know anything about him,' Lorelli was emphatic. 'He's just a name to me. No one knows anything about him, except Schultz.'

'And Korris,' Duke reminded her.

'Well, yes . . . I suppose so,' she looked over at the door, 'I want to get out of here.'

Duke grunted. 'Don't get excited. What about this map you were talking about?'

'If you think I'm looking for that now, you're crazy!' Lorelli exploded.

‘Besides the guy who murdered him has probably got it.’

Duke thought this might be true, but he didn’t let Lorelli know. ‘Presuming you didn’t kill him, sweetheart,’ he reminded her.

‘Don’t give me that stuff,’ she said. ‘You’ve got what you want out of me, so skip the pantomime.’

Duke glanced round the room, decided it would be too risky to search. He had a horror of leaving any fingerprints that might connect himself with the murder.

‘Okay, let’s get out of this. You can come along with me. I’ve got a lot still to talk to you about.’

‘I’m not talking anymore,’ she said, sharply. ‘If Schultz knew half what I said. . .’ she stopped, thinking of Schultz’s vicious rage and remembering what he had said about poison.

‘You’re double-crossing Schultz,’ Duke said. ‘That amuses me. Who do you think will go after this Pinder’s End business now Bellman’s out of the way. . . besides yourself, of course?’

Lorelli hesitated. ‘Well, Spade and Schultz . . . and I suppose you.’

‘Now, you’re being smart. And who do you think will get it in the long run?’

Her large eyes searched his face. ‘You want me to say you, don’t you? But I’m not sure. Spade is supposed to be smart.’

‘So am I,’ he returned. What I mean is, how about you coming in with me? You can trust me to split with you.’

She thought of Joe and wondered if Joe would work with Duke. Somehow, she couldn’t quite see Joe doing that. ‘I’ll have to think about it,’ she said, quietly.

They left the club by the front door. As they crossed the lounge, Kells suddenly appeared. He gaped at Duke, who waved his hand.

‘Hello, there,’ Duke said. ‘How’s Bellman?’

‘He’s okay,’ Kells said, looking at Lorelli with sharp eyes. ‘Do you want to see him?’

Duke shook his head. ‘I just looked in with the idea of playing one of your tables, but Plumpie sets her face against gambling.’

Again Kells looked at Lorelli.

‘Haven’t you two met?’ Duke said. ‘Why I thought you had. This is Lew Kells,’ he went on to Lorelli, who took a half step back. ‘This is Lorelli. Not

Lorelli Montgomery or Lorelli Spewack. Just Lorelli. She was hatched out of an egg.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Kells said, taking a splinter of wood out of his vest pocket and chasing holes in his teeth with it.

'He's so forgetful,' Duke said to Lorelli. 'That's the only way he can tell whether he's had a meal. Find anything good, Lew?'

Kells scowled at him. 'Would the lady like to sit down somewhere?' he said. 'I want to talk to you.'

Duke shook his head. 'She and me have got things to do tonight. Urgent and pressing things. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'I want to talk to you,' Kells said, expressionlessly.

Duke whispered in his ear and Kells' eyes opened. 'For shooting President Lincoln!' he exclaimed. 'So you see, Lew, we didn't oughta waste a lot of time.'

'You telling me!' Kells said, and stood back, looking at Lorelli with such a peculiar expression that she felt herself blush.

Out in the street, she said, 'What did you whisper to that punk?'

Duke patted her arm. 'One of those little things that men like to keep to themselves. Never mind, you run off. Don't forget to think over my proposition. I'll be getting busy soon and then you'll be sorry you aren't on my waggon. So long, and mind

Paul doesn't stretch your neck.'

Before she could reply, he had left her and was sprinting down the road towards his car.

SEVENTEEN

Sergeant O'Malley sat at his desk reading the sporting sheet. He was trying to pick a likely winner.

Two patrolmen, Stone and Fleming, were lolling on the wooden bench near his desk talking in low undertones. They were waiting to relieve the ten o'clock patrol.

O'Malley, satisfied with his choice, folded the paper and looked over at them. 'Daybreak looks good,' he said. 'Good anyway for a place.'

'How did you make out this afternoon, Sarg?' Fleming asked.

'Hit on Nagani,' O'Malley returned. 'Six to one. I got it from Duke.'

'Ain't it marvellous how that guy spots them?' Stone said. 'He must make a fortune out of racing.'

O'Malley nodded. 'He's a bright boy,' he returned. 'I reckon he's made me a couple of hundred bucks this month. If I'd the nerve, it could've been a grand.'

'It's a gift,' Fleming said, 'I could do with his luck.'

Stone wiped his nose with the back of his hand. 'Call that luck?' he said. 'He uses his head and besides, if a jock knows he's backing him, he's scared to lose a race.'

They laughed.

'He's a tough hombre all right,' O'Malley returned.

'Any more news about that guy Timson, Sarg?' Stone asked.

O'Malley shook his head. 'The Captain's looking after that. If you ask me, the set-up's a phoney.'

Stone and Fleming exchanged glances. 'What do you mean?' Fleming asked.

'Cullen told us an odd yarn, didn't he? He didn't seem easy telling it either.'

'Don't you think the guy committed suicide, then?' Stone demanded.

'You ask the Captain. He'll tell you.'

A car drew up outside with a squeal of brakes and a moment later, Tod Korris came in briskly.

Korris was a little man, dressed in black, with a white shirt and a yellow

tie. He was pale with a thin, sharp featured face and a pair of silver spectacle frames straddled his boney nose.

O'Malley beamed at him 'Good evening, Mr. Korris, sir,' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

'Cut that line of soft soap as a start,' Korris said. 'Where's Hallahan?'

'In his office, sir,' O'Malley said, lumbering down from behind his desk. 'Do you want to have a word with him?'

Korris pushed past him and entered the Police Chief's office.

O'Malley looked at the two patrolmen. 'Now, there's a monkey I'd like to catch on the wrong foot,' he said, his red face showing his temper. 'One of these days I'll catch him with something and won't I play him hell.'

Captain Hallahan looked up from his desk as Korris came in and got to his feet. 'Didn't expect to see you this evening,' he said, shaking hands. 'Anything wrong?'

'Not yet, there isn't,' Korris returned. 'But that doesn't mean there won't be.'

Hallahan waved him to a chair. 'Have a cigar?' he said, picking up a box from his desk.

'Not those stinking weeds,' Korris said, 'I'll have one of your specials.'

Hallahan made a wry face and opened a drawer in his desk. 'You know too much about this department,' he said, trying to smile it off.

Korris helped himself to a cigar from a box Hallahan held out to him, bit off the end with his sharp, white teeth and spat the end across the office. When he had lit it, he looked at Hallahan sharply.

'Well?' he said. 'What's cooking?'

Hallahan sat down. 'I've been waiting to hear from Mr. Spade,' he said, carefully. 'Doc tells me that Timson was murdered.'

'So?' Korris blew out a thin cloud of smoke. 'How did he come to find that out?'

'He'd been bashed on the back of his head and his throat was cut some hours after death,' Hallahan said, looking worried.

'You don't take Doctor Goldstien's reports seriously, do you?' Korris asked.

Hallahan stared at him. 'Seriously? Why not? Ain't he the pathologist around here?'

'I wouldn't know,' Korris returned. 'But Timson committed suicide.'

Anyway that's what Mr. Spade says?'

'But, look,' Hallahan shifted forward in his chair, 'I've got the report here. Goldstien says. . .'

'You've got the report? Can I see it?' Korris held out his hand.

Hallahan opened his desk drawer and handed over a folder.

Korris took ten minutes to read the report. While he was reading, Hallahan watched him uneasily, not moving or saying anything.

'The guy must be crazy,' Korris said, and tore the folder in half. While he did so, he did not take his hard little eyes off Hallahan's startled face.

'What are you doing?' Hallahan said, starting up.

'You wouldn't want an incorrect record to get into the wrong hands, would you?' Korris asked, smiling.

'You've torn it up. That's a hell of a thing to do.'

'I'll give you something else instead,' Korris returned, taking out a slip of paper and sliding it across the desk.

Hallahan picked it up. It was a cheque for five thousand dollars made out to him and signed by Korris.

The two men looked at each other, then Hallahan grinned. 'Goldstien will want fixing,' he said, uneasily. 'He takes his work seriously.'

Korris tapped ash over the police captain's carpet. 'Tell him that he doesn't know his job,' he returned. 'If he thinks he does, someone might call in on him one night and scratch his face for him . . . with a broken bottle . . . tell him that too.'

Hallahan eased his collar. 'I'll look after him,' he said, putting the cheque into his pocket.

'You don't want a murder case on your hands, do you?' Korris said. 'This town's record's clean up to now. You could run in the election next year with a record like that. You can't be blamed for suicide. That'd make a swell title for a book, wouldn't it?' He shook his head. 'Well, I guess I'd better be moving.' He stood up. 'I'll be around again before long.'

Hallahan shook hands. 'You're right about the election,' he said, looking thoughtful. 'You know, I'd like to go into politics, but it's an expensive job.'

'We'd put you up,' Korris said, carelessly. 'You look after the record and we'll look after the election. But, if Bentonville suddenly ran into a crime wave . . . well, I guess Mr. Spade might change his mind about the election.'

'Would Mr. Spade really finance me?'

‘You heard what I said. Especially about the clean record, or have you wax in your ears?’

‘That’s swell,’ Hallahan rubbed his hands. ‘I know Mr. Spade keeps his word and there ain’t likely to be a crime wave here. There never has been one and I don’t see why one should start now, do you?’

‘Not if you look after your end,’ Korris said, with a thin smile. ‘Okay, then I’ll tell him how it is.’

He wandered over to the door, paused and looked back at Hallahan.

‘Ever heard of a guy called Bellman?’ he asked.

‘Sure, you mean Bellman of the Chez Paree?’

‘That’s the fella.’

‘Why, of course. I know him very well.’

‘Ever give you anything towards your Sports Fund?’

Hallahan blinked. ‘No. . . he isn’t much of a sportsman.’

‘No. You ain’t heard about him yet?’

‘Heard about him? No . . . anything wrong?’

‘He committed suicide a few hours ago. Maybe Kells’ shy of you guys and isn’t going to tell you. You know Kells, of course?’

Hallahan stood still. ‘Committed suicide? Bellman?’

‘Yeah, so I’ve heard. It may be a rumour, of course. You know what rumours are.’

The telephone on Hallahan’s desk began to ring. He snatched it up, without taking his eyes off Korris’s face. ‘Yeah?’

He stood listening, then he said, ‘I’ll be right over,’ and hung up.

Korris tapped more ash on the carpet. ‘Would that be Kells?’ he asked, gently.

‘That was Kells,’ Hallahan said, grimly. ‘He says Bellman’s been murdered. He was stabbed to death not an hour ago.’

Korris shook his head. ‘I must send him a wreath,’ he said, half to himself.

‘You’ve got a pretty reliable source of information, haven’t you?’ Hallahan went on, still watching Korris closely. ‘How did you hear?’

‘You sound more like a cop than a candidate for election,’ Korris said, gently.

There was a short pause, then Hallahan said, ‘But this guy says it’s murder.’

‘I shouldn’t be surprised if that doctor of yours doesn’t say the same

thing.' Korris shook his head. 'Well, well, mistakes do happen.' He sauntered to the door. 'Mr. Spade says it's suicide. You know who to believe, don't you?' He went out and closed the door behind him.

Hallahan stood glaring after him, his loose mouth twitching. The door opened again and Korris put his head round. 'By the way, Captain,' he said, 'if you ain't satisfied with your pathologist, get rid of him. We'll find you someone else.'

Without waiting for a reply he walked out of the station, oblivious to O'Malley's obsequious salute.

EIGHTEEN

Peter Cullen was standing on the landing when Duke came up the stairs.

‘Where is she?’ he demanded, his face pale in the half shadows. ‘Isn’t she with you?’

Duke pushed passed him and went into his room. ‘Why should she be?’ he said, curtly, as Peter followed him in and closed the door.

‘You were out at Fairview all the afternoon, weren’t you?’ Peter demanded hotly. ‘What have you been doing? She’s been with you, hasn’t she?’

‘Now, look here,’ Duke said, coldly, ‘I’ve had enough of this from you. Cut it out. I haven’t seen Clare all day. Sam tells me she had fixed to meet you this evening.’

‘Well, where the hell have you been?’ Peter said. ‘You hang up on me without any explanation and I’ve been sweating for the past hour. Don’t tell me you’ve come straight from Fairview, because I won’t believe it.’

‘Get a grip on yourself for the love of mike,’ Duke snapped, ‘Sam tells me that Clare went to see Bellman this evening. She said she was coming on here after.’

‘Bellman?’ Peter repeated. ‘But she can’t be there now. That was nearly three hours ago.’

‘She isn’t. I went over right away.’

‘You went over?’ Peter took a sudden step towards him, half raising his fist. His eyes showed his anger. ‘Why didn’t you tell me where she was over the telephone? I could have got there in half the time!’

Duke blinked. It had never crossed his mind to tell Peter to go after Bellman. The moment he heard Clare might be in danger, he hadn’t paused to think. He’d just gone after her.

‘Yeah, I never thought of that,’ he said.

Peter grabbed him by his coat front. ‘I’ll never forgive you for this,’ he said, furiously. ‘If anything’s happened to her, I’ll. . .’

Duke’s eyes snapped fire. He shoved Peter away roughly.

Peter staggered, regained his balance and got set for a fight.

‘Aw, shut up!’ Duke said, harshly. ‘Cool down, can’t you? If Clare’s in a jam, this won’t help her.’

Peter hesitated and then dropped his hands. He stood glaring at Duke. 'You'll be sorry for this, Harry,' he said.

'Okay, okay,' Duke said, impatiently. 'We're going on like a couple of kids. Sit down, and let me talk.'

'Sit down?' Peter exploded. 'I'm going over to Bellman and twist his blasted neck!'

'Bellman's dead,' Duke said, quietly, as Peter was turning to the door.

'Dead?' Peter repeated. 'When . . . what happened?'

Duke took out the cigarette case and earring. He held them out to Peter. 'Seen these before?' he asked.

Peter took them, and then stared at Duke with alarm on his face. 'These are Clare's,' he said. 'Where did you get them from?'

'Under Bellman's body,' Duke said. 'He was lying on the floor with a knife sticking into him. I just shifted him to make sure that no one had left anything behind and found these.'

Peter began to sweat. 'Anyone else seen them?' he asked.

Duke shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'It was lucky I found them before the cops moved in. They might have tied the killing to Clare. You know how dumb Hallahan is.'

'But where is she?' Peter asked. 'You - you don't think she—?' he stopped.

'No, I don't,' Duke said, curtly. 'But maybe she disturbed the guy who killed Bellman. This is tricky, Pete, you've got to face up to it. There are one or two things I've got to do. In the meantime, check up with Sam and find out if she's returned to the office or her home. I don't think, somehow, she has, but it'll save time if you do that. It'd be better, I think, if you stick around. She might come here.'

Peter glared at him. 'If you think I'm waiting in this room, you're crazy! What the hell do you think you're going to do?'

'Me?' Duke looked vague. 'One or two little jobs, nothing to do with Clare. You've got to look after that end.'

'What jobs?' Peter persisted. 'Look here, Harry, you're not going to be secretive with me!'

Duke lifted his shoulders. 'You're forgetting that you and me might be tied to a murder rap,' he pointed out. 'Maybe the same guy's trying to tie Clare to another one. I'm looking after our headache. You'd better look after Clare's.'

He went out before Peter could stop him and ran downstairs.

Although he was worried sick about Clare, Duke knew that Pinder's End must come first. He was sure that was the key to everything and if that was fixed then all the other problems would automatically straighten themselves out.

He drove away from Peter's house, his mind busy.

Spade! He was at the bottom of the business. The mysterious, unknown Spade. Now if he could catch this Korris guy and persuade him to talk, he might get a line on Spade. Well, that was one of his jobs. To find Korris, but only one of them. He thought Kells might know something about Korris.

He turned into a side street and pulled up outside a small hardware shop. Leaving his car outside the shop, he walked down an alley and reached the back of the shop.

He knocked on the door and while he waited he took out a cigar and lit it.

The door opened and a thin shadowy figure stood peering at him. 'It's Duke,' he said. 'I've got some business for you, Elmer.'

The tall figure stood on one side. 'It's a hell of a time to call,' he said, 'But come in.'

Duke followed him down a dark passage into a living room at the back of the shop. Elmer's wife, a tall, pleasant looking girl in her early twenties looked up from the stove with a startled expression in her eyes. When she saw Duke, she smiled.

'Come to supper, Mr. Duke?' she asked. 'There's plenty.'

Duke said, 'Sure, if it's quick. I've got a job for Elmer tonight.'

'Tonight?' Elmer asked. He was getting on in years and Duke never could understand how a nice girl like Rose had married him. Not that he had anything against Elmer. He hadn't, but, to see this dried-up, scraggy, middle-aged man with a wife like

Rose got him.

Duke sat at the table which was already laid for supper. 'A nice shipping order, Elmer, but you've got to deliver it as soon as you can tonight.'

Elmer grunted. 'You guys with no work are just hell. You stick around all day and do nothing, then just when fellas like me have finished a hard day's grind, you look in with some business. Why couldn't you've come in this afternoon?'

Duke grinned. 'Because I didn't think you'd want Hallahan to see what

kind of business I was putting in your way.'

Rose, who was dishing up, shot a quick, anxious glance at Duke. He waved his cigar at her reassuringly. 'Now, don't get upset,' he said. 'He's done it before and he'll do it again.'

'Come on, my dear,' Elmer said, sharply, 'I want my dinner.'

'That's all you men ever think about,' she said, and brought a large T-bone with fried potatoes and corn on the cob to the table.

'That looks swell,' Duke said, tossing his half-finished cigar into the stove.

Rose took off her apron and sat down. She looked at Duke and then at her husband a little anxiously. 'I wish you didn't do this kind of thing,' she said.

'Don't be silly,' Elmer returned, curtly. 'Where else do you think I'd get enough money to keep you in pretty dresses?' He glanced over at Duke. 'Well, what do you want?' he demanded.

'Three submachine guns, a half a dozen rifles and some .38s. Ammunition to go with 'em,' Duke said, with his mouth full.

Even Elmer was startled. He laid down his knife and fork and gaped at Duke. 'Starting a war?' he demanded.

'Something like that,' Duke said. 'Don't stop eating or it'll get cold. Besides, I'm in a hurry.'

'Now, wait a minute,' Elmer said. 'I can't let you have all that stuff. Three Tommy guns?'

'And a half a dozen rifles and say ten .38s,' Duke repeated. 'Of course, you can let me have them.'

'Where do you think I'm to get 'em from?' Elmer said, cutting his meat savagely. 'Do you think I keep an arsenal?'

Duke smiled at Rose. 'You wouldn't have any of that old whisky I tried last time I was here? I suppose Elmer's wolfed it.'

She got up and went to a cupboard, taking out a black bottle. She glanced at Elmer. 'Can he have it?' she asked, smiling.

'Sure,' Elmer said. 'Comes here drinking my whisky, keeping me up half the night and talking bull about Tommy guns.' He shook his head as he continued to eat.

Rose poured Duke out a stiff whisky and he patted her hand. 'How you put up with this killjoy, I don't know,' he said. 'Any time you want to leave him, I'll give you a home.'

Elmer looked up. His scraggy face broke into a wide smile. 'There you are,

honey,' he said. 'It's a chance if you want to take it. This fella's got a lot of dough.'

Rose laughed. 'I'm not tired of you yet,' she said, and the look she gave him astonished Duke. He saw she was crazy about this skinny old man.

'All right, all right,' Elmer said, obviously pleased. 'But you know what you can do now if you get tired of me.' He looked across at Duke. 'Well,' he went on, 'you can't have all that stuff. I might manage the rifles, but the Tommy guns . . . no!'

'Skip it,' Duke replied, finishing his meal regretfully. 'You've got the stuff. Didn't you buy three Thompsons from the police department last week? Don't tell me you've sold 'em, because I don't believe it.'

You know too much,' Elmer said, scowling. 'But, honestly, Duke, I can't let you have them. One perhaps, but there are other fellas in the market besides yourself.'

'Never mind about the other fellas. I'm having them. I'll pay what you want and in about three weeks' time you can have 'em all back. How's that?'

Elmer looked doubtful. 'Well, if you'll let me have 'em back, I might consider it,' he said, at last. 'But what the blazes do you want all that lot for?'

'Never mind,' Duke returned. He pushed back his chair. 'Come on, Elmer, we'd better get going.'

'Don't even give a fella time to digest,' Elmer grumbled, getting to his feet. 'It's going to cost you plenty.'

'I'll give you a grand. The slugs extra,' Duke said, quietly, 'No more, and if you try to rob me over the slugs, I'll steal your wife from you.'

Elmer sniffed. 'Anything you say,' he said, feeling well satisfied. He had traded with Duke before and knew he could trust him. 'Do you want me to load them up?'

'I want you to do more than that,' Duke said, 'I want you to put 'em in your car and run 'em out to Pinder's End, Fairview. Know the place?'

'Pinder's End?' Elmer repeated. 'What's the idea?'

'Will you stop asking questions?' Duke said, irritably. 'Take 'em out there and ask for a guy named Casy. Tell him I sent them out and that he might expect trouble. Tell him to hold the place against anyone except the cops. Will you do that?'

Elmer scratched his head. 'Sounds like you're getting yourself in a jam. Suppose the cops get hold of that arsenal? They'll identify the guns and come

after me.'

'No, they won't,' Duke assured him. 'Don't be so windy. This guy Casy would never let the cops get hold of the stuff. He's a smart guy.'

'I don't like it, but I'll do it for you. . . and more fool me.'

'Fine! I'll send you a cheque in the morning. All right?'

'It'll have to be. You've yet to cheat me. Can't you make it cash? I don't like cheques.'

'I'll make it anything,' Duke returned. 'I've got to get going, Elmer, so I'll leave it to you. Get that stuff out fast. They may need it.'

'Don't you go off yet,' Elmer said. 'I'll want a hand loading up the ammunition. I ain't as young as I was.'

'Get Rose to help you. I've got a date,' and slapping Elmer on his thin back, Duke went back into the kitchen. 'Give him a hand, Rose,' he said, 'I've got to beat it.' He poured himself out a small shot from the black bottle and swallowed it. 'That's whisky,' he said, nodding his head. 'I'll come along and kill the bottle some night soon.'

'It'll be waiting for you,' Rose promised.

'Don't you stand there all night whispering to that good-for-nothing,' Elmer bawled from the bottom of the passage. 'Come on and help me shift these boxes.'

'See you sometime,' Duke said, and went out into the dark alleyway.

When he reached his car, he saw a shadowy figure standing in a nearby doorway and he slowed abruptly, his hand sliding inside his coat.

The street lamp reflected on silver buttons and he took his hand from his gun.

Hallahan stepped out of the doorway and wandered up to the car. 'That you, Duke?' he asked.

'Mr. Duke to you, copper,' Duke said, opening the car door and stepping in.

'What are you doing here?'

'Who, me?' Duke peered up at the Police Chief. 'I've been in to see the wild Rose.'

'Huh?'

'Don't you know Mrs. Roberts? Nice girl. Married to an old guy . . . too old, by the look of it. I drop in from time to time. You never know, do you?'

Hallahan rubbed his jaw. 'Where's Cullen?' he asked.

‘No idea, copper,’ Duke returned. ‘At home or out with a dame. These young fellas are difficult to keep pace with.’

‘I’ve been thinking about Timson. Not quite satisfied about that guy.’

‘Look, if I bothered my head about your troubles,’ Duke said, ‘I’d never get anywhere. Timson was a poor specimen. A guy who’ll cut his throat ain’t worth worrying about. I’d forget him.’

‘Bellman’s a pal of yours, ain’t he?’

Duke’s eyes narrowed. So Hallahan had got on to Bellman already. ‘Your mistake’ he said, politely, ‘I can’t use him.’

‘You weren’t in the Chez Paree tonight by any chance?’

‘I looked in. Had a word with Kells. Now, he ain’t such a bad guy.’

‘You didn’t see Bellman, then?’

‘Not tonight,’ Duke returned, wondering uneasily if he’d left any fingerprints in Bellman’s office.

‘You’re sure?’

‘What’s all this about? Why don’t you be a man and come out in the open?’ Duke snapped. ‘What’s the trouble with Bellman?’

‘He’s dead,’ Hallahan said.

‘Bellman? Someone shoot him?’

Hallahan spat in the gutter. ‘Suicide,’ he said. ‘That’s what the croaker said. Two guys in twelve hours. Must be infectious.’

This surprised Duke. ‘Well, well,’ he said. ‘Fancy a guy like Bellman knocking himself off. I wouldn’t have believed it.’

‘No?’ Hallahan dug his thumbs into his leather belt. ‘Well, nor do I, but it was suicide all the same.’ He stared at Duke for a long second and then turned away. Duke watched him go, then started his engine.

His one thought was to find Clare now. As the car pulled away, he began to puzzle out the most likely places to look for her. He thought maybe Kells might help him.

NINETEEN

Lorelli quietly opened the sitting room door and peered round.

Joe was standing by the empty fireplace bandaging his wrist with a roll of lint. He glanced sharply round, dropping the lint and fumbling in his hip pocket.

‘What’s the matter?’ Lorelli asked, keeping her voice down. ‘Got nerves or something?’

Joe pushed his gun back into his pocket and picked up the bandage. ‘Fix this,’ he said, shortly.

‘Is Paul back?’ Lorelli asked as she crossed the room.

‘No.’

‘What have you done?’ She made as if to take hold of his wrist, but he flinched away.

‘Be careful,’ he said, ‘I’ve only just stopped the bleeding.’

She took the bandage from him, noticing that his hand shook a little. She looked at him, seeing his paleness and the glisten of sweat on his face. ‘Sit down, Joe,’ she said. ‘What happened?’

Joe sank down on the divan. He chewed his underlip and went paler still.

She was suddenly scared that he was going to faint. ‘Hold on!’ she said. ‘I’ll get you a drink.’

He let his head hang while she ran over to the sideboard and poured him out a stiff brandy. She had to support his head while he drank.

After a few minutes, his colour returned and he wiped his face with a handkerchief. ‘It bled,’ he said, by way of an explanation.

She bandaged his wrist quickly and efficiently and sat back. ‘There,’ she said. ‘That’ll be all right. Take it easy, Joe. How do you feel now?’

‘I’m all right,’ he said, impatiently. ‘They’ve got guns up there.’

‘Pinder’s End?’

‘Yes. That guy Casy caught me as I was getting into the house. He didn’t ask questions. I was lucky to get out with my skin.’

Lorelli stared at him. ‘Do you think he knows?’

Joe mugged. ‘It looks like it.’ He nursed his aching wrist. ‘How did you get on? Did you see Bellman?’

‘He’s dead.’

Joe stared down at his small feet. ‘Did you get the plan?’ he asked at last.

‘Didn’t you hear?’ she said, sharply, ‘I said he was dead.’

‘It doesn’t matter, does it?’ He lifted his shoulders indifferently. Then a thought struck him and he faced her. ‘You mean they’ve got it?’

‘I guess so,’ she replied. ‘Otherwise why should he have been killed? There wasn’t much time. Harry Duke came in and caught me in there.’

‘I see,’ Joe stood up and moved away from her. ‘You’ve made rather a mess of it, haven’t you?’

‘Don’t be a heel, Joe,’ she said. ‘It wasn’t my fault any more than it was yours that Casy had a gun. We’re just not getting the breaks.’

‘Who killed him?’ Joe asked. ‘Spade?’

‘I don’t know. He was dead when I got into the room. He’d been knifed.’

Joe turned suddenly. ‘Well, what do we do now? We don’t get anywhere.’

Lorelli jumped to her feet. ‘Why don’t you get out and leave it alone if you don’t like the way it’s going?’

‘Shut up!’ Joe said.

There was a pause, then Lorelli said, ‘I’m going to work with Harry Duke. We talked it over tonight. He knows a lot and he’s going to get somewhere. I’d back Duke against Spade.’

Joe stared at her. ‘You’ve been talking to Duke?’ he said, in a thin voice.

‘He’s been talking to me,’ Lorelli said, hastily, not liking the look in Joe’s eyes. ‘I thought you and me might join up with him.’

Joe hesitated. ‘If Paul ever heard. . .’ he stopped, looking at her.

‘You’re not going to tell him, are you?’

Joe shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Why should I?’ He moved about the room restlessly. ‘So Harry Duke’s in this now?’ he went on. It seemed to worry him.

Lorelli went back to the divan and sat watching him. She was almost sorry she had told him.

‘First Bellman,’ Joe said, half to himself. ‘Then Spade, then Schultz, then you and me and now Duke.’ He leaned against the wall and looked at her. ‘Timson, Kells and probably Casy. Everyone knows about it.’

‘But they don’t,’ Lorelli said. ‘You’re making a fuss about nothing. They’ve only got on to the fringe of it. What do we know, if it comes to

that?’

‘The point is,’ Joe said, reasoning to himself, ‘is there anything there? That’s what I’m trying to get at. Or is the whole thing phoney? We only know what Schultz said to Spade. It doesn’t seem as if we’re getting any further than that.’

Lorelli said quietly, ‘If we could make Schultz talk.’

‘Ah,’ Joe nodded. ‘That might be something.’ His face became stony. ‘I think I could make him talk.’ He screwed up his eyes, thinking. ‘Where is he, anyway?’

Lorelli shook her head. ‘He hasn’t been back all day,’ she said, looking at the clock. It was after eleven. ‘He didn’t say he’d be late.’

Joe sat down. He felt tired and his head ached. ‘I couldn’t take him tonight,’ he said, feeling his wrist gently. ‘He won’t be easy.’ He yawned and ran his fingers through his close-cropped hair. ‘We’d have to kill him after, I suppose.’

Lorelli flinched. ‘No,’ she said. ‘We’ll keep clear of that.’ Then she remembered that Joe was a killer and she felt a little sick.

‘He’d have to go,’ Joe repeated. He rested back on his elbow. ‘Then there’s Spade.’ He glanced at Lorelli. ‘Spade’s really the important one. How do we get on to him?’

Lorelli shook her head. ‘I don’t know.’

Joe said, ‘Well, that’s another thing I’ll have to look after.’ He got to his feet. ‘I think I’ll go to bed,’ he went on, moving to the door. ‘This hurts,’ he touched his wrist.

‘What are you going to tell Schultz? He’ll notice it.’

‘He won’t see it ‘until tomorrow. Then it won’t matter.’ Joe looked at her, his eyes vacant. ‘About Harry Duke,’ he added as he reached the door. ‘We can do without him. Both of us. . .’

She nodded. ‘If that’s how you feel,’ she said. ‘I only thought. . .’

‘I know.’ He opened the door. ‘I wonder how much you told him?’ The look he gave her made her feel cold.

Without giving her a chance to answer, he went out of the room.

Lorelli sat for some time thinking. She was nervous of Joe. She was scared of Schultz too. If Schultz knew what she had said to Duke, he’d kill her. She was sure of that. She had a feeling that if anyone was going to get anything out of this business it was going to be Duke. There was something about him

that inspired her confidence.

The thing to do, she decided, was to play along with Joe as long as he looked safe and then switch to Duke. She made up her mind that she wouldn't stand for any killing. If Joe was going to get that way then the sooner she went over to Duke the better.

The clock on the mantelshelf struck eleven-thirty. It was no good staying up all night waiting for Schultz. He might come in any time. She got to her feet and as she crossed the room, she heard a car draw up and a minute later a key turned in the front door.

She whipped back to the divan and was lighting a cigarette when Schultz came in.

She stared at him in surprise. He came into the room with a firm, brisk tread and his big saucer-like eyes were unnaturally bright.

'Waiting up for me, my pigeon?' he said, going over to the sideboard and pouring out a stiff whisky.

'I've been in bed half the day,' she said, trying to be casual. 'So I thought I'd sit up. You're late, aren't you?'

'You haven't been drinking brandy?' he asked, looking at the brandy bottle which she had forgotten to put back with the other bottles. He picked up the empty glass and sniffed at it. 'Or have you been entertaining?' He turned and looked at her, his eyes hooded and suspicious.

'I got bored so I tried to cheer myself up,' she said, lolling back on the divan. 'Don't mind, do you?'

'Nasty habit. . . brandy.' He came over and sat down in the armchair. 'What a day,' he said as if he meant it. 'And to think you've been in bed resting your nice little body.' He raised the glass and poured half the whisky down his throat.

Lorelli sat staring at him, feeling a little sick. His right cuff was bloodstained and there was a smear of blood on his elbow.

She was too scared to say anything.

Schultz sat limply in the chair, his eyes darting around the room. First on her, then on the door, then to the window and then back to her again. He finished the whisky and again she saw the blood stain as he raised his wrist.

'That's better,' he said, putting the glass at his feet. 'I wanted that rather badly.' He sat back and took out his cigarette case. 'Where's Joe?' he asked, abruptly.

‘Joe?’ Lorelli might never have heard of him. ‘Why, he’s gone to bed.’

Schultz scowled. ‘I want him.’ He got to his feet and waddled to the door.

‘He’s got a headache,’ Lorelli said, quickly. ‘Can’t I do anything. . .?’

Schultz paused and half turned. ‘How amusing,’ he said. ‘My pigeon is being considerate.’ He opened the door and shouted, ‘Joe!’

There was a moment’s silence, then Joe called, ‘Yes?’

Schultz said, ‘Come downstairs, will you?’ He came back into the room, moved the armchair so that he could see both Lorelli and the door and sat down again. ‘So Joe’s got a headache.’ He smiled at Lorelli. ‘I’ve often wondered if I was doing right letting you two stay together in this house. It’s a big temptation. You’re both very young.’

‘Don’t talk like a dope,’ Lorelli said, angrily. ‘I’ve told you before, Joe’s just a kid.’

‘Yeah, so you did. I remember.’ Schultz took out a handkerchief and mopped his bald head. ‘It’d be amusing if you two thought you could double-cross me,’ he went on. ‘I’m quite capable of taking care of myself. Perhaps you didn’t think so?’

Lorelli flounced round on the divan, so that her back was to him. ‘You make me tired,’ she said. ‘You’re jealous. That’s all the trouble is with you.’

‘Very probably,’ Schultz said, a spiteful look in his eyes. ‘After all I am a little old for you. Yet, my pigeon, I have been nice to you, haven’t I?’

‘I don’t know what you’re driving at,’ Lorelli said. ‘I think I’ll go to bed.’

‘No,’ Schultz said, ‘I’ve got something for you to do. You and Joe.’

She turned. ‘Tonight?’

He nodded. ‘Something very important.’

The door opened and Joe came in. He stood looking at Schultz without expression.

‘Come in, Joe,’ Schultz said. He had put his handkerchief on his lap with his hand under it.

Joe looked at the handkerchief, then at Schultz’s face. His mouth tightened. ‘Did you want me?’ he asked tonelessly.

‘What have you done to your wrist, Joe?’ Schultz asked. ‘Lorelli said you had a headache. She didn’t say anything about your wrist.’

‘Oh, I cut it,’ Joe said, leaning against the wall. ‘It’s nothing.’

‘I see.’ Schultz pulled at his lower lip. ‘Can you drive the car?’

‘Tonight?’ Joe’s voice betrayed his dismay.

‘I wish you two wouldn’t keep saying that. Of course, tonight. Immediately.’

‘I’ll drive,’ Lorelli said, quickly. ‘His wrist’s worse than he says. It was a bad cut.’

‘You seem to know everything, don’t you?’ Schultz said, looking at her coldly. ‘I suppose you put the bandage on?’

‘If a fella cuts himself, what do you expect me to do?’ Lorelli demanded. ‘Hang out flags?’

Schultz took the handkerchief off his lap and put it in his pocket. He was holding an automatic in his left hand.

Both Lorelli and Joe froze when they saw it.

‘What’s the idea?’ Lorelli demanded, harshly.

Schultz waved the gun at her and then at Joe. ‘Just a precaution,’ he said, with an oily smile. ‘I’ve learned to take precautions and besides, didn’t I tell you that it would be unwise to double-cross me?’

Joe said, ‘What’s the idea?’ He was careful not to move because he didn’t like the determined, cold expression on Schultz’s face. It was almost as if Schultz had made up his mind to shoot.

‘Never mind,’ Schultz said, getting to his feet. ‘We’re going on a little journey. I’ve got a job I want you to do.’ He jerked his head. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘You can drive the car, my pigeon, and Joe can sit beside you. I’ll sit at the back. I won’t be lonely

because I’ll have the gun.’

‘Well, if that’s how you feel,’ Lorelli said, shrugging, ‘I suppose we’ll have to go. You don’t mind if I get a coat, do you?’

‘I’m afraid we won’t stop for that,’ Schultz said, smiling again. ‘It’s hot out . . . you won’t need a coat, nor will Joe need a hat. You’ll come just as you are.’

Lorelli looked at Joe helplessly, but he gave no sign.

Schultz motioned her to the door. ‘Get moving,’ he said.

‘What are you going to do with me?’ Lorelli asked, now getting into a panic. She didn’t like the fixed, glassy look in Schultz’s eyes.

‘If you don’t get out of this room when I tell you,’ Schultz said softly, ‘I’ll hurt you and then Joe’ll have to carry you.’ His other hand groped and caught up the whisky bottle by its neck. ‘I’ll knock you on your pretty head with

this.'

She suddenly felt weak and put her hand on Joe's arm. He winced away, going pale and Schultz was quick to notice his pain.

'More than a cut, Joe,' he said, softly. 'We'll look at that later. Now, march!'

They went out of the room, into the darkness outside. For one fleeting moment, Lorelli nearly ran for it, but she remembered Schultz was an expert shot and she remembered, too, the look in his eyes. She climbed into the car and Joe followed her.

'What are we to do?' she whispered, as Schultz was climbing in.

Joe said, 'Wait. He'll slip up. Just wait.'

'Don't whisper,' Schultz said, evenly. 'It's rude,' and he smacked Joe on the side of his face with the gun barrel,

Joe sat forward, holding his face in his hand, his breath coming from between his teeth in a little hiss.

Lorelli had a horrible premonition that Schultz was going to kill them. She sat back against the cushions of the car, her fists clenched to her mouth, trying not to scream.

Schultz poked her with the gun. 'Pull yourself together, my pigeon,' he said in her ear. 'Or I'll get annoyed with you.'

With trembling fingers she turned the ignition switch and started the engine. 'Where are we going?' she asked.

'To the office,' Schultz said. 'And step on it.'

The drive through the dark streets was a nightmare to Lorelli. She clung to the wheel, her eyes staring at the jerking pools of light thrown by the headlights. She wanted the car to go on forever into the darkness, because she knew that so long as she was driving nothing would happen to her.

The gun barrel rapped her shoulder. The sharp pain made her catch her breath and she squirmed away.

'All right, all right, you stop here,' Schultz said. 'Don't tell me that you don't know the place.'

She stopped the car and sat huddled behind the wheel. Joe hadn't moved. He sat, his face in his hand, leaning forward, motionless.

Schultz slid out of the car and stepped away. The gun jerked up, covering them. 'Come on,' he said. 'Both of you out this side.'

Lorelli and Joe got out of the car and stood looking at him.

Joe's arm began to throb and he was worried about it. If it wasn't for that he wouldn't have been scared of Schultz. Joe had a lot of confidence, but with one arm, it wasn't going to be so easy.

'Take the key and open up,' Schultz said, tossing the key at Joe.

It fell at Joe's feet. He picked it up and walked to the door of the poolroom. He unlocked it and went in, putting on the lights. Schultz had to give Lorelli a little shove before she would go in and she immediately ran over to Joe.

Schultz shut the door. 'Across the room and downstairs. Be careful how you go. I'll be right behind you.'

They crossed the room and with Schultz following them they went down a steep flight of stairs. They stood in a dimly lit cellar that smelt damp. There was also a strong smell of whisky and beer from the large vats that stood round the room.

Schultz pointed to a trap door. 'Get it open,' he said. 'Go on, it won't bite you.'

Joe took hold of the small iron ring that protruded from the trap and pulled. It was too heavy for him and Lorelli went to his help. Together, they got it open. They looked down with growing uneasiness into a dimly lit vault.

Schultz watched them with a little smirk on his face. 'Down you go,' he said, softly. 'Now is the time for you to start anything if you feel that way. I warn you, no one will hear me shoot, so you must please yourselves what you do.'

Lorelli said, 'Paul, you can't do this. What have I done? Why have I got to go down there?'

'You won't be there long,' Schultz said, gently, 'I just want to make sure where you are when I want you. I'm going to be busy for the next few hours. You'll be all right down there and you'll have company. Now, get down.' His finger tightened on the

trigger of the gun and the hammer lifted slightly.

Lorelli sat on the floor, her legs hanging into space. The drop was not more than twelve feet and she swung herself down.

'Now you, Joe,' Schultz said, watching the boy with intent eyes.

Joe hesitated. He hoped that Schultz would have been off guard at least a few seconds, but he had given him no chance. He had been watching Joe the whole time, the gun never leaving Joe's chest.

Catching Schultz's eye Joe decided that this was not the time to start anything and with a little shrug, he dropped through the trap.

Lorelli and Joe stared up at Schultz as he padded forward and lifted the trap door. Then they suddenly heard a startled gasp from behind them. Out of the dim shadows a figure moved, slid away from them and crouched in a corner.

Lorelli screamed and grabbed hold of Joe.

'There's nothing to be scared of,' Schultz called from above. 'Let me introduce you. The lady in the corner is Miss Russell. Miss Clare Russell, late of the Clarion. You'll all have time for a nice little chat,' and laughing quietly, he let the trapdoor down with a slam.

TWENTY

Harry Duke drew up outside the Chez Paree, got out of his car and stood looking up at the dark building.

Somewhere down the street a clock chimed one.

The Chez Paree was closed and two patrolmen stood at the front door. They looked at Duke suspiciously. One of them came down the steps.

‘What do you want?’ he asked, looking Duke up and down.

‘Why, it’s closed,’ Duke said, looking beyond the patrolman at the building. ‘What’s the idea? I wanted a drink.’

‘You’d better come inside. The sergeant might like a word with you,’ the patrolman said, grimly. ‘Come on.’

Duke fell in step beside him. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘If it’s O’Malley, he might dig me up a drink.’

The patrolman looked at him closely. ‘I’ve seen you before somewhere, ain’t I?’ he asked.

‘Duke . . . Harry Duke’s the name.’

The patrolman relaxed. ‘Why, Mr. Duke, I didn’t recognize you. The sarg’ll be pleased to see you.’

They came up to the door and the other patrolman looked at Duke with interest.

‘It’s Mr. Duke,’ his companion said to him. ‘Wants to see the sarg.’

‘Go right in,’ Stone said, pushing open the door. ‘He’s in the office up on the left.’

Fleming, the other patrolman, cleared his throat as Duke walked into the hall. ‘Mr. Duke, you’ll pardon me, but how do you fancy Daybreak for tomorrow? Sarge says he looks good and I wanted to make myself a little dough for the weekend.’

‘He looks fine,’ Duke said, airily, ‘I’ve never seen a finer horse in the stable. Take the stable away and he’ll fall down.’ He crossed the hall, leaving the two patrolmen gaping after him.

He found O’Malley in Bellman’s office wandering around, smoking one of Bellman’s cigars.

The police sergeant seemed surprised to see him.

‘Hello, sarg,’ Duke said with a smile. ‘They said you were up here.’

‘Hey!’ O’Malley said, his red face darkening. ‘What about that licence number you got me to turn up.’

‘Forget it,’ Duke returned, his eyes busy round the room. They had taken Bellman’s body and the place looked as if they’d given it a thorough combing. ‘She was a nice-looking kid and I thought after all I’ve done for you, you might just as well do

something for me.’ He sat on the edge of the desk. ‘I hear you think Daybreak looks good.’

O’Malley’s eyes popped. ‘Well, doesn’t it?’ he asked, anxiously.

‘You’d better give up picking winners, you just haven’t got the feeling for them. Cigars broke that horse’s wind years ago. Get on to Hottentot. You can’t go wrong.’

O’Malley closed his eyes. ‘Gee!’ he said. That was close. I nearly put my week’s rent on Daybreak.’

‘Well, why don’t you ask next time? You know I don’t mind giving you boys a break. Besides, it’s a good thing to keep in with the cops, ain’t it?’

O’Malley looked at him. ‘Can I go the limit on this Hottentot?’ he asked.

‘Sure, I’ll put the bet on myself. What do you want? A grand?’

O’Malley blinked. ‘I ain’t got a grand,’ he said.

‘Okay, I’ll put you on for a grand.’

There was a short pause and then O’Malley looked away. ‘It’ll be tough if it loses,’ he muttered, loud enough for Duke to hear.

Duke watched him closely. ‘Tough for me,’ he said. ‘But it’ll win all right.’

O’Malley brightened. ‘You come in here pretty often, don’t you, Mr. Duke?’ he said, after another pause.

‘In here? You mean in this actual room?’

‘Yeah. There were some fresh fingerprints of your on the desk. I know that little burn you’ve got on your right forefinger.’

Duke didn’t say anything.

‘Doc says Bellman knocked himself off, so I didn’t think I’d complicate the case with your prints. I got rid of them.’

Duke drew in a little breath. ‘I suppose Hallahan knows about them?’ he asked, casually.

O’Malley shook his head. ‘I don’t tell Hallahan more than he needs to

know,' he said. 'Just thought I might save you some trouble.'

'Thanks.' Duke remembered the many tips he had given O'Malley in the past and was glad that he had done so. 'Well, I looked in to see Kells,' he went on. 'Is he around?'

O'Malley shook his head. 'He's over at the Western Turkish Baths,' he said. 'He's spending the night there.'

'I wanted to see him. I'd better get over there,' Duke said. He looked round the room. 'I suppose this joint'll be up for sale?'

O'Malley shrugged. 'Not my idea of an investment,' he returned. 'I like a joint where you can spit on the floor.'

'Oh, you can spit here if you like. They only charge you more for it.' Duke went over to the door. 'So long, pal. I'll fix that bet for you. You'll have quite a time spending your winnings.' He nodded and went out.

At the foot of the stairs, Fleming and Stone were waiting for him. 'How about this Daybreak?' they asked, anxiously.

'Hottentot,' Duke returned, feeling that he might as well keep in with the whole force while he was about it. 'Get your shirts on him, boys, it's a cinch.'

He left the club and drove over to the Western Turkish Baths.

The Negro attendant's face lit up when he saw him. 'Ain't seen you for a long time, Mr. Duke, boss,' he said.

'I haven't had time to get drunk recently,' Duke said, regretfully. 'Seen Mr. Kells?'

'Why sure, boss, he's in the hot room now.'

'That's fine. I'll join him How's trade . . . quiet?'

'It's slow tonight. You and Mr. Kells are the only two I've seen in the last couple of hours.'

'I'll probably stay the rest of the night,' Duke said. 'It's late enough now. That okay?'

'You suit yourself, Mr. Duke, boss. Can I order you breakfast?'

'Yeah. I'll want it early. Let me have a tenderloin steak, fried eggs and a coffee, will you? I've got a lot of things to do tomorrow morning.'

'Okay, boss, I'll fix it,' the Negro said, handing out towels and a bathrobe. 'You know your way?'

Duke nodded and went into the changing room. While he was undressing he thought about Clare. Where was she? She could, of course, be tucked up in her bed oblivious of his anxiety. She might be at the Clarion office pounding

out the story of Bellman's sensational suicide. But he doubted it. She might be scared and have left town or she might be kidnapped. These were the most likely ideas, he thought. If she had left town there was nothing to do except wait until the news got round that Bellman had committed suicide. If she'd been kidnapped, there was nothing to be done about it until he could determine the most likely people who could have done it. If she was kidnapped, it meant that she had seen Bellman's killer. There were ugly possibilities that she might, herself, be dead. Duke didn't like to think about that.

He wrapped a towel round his middle, lit a cigar and wandered down the passage into the hot room. He found Kells lolling back in a canvas deck chair, a towel across his knees. He was asleep.

Duke felt tired too, but he had to talk to Kells. He drew up another deck chair and sat down close beside Kells.

'Hey!' he shouted in Kells' ear, 'the place is on fire!'

Kells opened his eyes and looked at him sleepily. 'Oh, it's you,' he said in disgust, and closed his eyes again.

Duke admired his nerve. 'I want to talk to you,' he said. 'Wake up. This is important.'

Kells sighed and opened his eyes again. 'Got a cigar for me?' he asked, hopefully.

'What do you think I am, a kangaroo?' Duke slapped his naked chest. 'Still, I'll get you one.' He walked over and rang the bell.

'Let's have some Scotch too,' Kells said, yawning. 'You heard about Bellman?'

'Yeah,' Duke said, coming back to his chair. 'I wanted to talk to you about Bellman.'

'I guessed you did,' Kells grinned mirthlessly.

The Negro attendant came in and Duke told him where to find his cigar case. 'Bring us a bottle of Scotch and a couple of Whiterock and ice. It's hot in here.'

'It's supposed to be,' Kells said, as the Negro went out.

'I was forgetting,' Duke frowned down at the glowing tip of his cigar. 'Well, who killed Bellman?'

'It was suicide,' Kells said. 'Even the croaker said so.'

'I know what they said, but between you and me . . . who killed him?'

‘Maybe it was you and the chicken woman.’

‘Chicken woman?’

‘Yeah, the one that came out of an egg.’

‘Oh, yes. Well, it wasn’t. I just found him. You see, I’m being honest with you. I found her in the room and Bellman lying on the floor.’

‘Then she killed him,’ Kells said. He wasn’t taking much interest in the conversation.

The Negro came back with the drinks and cigar. Kells lit the cigar and shut his eyes. ‘Make the whisky a strong one.’

When the Negro had gone away, leaving the drinks close by Duke’s chair, he tried again. ‘How are you fixed, Lew?’

Kells drank half the whisky before replying, ‘Okay,’ he said, ‘I can look after myself. Korris will buy the club, I suppose.’

Duke looked surprised. ‘Korris? I shouldn’t have thought he’d have wanted Chez Paree. What makes you think that?’

‘I don’t know that he’ll buy it,’ Kells said. ‘I just say that he might.’

‘Bellman bought Pinder’s End, didn’t he?’ Duke asked, casually.

Kells shot him a hard look, hesitated and then nodded.

‘How far are you in this?’ Duke asked.

‘Far enough,’ Kells returned, looking sly.

‘Well, let me put my cards on the table if you’re going to act coy,’ Duke said, finishing his whisky and mixing himself another. ‘You ain’t the only one interested in Pinder’s End.’

‘I didn’t say I was interested,’ Kells said, guardedly. ‘And who else is there, anyway?’

‘There’s me,’ Duke returned, stretching out his long, muscular legs. ‘Then there’s Spade.’

‘Yeah,’ Kells cleared his throat. ‘Spade.’

‘What do you know about that guy?’ Duke asked, casually.

‘He worries me,’ Kells admitted. ‘I’ve been trying to find out who he is and where he fits in. No one seems to have ever seen him except Korris.’

‘I know all that,’ Duke said, shortly. ‘Now look, Lew, what do you know about Pinder’s End? If you want to play, we’ll pool. If you want to do this on your own, okay, we’ll forget it.’

Kells groped round for his glass. ‘You ain’t finished all that whisky?’ he asked.

Duke handed it over. He knew Kells was trying to make up his mind. He wasn't going to hurry him.

'You know Schultz is in this too?' he said, abruptly.

Kells slopped the whisky, steadied his hand and went on pouring. 'Schultz?'

'Yeah.'

'Schultz ain't much,' Kells said, as if trying to convince himself. 'I wouldn't worry about him.'

'Schultz works for Spade,' Duke announced, closing his eyes and giving way to the insidious heat that soaked into his tired muscles.

'I see. So if you and me. . .'

'That's the idea. You and me against Schultz and Spade. On our side we've got Casy . . . do you know Casy?'

'No.'

'Casy owns the big house at Pinder's End. He's got three Tommy guns and a lot of other lethal stuff up there with orders from me to keep everyone out. . . except me.'

Kells twisted in his chair and gaped at Duke. 'That's smart!' he said. 'So you've got the place sewn up?'

'Yes. But let me go on. I was talking about our side,' Duke said, his eyes still closed. 'We've got Pete Cullen, we've got the whole of the staff of the Clarion and we might have the chicken woman and her boyfriend Joe. They're ready to double-cross

Schultz. On the other side there is Korris, Schultz and, of course, Spade. I like the look of my side, Lew.'

Kells fidgeted with his bare feet. 'Yeah, it looks all right.'

'It's the carve-up that's worrying you.' Duke opened one eye and regarded him. 'Ain't there enough in it for us all?'

Kells hesitated. 'I reckon it's worth five hundred grand,' he said, at last.

Duke pursed his lips. 'Quite a nice slice,' he said, and fell silent.

'That's what Bellman said,' Kells went on hastily. 'Maybe he was lying. You remember Frank Noakes?'

Duke said, 'Frank Noakes? The bank bandit?'

Kells nodded. 'That's the fella. Just before the Feds knocked him off he passed through Fairview. This was some twelve years ago. He stayed at Pinder's End in Casy's house. Then he was smoked out and went on the run

again. Bellman says he left the whole of his loot in that house. The cops reckoned that it was worth five hundred grand.'

Duke thought for a few minutes. 'So that's the story, is it?' he said. 'That's the mystery of Pinder's End. Almost like the movies, ain't it?' He tossed the butt of his cigar neatly into a spittoon across the room. 'How did Bellman hear about this?'

'He got it from a guy who worked with Noakes. Deafy something or other, I forget his name. Deafy wanted Bellman to help him get the stuff. He had a map just where it was planted, but he was scared to go up to Pinder's End on his own. He was coked to the ears and hadn't the nerve even to cross a road. Bellman got rid of him.' Kells shook his head. 'I didn't like that part of it. There'd've been enough for Deafy. Anyway, Bellman didn't want to be bothered with him, so he got rid of him.'

Duke grunted. 'Nice guy,' he said, reflectively. 'And then he got Timson to buy the place?'

'That's right. Whoever killed Timson stole the title deeds. That put Bellman in a jam. Without the title deeds he couldn't take Pinder's End over. He didn't like to make too much fuss in case Spade got wise. Well, Spade, was wise all the time.'

'Do you think Spade killed Timson?'

'He might have done or one of his boys.'

'That means that Spade's got the title deeds?'

'I guess so.'

'Well, it doesn't matter. He can't get in that place without coming into the open and then we can ask him how he got hold of the deeds. So that's tied him up,' Duke said. 'If he tries to bust into Pinder's End, he'll get an almighty reception.'

'All we've got to do now,' Kells said, scratching the sole of his foot, 'is to go out to Pinder's End tomorrow and take the joint to pieces. When we've found the dough, we can laugh at Spade.'

'You like the set up?' Duke said.

'It's a cinch,' Kells returned. 'You can count me in.'

'You say there's a plan where the stuff's hidden. Who's got that, do you think?'

'We don't have to bother with that,' Kells returned. 'Who's got it? The guy who knocked off Bellman, I should think.'

‘Maybe the dough isn’t in Casy’s house. It might be in the garden or in one of the other bungalows.’

‘So what? We’ve got a lot of time, haven’t we? If we don’t find it in Casy’s well look someplace else. I don’t mind working for five hundred grand.’

‘Okay.’ Duke got up, tucked the end of his towel in at his waist and padded across the room to where a telephone stood on a table.

He dialled Clare’s number and sat listening to the crackling on the line. After a while the operator told him there was no reply.

He looked at the clock on the wall. It was a little after two o’clock.

Kells watched him sleepily. ‘Don’t you ever rest?’ he asked. ‘What’s wrong now?’

‘Go to sleep,’ Duke said, shortly. ‘You’ve got some hard work to do tomorrow.’

Kells grunted and made himself comfortable. He seemed to fall asleep the moment he closed his eyes.

Duke rang Peter’s apartment. There was no answer, and rather savagely, he slammed down the receiver.

It was no good going on like this, he decided. He’d have to leave things until the next day. There was a lot of things to do. The most important was to find Clare.

The heat in the room oppressed him and he slid into his dressing gown and walked into the next room. It was cooler in there.

Before going to sleep he had a cold shower. It didn’t help the feeling of acute depression that settled over him, but it cleared his head and lying on the narrow, comfortable bunk, he thought about Pinder’s End.

He saw things that he hadn’t seen before. The initials carved on the mantelpiece for instance, F.N. He understood why the unknown someone had been hiding upstairs. Five hundred thousand dollars was a lot of money. He wondered vaguely what was going to happen to the money when they found it. Two guys had got themselves killed through it already. It wouldn’t surprise him if several more went the same way before this business was over. Just before he fell asleep, he hoped sincerely that he wouldn’t be one of them.

TWENTY-ONE

Tod Korris opened his eyes and sat up in his bed with a jerk.

The telephone was ringing insistently at his elbow and as he reached out, he glanced at his watch. It was half past three a.m.

‘What is it?’ he snarled into the receiver.

‘Korris?’ He recognized the harsh voice at the other end of the line and his brain instantly became awake.

‘Yes, Mr. Spade,’ he said.

‘Did you see Hallahan?’

‘That’s all fixed,’ Korris said, inwardly cursing Spade for ringing at this time in the morning. ‘I gave him the money and he’s playing.’

‘Good.’ Spade was silent for a minute and Korris, thinking the connection had been cut, said, ‘Hello? You still there, Mr. Spade?’

‘Leave my name, out of it,’ Spade said, sharply. ‘We can’t fool around any longer, Korris. We’ve got to get moving.’

‘First thing tomorrow,’ Korris said, sinking back into the pillows and propping the telephone receiver against his ear.

‘I’ve got a job to do,’ Spade said, softly. ‘That’s why I’m ringing you now. Listen, get the mob together. We’re going out to take Casy’s house over. About a half a dozen men’ll do. Give ‘em guns and some ammunition. Casy’s got a gun from Duke. There may be a little trouble, but I don’t think so. I want you over there first thing tomorrow. When you’ve fixed Casy and the other guys, go through the house brick by brick. Do you understand?’

Korris nodded. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I’ll do that. Will you be there?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe I’ll come out. I’ll see.’

‘Have you seen Schultz?’ Korris asked, remembering.

Spade drew in a little hiss of breath. ‘No,’ he said.

‘What do you think?’

‘Yes,’ Spade said. ‘He’s double-crossing us. I’m going to have a little talk with him now.’

Korris grinned. ‘Do you want me to come along?’

‘I can manage Schultz,’ Spade returned. He sounded as if he meant it. ‘Have you seen anything of his girl and the boy?’

‘Not today.’

‘They’ve disappeared. Looks as if Schultz’s ready to clear out fast. He’s got the map, of course.’

‘Must have. I wish I’d fixed Bellman now, instead of sending him. I always thought we could trust Schultz.’

‘You can’t trust anyone,’ Spade returned. ‘I’ll give you a ring if I want you. You know what you’ve got to do, get to Casy’s as soon as you’ve rounded up the mob.’

‘Okay,’ Korris said, and the connection went dead.

Korris put the receiver on its cradle and shut his eyes.

So Spade was after Schultz. In a way, Korris wished he could be there. Schultz would be rather amusing to kill. He played with the idea of ringing Schultz and warning him, just to make his last hours more complicated. He knew that Schultz was caught. He was like a monkey with his paw in a bottle. He would never leave Fairview without Frank Noakes’s nest egg.

Korris hesitated with his hand on the telephone. Then he decided he couldn’t be bothered. There was too much to do in the morning. He’d better get some sleep while he could.

He reached for the light and switched it out. He went to sleep after a while and dreamed that Schultz was kneeling at the foot of his bed. He seemed quite happy, smiling in his fat, oily way, but when Korris looked closer, Schultz had a big wound in his throat.

The dream, however, did not disturb Korris. In fact, he slept all the better for it.

TWENTY-TWO

Schultz drove back to his house and put his car in the garage. He stood for a moment looking up and down the dark, deserted street, then moving quickly up the path, he let himself into the house.

He went immediately upstairs without turning on the lights. The house was silent and a little oppressive, he thought as he reached his bedroom. It was a pity about Lorelli. He would liked to have taken her with him. But, it was no good. If he couldn't trust her, he would never be at ease. He was getting too old anyway to have a young girl like Lorelli to worry about.

He turned on the electric light and looked round the small bedroom. It was neat and orderly. The door to Lorelli's room stood open and he half expected to hear her call out in her mocking voice. 'Is that you, Maestro?'

He walked to the door and fumbled for the switch. Turning on the light he looked round the room. The bed had not been made and Lorelli's silk pyjamas lay on the armchair. Powder was scattered on the dressing table and on the mirror. There was her unescapable scent in the room and he shook his head a little sadly. He was going to miss Lorelli. In a way, of course, he was going to miss Joe. The boy was useful. But, if he could get his hands on the money at Casy's, he wouldn't have to worry about Joe. He could go somewhere quiet, and settle down in his own little house with his own land and rear orchids to his heart's delight. But, he had got to get the money first.

He went over to Lorelli's dressing table and pulled out the drawers. In various little corners he found the small collection of jewellery he had given her in the past. The sum total could not have been worth more than a few hundred dollars, but he was leaving nothing of value.

He put the trinkets in his trouser pocket and then crossed over to the wardrobe. The Persian lamb coat he'd have to leave. It was too bulky to take with him. This irritated him. He disliked leaving anything of value. He went through all her clothes and found a small diamond brooch left carelessly on an evening gown. He unpinned it and put that in his pocket. Then leaving the wardrobe he went through the drawers in the fitted cupboard by the window.

There he found a small roll of money. It wasn't much and he didn't bother to count it. He simply stuffed it into his pocket and went on hunting. At the

back of the drawer he found a bundle of letters tied up with green ribbon. He looked at them suspiciously, ripped the ribbon off and read one or two quickly. Then he threw them back into the drawer, a snarl on his parrot-like mouth.

He had always suspected that Lorelli had cheated and now he knew for certain. He looked round the room, his eyes flecked with red, feeling that he would like to rip all her things to pieces. But he controlled himself. It was no good wasting time. There was still much to do.

Leaving her room, he went on to the landing and stood listening, then he groped his way to the top floor where Joe slept.

Joe's room was neat and clean. Every drawer in the chest was locked and so was the wardrobe.

Schultz took from his hip pocket a small jemmy and prised open each drawer. He found very little that interested him. A large box of .38 ammunition set him hunting for Joe's gun, but he didn't find it. This made him angry. What a fool he had been not to have searched Joe before he let him drop down into the cellar. There wasn't much chance of anyone hearing them shouting for help, but a gun was different. They might attract attention with the gun.

He stood thinking, pulling at his thick underlip, a heavy, scowling frown on his fat face. After he'd been out to Casy's, he'd have to go back. He shook his head. No, that was too risky. He'd have to go back before he went on to Fairview.

A patrolling cop might hear something. It wouldn't do to let them find Clare. It didn't matter much about Lorelli and Joe, but Clare was dangerous.

As he stood thinking, he heard a faint noise on the roof just above his head. He stiffened, his hand moving inside his coat, his ears straining.

The noise was repeated. It was soft, almost as if someone had tapped on the tiles very lightly with a stick.

Schultz moved silently across the room, and turned off the electric light. He was not alarmed, but he was taking every precaution. He thought the sound might be from a branch of the nearby tree moving in the wind against the roof. But Schultz was a little nervy and he wanted to satisfy himself.

He groped his way across the dark room and very gently pulled back the curtains. Below him was the sloping roof.

The moon rode high, lighting the street and the trees and shining directly

on to the roof. He heard the sound again distinctly. It seemed closer and then a small, black shadowy form walked delicately along the tiles. It was a cat.

Schultz grinned at it. He took his hand away from his gun and took out his handkerchief. He found his face was running with sweat.

‘A cat,’ he said, softly. ‘Losing my nerve or something.’

He watched the cat walk along the roof and then pause at the gutter. It sniffed at the space below and then turned and came walking back. Schultz could see its gleaming eyes as it passed close to him. He heard it overhead and he relaxed, drawing the curtain and putting on the light again.

The cat had disturbed his train of thought. He stared round the room, trying to remember what had been worrying him. Ah, yes, the gun. Once again his face puckered into a heavy frown. It was going to be difficult to tackle Joe. He was a vicious boy and might shoot on sight.

What a fool he had been not to guess that Joe would be carrying a gun. He went out of the room, turning off the light, and made his way along the corridor to the head of the stairs.

The house seemed full of vague sounds and he stopped to listen. There was a wind getting up and somewhere downstairs a door slammed loudly.

Had he left a window open? He couldn’t remember. It was a hot night and he may have done, or even Lorelli might have left it open before leaving the house.

As he stood listening, he thought of Spade. There was no association of ideas to account for the reason why he should suddenly think of him. But the name slipped into his mind unexpectedly and he immediately tried to discard the thought. But, now that Spade was in his mind, he began to think that Spade was everywhere.

The darkness around him was full of Spade’s presence. The creaking of the stairs, the rustling of the curtains below were made by Spade. Even the soft footfalls of the cat overhead were made by Spade as he crept across the moonlit tiles.

Schultz shivered. The fat of his body had gone cold, encasing him in a trembling, chilling mass of clay. He pulled at his underlip nervously and stared down into the darkness. For several seconds he struggled to gain control of his jumpy nerves. Then, as if to reassure him, the wind died down and the noises in the house were stilled.

He put out his hand and touched the banister rail and descended the stairs

slowly and noiselessly.

Back in his bedroom with the light on, he recovered his nerve. As he began to pack, he thought about Spade.

In actual fact, Spade ought to be pleased with him. Hadn't he got rid of Bellman? Even the police thought it was suicide. That showed that he had done the job well.

He put his fat hand inside his coat and took out a worn wallet. From the wallet he pulled out a square piece of paper and looked at it. It was the plan of where Noakes had hidden the bonds.

He wondered if Spade knew of its existence. If he did he might be wondering why he hadn't come over and given it to him. Yes, he ought to have telephoned Korris and played for time.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly a quarter to five. This startled him. He had no idea that he had wasted so much time. He hurried on with his packing, throwing his things into two large suitcases, taking with him only the bare essentials.

When he had finished packing, he picked up the suitcases and went downstairs. As he reached the hall, he came to an abrupt halt. He felt his heart give a jerk and the back of his throat suddenly went dry.

From under the door of his sitting room came a streak of light.

He put the bags down very gently and fumbled for his gun. He'd been in there, of course, but he was almost certain that he had turned the light out before going upstairs. Now, it was on.

Once again his nerves fluttered and he went cold again. He tiptoed across the hall and listened with his ear against the panel of the door. There was no sound. Outside a car went past with a noisy change of gears.

Schultz drew his gun and very gently turned the handle of the door. He threw it open at the same time stepping quickly to one side. The room was empty.

He drew in a deep breath of relief and edged cautiously into the room. As he stood looking round, the curtains suddenly billowed out, caught by the wind. He whirled round with a snarl of fear. The curtains fell into place and then heaved out towards him again. Crossing the room with jerky steps, he drew the curtains and peered out into the garden.

The first light of dawn came over the rooftops and he could make out the flower beds and the flowers moving in the wind. There was nothing out there

that could cause alarm.

He closed the window and drew the curtain. He was frightened. He knew someone had opened the window while he had been upstairs. He remembered particularly that the window had been closed as he came up the path after putting the car in the

garage. Was someone hiding in the house, or had they heard him and gone away?

He pulled nervously at his thick underlip, feeling the sweat run down behind his ears and along his collar.

Then as he turned to the door, he distinctly heard someone moving overhead.

The heavy, deliberate tread was unmistakable. Someone was walking about Lorelli's room without taking the trouble to conceal the fact.

Schultz's blood chilled. He crossed the room with two quick strides and snapped off the light. Then he stood in the hall listening.

The sound of the footsteps came out of Lorelli's room. Someone was coming along the upstairs passage towards the stairs. He crouched back feeling his heart thumping against his side. The footsteps stopped abruptly.

Through the fanlight over the front door came the first light of the new day. But a new day meant nothing to Schultz. He felt that for him the immediate future was very unlikely now that Spade was in the house. In fact, he began to wonder in a vague frightened way how much of the immediate present was left to him.

Out of the thinning darkness, the sound of the footsteps came down the stairs. They did not creep down. They came down firmly and deliberately as if aware that he was crouched against the wall, suffocating with terror.

TWENTY-THREE

Clare supposed she must have slept. She didn't remember dozing off and it came as a shock to her to be roughly shaken and to find Joe bending over her. For a moment, she couldn't remember him and her blank, frightened look seemed to irritate him.

'Wake up!' he said. 'This ain't the time to sleep.'

Then she remembered where she was and how he had come through the trap with the girl and how Schultz had laughed at them before closing the trap. She had no idea how long she had slept.

She remembered liking the girl. She had been friendly, but the boy, with his white face and stony, blank eyes, had made her nervous. He wouldn't let the girl say anything. Every time she spoke to Clare he had said, 'Don't tell her anything. Whatever you say'll go into the paper.'

So in the end the girl had gone over to a pile of straw and stretched out. Clare must have dozed off soon after.

Now, a little alarmed to find the boy bending over her, she struggled up. 'What's the matter?' she asked, anxiously.

'There's nothing the matter,' Lorelli said, coming over and yawning. 'He never lets anyone rest. He's just in a bad mood.'

Joe looked from one to the other. His wrist ached and the small cellar oppressed him. 'We've got to get out of here,' he said. 'Can't you think of something instead of sleeping?'

Clare thought that was reasonable, but she was tired and the close, damp atmosphere made her eyes heavy. She looked round the dimly lit stone and cement walls. 'There's no way out,' she said. 'I've looked everywhere.'

But Joe wouldn't let it rest. 'You're educated,' he persisted. 'Well, use your brain. We've got to get out.'

'Oh, shut up, Joe,' Lorelli said, sharply. She came and sat down beside Clare. 'You've got the jitters. Paul'll come back.'

'He'll come back,' Joe said, staring round. 'And you know what he'll do. We'll be like rats in a trap.'

'Where is this place?' Clare asked.

'It's under a poolroom Schultz has an office here, but I never knew about

this cellar,' Lorelli told her.

Clare said quickly, 'This is where Harry Duke works?'

Lorelli looked at her suspiciously and Joe cut in, 'Always questions - questions,' he said, nursing his wrist. 'Can't you stop talking?'

'What do you know about Harry Duke?' Lorelli asked, ignoring Joe.

'He's a friend of mine,' Clare said, feeling confused.

Lorelli wondered how Harry Duke had met her. She shrugged. 'He won't help you,' she said. 'No one would think of looking here.'

'Can't you two stop talking and use your heads?' Joe said. 'I tell you we've got to get out of here.' Clare got to her feet and once more looked round the cellar. It was full of boxes, enormous barrels and straw. The only piece of furniture was a large cupboard standing against the far wall.

'What's in here?' she asked, rapping one of the barrels.

'Talk sense,' Joe said, bitterly. 'It doesn't help us to get out.'

Clare tried to tilt the barrel, but it was too heavy. 'There's something in this,' she said.

Lorelli came over. 'Beer,' she said. 'We shan't die of thirst.' She gave a little giggle, and added, 'Joe hates beer like hell.'

Clare wasn't listening. She glanced up at the trap in the ceiling and then at the barrel. 'How did they get it in here?'

Joe clenched and unclenched his sound hand. 'Can't you stop talking?' he said, viciously.

Lorelli glanced at the trap and then she got excited. 'She's right, Joe. This couldn't have come through the trap. It's too large.'

'What do you mean?' Joe said, suspiciously, staring at the barrel.

'Can't you see?' Clare said. 'There must be another way in. These barrels didn't grow here and they couldn't have come through the trap.' She picked up the lantern and began to examine the walls carefully. The other two stood watching, but she didn't find anything.

When she came to the cupboard, she found it was locked. 'Can't we get this open?' she asked.

Joe came over and examined the lock. Drawing back, he aimed a vicious kick at it and the plywood splintered.

Clare peered through the split wood. 'There's a door behind this,' she said, excitedly.

Joe pushed past her and began ripping the wood away. He worked

feverishly with his one sound hand and when he had made a large enough opening, he could see a door in the back of the cupboard. He wedged himself into the cupboard and turned the handle. The door opened outwards.

‘Bring the lantern,’ he said, keeping his voice low. ‘And don’t make a noise.’

Clare slipped through the broken panels, but Lorelli had a lot of difficulty. As she squeezed through, tearing her dress, Clare heard her swear softly.

They stepped into a dark passage. It was low and smelt of damp.

‘Give me the light,’ Joe said, sharply.

Clare handed it to him and he held the lantern above his head. There was a staircase just in front of them and beyond that, a passage continued to a door.

Joe went down the passage and found the door was locked. There was nothing he could do about that and he returned. ‘That’s our way out,’ he whispered, jerking his thumb to the stairs.

Keeping close to him, they followed him up the dusty stairs. ‘Half way up, Joe paused. ‘Listen,’ he said, softly.

Above them came a low murmur of men’s voices. Joe felt in his hip pocket and pulled out his gun. ‘Wait here,’ he said, ‘I’ll see what’s going on.’

Lorelli clutched at his sleeve. ‘I don’t like this,’ she said, nervously.

He shook her off. ‘Shadup!’ He stood listening, his thin, white face uneasy in the light of the lantern.

Clare thought he looked like a cornered ferret. His black eyes were bright and restless and a muscle fluttered in his cheek. He blew out the lantern and set it on the ground. ‘Wait here,’ he repeated. ‘If you hear anything, don’t give yourselves away.’ He moved quietly up the stairs, leaving them standing tense in the darkness.

When he had gone some way up, he paused to listen again. The voices seemed very near. He could hear snatches of conversation.

A man said violently, ‘How much longer do you think I’m going to wait here?’

‘Shut your mouth, you punk,’ another voice growled. ‘You’ll wait and like it.’

There was a confused sound of voices, then someone said, ‘Can’t one of you guys make some coffee? I feel like hell.’

Joe judged there must be quite a number of men up there. He crept forward until his feet told him that he had reached the top of the stairs.

He could see a light coming from under the door at the far end of the passage. Near him was a window with the blind down. The early morning light filtered round the edges of the blind and that made him look at his watch. It was 5.30 a.m.

He raised the blind a few inches so that he could see. There were two doors at either end of the passage. The door on the right led to the room where the men were. The one on the left might lead to the street. He walked down the passage and opened the left-hand door. He had one brief glimpse of the sky and an alleyway, before he realized, with a shock that sent his heart fluttering, that he had walked into Tod Korris.

Just for a split second they stared at each other, then Joe, with the courage of desperation, swung his fist and hit Korris on the jaw with his left hand. The blow sent Korris reeling back with a startled grunt. Joe jerked up his gun. He covered Korris who backed against the wall.

‘Hold it,’ Joe said, softly.

Korris recovered himself, adjusted his glasses and grimaced at Joe. ‘You nuts or something?’ he said, feeling his jaw with his fingertips. Then he recognized Joe. ‘Schultz’s kid?’ The pale eyes behind the glasses became cold. ‘What do you want here?’

Joe did some quick thinking. If he could get the girls he could knock Korris out and they’d get away. But it wasn’t going to be easy to let them know what was going on. He knew that Korris was as dangerous as a cobra. It wouldn’t do to take his eyes off him for a second. On the other hand, if he didn’t act quickly, someone might come out of the room at the far end of the passage.

‘I didn’t mean to hit you,’ he said. ‘You scared me. I was looking for Schultz and got lost.’

Korris raised his eyebrows. ‘Could you point that heater somewhere else?’ he asked, politely. ‘It might go off.’

Joe lowered the gun, but he was very watchful. He didn’t know what to do. ‘You’re bright and early, ain’t you?’ he said, edging a little closer. He thought if he could catch Korris off his guard, he might smack him with the gun butt.

‘The early bird gets the worm,’ Korris said, glancing behind Joe and then looking at the boy with a smile. He touched his jaw again. ‘You’ve got quite a punch for a youngster.’

Something rammed into Joe's spine and a voice said, 'Drop the rod, you jerk!'

Joe shivered, hesitated, but the gun kept grinding into his spine, so he let his .38 slip out of his fingers to the floor.

He was suddenly jerked round and he found a man with heavy eyebrows and a scar that ran down his cheek to his collar grinning at him. He had time to notice that the man's teeth were broken and decayed and then the man hit him with his half clenched fist high up on his cheek bone.

Joe thudded against the wall and slipped to the floor.

'Hello, Biff,' Korris said. 'The other boys here?'

The man nodded. 'Who's the punk?'

'Schultz's boy,' Korris said, looking down at Joe without interest. 'Bring him along.'

The man, Biff, reached down, grabbed Joe by his shirt and coat and jerked him to his feet. Holding Joe so that only his toes scraped the ground, he marched down the passage into a large, smoke-filled room.

There was a table in the centre of the room, covered with bottles, playing cards, glasses and money. About eight men sat round the table playing poker.

Biff carried Joe in, gave a heave and flung the boy on to the table. Joe swept the table clean with his body, upsetting two of the men nearest to him.

There was an immediate uproar. Men jumped to their feet, cursing. The two men who had gone over lay stunned for a moment and then joined in the noise.

Biff bellowed with laughter. He thought it was the funniest thing, Joe scrambled to his feet and backed hastily away.

There were at least a dozen men in the room. Some he had seen in the various poolrooms in his district, but none that he had ever spoken to.

Komski, one of the men who had fallen over, a thin, vicious looking fellow with long black hair and an unshaven chin, stepped up to him, swept his hands away and knocked him across the room with a back hand slap on his mouth.

Joe cannoned into another man, who spun him round and kicked him across the room. He fell on his hands and knees and another boot thudded into his ribs, sending him over on his side. He lay there, riding the pain and shivering with repressed rage and hatred.

As someone else moved over to kick him again, Korris said, sharply,

‘Shadup, you guys!’

The room became quiet and they all looked in astonishment at Korris. They hadn’t noticed him in the uproar.

‘Leave him alone,’ Korris said, sitting at the table. He glanced at his watch and eased the muscles in his shoulders. ‘Ain’t one of you lazy punks got some coffee going? I’m feeling half dead. Come on, don’t stand there like a lot of half-gutted monkeys. Get some coffee and bring that guy to me. I want to talk to him.’

Komski grabbed Joe and pulled him to his feet. When Joe got his balance, he jerked free, jumped away from Komski and snatched up a chair. He smashed it down on Komski before he could get out of the way. The chair flew to pieces and Komski was beaten to his knees.

The others scattered hastily, leaving a space round Joe, who circled slowly, holding the back of the chair in his sound hand.

Komski knelt on the floor, holding his head and swearing.

Biff said, ‘What’s the matter with you? He’s only a kid,’ and went off in a bellow of laughter.

Komski got to his feet and rushed at Joe, who sidestepped him and hit him on the back of his neck with the chairback. Komski stumbled and then pitched forward on his face.

Someone standing behind Joe kicked his legs from under him with a strangled grunt of a laugh and then shifted closer and stepped on Joe’s upturned face.

Korris said, ‘Be careful with him. I want to talk to him.’

Biff went over to Joe and hauled him to his feet. Joe’s face ran blood where his nose had been flattened. He looked at Biff murderously, but he didn’t struggle. He thought his nose was broken and it hurt him a lot. Biff took him over to Korris.

‘What are you doing here?’ Korris snapped.

Joe didn’t say anything.

Korris looked at Biff. ‘He’s deaf,’ he said.

Biff grinned. He put his great hand over Joe’s face and pressed. Joe gave a strangled scream, backed away and then Biff caught him again.

‘What are you doing here?’ Korris asked again.

‘I told you,’ Joe said, his voice thick. ‘I was looking for Schultz.’

Korris waved him away. ‘Soften him, Biff,’ he said. ‘Take him somewhere

and get all the dope. I've got things to do. Find out what he's been up to.'

Biff looked bored, but he grabbed hold of Joe and dragged him to the door.

Komski had got up by now. 'Let me do it,' he said, holding the back of his neck and staring at Joe.

Biff looked at Korris. 'Okay?'

'Sure, but you're not to kill him,' Korris said. 'Just soften him up.'

Komski went over and took Joe by his bad wrist. He twisted it and Joe nearly went out. He hung on to his senses with an effort, but there was nothing much he could do for the moment. He let Komski drag him out of the room.

While this had been going on, Clare and Lorelli had been waiting on the stairs. They heard Joe talking to Korris and they heard Biff telling Joe to drop his gun. Then they heard them go into the room and shut the door.

They ran up the stairs and when they reached the back door, Clare saw Joe's gun lying on the floor. She picked it up. 'You're not going to leave him here?' she whispered to Lorelli.

'Give me that,' Lorelli said, snatching the gun out of Clare's hand. 'You go. I'll wait here. Get Harry Duke. It's no good going to the cops. This is Spade's mob and the cops work for 'em. Get Harry Duke.'

Clare hesitated. 'No, I can't leave you. I can't. . .'

Lorelli shoved her to the door impatiently. 'I'm okay,' she said, curtly. 'You don't think a bunch of rats like them could scare me, do you? I've got the gun. That's all I need. Get off; otherwise we're sunk.'

Clare realized that there was some sense in that. 'Where shall I find him?' she asked. 'I don't know where he lives.'

Lorelli frowned. 'This Cullen fellow will tell you,' she said at last. 'But be quick.'

Clare said, 'I'll do it,' she squeezed Lorelli's arm and then slipped out into the alleyway.

She hadn't been gone a half a minute when Komski came out, dragging Joe. When the door closed behind him, Joe suddenly went for Komski

Komski, snarling, began to club Joe about the head with his fists. Joe held on, punching, kicking and biting like a madman.

Biff put his head round the door. 'For the love of mike,' he said, 'Can't you handle a little punk like that?'

Komski threw Joe against the wall and hit him on his nose. Joe gave a thin

wail and slithered down to the floor.

‘Beat it!’ Komski said, savagely. ‘I’ve only just started on this unprintable this, that and the other.’

Biff grinned and went back into the room.

As Komski bent over Joe, Lorelli came up behind him in a silent rush. She hit Komski on the head with the butt of the .38. She hit him as hard as she could and the jar from the blow ran up her arm.

Komski gave at the knees and folded up on the floor on top of Joe. Lorelli dragged him clear, pulled him over on his back and hit him just above the bridge of his nose. She was so excited that the sharp sound of breaking bone didn’t even make her flinch.

Joe spat blood. ‘Hit the heel again,’ he said, and fainted.

That was how the third day began and by nightfall the whole business was finished.

TWENTY-FOUR

The smell of food woke Harry Duke. He sat up, blinked and then gaped at the Negro who was shaking him gently. 'Breakfast, boss,' the Negro said. 'You said you wanted it early.'

Harry Duke yawned and sat up. He felt low. 'Get me a drink, will you?' he said, looking at the steak and fried eggs with an uneasy eye. 'Did I order that lot? I must have been crazy.'

While the Negro went into the hot-room for the whisky Harry Duke swung himself off the bunk and took a shower. He felt a lot better after that and when he had a stiff drink, he felt fine. He sat down and began to eat

'Mr. Kells up?' he asked.

The Negro nodded. 'Yeah, boss, he's coming in now.'

A moment or so later, Kells came in. He looked sleepy and the sight of Duke eating made him wince. 'That's enough to turn the strongest stomach,' he said, looking away. 'Steak at five o'clock in the morning.'

'Get him something,' Harry Duke said to the Negro. 'He'll want it before the day's out.'

'Coffee,' Kells said. 'And nothing else.'

'Don't be a dope,' Duke returned, spreading mustard on his steak. 'We're going to be too busy to bother with food once we get going.'

The Negro grinned. 'I'll fix you with something,' he said, and went out.

'What's the first move?' Kells asked, examining his chin in a mirror on the wall.

'We'll get over to Cullen's, pick him up and find out if he's seen Clare.'

'Clare?' Kells repeated. 'Every time you open your mouth you introduce a new character into his business. 'Who's she?'

'Clare Russell of the Clarion. She's missing. Did you see her last night? She came to talk to Bellman just before he was murdered.'

'That's the dame, is it?' Kells said, then he banged his fist on the table. 'Holy smoke; I remember now! Schultz and she were leaving when I arrived at the club last night.'

'Schultz?' Duke threw down his knife and fork. 'Was he there?'

Kells got quite excited. 'I never went near Bellman. Schultz could have

killed him! What a dope I am! He had the girl by the arm and he said something about her not feeling well. She looked as if she were going to pass out and he had to support her as she walked.'

Harry Duke kicked back his chair and stood up. 'You brainless lug!' he said angrily. 'We could have got on to him last night. Come on, we ain't got a minute!'

'Hey!' Kells looked alarmed. 'What about my breakfast?'

'Forget it!' Duke returned, struggling into his coat. 'We've got to get hold of Schultz.'

Kells ran back into the hot room to get his clothes, while he was dressing, Duke rang Peter, but after delay, the operator said that there was no reply. He stood waiting for Kells impatiently, eating the last of the steak.

'Fill up,' Kells said, bitterly. 'Don't mind about me.'

'Come on,' Harry Duke said, impatiently. 'I couldn't care less about you.'

As they left the room, the Negro came in with a tray. Kells grabbed a plate of grilled ham, hastily put the ham between the two slices of bread and butter and followed Harry Duke into the street.

The Negro gaped after them, his eyes bulging out of his head.

Duke drove furiously, while Kells munched his sandwich.

'I can't make out where the hell Peter's got to,' Duke said. 'I ought never to have left him.'

Kells grunted. He wasn't interested in Peter. 'He'll turn up,' he said, finishing his sandwich and wiping his fingers on his coat. 'Don't you worry about him.'

'Where's your car?' Duke asked abruptly.

'My what?'

'Car, you dope, thing with wheels and gasoline.'

'In the garage behind Chez Paree.' Kells looked bewildered. 'Why?'

Duke turned off the main street and drove furiously down the street that lay parallel to it. 'I've just thought of something. I want you to take your car and get over to Pinder's End. Tell Casy how things look and tell him to watch out. I'll feel safer with you out there.' He slowed down as they reached the Chez Paree. 'Okay?'

Kells got out of the car. 'Sure,' he said. 'Suppose the guy shoots me?'

Duke remembered the applejack and pushed the earthenware jar into Kells' hands. 'Show him that,' he said. 'He'll know you're a friend.'

He drove off, leaving Kells taking a long pull from the jar.

It took him five minutes of reckless driving to reach Schultz's house. He didn't attempt to creep up on Schultz, but nailed the car outside the front door, jumped out and ran up the path.

The front door was locked, but Duke didn't hesitate. He took a flying kick and the door crashed off its hinges. He walked straight into the passage, over the door, his coat open and his hand ready to go for his gun. There was a hard look on his face and a frosty gleam in his eye.

Then in the hall, he stopped short. There were bloodstains on the wall. Long smears as if someone, bleeding badly, had supported himself against the wall.

He stood still. It was a moment of great revelation to him. He found then what Clare meant to him. He had only seen her twice in forty-eight hours. He had quarrelled with her and he had put her out of his mind in those forty-eight hours. But thinking that this was her blood, he realized how much she meant to him and how empty and thin his life was going to be without her.

It came as a complete shock to him, as if he had been blindfolded and now he could see. Life had a bleakness that frightened him.

He didn't want to go into the house in case he found her. He didn't want this sudden unexpected and horrible nightmare to come to life.

And as he stood there, he heard someone run up the path and he heard Clare's voice say, 'Oh, Harry . . .' and he turned, not believing that he had heard correctly.

She was standing just outside the house, peering in at him. The sun in her hair and her great eyes alive with relief.

He stood looking at her and then he walked across the fallen door and took her in his arms. She looked up at him, her eyes bewildered and then he crushed his mouth down on hers, holding her against him, so that she couldn't move and he stayed like that for a long time.

Clare wanted to get away from him, but he was too strong, then she felt something inside her melting and she wanted never to be out of his arms. She clung to him, feeling her lips bruising, but wanting him to remain like that.

He suddenly put her away from him and shook his head as if trying to clear something from his mind. 'I thought something had happened to you,' he said, still holding her arms. 'I thought something horrible had happened to you.'

She couldn't say anything, but she just stared at him, not knowing what to think.

He remembered the bloodstains and looked back over his shoulder at the house. 'Wait here,' he said, 'I won't be long.' Then leaving her, he walked into the house again.

In the sitting room he found Peter Cullen. He was sitting in a chair, the front of his shirt was red and there was a red smear on his mouth. He seemed to be looking up at the ceiling in a frightened, concentrated stare and a fly walked across his open eye as Duke looked at him.

Duke just stood there looking. He felt no shock. He felt nothing. This wasn't the Peter Cullen he had known. This was someone who didn't matter, who was dead and who looked rather horrible. The Peter Cullen he knew was still going about, still worrying over things that need not be worried over, still looking at him in a friendly critical way and telling him that he was wild.

Then Clare came in.

Duke was too late to stop her. He just put his arm round her and held her against him while she looked at Peter Cullen. He felt her trembling against him and that made him feel bad.

She didn't ask if he was dead. She could see he was. She just held on to Harry Duke and felt the small life she had built round Peter Cullen gradually go to pieces.

She said, 'Take me away,' at last, and he picked her up and carried her out of the house.

He liked the feel of her against him, the weight of her that tugged at his muscles and the touch of her hair against his face. He put her gently into his car. 'I've got things to do,' he said. 'You'll wait for me . . . won't you?' and he went back into the house.

He walked hurriedly from room to room, not expecting to find anyone and not finding anyone. Then he went back to Peter Cullen and stood looking down at him.

Peter had been shot at close quarters. There was a burn on his shirt from the flash of the gun. Otherwise, there was nothing to tell Duke how it happened. All he knew was that it must have been Schultz. Somehow, Peter had learned that Schultz had got Clare and had come out after her. He had come out without a gun, Duke reasoned, and Schultz had shot him down.

Duke touched Peter's hand. 'I'll get him,' he said, quietly. 'I'll fix him for

this,' and he went back to his car.

Clare sat, wooden, staring in front of her. When Duke got in beside her, she said, 'There's a girl Lorelli and a boy called Joe . . . do you know them?'

'Sure,' Duke said. 'But don't worry about anything right now.'

'But they are in trouble,' Clare said, anxiously. 'That's why I came. Lorelli said for you to come. They are in the back of your poolroom with Korris and a lot of men.'

Duke pushed his hat off his eyes. 'Never mind about them,' he said. 'They're just no count bums. What can I do for you? Where do you want to go?'

She twisted round fiercely in her seat. 'But they helped me. You've got to do something. You've got to help them.'

'Okay, okay,' Duke sent the car leaping forward. 'I'll do something,' and he drove furiously towards the poolroom.

While he drove, he forgot about her and thought of Schultz. He wondered where he was and how soon it would be before he found him. His hands tightened on the wheel. He made up his mind there and then that wherever Schultz hid himself he would get him. He became aware that Clare was speaking and he glanced at her white, strained face wondering how much Peter had meant to her.

'You can't go there alone,' she was saying. 'There are a lot of them. You must get help, but the girl said that it was no use going to the police.'

Duke said, 'I'll take care of it. Don't you worry about this,' and swung the car off the main street, heading for his own apartment. 'I've got a Tommy at home. That'll hold 'em and it won't lose much time; it's in the same direction.'

'Who killed him?' she asked, suddenly, her fists clenched so that her knuckles shone in the sunlight.

'Schultz, I should say,' Duke said, between his teeth. 'Yes, I guess it must have been Schultz.'

'I asked you to leave him alone, didn't I?' She didn't sound angry, but just as if she were thinking aloud in a dazed, bewildered way. 'If you had left him alone this wouldn't have happened. I told you he couldn't look after himself. But you wouldn't believe me. He wouldn't believe me either. He was too nice and kind and decent to die like that. That's the way people like Spade and Schultz and - and you will die. But, Peter wasn't made for that sort of

end.'

Duke stopped outside his apartment house. He turned in his seat. 'I know how you feel about this,' he said. 'But being bitter won't help. Peter was a good friend of mine and I'll miss him. He meant a lot more to you than he meant to me and you'll miss him too. But, we can't do anything about it. All we can try to do is to remember him as we knew him and just think that he's gone away. Then neither of us will be sorry for saying things that might not be true and might hurt other people.'

She didn't say anything, but sat looking down the road, wooden and bitter in her loss.

'I'll get the gun,' Duke said. 'If you want to go home, why don't you take a taxi?'

She looked at him and he saw the pent-up dislike for him in her eyes. 'I want to see the end of this,' she said. 'You don't think I want to stay out of it now he's gone, do you?'

He shrugged and ran into the house.

While he was loading the Thompson, the telephone rang. He hesitated, then throwing the gun on the bed, he answered the telephone.

'Harry Duke?' He recognized Lorelli's voice. She sounded excited.

'Where are you?' he said, surprised. 'I was coming out to rescue you like they do in the movies.'

'I can look after myself,' she said. There was pride in her voice. 'What do you think I am? Listen, I'm phoning from a drug store on the corner of Lincoln Street. Will you come and get me?'

Duke said, 'I'm on my way,' and hung up.

He wrapped the gun in a blanket which he yanked off his bed and ran downstairs.

'Lorelli's okay,' he said, dropping the gun into the back of the car and climbed in beside Clare. 'She's just phoned. We're going to pick her up.'

Clare said nothing. Her wooden face made him nervous. He wished she would cry or something. Anything would be better than sitting there with that set face and her eyes like holes in a white sheet.

He reached Lincoln Street in under four minutes. Lorelli and Joe were standing on the corner. Joe was holding a handkerchief to the lower part of his face. His eyes glowed viciously.

Lorelli got in the car and Joe followed her. 'Fairview,' she said. 'And step

on it. I'll talk while you drive.'

Duke turned the car and began to beat it up the main street. 'What's cooking?' he asked.

'Plenty.' Lorelli sounded quite worked up. 'Spade's mob is getting ready to take over Pinder's End. When we left they were making plans. Twelve men and Korris. All have guns, but they're not expecting trouble.'

Duke smiled. 'Then there's a little surprise waiting for them,' he said. He looked round at Clare. 'This is the chance I was talking to you about. Remember? I said the only way to rid Bentonville of this mob was to get them in a bunch and knock them off. This is where they get it. And the guys who'll give, it to them are the outcasts of the district. If it still means anything to you, I'll bet that Bentonville will be as clean as a whistle in a week's time.'

'It's a little late,' was all Clare said, still nursing her grief.

Lorelli was leaning forward breathing down Duke's neck. 'What are you going to do?' she demanded.

'I'll drop you three at Fairview and then go on and warn Casy. They've got guns up there and Kells has joined them. If we plan it right, we ought to beat hell out of them.'

'If you think I'm going to miss this, you're crazy,' Lorelli said. 'You ought to have seen me crack the skull of a guy who was pushing Joe around.'

Duke shook his head. 'Sorry,' he said. 'You're out. I don't want women in this fight.'

Joe said tonelessly, 'There are other things at Pinder's End beside a fight. You look after the fight and we'll look after the other things.' He had found the Thompson and he was pointing it at Duke's head.

Duke could see the barrel reflected in his driving mirror. He could also see Joe's bloodstained face. He didn't like the look in the boy's eyes.

'If that's how you feel,' he said, more amused than alarmed, 'just let me drop Clare off and we'll all make up a happy party.'

Clare said, 'I'm coming too.'

'Let her come,' Lorelli said to Joe. 'She might be useful.'

'Everyone's in this,' Joe said, lowering the gun and mopping his nose again. It hurt him and so did his wrist. His temper was dangerous and uncertain. 'Why don't you invite the whole town up there?'

'Quiet!' Lorelli returned. 'What else can we do?'

'Know how much there's supposed to be up there?' Duke said. 'Five

hundred grand. That's enough to share out, isn't it?'

Joe seemed more easy. 'Five hundred grand.' He almost forgot the throb of pain in his nose and wrist.

As they approached Fairview, Duke said to Clare, 'Are you sure you want to come?'

'I'm coming,' she said, flatly.

He lifted his shoulders and trod down on the gas. It was not long before they reached the dirt road that led up to Pinder's End.

They hadn't gone far when a voice hailed them. 'Stop or I'll fire!'

Duke hastily jammed on his brakes and looked round, not seeing anyone. Then from behind a bush, Jetkin appeared, holding a rifle and looking self-conscious.

'I didn't mean to scare you, Mr. Duke,' he said. 'But that crazy guy Casy told me I'd got to stop anyone coming up.'

Duke grinned. 'That's fine,' he said. 'Where's everybody?'

Jetkin waved his hand towards the field. 'They're making plans. What's the idea, Mr. Duke, is there going to be trouble?'

'You bet,' Lorelli broke in. 'There's a whale of a lot of trouble coming now in two autos.'

Jetkin looked alarmed. 'Is that right?' he asked Duke.

'I guess so,' Duke returned. 'Ever handled a rifle before?'

'A shotgun, but not a rifle,' Jetkin confessed. 'But I've got the hang of this now, I guess.' He looked at the rifle and snapped up the bolt. 'I'd like a shot with it,' he added, hopefully.

'You'll get it,' Duke said, starting his engine. 'The next load of cars that come up won't stop, pal. You start blazing away the moment you see them. But, watch yourself, they'll shoot a lot straighter than you.'

Jetkin's mouth fell open. 'You mean I can shoot at these guys?'

'Sure,' Duke said. 'Shoot as many as you can.'

'Can I kill 'em?' Jetkin asked, hopefully.

'I'll be angry with you if you don't,' Duke said, waving his hand, and he drove on, bumping over the road and jerking them all up and down as if they were riding on a switchback.

Lorelli said, 'Hey! Let me out of here! I'd rather walk than have my vitamins disturbed.'

Duke slowed down. 'I can't leave the car in the road,' he said. 'I'll have to

take it over the field and hide it up some place. Maybe you all had better walk, otherwise my springs'll go.'

He went on after they had got out and bumped cautiously over the field. Clouds of dust rose from the parched ground, covering the car and himself in a fine white powder. He couldn't see where he was going and he cursed as the wheel jerked and pulled trader his hand.

Finally, however, he reached Casy's house. Kells was standing at the gate and Casy was on the porch.

'Can I get round the back?' he called. 'I want this out of the way.'

'Sure,' Casy said. 'Shove her through the fence. It won't last much longer anyway.'

Duke nosed his way up to the fence, put a little more pressure on the gas pedal and ironed the fence flat. He jolted across the rough mud patch, swung the car round the back of the house and stopped. He climbed out and walked round to the front again.

'Who's coming?' Kells asked, squinting through the dust.

'Schultz's girl and Joe, Miss Russell's along with 'em too.'

'What's this - a party?' Kells asked in disgust.

'Listen, pal,' Duke returned, 'Schultz's knocked off Peter Cullen. The girl feels bad about it. Will you watch your mouth?'

'What girl?'

'Miss Russell,' Duke said, patiently.

'Cullen dead, eh? What did Schultz want to kill him for? Not that it grieves me. I had no use for that guy.'

'Never mind what use you had for him,' Duke said, his eyes cold. 'Just lay off him, will you?'

Kells gave him a quick look. 'Sure,' he returned, hastily, 'I wouldn't speak out of turn.' He hitched his trousers up. 'Well, I must say you've done a swell job of work. These guys are like a lot of grasshoppers, jumping mad to kill someone.'

Casy joined them. 'Mr. Duke,' he said, shaking hands. 'That was a swell assortment of guns you sent up, but I ain't quite clear about this. We ain't killing anyone, are we?'

Duke scratched his head. 'I guess so,' he said. 'We've got every right. If they attack us, we'll just let 'em have it. It's self-defence and besides I took the precaution of getting myself sworn in as a deputy sheriff, so we've got

some legal covering.'

'That's a load off my mind.' Casy spat into the dust. 'I didn't want these guys to get themselves into trouble.'

'We'll be having visitors in a little while,' Duke said. 'I want to be prepared. Are you keeping 'em out of Pinder's End or don't you want a fight on your hands?'

Casy's eyes hardened. 'What sort of a fight?' he asked.

'A pretty tough one. Maybe, some of us'll get hurt. These boys don't play at it. Spade's mob is tough.'

Casy scratched his beard. 'If it wasn't for the women and kids, I'd say yes.'

Duke took a roll of notes out of his pocket. 'Tell 'em to clear out for the day. Tell 'em to take this money and go down to the Clarion offices. If they ask for Sam Trench, he'll fix 'em up.'

Casy looked relieved. 'You've got a head piece on you, mister,' he said. 'We'll fight.'

'Okay.' Duke looked relieved. 'There's lots to do, Casy. Get the women and kids off first. Then get your boys here with the guns and slugs. I want to talk to them.'

Casy went off fast, dust spurting up under his great feet as he broke into a shambling run.

Kells tilted his hat farther over his eyes. 'Do you think they'll fight?' he asked, looking across the field.

'Wouldn't you for five hundred grand?' Duke returned. 'I bet they don't fight at once. They'll come in the night. I know Korris. He ain't got the stomach to come out in the daylight.'

Clare, Joe and Lorelli joined them.

Duke introduced Kells to Clare. She hardly looked at him, but stood staring at the ramshackle houses and at the women and children who were bustling about getting ready to leave.

'What's the matter with her?' Kells whispered to Duke. 'She looks like she's run her face up against a wall.'

Duke scowled at him. 'You know Joe and the chicken woman?'

Kells smiled at Joe. 'That face suits you,' he said. 'You ought always to wear it.'

Joe said something under his breath and Lorelli flared up. 'You lay off,'

she snapped. 'He wants fixing. Isn't there some place where I can do it?'

Just then Casy returned and he took Lorelli and Joe into his house.

Clare hesitated and then followed them. Duke looked after her, shaking his head. 'She's in a bad way,' he said to Kells.

When Casy came out, the women and kids were ready to leave. They went off in a body, some thirty of them, over the fields at the back of Pinder's End. It was the longest way round, but Duke thought it would be safer. By going that way they would bypass the dirt road and would not be likely to run into Korris and his mob.

Duke, watching them go, wondered what Sam would say when they walked in on him. He'd have given a lot to see Sam's face.

'Well, come on, get your boys together,' he said. 'We've got a lot to do and not much time.'

'What about Jetkin?' Casy said. 'Does he know what to do?'

Duke looked at Kells. 'Maybe you'd better take a couple of guys with Thompsons and relieve Jetkin. If anyone comes up the road, stop them and turn them back. Don't start shooting unless you have to.'

Kells looked across the broad field. 'Hell!' he said. 'You don't want me to walk all that way, do you? Why can't this guy go.' He jerked his thumb at Casy. 'He's used to the dust.'

Duke bunched his shoulders. 'You said you'd work for five hundred grand. This is where you start. Get off!'

'Who do you think you are? Stonewall Jackson?' Kells asked, but he went.

TWENTY-FIVE

When Lorelli had fixed Joe's nose, she threw the red-tinged water down the sink, put away the towel she had been using and then inspected her handiwork.

Joe hid behind a large plaster bandage. All she could see of his face were two glowing eyes. He looked as mean as a rattlesnake.

'Well, come on,' she said, briskly. 'This is the house and we may as well start looking.'

Joe gritted his teeth. His wrist still hurt him and his nose gave him hell. The prospect of searching the house didn't appeal to him. 'You leave me alone,' he said, sitting down, 'I want to rest.'

'You'll have a lifetime to rest if we find this money,' Lorelli said, tartly. 'So come on, you lazy lug.'

Joe just sat and glared at her. 'Leave me alone,' he snarled.

Clare, who had been standing by the window, turned. 'Where are you thinking of looking?' she asked. 'And do you know what you're looking for?'

'Never mind,' Lorelli said, hastily. 'You keep Joe company,' and she went out of the room.

She ran into Duke who was just coming in. 'Hello,' he said. 'Where are you off to?'

'Hadn't we better start looking?' she said, a little anxiously.

He grinned. 'Sure, why not? Come upstairs with me. Where's Joe?'

'Oh, he's sulking in there,' Lorelli said. 'The fuss men make over a little pain. You'd think he was dying.'

Duke went into Casy's sitting room and stood over Joe. 'Come on,' he said. 'You're going to do some work. There's a lot to be done.'

Joe got out of his chair and swung his left fist up in a sizzling uppercut.

Clare screamed as she saw Joe shape for the punch, but Duke swayed away and blocked Joe's fist with his forearm. He grabbed Joe's arm, bent it behind him and kicked him across the room.

Joe landed on his hands and knees at Lorelli's feet. She stepped back, drawing her skirt round her knees. 'What do you think you are . . . a twelve-minute egg?' she demanded.

Joe got to his feet. He looked dangerous. His hand went to his hip pocket, but Duke slid across and grabbed hold of him again. 'Cut it out,' he said. 'What's the matter with you?' He walked out of the room, pushing Joe in front of him.

Lorelli followed them upstairs into the lumber room overlooking the front mud patch.

Duke let Joe go and stood back. 'You going to behave or do you want me to slap you?'

Joe straightened his coat, gave Duke an ugly look and stood silent.

'Swell,' Duke said. 'Now, this is the first room. Go over it as if you were looking for a needle. Take it to pieces. It'll be fun for you both.' He picked up a rusty crowbar that stood in the fireplace. 'Get the flooring up and hack the walls down if you

think there's anything behind 'em. If you don't find anything, start on the room next door. Casy don't care what happens to the joint. He's moving into something smaller.'

He handed the crowbar to Lorelli and moved to the door. 'If that guy doesn't work, bop him with the iron or call me,' and he went downstairs.

Clare turned back to the window when he came into the room. He stood looking at her. She seemed so tense and pathetically alone that he wanted to take her in his arms. He went over to her.

'You shouldn't've come,' he said. 'I know how you are feeling. Why don't you get out while there's time? My car's outside, you could just do it if you went now.'

'I'm all right,' she said, coldly. 'Please don't bother with me.'

'But I want to do something for you. . .' he began, but she turned sharply away from him.

'You've done quite enough already,' she said, fiercely.

Duke suddenly felt a hot surge of anger. He put his hand on her arm and jerked her round. 'You've got to listen to me,' he said, angrily. 'You've always thought that Pete was just an ordinary kid who ran around not knowing his right hand from his left. Well, it's time you knew better. Pete wasn't all that good. He knew more about taking care of himself than I ever did. He and I worked together. He was smart. Do you know why? He kept out of trouble. I wasn't so smart and I caught the rap, but he and I were in the same game and he was the guy who should have taken the rap. . .'

Clare smacked his face. 'What a swine you are,' she said, her face white and her eyes blazing. 'I might have expected that from you and you've always called Peter your friend.'

Duke stood very still, looking at her. He touched his face and then suddenly shrugged. 'What the hell does it matter?' he said. 'Think what you like. I was mug enough to fall for you. You may as well know. It won't hurt you and it gives me a kick just to tell you. You're the one woman that has ever meant anything to me. Don't ask me why. I don't know. We've fought ever since we met, but I'm still crazy about you and I'll always be crazy about you. Pete's dead. Otherwise I wouldn't have told you, but if I know you, you'll hang on to his memory until it's too late to do anything about anything. Then you'll be sorry. I'm telling you, you are hanging on to a pipedream. Pete was no better than me and I liked him. But if you'd known him as well as I did you would have hated him as much as you hate me, because you've always played for safety and you think you like guys who are safe. Believe me, a girl with your brains couldn't have a worse set-up. You'd better get that car and beat it. Having you around here just gives me a pain,' and he walked out leaving her staring after him with angry, but bewildered eyes.

Casy joined him as he walked on to the porch. Casy looked at him sharply. 'Anything wrong, mister?' he said. 'You sure look as mad as a hornet.'

'Never mind how I look,' Duke snapped. 'We'll go round and have a look at the boys.'

He paused for a moment to watch a bunch of fellows filling potato sacks with mud and piling them against the windows of Casy's house and then he walked on to the back of the house where another gang of men were digging a slip trench a few hundred yards from the house.

'I'll move my car,' he said, getting in and starting the engine. 'It spoils the uninterrupted view we have here.'

He drove the car across the field and parked it behind another bungalow, then he came back.

Casy watched him with interest. 'You sure are expecting trouble,' he said, stroking his beard. 'This reminds me of the last war.'

Duke grinned. 'You wait until it starts,' he said, 'you'll think it's the present European war.' He satisfied himself that the men digging the trench knew what was wanted and then he moved on back to the front of the house.

There he could see a party of men digging carefully spaced slit trenches way out in the field.

‘They’ll make swell machine gun nests,’ he said. ‘Put two guys in each of those trenches with the Thompsons. How many men have you got?’

Casy screwed up his face and did some arithmetic. ‘Thirty all told,’ he said. ‘And each of them has got a gun of sorts. We’ve got some shotguns as well as the stuff you sent up.’

Duke nodded. ‘That’s fine,’ he said. ‘I’ll walk over and see how Kells is doing.’ As he turned away, he added, ‘You keep those guys hard at it Make the house a tough nut to crack. You haven’t any barbed wire?’

Casy said he thought he might have, but he wasn’t sure.

‘Have a look and get some round the house,’ Duke said. ‘There’s nothing like a little barbed wire to slow up enthusiasm.’

He set off across the field and as he drew near to where Kells was stationed, he saw a cloud of dust coming up the road. He broke into a run and reached Kells just as a car drew level.

Kells bawled at it to stop and it drew up with a jerk.

Korris, sitting at the back, leaned out of the window. He scowled at Kells and then seeing Duke, his mouth tightened. ‘What’s all this?’ he asked.

There were three men in the front of the car and two men with Korris at the back. Duke recognized most of them and he knew they were a tough bunch of killers.

He walked up to the car and put his foot on the step. ‘Don’t start any trouble, boys,’ he said, quietly, ‘I’ve got a couple of guys behind those bushes with Thompsons, and they’re fainting to let ‘em off.’

‘What’s the idea?’ Korris said, looking first at Duke and then at the bushes.

‘I’ve taken over Pinder’s End,’ Duke said, easily. ‘Sorry if I’ve spoilt your play, but the dump interests me. We don’t want any visitors up here until the end of the week. So just turn the car and go home.’

Korris adjusted his glasses. ‘You can’t take it over,’ he said. ‘It ain’t yours to take. You’d better beat it before you run into trouble.’

Duke grinned. He pulled his coat on one side and showed a silver badge. ‘I’m deputy sheriff up here and I’ve requisitioned Pinder’s End. Laugh that off.’

Korris raised his shoulders. ‘Don’t be a dope,’ he said. ‘Someone’s going to get hurt if you play around like this. There’re women and kids up there.’

You don't want anything to happen to them, do you?'

Duke shook his head. 'They've gone,' he returned, feeling in his pocket for his cigar case. He selected a cigar without taking his eyes off Korris. 'If you want a fight you can have one. Take a look at the place. We're preparing for a war. The only thing

we ain't got at the moment is someone to fight. We've got everything else except aircraft and artillery. We make up for that by having a lot of ambition.'

Korris sat staring at him. His eyes gleamed with fury behind his spectacles and Duke thought he was going to start something there and then, but Korris controlled himself. 'If we start on you,' he said, 'we don't let up. You'd better quit this fooling before anything happens. It'll be too late to be sorry then.'

Duke blew a cloud of smoke in his face. 'Be your age,' he said. 'Why, Kells and me could take your bunch without getting out of bed. Scram! And keep scrambling. When you get back, you might tell your boss that we know all about Noakes's little nest egg. If anyone's going to have it . . . we are!'

Korris said to the driver, 'Okay, turn her round and let's go.' He leaned out of the car. 'We'll be seeing you,' he said. 'Leave a will some place handy. I'll get it fixed for you.'

Duke watched the car bump down the dirt road and then grinned at Kells. 'Well, there you are,' he said. 'Now Mr. Korris'll beat up as many toughs as he can and call on us about dusk. Then we'll have some shooting practice.'

Kells sneered. 'I've a hell of a thirst,' he said. 'You don't want me to hang around here anymore?'

'Come back with me,' Duke said. He turned to the other two. 'You guys stay here. If you see anything fire a burst in the air. Then if that don't stop 'em, let 'em have it. I'll get you relieved in another hour.'

He set off once more across the fields. 'I've got Lorelli and the boy looking for the money,' he said to Kells. 'It may take a few days. You know, I don't think it's going to be very hard to stop Korris. Not if we plan things right.'

Kells grunted. He eyed the fellows digging in the field. 'What's the idea?'

'Machine gun nests,' Duke grinned. 'That ought to stop 'em.'

They walked back to the house and Duke called Casy. 'Get a man up on the roof, Casy,' he said. He ought to see right down to Fairview. Tell him to

holla if he sees cars coming out. And get water into the house. That's a thing we can't do without.'

Casy went off and Duke and Kells entered the house.

They found Clare busily loading clips into a stack of rifles and sorting out rounds of ammunition to go with each rifle. She didn't look up as Duke came in and he didn't say anything.

Kells said, 'You know, I'm beginning to get a kick out of this. If we don't have a battle, I'll be disappointed.'

'You won't be disappointed,' Duke returned. 'Can you see a guy like Spade passing up five hundred grand?'

'I can't see Korris passing it up,' Kells returned. 'And if Spade's anything like him, I guess you must be right.'

'We'll go upstairs and see how they're getting on,' Duke said.

They found Lorelli, streaks of dirt across her face, her eyes smouldering with annoyance, standing in the middle of the room, surveying it defiantly.

Joe sat on the window still and smoked. He glared at Duke as he came in.

'Well, have you found anything?' Duke asked, looking at the loosened boards and the walls that had been hacked and holed in a number of places.

'There's nothing here,' Lorelli said in disgust. 'If we had the plan that Paul grabbed, we might get somewhere.'

'Well, we ain't got it,' Duke reminded her. 'So we'll just have to go on looking. Okay, you two, you knock off. Kells and I'll have a look. Suppose you get the food end of this business organized. There are about thirty-six of us and we'll all want feeding. Check the stores and if you want anything take Joe and a gun and get everything before dark. Take my car.'

'And leave you alone here?' Lorelli shook her head. 'What do you take me for? If you find the money, you'll scam out of here and leave us flat. I'm not as soft as all that.'

Duke smiled at her. 'You've got such a trusting little nature, haven't you?' he said. 'Take Joe and get out. I'm running this outfit and you take orders from me and you'll like 'em.'

Lorelli looked at Joe. 'Did you hear that?' she asked.

Duke stepped past her, grabbed Joe by the scruff of his neck and ran him out of the room. He paused at the top of the stairs. 'On your way, handsome,' he said, and tossed Joe down the stairs.

As Joe banged and crashed his way from stair to stair, Clare ran out in

alarm. She gave Duke one horrified look and ran to Joe.

‘Are you hurt?’ she asked. She drew back startled, as she met his murderous look.

He got slowly and painfully to his feet and faced Duke, who was leaning over the banisters, a grin on his face. ‘Come up and I’ll do it again,’ Duke said.

Joe didn’t move. He took no notice of Clare, who seeing he wasn’t hurt swept round on Duke. ‘What kind of a bully do you think you are?’ she demanded, hotly.

He turned back into the room, without even looking at her. Lorelli backed hastily away.

‘You going quietly?’ he said, easing his muscles. ‘Or do you want me to sling you out the same way?’

‘I’m going,’ she said, and whipped across the room to the door. ‘If you gyp me out of my share, I’ll cut your lights out!’ and she was gone.

Kells grinned. ‘Quite the dictator, ain’t you?’ he said. ‘Now what do we do?’

Duke took off his coat. ‘We look for the dough,’ he said. ‘Come on,’ and he began shifting the lumber into the middle of the room.

‘They’ve looked here,’ Kells complained. ‘Why not try the other room?’

‘I fancy this spot,’ Duke returned. ‘But you go next door and see what you can find.’

‘Okay,’ Kells said. ‘What do I use? My bare hands?’

Duke was systematically hacking the plaster down from the walls with the crowbar. ‘Don’t be a sissy,’ he said. ‘Use your teeth.’

TWENTY-SIX

By nightfall, Pinder's End had been converted into a fort. Duke, tired and dirty and what was worse, unsuccessful, went round the outposts just before sunset. He made sure that everyone was on their toes and knew what they had to do. Then he returned to Casy's house and washed in the sink.

Clare and Lorelli were dishing up supper. Lorelli had recovered her good humour and was singing under her breath. She had laid in a big stock of food and with Clare's help she had coped with the large quantities needed to feed so many.

'So you didn't find anything,' she said, pushing Duke out of the way so that she could get at the sink.

'Nope,' Duke returned, wiping his face off with a towel. 'Did it ever strike you that there might not be anything here? We've only got Bellman's word for it.'

Lorelli dumped the big iron saucepan into the sink and began dishing up. 'It's going to give me an outsize pain if there isn't,' she returned. 'I'm relying on my share. What's going to happen to me if I don't get it?'

'Well, you can go to work,' Duke said, grinning. 'You might do quite well if you picked the right kind of job.'

She scowled at him and carried a large dish of meat to the table. 'I don't like your jokes,' she said, shortly.

Throughout the evening, Clare had ignored Duke. She had been a help. She had loaded all the guns and handed them out. She had helped prepare the supper, but she had hardly spoken a word to anyone,

Kells, Duke, Joe and Lorelli sat down at the table but Clare moved out on to the porch. She stood looking across the darkening field and finally sat down on the dusty stoop, her hands supporting her face.

Lorelli said, 'What's the matter with her? You'd think she was a deaf-mute.'

'Leave her alone,' Duke said shortly.

They ate in silence for a time then he said, 'You ought to know where Schultz's likely to hide. Can you give me a line?'

Lorelli paused with her fork suspended. 'Why, I think. . .'

‘Shut your trap,’ Joe snarled. He looked over at Duke. ‘I’m getting Schultz,’ he said. ‘You lay off. I’ve been wanting to fix that rat for a long time.’

Duke saw it wouldn’t get him anywhere to press the question. He shrugged. ‘Schultz’s above your weight, sonny,’ he said. ‘You’d better leave him to me.’

‘Him?’ Joe laughed and went on eating.

‘Never mind about Schultz,’ Kells said. ‘What about this dough? We’ve been through the house and nearly wrecked it. There ain’t a sign of it.’

‘Maybe it’s buried in the garden,’ Lorelli said, stretching for the salt. ‘You any good at digging?’

Duke grinned at Kells’ look of alarm. ‘It’ll be good for your figure,’ he said to Lorelli.

‘Don’t you worry about my figure,’ Lorelli said, quickly. ‘I know what’s good for it without digging.’

Joe scowled round at them. ‘Talk,’ he said, bitterly. ‘Talk, that’s all you guys do. Why don’t you use your heads? We might be years before we find the dough.’

Duke shifted from the table. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘You start. Don’t forget we’ve got Korris on our hands. What do you think?’

Joe looked at him, his eyes glowing. ‘I’ll get after Schultz,’ he said, ‘I know where I can find him I’ll get the plan from him and then we’ll get some place. I’ve been thinking and I guess I know where I can pick him up. If I get the plan you’ll have to give me a couple of grand before you make the split.’

Duke glanced over at Kells. ‘Like the idea?’

Kells hesitated. ‘I’d better do the job,’ he said. ‘This jerk’s got a damaged hand. Schultz’ll want fixing.’

‘That’s what I think.’

Joe sat motionless, his white, stony face expressionless. ‘I do it, or no one does it,’ he said. ‘I know where I can pick the punk up. You don’t.’

Duke made up his mind quickly. He didn’t think Joe would be much use if it came to a fight with Korris, but, he could see the boy had such a hatred for Schultz that he might bring it off. He nodded. ‘Okay, get going. Take my car and be careful.’

Joe kicked back his chair. ‘I’ll be careful,’ he said, and smiled wolfishly.

Looking at him, with the plaster across his nose and his hard, stony eyes

and thin mouth, Duke didn't envy Schultz.

Lorelli suddenly stood up and joined Joe. 'I want to go with him,' she said. 'He can't drive the car and I could help him.'

Duke glanced at Joe. 'Do you want her?' he asked.

'Why not?' Joe tried to sound casual, but Duke caught the eagerness in his voice.

'I thought you didn't trust me,' he said to Lorelli. 'Suppose we turn up the dough when you've gone. How do you know I won't gyp you?'

'Talk sense,' Lorelli said, watching him with intent, frightened eyes. 'We've looked all day. We'll never find it without the plan.'

Duke eased himself away from the table. 'I'm beginning to think we'll never find it with the plan,' he said.

Joe said, 'You smart punk,' and an automatic sprang into his hand.

Duke tried, but he was a shade late. His fingers were pulling his gun as Joe fired.

There was a sharp, vicious crack and flame, then he found himself on the floor with the chair on top of him. Pain stabbed his shoulder and he lay there, waiting for Joe to shoot again.

He heard Clare scream and he heard Joe shout in an unnaturally high-pitched voice, 'Freeze!'

Kells sat at the table, his eyes bolting out of his head. The whole thing had happened so quickly and so unexpectedly that he was completely dazed.

Clare ran over to Duke and knelt at his side. She saw blood running down his sleeve and she tried to lift his head.

Joe swept Lorelli to the door, keeping his eyes on Kells. 'Start anything and see what you get,' he said.

Kells sat, with his hands on the table, gaping at him.

Duke said to Clare, 'It's okay . . . don't get excited,' as Joe and Lorelli backed out of the room, slamming the door behind them.

When Duke spoke, Clare flushed and let go of him. 'I thought. . . I thought he had. . .' she stopped.

Duke shouted to Kells, 'What the hell are you waiting for? Get after them, you slow-witted monkey.'

Kells came to life. Jerking out his gun, he rushed across the room and threw open the door. He heard Duke's car start up and he blundered out into the darkness.

He was met by gunfire, but the car was already moving fast and he didn't even hear the bullets as they passed well overhead.

He steadied himself against the doorway and fired after the car. Then a new sound startled him. A burst of machine gun fire came from the front of the house.

He could no longer see the car, so he stopped firing and listened.

The night seemed suddenly full of rifle and machine gun fire. Korris and his mob had arrived.

He ran back to the house where he found Duke sitting up, his coat off and Clare bandaging his arm.

'They've got away,' he said, breathlessly. 'And Korris is moving in.'

Duke looked at Clare. She was close to him and her hair touched his face. 'Can you hurry?' he said, 'I've got to get going.'

She wound the bandage skillfully over a pad she had put on the wound. 'You can't go out with this,' she said, handling him as if he were made of china.

'I'm okay,' Duke returned. He looked at Kells. 'How many are there?'

'I don't know,' Kells said, peering through the slit in the sandbags. 'It's dark out there.' He glanced back over his shoulder. 'You hurt bad?'

'No . . . a couple of inches lower and I might have been. I didn't know the little rat could pull a gun as fast as that.'

'What's the idea?' Kells said, still watching out of the window. 'What did he have to do that for? Gone crazy or something?'

'Those two have got the dough,' Duke said, grimly.

Kells nearly fell over. He left the window and came close to Duke. 'What dough?'

'Noakes's nest egg,' Duke said, getting to his feet. 'All right, honey,' he said to Clare. 'Don't worry. I'm okay now.'

She drew away from him and after giving him a searching look, she began to gather up the bowl of water and the spare dressings. She went into the kitchen.

'What're you talking about?' Kells snarled.

'It's a double-cross. They waited until the last minute, then sprang it on us. If Joe hadn't been so eager, I'd've fallen for it. They were up in that room all the morning and they found the dough. Then they put their heads together and decided to cross us up. Well, it looks as if they've got away with it.'

Duke laughed shortly. 'And we've been left with this baby,' he jerked his thumb to the window.

As he finished speaking more gunfire came from the field and they heard bullets smack against the wall of the house.

'Call this fight off,' Kells said, furiously. 'Tell Korris and we can get after those two.'

Duke shook his head. 'Korris wouldn't play,' he said. 'Now we've got to see this through and then get after them Let's face it, Lew, we've been outsmarted.'

Before Kells could protest, the door opened and Casy came in. His eyes were bright with excitement. 'There's a bunch of guys out there looking for trouble. My boys are getting the jitters. What do you want me to do?'

'I'll be with you in a second,' Duke said. He turned to Kells, 'I'll send some of those guys back here. You watch the house and see nothing happens to Clare. I'll have a look round and if I think they're too many, I'll get the boys inside. We stand a better chance if we keep together.'

Kells bit his nails. 'It's the dough that worries me,' he said. 'We're not getting anything out of this fight.'

Duke grinned. 'Yes, we are,' he said, 'we're cleaning Bentonville up. That's good enough for me, even if I never see Noakes's money.'

Kells turned away in disgust. 'You're crazy,' he said.

Duke went into the kitchen. Clare turned swiftly as he came in and they stood looking at each other.

'I'm going out to have a look round,' he said. 'I want you to keep under cover. Kells will stay here, so you've got nothing to worry about.'

She said, 'You don't think I'm frightened, do you?'

He shook his head. 'No, I just don't want anything to happen to you.'

She turned away. 'I don't see why you should care,' she said, coldly.

He crossed over and pulled her round gently. 'Don't let's fight,' he said. 'I'm sorry for everything . . . really sorry.'

Suddenly she was clinging to him, crying. He held her against him and didn't say anything.

Casy put his head round the door and stared at them and after a moment, he went away.

More gunfire came from the front of the house and suddenly Clare said, 'Don't go out there. You'll get killed. I know you'll get killed.'

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘We want to get this over. There are things we’ve got to do.’ He patted her shoulder, and then pushed her gently from him. ‘What I said about being crazy about you still goes,’ he said, and went out of the room before she could say anything.

He found Casy waiting in the passage. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s go.’

‘They’ve got the front door spotted,’ Casy said. ‘We’d better go out the back.’

Duke knelt down, opened the front door and slid out on to the porch. From a tree on the far side of the field came a flash of gunfire and a bullet zipped a couple of feet above his head.

‘Keep down,’ he called to Casy. He took a snapshot at the tree with his .38. A second later the sniper returned his fire and again the bullet seemed very close.

‘That guy can shoot,’ Duke said, shifting his position cautiously. ‘Almost as if he could see me. Got a rifle there, Casy?’

There was a moment’s delay and then Casy crawled up beside him with a rifle. Duke took it, winced a little as his shoulder pained sharply and then brought the rifle up, covering the tree.

He took a long time settling himself and then very gently he squeezed the trigger. He didn’t move after he had fired but kept the sights on the tree. The return fire was almost immediate and he instantly pressed his trigger again. The gun crashed as splinters flicked up not a yard from him. A faint yell came across the field and then came the sound of a body crashing through the branches of the tree.

Duke laid the rifle down. ‘I guess that guy ain’t going to like sausage anymore,’ he said. ‘Let’s go before they start something else.’

Keeping low they ran towards the nearest slit trench. When they were within fifty yards, Casy called softly.

The two men in the trench jerked round and sprayed bullets with the Thompson. They were so jittery that they aimed too high, otherwise Casy and Duke would have been cut to pieces.

Casy, at the top of his voice, cursed them. Korris’s mob heard him and for several minutes, they had to lie flat while bullets hummed all round them. Then when the firing had died down, they scrambled into the trench.

‘What the hell are you playing at?’ Casy snarled. ‘You nearly had us.’

Jetkin and a little guy named Singer peered at him nervously. ‘They were

crawling all over us,' Jetkin said. 'Can't you get us out of here?'

'That's okay,' Duke said, taking the Thompson out of his hand. 'We'll stay for a while. You two get back to the house. They might easily bypass this spot, so watch out as you go back. I wish the moon would get up.'

'It'll be up in another ten minutes,' Casy said. 'You can see it coming up behind those trees now.'

'Careful how you go,' Duke said to the other two. 'When we come back, we'll whistle. Don't start trying to knock us off, will you?'

Jetkin peered uneasily out into the darkness. 'Can't say I look forward to that crawl home,' he said. 'These guys shoot straight.'

'You'd better get off before the moon gets up,' Casy said. 'Go on, you two, beat it.'

Singer scrambled out of the trench,

'Get down flat, you fool,' Duke called quickly.

Gunfire came from across the field and Singer rolled back into the trench.

'The crazy fool,' Duke said, savagely. 'What was he thinking about?'

Jetkin wanted to strike a match, but Duke knocked the box out of his hand. He bent over Singer and then straightened. 'He's dead,' he said. 'And he asked for it.'

Casy and Jetkin stood uneasily, looking down into the dark trench. They had known Singer for a long time. They knew his wife and kids. They both felt a little sick.

Duke's shoulder began to ache. This blind shooting wasn't going to get them anywhere. He suddenly decided to take the fight to Korris.

'Go back to the house,' he said to Jetkin, 'and tell Kells to come out here. Tell him to bring a Thompson.'

Jetkin didn't want to go, but he finally decided that it would be safer in the long run and he began his long crawl home.

When Jetkin was out of sight, Duke turned to Casy, 'I'm going to try and get across the field with Kells. If we can catch Korris by surprise we might do him a bit of damage.'

Casy grunted. 'It's a long way across there,' he said. 'And the moon will be up by the time Kells gets back here.'

'We'll try anyway. They may not think we'd have the nerve to come all that way,' Duke returned. 'I'm sorry about him,' he jerked his thumb to where Singer lay.

‘Yeah,’ Casy said. ‘It’s tough. He’d got a wife and kids.’

‘You guys may come off badly in this business,’ Duke said, quietly. ‘Maybe you won’t even make money out of it.’

Casy thought about this, then he said, ‘You’ll have to do something for us, mister.’

‘Yeah,’ Duke said, peering into the darkness, ‘I guess I will.’ He had no idea what he could do, but this wasn’t the time to worry about that. As soon as he had shaken Korris off he would get after Joe and Lorelli. It wasn’t going to be easy and he had a feeling that this business might go on for a long time. Whatever happened he was quite determined to see it through to the finish.

After a little while, he heard someone coming towards them and then Kells called, ‘Don’t you start shooting.’ A moment later he had rolled into the trench, clutching a Thompson.

He trod on Singer before Duke could warn him. It gave him a shock. He stepped hastily back. ‘I heard you had a casualty,’ he said, peering down. ‘Those two guys were in a swell state.’

‘Listen,’ Duke said, ‘I ain’t going to stay here and get shot at. My idea is to get over to Korris’s mob and surprise ‘em. With Thompsons we could do a lot of damage.’

Kells made a face. ‘Yeah, I know,’ he said. ‘And they could do us a lot of damage too.’

‘We’ll go forward under covering fire, like they do in the movies,’ Duke said. ‘It should work out okay.’

Kells shrugged. ‘If that’s the way you want it,’ he said.

‘Let’s go then,’ Duke said. He turned to Casy. ‘When we get out into the field start firing at the road and trees. Nice long bursts. I’ll tell the other guys to do the same when we pass ‘em.’

‘Mind how you go,’ Casy said and watched them crawl out of the trench.

The moon was above the trees now and the field was no longer dark. Crawling forward, Duke felt very naked and expected someone in Korris’s mob to start shooting at him. But nothing happened and they reached the next trench safely.

The two men in the trench had seen them coming and had recognized Duke. He told them what to do and then crawled on to the last trench.

Casy began firing over their heads, and after they had stopped at the last

trench, talked with the occupants and then moved on, the others took up the covering fire.

The night became alive with gun flashes as Korris's mob replied to the firing.

'They're over there to the left,' Duke said, pointing to where the heaviest firing was coming from.

'I wish we had a few grenades,' Kells said, 'I'd feel a lot safer.'

Duke grinned in the darkness. He was getting a big kick out of this. If his shoulder didn't pain him, he would have thoroughly enjoyed himself.

They went on and finally reached the bushes that skirted the road.

'No more talking,' Duke whispered to Kells. 'They can't be far away now.'

Kells grunted and keeping close to the bushes, they edged their way forward. After a few minutes' crawling, Duke suddenly held up his hand. They both crouched down and listened.

They could hear men talking farther down the road and Duke moved on.

Both he and Kells took care not to make any noise and the sound of voices became more distinct. Peering through the bushes, Duke could see shadowy forms standing round two cars. He saw the glow of cigarette ends and he grinned to himself.

These guys were certainly not expecting trouble.

One of them said, 'It'll blow up in a minute. He must have reached the house by now.'

'Give him a little longer,' another voice said. 'He had to go round in a big circle. Have you got everything?'

'Yeah, I don't fancy crossing that field. They've got a couple of machine guns there. What do you think they're firing at?'

Someone laughed. 'Just jitters,' he said. 'Let 'em waste their slugs if they feel that way.'

Duke rose on to his knees cautiously, signalling for Kells to keep down. He could see five men standing by the car in a bunch. They all had shotguns and they were looking away from him, across the field.

He bent over Kells. 'They're in a bunch,' he said. 'Five of them.'

Kells grinned. He tucked the butt of the Thompson into his hip and together they rose quietly to their feet.

'Okay,' Duke shouted suddenly. 'Let 'em have it!'

Casy, in his trench across the field, saw the sudden flashes and heard the staccato crash of gunfire. He wondered uneasily what was going on.

TWENTY-SEVEN

'You're going the wrong way,' Joe said, as Lorelli turned the car on to the Bentonville road.

'I'm going home,' she said. 'We may have all the money in the world, but there are still some things I'm not going to part with.'

'Don't be a fool.' Joe struggled upright. His head throbbed and his wrist was very painful. He felt a sheet of hot flame running up and down his arm, like a little red car on a switchback. 'Turn round and let's get over the Stateline.'

'Talk sense,' Lorelli said, treading hard on the gas and sending the car flying along the deserted road. 'We've got all the time we want. Do you think Duke'll wriggle out of that spot in five minutes?'

Every jolt of the car made Joe wince with pain. He was getting worried about his wound. He didn't seem to be able to think straight and he was scared that he might collapse. Lorelli had the bonds and he didn't trust her with so much money. If anything happened to him she might make off and leave him flat.

'Some car,' she said, as the needle flicked to seventy-five. 'We certainly fooled Duke. You were quick, Joe. I thought for a moment that you had left it too late.'

Joe grunted. He was riding the pain and he began to feel lightheaded. Huddled up in his seat, he thought about the money. Five hundred thousand in bonds. He knew whom he could take them to. He might not get more than half their value, but even that was nice going. He glanced at Lorelli and his mouth set. It might be an idea to get rid of her. A woman could be a nuisance if the cops got on to him. There was something about Lorelli that would catch any copper's eye.

But he was too tired and his wrist hurt too much to make plans. The first thing to do was to get over the Stateline. He felt a weak fury rising inside him. If he hadn't felt like hell, Lorelli would never have dared to go to Bentonville.

'What do you want, that you're going back there?' he said, suddenly.

'My clothes and my jewellery,' she returned, her full lips set in an

obstinate line. 'Why should I lose them when we've got the time to pick them up?'

'We haven't got the time,' Joe said, feverishly. 'Every minute we waste might go against us.'

'You're losing your nerve,' she returned, giving him a curious glance. 'Get hold of yourself. What's the matter with you? Don't you feel well or something?'

He gritted his teeth and sat up. Blood seemed to rush to his head and the road and lights of the car converged in on him. He closed his eyes and held on to the door of the car, feeling himself sliding off the edge of the earth.

'We're nearly there,' she said, after she had been driving for some time. She turned off the main street and a few minutes later she drew up outside Schultz's house.

Joe's head cleared slightly when the car stopped. He watched her get out and then opened the car door. His legs nearly let him down and he had to cling to the car. The smell of the flowers in Schultz's garden had an almost overpowering effect on him.

Lorelli came round the car and took his arm. 'What's the matter with you?' Her voice was hard and impatient.

She peered at his face and saw how ill he looked and her eyes hardened. She saw that Joe was not going to be much use to her, anyway for the time being. While she stood looking at him, the thought entered her head that this was the time to leave him and look after herself.

Joe sensed this and clutched at her arm. 'You'd better stick close to me,' he said. 'If you try a double-cross you'll get a surprise.'

'What's the matter?' she said. 'Don't you trust me?' She knew that she could easily wrench away from him, but she remembered how quick he was with a gun, so she decided to wait.

'I don't trust anyone,' he said, going with her to the house. He fumbled for the key, tried to open the door, but his hand shook so that he gave it to her. 'You open it,' he said, impatiently.

They entered the dark hall and stood listening, then entered the sitting room. Lorelli turned on the light. They both saw Cullen.

Lorelli's wild scream scared Joe. He struck at her feebly and she jumped away.

'Who is it?' she gasped, backing against the wall.

Joe moved forward cautiously. 'Duke's pal,' he said, and then Lorelli recognized him.

'Pete Cullen,' she said, shuddering.

They stood staring at him.

'You were crazy to come back,' Joe said, unevenly. He walked over to the sideboard and poured himself out a stiff brandy. The liquor cleared his head.

Lorelli turned blindly to the door. 'I'm going,' she said. 'Quick, Joe, let's get out of here.'

Hallahan and O'Malley were standing in the doorway watching them. They had guns in their hands and as Lorelli saw them and caught her breath in a sob, Hallahan said, 'Don't move!'

Joe saw the steel buttons and he went for his gun. It was entirely a reflex action and he could do nothing about it.

Hallahan shot him between the eyes as he was jerking up his gun. Joe reeled back and crashed into the fireplace, scattering the fire irons, his gun sliding out of his hand.

Lorelli stood shivering, staring at the wound in Joe's head, then she covered her eyes and began to cry.

A quiet voice sounded in her ears. 'You should never have gone with him, my pigeon,' said the voice, and a fat, hot hand took her arm.

She gave a frightened cry and tried to get away, but Schultz held her.

'She's nervous of me,' Schultz went on to Hallahan, 'I'm not surprised, leaving me and running around with a little killer like that.'

Hallahan put up his gun. 'It'll save the State a trial,' he said, indifferently.

Schultz pushed Lorelli into a chair. 'Sit there,' he said, 'and don't move until I'm ready for you.'

While Hallahan was making sure that Joe was dead, Schultz quietly picked up the boy's gun. He took out his .38 and slid Joe's gun into his pocket. It was done very swiftly and neither Hallahan nor O'Malley saw him do it.

As Hallahan straightened, Schultz handed him his gun. 'The boy killed Cullen,' he said. 'You'll find the slugs match.'

Hallahan glared at him. 'Why didn't you leave it where it was?' he snapped, taking the gun. 'You've left fingerprints.'

Schultz's saucer-like eyes were bland. 'I never thought of that,' he said. 'Still, the boy's dead. You don't need evidence.'

Hallahan grunted. 'Maybe Mr. Spade will call it suicide again,' he said in

disgust.

Schultz shook his head. 'I don't think so,' he said, and laughed. 'No, I really don't think so. It's a nice clean case, Captain, you have the murderer,' he waved towards Joe. 'And I've found my little girl again.'

'What's she doing with him?' Hallahan said, looking suspiciously at Lorelli.

'I've told you already,' Schultz said, smoothly. 'The boy had an odd influence over her. She'll be all right now. You don't have to worry about her.' He grinned at him. 'Mr. Spade always favours her, doesn't he, my pigeon?' The thick fingers dug into Lorelli's muscles and she shrank away.

Hallahan hesitated. 'Okay,' he said. 'We'll send the wagon over for these guys. You'll have to bring her to court.'

Schultz nodded. 'She'll be there tomorrow,' he said. 'And thank you, Captain. I'll be glad to get rid of these two. It makes my home seem a little unnatural.' He laughed again.

Hallahan stared at him and then turned to O'Malley. 'Stick around,' he said, 'I'll fix things at the station,' and he went out.

O'Malley eyed the whisky bottle hopefully, but Schultz said, 'You might wait outside the house, Sergeant. I want to be alone for a while.'

Lorelli suddenly screamed out, 'Don't leave me,' and she tried to break away from Schultz.

O'Malley stared at her and then looked towards Schultz.

'She knows I'm going to punish her for running off with this boy,' Schultz said, holding Lorelli firmly by her arm. With his other hand, he took out of his pocket a crumpled roll of notes. He pressed them into O'Malley's hand.

'You might leave us, Sergeant,' he said, and grinned evilly.

Lorelli grabbed O'Malley's sleeve and hung on, her big eyes wide with terror. 'Don't leave me with him,' she gasped. 'He'll kill me . . . I know he'll kill me!'

O'Malley jerked away from her and grinned. 'He won't do that,' he said, putting the money in his pocket. 'Will you, Mr. Schultz?'

'She might think she's going to be killed,' Schultz said, twisting her arm and locking it behind her back, 'but I won't be quite so drastic as that.'

O'Malley moved reluctantly to the door. 'If you want any help. . .' he began, but Schultz waved him away.

'She may scream a little,' he said, 'but don't let it worry you.'

O'Malley went out and Lorelli shrugged wildly, screaming for him to come back. Schultz slapped her very hard across her mouth. The blow stunned her and, wailing softly, she fell on her knees.

Schultz said, 'Well, my pigeon, this is the last time you'll double-cross me. Where's the money?'

'Joe's got it,' she whimpered, trying to crawl away from him.

He slapped her again. 'Give it to me before I tear your clothes to pieces. You'd never let Joe have it.'

With trembling hands, she produced the bonds. She had them under her dress and it took a few minutes before she could get them. She threw them at his feet.

He looked down at the oilskin wrapper and his eyes glistened. 'Very nice,' he said. 'I've waited a long time for these.'

Lorelli scrambled to her feet and made a dive for the door. Schultz's great hand shot out and hit her at the back of her neck. She pitched forward flat on the carpet.

He reached her in two strides. 'No one will interfere this time,' he said, softly, and his thick fingers closed round her throat.

She wriggled over on her back, fighting and tearing at his hands with her sharp fingernails. He swore softly and bunching his great muscles, he tightened his grip.

She fought him. She knew that he was going to kill her and if she couldn't loosen his fingers there was no hope for her. The knowledge that O'Malley was only a few yards away drove her to make desperate efforts and Schultz had difficulty in holding her. He shifted and rammed his great knee down on her chest. She felt the breath leave her body in a concentrated gasp and she heard roaring in her ears and her tongue seemed to be growing in her mouth.

She no longer struggled, but lay pulling at his thick fingers feebly, her legs jerking spasmodically.

Then she heard Schultz give a groan. It seemed a long way off and his fingers suddenly slackened letting the breath come into her tortured lungs. She felt herself sinking into a sea of darkness, then someone said, 'It's all right,' and she opened her eyes.

A little man with a shock of white hair was bending over her, supporting her head. 'You're all right,' Sam Trench said, 'I guess we were about just in time.'

Lorelli struggled up, holding her aching throat. Schultz lay on his side, a bloody gash on the side of his head. Al Barnes, swinging a length of lead piping, grinned at her. 'Last minute rescue,' he said. 'Just like the movies.'

She stared at them blankly and tried to get to her feet.

Sam Trench supported her and led her to a chair. 'Take it easy,' he said. 'You've got nothing to be scared of now.'

Barnes turned Schultz over, raised his eyelid and grunted. 'I thought I'd killed him,' he said, disappointment in his voice. 'This guy must have a head like a strong room.'

Sam went over to Cullen and touched his hand. 'He's been dead some time.' He looked over at Barnes and shook his head. 'Poor Clare! She was fond of this boy.'

'Look at them,' Barnes said. 'Two corpses, a guy with his brains oozing out and a judy with her neck stretched. Good enough for a horror play, ain't it? I wish I'd got my camera. It'd make a swell picture for the Clarion.'

'This is tabloid stuff,' Sam said. 'Our paper's too classy for stuff like this.' He glanced round the room and saw the oilskin packet that was lying next Schultz. He picked it up and glanced inside. Hey!' he said. 'Look at this!'

Lorelli struggled to get out of the chair, but she couldn't quite make it. 'That's mine,' she gasped, fiercely.

'Oh, no,' Sam said, 'I don't think so.' He stood staring at the bonds, checked their numbers and screwed up his face. 'Yeah, I think I know where this little lot's come from.'

Barnes peered over his shoulder. 'They're pretty old, ain't they?' he said. 'Gee! There must be nearly a half a million bucks there.'

'This is Frank Noakes's loot,' Sam said. 'I remember having the numbers sent to me nearly ten years ago. Pinder's End! This explains everything, Al.' He stuffed the packet in his pocket. 'We'll take her out the back way and we'll have a little chat with her.'

Barnes grinned. He went over to Lorelli and helped her up. 'Come on, honey,' he said. 'Your troubles are only just starting.'

Lorelli tried to wriggle away, but he held her. 'Let me go,' she panted. 'And give me that money. It's mine, I tell you!'

'How you dames love to kid yourselves,' Barnes said, good-humoredly, and pushed her out of the room.

An hour later, Captain Hallahan's telephone rang and he sat for several

minutes listening to Sam's voice. He could hardly believe the startling information that Sam had to tell him. When the conversation finished, he hung up and sat brooding. Then, somewhat reluctantly he issued a warrant to arrest Paul Schultz for the murder of Peter Cullen. He was now convinced that he would not run for election after all and that the suicide wave had come to an end.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Clare looked up sharply as the door of Casy's sitting room jerked open. Then her hand flew to her mouth.

Korris smiled at her. 'Don't move,' he said. 'Just stay right where you are.'

Biff, looking over Korris's shoulder, showed his broken teeth.

'Hello, good-looking,' he said, moving round Korris and coming into the room. 'Didn't expect us, did you?'

Clare sat still, her heart thumping and her face white.

Korris said, 'We ain't got long.' He pointed a snub-nose automatic at her. 'You know what we want. Where is it?'

'I don't know,' Clare said, keeping her voice steady with an effort. 'I don't know anything about it.'

Korris glanced over at Biff. 'Well, we're in and they're out. Maybe we could persuade Duke to talk business now.'

Biff nodded. 'Yeah,' he said, and grabbing Clare by her arm he dragged her out of the chair.

She made as if to struggle, but he twisted her arm, threatening her with his fist. 'Keep still,' he said, 'or you'll get hurt.'

Out of the night came the sound of gunfire and Korris turned his head sharply. 'They're still at it,' he said. Then the door opened and Jetkin came in.

Korris rammed his gun into Jetkin's side. 'Don't get excited,' he said.

Jetkin looked over at Clare, gaped at Korris and Biff and then went a dirty white.

Clare thought he was going to faint.

Korris glanced at his watch. 'Find Duke,' he said to Jetkin. 'Tell him if he doesn't come back here in ten minutes, we'll shoot the girl. We want to get this little business tied up.'

Jetkin just stood there trembling and Korris, digging the gun into him, had to force him out of the room

'They'll shoot me,' Jetkin quavered. 'Duke's gone across the fields.'

Korris grinned. 'I'd hate that to happen,' he said, tearing down a dirty white curtain that covered the passage window. 'Here, take this and wave it

above your head. Maybe they won't shoot you. But, get Duke,' and he kicked Jetkin into the darkness.

When he made sure that Jetkin was on his way, Korris went back into the sitting room.

'Take her upstairs,' he said to Biff. 'Stand just at the head of the stairs and listen. If Duke starts anything, kill her. Do you understand?'

'Sure,' Biff said, and he dragged Clare out of the room.

Korris went out and sat on the stoop in the shadows. Above the spasmodic gunfire, he could hear Jetkin's quavering voice, yelling for Duke. He sat there waiting.

It was almost twenty minutes before he saw Duke coming across the field. Jetkin trailed along behind.

Korris wondered where his own men had got to and he suddenly felt a little uneasy. He poked his automatic forward and waited.

Duke walked to the broken gate and stood looking up at the house, his hands hanging by his sides.

Korris called softly, 'Come on up here.'

Duke walked towards him, came up the steps and Korris led the way inside the house. Duke leaned against the wall when he got into the sitting room. His eyes were very watchful. 'How do you like the battle?' he asked.

Korris wandered around the room. 'Never mind about that,' he said. 'The girl's upstairs. If you start anything, Biff'll kill her. You know Biff?'

Duke nodded. 'Sure,' he said. 'Can't you fight a war without dragging women into it?'

'Where's the dough?' Korris said, softly. 'I'm in a hurry, Duke.'

Duke shook his head. 'Half way to Bentonville by now, I guess,' he said. 'Lorelli and the boy double-crossed me. They found it and got away.'

Korris's white face seemed to fall to pieces. 'Got away?' he repeated stupidly.

Duke nodded. 'Yeah, I tried to find a way of telling you and to call this fight off, but you were too enthusiastic. They've been gone a half an hour now.'

Korris said, 'You're lying!' His finger tightened on his gun trigger.

'Go upstairs and see for yourself,' Duke said. 'It was hidden up there.'

Korris stood away from the door. 'Show me!' he said.

As Duke began to walk up the stairs, Biff called down, 'What's the game?'

Korris said, 'It's all right. Take her into one of the rooms and watch her. I'm right behind him.'

Duke heard Biff drag Clare into the back room and he had difficulty in controlling himself. He half turned.

Korris said, 'Go on up. You don't want anything to happen to her.'

Just behind Korris, Duke saw Kells. He had a knife in his hand that caught the moonlight coming through the open front door. He moved like a shadow and had reached Korris before he could do anything.

The knife went into Korris with a faint ripping sound. Korris stiffened, then bent forward, dropping his gun, his arms clutching his middle. He gave a faint sigh as his knees folded up.

Kells caught him and grinned at Duke. 'I've spoilt his suit,' he whispered, and carried Korris quietly down the stairs.

Moving swiftly, Duke went into the room where Biff had taken Clare. He could see the silhouettes of Clare and Biff as they stood watching him. The bright moonlight that came through the chinks in the shutters let in just enough light for him to get his bearings.

'It's in here,' he said, speaking over his shoulder.

He foxed Biff who thought Korris was coming in. It gave Duke just enough time to jump him. There was nothing else to do and he had to take the risk. He crashed into the two of them, feeling his shoulder hit Clare in the body. They all went over together and Biff fired his gun.

The flash scorched Duke's face and he clubbed at Biff with his fist.

Clare rolled away from them, and Biff closed with Duke, hitting him about the body. He had a punch like a pile driver and Duke thought his ribs were going to cave in.

Shifting his hands, he fastened on Biff's throat and squeezed. Then a violent stabbing pain came in his shoulder and he knew that he had reopened his wound. Strength left his hands and Biff began beating him about the face. He tried to hang on, but Biff was too strong for him. He suddenly caught a punch that flung him half across the room and, dazed, he saw Biff struggle to his feet.

Then Kells came in.

Biff swung round, saw Kells' gun and gave a strangled squeal.

Kells jerked up the gun and shot him through the head. Biff went down with a crash that shook the room.

‘I thought this mob was tough,’ Kells sneered. ‘It’s as easy as knocking off sheep!’

Duke got slowly to his feet. He felt blood seeping through his coat and his ribs hurt where Biff had hit him. He looked anxiously round for Clare. She was crouched against the far wall and he went over to her.

‘Scared?’ he said, reaching out and holding her.

She felt the blood on his coat wet and sticky to her touch. ‘You’re hurt,’ she said. ‘Come downstairs where I can see.’

Duke said, ‘It’s all right.’ He felt his knees giving and he leaned against her. ‘I like your guts,’ and as he began to slide down on his knees, she called wildly to Kells.

‘He’s only fooling, lady,’ Kells said, propping Duke up. ‘Come on, you punk,’ he went on to Duke. ‘What sort of sissy are you?’

TWENTY-NINE

It was after twelve when Clare pulled up outside her house. They had taken the black Packard that had brought Korris to Pinder's End, leaving Casy and the others to bury the dead.

Clare said, 'There's someone in there.'

They looked at the light in the window and Duke wearily groped for his gun. 'Never a dull moment,' he said, and got out of the car.

Kells joined him.

'Wait here,' Duke said to Clare. 'We'll just make sure.'

At that moment the front door opened and Sam Trench came down the path. 'I thought maybe you'd be along,' he said. 'Come in, I've got some coffee for you and some food.'

'But Sam,' Clare was never more pleased to see anyone, 'how did you know?'

He put his arm round her. 'I'm clairvoyant,' he said. 'Now, come on in, you must want to take the weight off your feet.'

Duke hung back. He looked at Kells. 'I guess we may as well go on. It's getting late.'

Sam stopped and turned. 'Come in!' he snapped, 'I've got a lot to talk about.'

'Save it,' Duke returned, 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Tell him to come in, Clare,' Sam said. 'He's waiting for an invitation.'

Clare hesitated and then said, 'Please come.'

So they all went into the house and crowded into her little sitting room.

Clare went over and sat in the armchair. She looked white and ill. Duke sat on the table, nursing his arm while Sam poured out coffee.

'Any hard liquor in this joint?' Kells asked, anxiously.

Clare pulled herself together. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm not being much of a hostess.' She was about to get up when Sam said, 'I'll fix everything,' and went to the cupboard and produced a bottle of bourbon.

'It licks me how you knew we'd come here,' Duke said, looking at Sam with thoughtful eyes. The little man seemed to ooze triumph and Duke wondered what had happened.

Sam winked at him and as soon as everyone had something to drink, he took up his position before the empty fireplace.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘How did you get on?’

Duke passed his hand across his eyes. ‘We’ve wiped out Spade’s mob,’ he said. ‘Ten guys killed and the rest ran for it. Korris is dead. I don’t think there’ll be much trouble from the rest of them. It’s a pity we didn’t get Spade.’

‘And what about Pinder’s End?’ Sam demanded.

‘Well, I promised you the story, so here it is,’ Duke said. He told Sam the whole story up to date. When he wanted to skip details, Sam stopped him and made him go over the story again. By the time he had come to the part about Joe and Lorelli, Clare was dozing and Kells was getting high on the bourbon.

‘So, they got away,’ Duke said in disgust. ‘Schultz got away too. That’s my next problem tomorrow.’

Sam opened his coat and tossed the oilskin packet on the table. ‘That’s what you’re looking for, ain’t it?’ he said, beaming from ear to ear. ‘So you thought you’d leave the old man out of it, did you?’

Duke picked up the packet, glanced inside and then stared at Sam. Why - you old fox!’

‘Joe’s dead,’ Sam said. ‘Lorelli’s left town. I gave her a couple of hundred bucks and my blessing and she shot out of town like a streak of lightning.’

‘And Schultz?’ Duke asked, softly.

‘Schultz is in jail,’ Sam returned. ‘I had an interesting talk with Schultz just now. He’s been charged with the murder of Peter Cullen.’

Duke frowned at him, but Sam didn’t take any notice.

‘He doesn’t even deny it,’ he went on. ‘We shan’t have to bother with him anymore. . .’

Clare stood up. ‘Do you mind if I go to bed, Sam?’ she said. ‘I’ve had about as much as I can stand for one day.’

Sam went over to her. ‘Bed?’ he said. ‘When we’ve got the biggest inside story that’s ever broken in our hands? What sort of a newspaperman do you call yourself? I’m bringing out a special edition of the Clarion tomorrow and there’s work to be done.’

Clare stared at him. ‘But, Sam . . .’

‘But . . . hell!’ Sam snapped. ‘This is your story and you’re going to write it.’ He went up to her and gripped her arms. ‘We’ve cleaned up Bentonville

between us!' His eyes were alight with excitement. 'It's our own exclusive story. The Clarion's made with a story like this! We've got enough money to put Fairview on its feet. We can own Fairview if we want to! Can't you see the story we've got? Why, we can even get those factories going! This town won't need to play second fiddle anymore. Bentonville's licked!'

A little sparkle of excitement showed in Clare's eyes. 'But, Sam, we haven't got Spade!' she said. 'So long as he's around. . .'

'Spade?' Sam stared at her. 'Spade's dead! Schultz killed him. He went after Schultz, but Schultz outsmarted him.'

'I don't understand,' Clare said, bewildered.

'I thought you had guessed.' Sam suddenly became quiet. 'Well, you've got to know sooner or later. Peter Cullen was Spade, my dear. I don't like telling you this, but well. . .' he stopped.

'Peter?' Clare took a step back.

'Why did Timson die in Cullen's room?' Sam went on. 'That made me think. I know now. He found out who Cullen was and came to trade those title deeds with him. Cullen killed him, but before he could get rid of the body, Duke, with the girl, surprised

him. I've found the title deeds. They were in Peter's bank. I got the police to check on his deposits. We dug out the bank manager only a half an hour ago. He's got three hundred thousand dollars to his credit in ready cash. Isn't that enough proof for you? Every nickel of it was made out of the gambling rackets. It was a nice set-up for him. Korris did the work and he made the money.'

Duke said, 'Shut up! You've said plenty for tonight.'

'But she's got to know,' Sam returned, angrily. 'It'll ruin everything for her if she doesn't know.'

Duke whipped round to Kells. 'Get him out of here,' he said, fiercely. 'Go on, get out, both of you!'

Kells got to his feet, a surprised look in his eyes. 'Sure,' he

said. 'Come on, pa,' he went on to Sam, 'It's time you were in bed.'

'But, what about my story?' Sam protested as Kells hustled him out of the room.

'Never mind about that,' Kells said, 'I'll tell you a story I heard the other night, only you won't be able to print it.'

When they had gone, the room became quiet. Clare was standing by the

fireplace, her back turned and her head on her arm.

Duke went up to her and turned her. 'Don't you think we can call this fight off?' he said, holding her against him 'I guess we both need each other.'

She tried to push him away, but he held her.

'Let me go,' she said, fiercely. 'I know it's your fault . . . I know he wouldn't have. . .' and she stopped.

Duke shook his head at her. 'Stop kidding yourself,' he said. 'I warned you. Pete was a good guy to you and me, but he was a mean citizen. I'm not much better, but Pete's dead, so it makes me twice as good as he is. Don't be obstinate, Clare. There's a lot to do. There are worthwhile things to do and I want you to help me.'

She said, 'I want to go away. I don't want ever to see Fairview or Bentonville again. I'm so tired of it all.'

'You won't be tired of the new Fairview - not with me around. You don't know your own mind. You've been too long on your own. Well, I'm going to take charge of you and you'll have to learn to like it.' He lifted her chin and kissed her.

For a brief moment, Clare tried to push him away, then her arms went round his neck and she clung to him.

'Forgive me,' she said, her hair against his cheek, 'I've been an awful fool, but I won't be like that anymore.'

Sam and Kells flattened their noses against the window as they watched them.

'I knew that would happen,' Kells said, grinning. 'The guy never stood a chance.'

'He won't complain,' Sam said. 'I've known that girl for some time and she'll make him happy.'

They watched for some time, then lifting their voices they began to sing, 'It's a lovely day tomorrow.'

And that's how it ended...