

CORGI

Safer Dead

**JAMES
HADLEY
CHASE**

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Safer Dead
James Hadley Chase
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CHAPTER ONE

I

Edwin Fayette, editor of Crime Facts, sat behind his desk in his luxurious office, a cigar between his teeth and an unfriendly gleam in his eyes.

‘Sit down,’ he said, waving impatiently. ‘What are you two guys working on?’

I folded myself down in the most comfortable armchair in the room while Bernie Low sat as far from Fayette as he could and began to bite his nails.

Bernie and I had been collaborating for the past two years, writing stories for Crime Facts, a monthly magazine of crime and detection stories with the biggest circulation of any of its rivals. I did the thinking and Bernie did the writing. The arrangement suited us both. I never could work up enough energy to commit ideas to paper, and Bernie never had any ideas.

An ex-Hollywood scriptwriter, Bernie was short, plump and impressive looking. He had a dome-shaped head, a massive forehead and his heavy horn spectacles made him look brainier than he was. He had once confided to me that it was entirely due to the shape of his head that he had remained in the movie business as long as he had.

Bernie had a horror of losing his job. Whenever he was called to Fayette’s office, he imagined he was going to get the gate. Saddled with an expensive, luxury-loving wife, an enormous house and a flock of debts, his life was one continual battle to keep the wolf from the door.

‘Right at this moment,’ I said, ‘we’re tossing an idea around in our minds and building up atmosphere. We’ll have something for you in a week or so and it’ll knock your eye out.’

‘Well, shelve it,’ Fayette said. ‘I’ve got something I want you two to work on. Will your story wait?’

‘Oh sure, it’ll wait. What have you got for us?’

Fayette produced a file from his desk.

‘I want a series of articles done on missing people,’ he said. ‘Do you realize thirty or more people walk out of their homes every day in this

country and disappear? I've got Carson to dig up few of the more interesting cases, and I've a good one here for you. I want you to get moving on it right away.'

Bernie and I exchanged glances. We had been bogged down for the past week on a story idea and Fayette's suggestion was welcome.

'What's the story then?' I asked.

'During August of last year, a girl named Fay Benson disappeared,' Fayette said. 'She was a song and dance artist, working at the Florian nightclub in Welden. Welden, if you don't know, is sixty miles southeast of San Francisco. This girl had been a success. The manager of the club told her he would extend her contract so she had no reason to disappear as she did. On August 17th she came as usual to the club and went to her dressing room. At nine o'clock, the callboy warned her she had five minutes before her act began. He saw she was wearing her stage getup which consisted of a bra, a pair of spangled shorts, a top hat and some feathers. She said she was ready, and he left her. He was the last person to see her. When she didn't appear on the stage he was sent to fetch her, but her dressing room was empty. The clothes she had arrived in were there, and more important still, her purse containing twenty dollars was on her dressing table, but she had vanished.

'The manager asked the stage door man if he had seen her, but he hadn't. The only other exit, apart from the customers' exit which was through the restaurant, was in the basement. The man in charge down there hadn't seen her either. Bearing in mind she was still wearing her stage getup, no one could have failed to have seen her if she had used the delivery exit, the stage door exit or if she had gone through the restaurant to the main exit. The manager decided she must still be in the club. The building was searched but they didn't find her. The police were called in. They didn't find her either. They learned that she had got the job at the club through an agency, but the agency didn't know anything about her except she had told them she had worked at the

Swallow Club in San Francisco. When the police checked, the Swallow Club had never heard of her. She didn't appear to have any friends. She stayed at the Shad Hotel, a moderate joint near the club, and the reception clerk said she never had any visitors nor any mail. The police kept at it for a couple of weeks, then as they didn't get a lead or find her body, they dropped the case.'

Fayette closed the file and looked at me. 'Doesn't that sound like the makings of a good story?'

I thought it did, but I had learned not to show too much enthusiasm for Fayette's ideas. They had a habit of blowing up in one's face.

'It sounds all right, but if the police couldn't get a lead on her, how can we?'

'Most people don't like talking to the police. Besides, I like this story, and I'm willing to spend some money on it. People will talk if they think they're going to get something out of it. I'm sure we've got something hot here, and I want you two to get after it.'

'Okay,' I said and held out my hand for the file. 'All the dope here?'

'There's not much more than I've already told you: a few names and a photograph of the girl, but that's all. You'll have start from scratch.'

'How about expenses?' Bernie asked a shade too eagerly.

Fayette scowled at him.

'Within reason, and I mean my reason and not yours. I want an account kept of every dime you part with - understand?'

Bernie smiled happily. He hadn't been in the movie business for four years without learning how to pad an expense sheet.

'You'll get an account okay, Mr. Fayette,' he said.

I was looking at the picture of Fay Benson I had found in the file. The glossy photograph was of a girl of about twenty-four in a spangled brassiere, spangled pants and a top hat. Her lovely face, framed by fair, silky hair was to my thinking as sensational as her figure was seductive. I handed the picture to Bernie.

'Take a look at this,' I said.

Bernie's eyes popped and he pursed his lips in an appreciative whistle.

'Well, come on, let's go,' he said, getting to his feet. 'If she's as good as she looks, she's worth finding.'

II

It was growing dark as we drove into Welden in the Roadmaster Buick I had hired in San Francisco. At first sight, Welden appeared to be a compact, well laid out town, prosperous and clean, with broad streets and crowded sidewalks.

‘For a hick town, this doesn’t look so bad,’ Bernie said, screwing his head around to catch a last glimpse of a tall, willowy blonde who was waiting at the traffic signals to cross the street and who had given him a long, bold stare as we passed. ‘Anyway, the women don’t appear to be repressed, and that’s always a good sign.’

‘Will you shut up?’ I said impatiently. ‘That’s all you think about - women. For a married man you should be ashamed of yourself.’

‘If you were married to Clair, you’d act the same way,’ Bernie said. ‘That girl drives me nuts. She’s always yelling for something. If I didn’t circulate among other women now and then I’d begin to imagine they were all like her.’

‘You shouldn’t have married her.’

Bernie laughed bitterly.

‘Do you think I’m that crazy? I didn’t marry her; she married me.’

I slowed down and pulled to the sidewalk to ask a patrolman where the Shad Hotel was. He directed me, and after about five minutes driving, we came to the hotel.

It didn’t look much. It was a tall building sandwiched between a block of offices and a hardware store. Opposite was the hotel garage, and when we had parked the car, we carried our bags across the street and entered the hotel.

Potted palms, basket chairs and tarnished spittoons gave the lobby a seedy, down-at-the-heel look, and the reception clerk, a shabby, elderly man with a network of fine red veins decorating his over large nose, didn’t do anything to raise the tone of the place.

‘What a dump,’ Bernie said, ‘I’ll bet there are beetles in the bedrooms.’

‘What do you expect? Silkworms?’ I said and crossed over to the desk.

The clerk seemed surprised when I asked for two rooms and told him we were likely to stay a week.

‘I have two rooms on the first floor,’ he said. ‘Would they do?’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Have these bags taken up. Where’s the bar?’

‘Through there; second on your right.’

The bar was a long, narrow room with more potted palms, tarnished spittoons and basket chairs. There was no one in it except the barman who was reading the evening paper which he folded with a resigned air when he saw us.

‘Good evening, gentlemen,’ he said. He was big and tough with a brick red face and the bright blue eyes of a drinker.

I ordered two highballs.

‘Looks festive enough to hold a funeral in,’ Bernie said looking around. ‘Don’t the folks in this hotel ever drink?’

‘It’s early yet,’ the barman said as if accusing us of disturbing his peace. ‘You staying here?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Ever read Crime Facts?’

He showed his surprise.

‘Why sure, it’s my favourite reading.’

I finished my highball at a swallow and pushed the glass back to him. Bernie, who believed in keeping pace with me, hurriedly downed his too.

‘Fill them up,’ I said. ‘We work for Crime Facts. We’re covering the Fay Benson case. Remember her?’

The barman had picked up my glass. It suddenly slipped out of his hand and smashed on the floor. He swore as he bent to kick the bits of glass under the counter. When he straightened up I had an idea he had lost some of his colour.

‘What was that again?’ he asked.

‘Fay Benson. Remember her?’

‘Why, sure.’ He turned to fix another drink. ‘You mean you’re writing up the case?’

‘That’s the idea if we can get a new angle.’

He put two more drinks before us and then leaned against the counter while he began to arrange some glasses in a more orderly group.

‘What sort of angle would that be?’ he asked without looking at me.

‘Search me. We’re just looking around and seeing what we can pick up. It’s an interesting case. A girl, wearing only pants and bra, suddenly vanishes. Where did she go? Why did she go? Have you any ideas?’

‘Me?’ the barman scowled. ‘Why should I have any ideas?’

‘You knew her?’

He hesitated, then as he began to polish another glass, he said, ‘I didn’t know her. She came in for a drink now and then.’

‘Was she alone?’

‘She was always alone. I guess she came in here for company.’

‘Didn’t she have a boyfriend?’ I asked, aware that the barman wasn’t at ease. I sensed his tension rather than saw it, but I was pretty sure it was there.

‘She didn’t seem to know anyone. She kept to herself.’

‘But you don’t know for certain she didn’t have a boyfriend,’ Bernie put in. ‘She might have without you knowing about it.’

The barman scowled at him.

‘Maybe. What’s the idea of writing up the case again?’

‘We won’t write it up unless we can find out why she disappeared,’ I said.

‘The cops didn’t find out - why should you?’ He looked quickly at me, then away, but not fast enough for me to miss his furtive expression. This guy was beginning to interest me.

‘We’re the guys who put Sherlock Holmes out of business,’ Bernie said airily. ‘You’d be surprised at the number of unsolved cases we’ve solved. Surprises us sometimes. The cops know how good we are: they work with us now.’

‘Is that right? Well, you’ll have to be pretty smart to crack this one,’ the barman said curtly and turning, he moved away to the end of the bar and fetched out his paper.

I finished my drink.

‘Know where the Florian club is?’ I asked.

‘Hundred yards down on the right,’ the barman said without looking up.

As we left the bar, Bernie muttered, ‘He didn’t seem too friendly. Did you notice it?’

‘He looked scared to me,’ I said, letting the barroom door swing to behind me. ‘Wait a second.’ I turned and peered through the glass panel of the door. I watched for a moment, then joined Bernie. ‘He’s using the telephone.’

‘Maybe he’s putting a buck on a horse.’

‘At this hour? Come on, let’s eat.’ I was thoughtful as we crossed the lobby and walked down the steps to the street. ‘I’m not so sure now my approach was right. I wouldn’t have told him about Crime Facts if I’d known

he was going to react like that.'

'Like what?' Bernie said, bewildered. 'He happened to drop a glass. Okay, anyone can do that. I admit he wasn't too friendly, but maybe he didn't like our faces. Some people don't.'

'Will you stop drivelling and let me think?' I said impatiently.

'Okay, okay,' Bernie said in a resigned voice. 'Go ahead and think. Anyone would imagine I wasn't in this combination the way I'm treated.'

'Shut up!' I said fiercely.

III

There was quite a crowd moving through the brightly lit lobby of the Florian club. The hatcheck girl who took our hats was wearing a frilly little frock, a low neckline and a come-hither look.

Bernie leered at her.

‘What’s the food like in this joint, babe?’ he asked. ‘Come to that, you look good enough to eat, yourself.’

The girl giggled.

‘The food’s fine,’ she said, then lowering her voice, she went on, ‘but don’t take the goulash. The kitchen cat’s missing.’

‘Come on!’ I said, dragging him away. ‘Lay off. We’re working.’

‘When don’t we work?’ he said bitterly. ‘Why did I ever get into this racket?’

The captain of waiters led us to a corner table.

The restaurant was fairly large with a five-piece band, a small dance floor and pink diffused lights.

After we had ordered, Bernie said, ‘What’s the next move?’

‘I want to talk to the manager,’ I said. ‘He might have something for us. Then there’s the callboy. He might know more than he told the cops.’

‘Those wrens huddled in the corner over there must be the hostesses. Would it be an idea if I made myself pleasant to one of them while you talk to the manager? No need for both of us to talk to him, and I might find out something.’

‘You might,’ I said, ‘but make sure it’s to do with this case.’

‘You’ve got a horrible mind,’ Bernie said indignantly.

A half an hour later, I paid the bill and got to my feet.

‘Don’t get into trouble,’ I said to Bernie.

‘She’s the one who’ll be in trouble,’ Bernie said, staring fixedly at a red head whose pretty painted face was stiff with boredom. ‘I’ve always wanted to third degree a dance hostess.’

I left him and searched out the manager’s office.

He turned out to be a short, dark man whose name was Al Weiman. When I told him I was from Crime Facts, he seemed pleased to see me.

‘What can I do for you, Mr. Sladen?’ he asked, waving me to a chair.

‘I’m trying to dig up some new facts about Fay Benson,’ I said. ‘We want to write up the case if we can find out any new angles.’

‘You have a job on, haven’t you? She disappeared fourteen months ago.’

‘I know.’ I accepted the cigarette he offered me and lit it. ‘But sometimes when one starts digging into an old case, you get on better than if it had just happened. If this girl met with foul play, the guy who did it is sitting pretty. Then he suddenly discovers, just when he is certain he is safe, that a new investigation has started up. The chances are he’ll get rattled. He might even make a mistake and give himself away. It’s happened before.’

‘Yes, I can see that. Well, how can I help?’

‘Have you any idea how the girl, dressed as she was, could have left here without being seen?’

Weiman shook his head.

‘I’ve often thought about it, but it foxes me. Both the rear exits were guarded, and she couldn’t have gone through the restaurant without being seen.’

‘Who were the men on the rear exit?’ I asked.

‘Joe Farmer was on the stage door exit and Pete Schultz was on the basement exit.’

‘Did it occur to you one of them might have been lying? If one of them lied, there’s no mystery to this at all. Didn’t the police think of that?’

‘Oh sure. They worked on both of them, but they couldn’t shake them. They both swore they didn’t leave their posts nor did they see the girl.’

‘Got anything against either of them?’

‘Schultz was all right. Besides, he was taking a delivery of beer and the police checked with the driver of the beer truck. He said Schultz was on the door at the time the girl disappeared.’

‘So that leaves Farmer. Anyone to support his story?’

‘No. I’ve often wondered about Farmer. He used to drink more than was good for him. Before this happened, he used to slip across the road to Mike’s bar, and I caught him at it. I told him if he did it again, I’d give him the gate.’

‘That’s not in your statement,’ I said.

‘I know it.’ Weiman smiled. ‘I didn’t want to get the guy into trouble. I talked to him before I called the cops and he convinced me he hadn’t been across the road.’

‘You caught him at it once. He knew if you caught him again he’d go. He would be pretty convincing, wouldn’t he?’

‘Before I questioned him, I went over to Mike’s bar. The barman there said he hadn’t seen him. I’m sure Joe was telling the truth.’

‘If he wasn’t, there’s no mystery. The girl could have gone that way.’

‘She couldn’t have gone far without being seen.’

‘Why not? If a car was waiting for her, she wouldn’t have had any trouble in getting away. I’d like to talk to Farmer.’

‘He’s dead.’

I stared at Weiman.

‘Dead? When did he die?’

‘Two days after the girl disappeared. He was killed by a hit and run driver. They never did find the driver.’

‘Well, that’s that,’ I said, disappointed. ‘I thought I was getting somewhere. Is the callboy still with you?’

‘Spencer? Yes, he’s with us. Want to talk to him?’

‘He was the last one to see her, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes. You stick here, Mr. Sladen. I’ve got business to look after. I’ll send him to you.’

‘What did you think of Fay Benson?’ I asked as he got up. ‘Was she the type who could get into trouble?’

He shook his head.

‘I wouldn’t have thought so. She was a fine kid and her act was a success. She wasn’t like the usual girl we get here. She kept to herself, but she wasn’t unfriendly, and she behaved herself. No, she wasn’t the type to get into trouble.’

‘She didn’t mention her people? She didn’t give you a lead to where she came from?’

‘She didn’t talk about herself. I liked her act. She obviously had plenty of experience. She must have been in the game for some years. You can always tell if a girl’s had experience, and she had.’

‘It looks to me as if she was hiding from someone. She had no friends, no mail, kept to herself and lied about her background. It points to it. Well, okay, I mustn’t keep you. I’ll talk to Spencer.’

When Spencer came into the office, I waved him to a chair. He was tall and lanky and in his early twenties. He looked popeyed at me, and there was

a mixture of nervousness and admiration in his gaze.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, ‘but are you the Chet Sladen who writes for Crime Facts?’

‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘You read my stuff?’

‘Read it! Gosh! I’ll say I do. I think it’s terrific. I’ve been reading it for years.’

‘I’ve been reading it for years myself, so that makes two of us,’ I said grinning. ‘I’m working on the Fay Benson case, and I’m hoping you can help me. How did you get on with her?’

‘I got on fine with her. She was a sweet kid, Mr. Sladen. She never made trouble for me.’

‘When you went to her room to call her the second time, was the room all right - no sign of a struggle?’

‘It was just the way I had seen it when I gave her her first call; except she wasn’t there.’

‘When you called her the first time, you’re sure she was there?’

‘Why, sure. After I knocked and she had called out, I opened the door and looked in. She was standing by the mirror. She had on her stage getup and she said she would be right along. She asked about a telephone call she was expecting and I told her she’d have to take it when it came through in Joe’s office.’

‘She was expecting a call?’

‘Yes; she seemed anxious about it.’

‘Did it ever come through, do you know?’

‘I don’t think it did.’

‘Can I take a look at her dressing room?’

‘You can see the outside, Mr. Sladen. There’s a girl using it right now.’

‘The outside will do.’

He took me along a passage down some stairs and to the back of the building. He opened a door and I found myself in a lobby that contained among other things wooden crates, odd spotlights and musical instrument cases. The dressing room door didn’t tell me anything. It was only fifteen yards from the stage door exit and the stage door office was just around the bend in the passage out of sight of the dressing room door.

‘You’re sure she didn’t have any other clothes in her room? She couldn’t have changed out of her stage getup?’

‘I’m sure, Mr. Sladen. One of my jobs is to clean out the dressing rooms, and the cupboard was always empty. There was nowhere for her to keep anything except in the cupboard.’

‘It’s a baffler, isn’t it?’

‘It certainly is, Mr. Sladen.’

‘Well, thanks. If I can think of anything I’ll look in and see you again. Where’s Mike’s bar?’

‘I’ll show you.’

He took me past the stage door office, opened the stage door and pointed across the alley. ‘That’s it.’

‘Thanks,’ I said, crossed the alley and pushed open the bar door.

There were three men, sitting at a table drinking beer; another man lolled up against the bar, a whisky in front of him. The barman, a beefy looking man with a red humorous face, was fiddling with a radio set. I entered and going to the far end of the bar away from the four men, waited for the barman to come to me.

‘I’ll have a double Scotch and water,’ I said, ‘and if you have nothing better to do, have one yourself.’

He grinned.

‘Glad to, mister, and thanks.’

When he came back with the drinks, I said, ‘I haven’t been in Welden for over a year. I used to know Joe Farmer. I hear he’s dead.’

The barman nodded.

‘That’s right. He got killed by a hit and run artist. The driver was never found. The cops in this town couldn’t find their own names in a telephone book.’

‘You knew him, didn’t you?’

‘No. I’m new here. He died a couple of days before I came here. But I heard about it.’

‘What happened to the barman who used to serve Joe?’ I asked, suddenly interested.

‘Jake Hesson? He left; got himself a better job.’

‘Know where?’

‘Some hotel. I forget the name.’

I had a sudden inspiration.

‘Was it the Shad Hotel?’

The barman nodded.

‘That’s right. The Shad Hotel.’

‘Go on, drink up,’ I said, beaming at him, ‘and have another.’

I knew now I was making progress.

CHAPTER TWO

I

When I went back to collect Bernie, the captain of waiters at the Florian told me he had left twenty minutes ago.

‘Was he alone?’ I asked suspiciously.

The captain of waiters shook his head.

‘He had one of our hostesses with him,’ he told me, obviously disapproving.

Knowing Bernie’s little ways, I was pretty sure I wouldn’t see him until the following morning so I returned to the Shad Hotel. I wanted another talk with Jake Hesson the barman, but I found the bar closed.

I concentrated my attention on the reception clerk who was idly thumbing through a magazine.

‘I didn’t get your name,’ I said, leaning up against the desk and offering him a cigarette.

‘My name’s Larson. I don’t smoke, thank you.’

‘Haven’t I seen your barman before somewhere? What’s his name?’

‘Jake Hesson.’

‘I have an idea he used to work at Mike’s bar at the back of the Florian club. That right?’

‘Yes,’ Larson said, staring blankly at me. ‘He came to us about a year ago.’

‘Remember exactly when?’

‘Last September. Why the interest?’

‘So he wasn’t here when Miss Benson was here?’

‘Miss Benson?’ Larson pushed aside his magazine. I could see he didn’t know whether to be interested or suspicious. ‘You mean the girl who disappeared?’

‘That’s the one. Hesson wasn’t working here when she stayed here?’

‘No.’

‘That’s funny. He told me he knew her.’

‘Are you interested in Miss Benson?’ Larson asked.

‘Yeah; I’m covering the case for Crime Facts. How long did she stay here?’

‘You mean they’re reopening the case?’

‘It was never closed. How long did she stay here?’

Larson pulled the big leather bound register towards him, and began thumbing over the pages. After a while he said, ‘She booked in on August 9th and disappeared on August 17th.’

‘Did she pay her bill before she left?’

‘No; she owes us thirty bucks. I don’t reckon we’ll ever see it.’

‘What happened to her luggage?’

‘The cops took it. There wasn’t much: a suitcase and a small handbag.’

‘She didn’t have any visitors?’

‘No, nor any mail either.’

‘Any telephone calls?’

Larson shook his head.

‘Three days after her disappearance some girl asked for her. But no one asked for her while she was staying here.’

‘What girl was that?’

‘I don’t know. She came in and asked if Miss Benson had been found. I told her she hadn’t, and she asked me to call her if Miss Benson did turn up.’

‘Did you tell the cops?’

‘About this girl? Why should I? It was bad enough to have them tramping around here in the first place. Nothing like a flock of buttons to drive away trade. The way things are with this hotel, we can’t afford to upset our customers.’

‘Do you remember who the girl was?’

Larson turned to the last page of the register, removed a card that was clipped to the page and handed it to me.

I looked at the card.

Joan Nichols.

Apartment B.

76, Lincoln Avenue. Welden. W. 75600

‘Thanks,’ I said and slipped the card into my pocket. ‘Is Hesson around? I want a word with him.’

‘He doesn’t live here. He has a room on Bay Street.’

‘Do you remember the number?’

‘27: what’s the idea?’

‘No idea. I pick up information the way a magpie picks up anything that glitters. My mother was frightened by a magpie before I was born. Well, I guess I’ll turn in. See you in the morning.’

I left him gaping and went up to my room.

I hadn’t been asleep for more than half an hour when my door burst open and the light turned on. I sat up blinking to see Bernie standing in the doorway.

‘For the love of Mike! Can’t you let a guy sleep?’ I growled.

‘You ought to be up and working like me,’ Bernie said, coming unsteadily over to the bed. ‘Brother! Do I feel cockeyed.’ He flopped heavily on the bed and blew out his cheeks. ‘I’ve got news for you. Fay had a boyfriend.’

‘What?’ I sat bolt upright. ‘Have you found him?’

‘I haven’t found him, but I’ve got a swell description of him. I knew a girl like this Benson frill couldn’t have gone through life without a boyfriend: it was against nature. I got friendly with that redhead. She calls herself Dawn, but I bet her name’s Beulah or Dagmar or something awful. But what a girl! No inhibitions, no repressions, and how she loves money!’

‘What did she tell you?’

‘She was working at the club at the same time as Fay was,’ Bernie said, passing his hand across his eyes. ‘Is the floor moving up and down or am I drunker than I imagine I am?’

‘There’s a heavy sea running tonight,’ I said sarcastically. ‘Get out with it!’

‘Dawn tells me none of the girls knew much about Fay. It wasn’t that she was high hat, but she had her own dressing room and she kept to it. The girls wondered about her, as girls do. The third night after Fay had first come to the club, Dawn saw her talking to the driver of a car parked at the far end of the alley at the back of the club. Dawn couldn’t see much of the driver. He had his hat pulled down low and he wore dark glasses which Dawn thought was odd as it was dark. It was a good car. A Cadillac convertible: green and cream.’

‘He could have been asking the way, you dope!’

‘I thought of that.’ Bernie opened his eyes and looked suspiciously at the floor. ‘I may not show it, but I have a natural talent for detection. Dawn saw this guy again two nights later. He was talking to Farmer in the stage door

office, and she got a good look at him. When he had gone she asked Farmer who he was and he said he didn't know, but he was waiting for Fay. I have his description written down in case I forgot it.'

'It's a marvel to me you didn't forget to write it down, and it beats me how you ever got back here in the condition you're in.'

Bernie smirked as he took out his wallet and produced a sheet of paper.

'Dawn brought me back. That's the kind of girl she is. She says she always looks after her investments. She calls me her goose that lays her golden eggs. Cute, isn't it?'

'Get on with it, you drunken lug!' I snarled. 'Let's have the guy's description.'

Bernie peered at the paper, frowned, then said, 'That's funny. I seem to have written this in Chinese.'

'You have it upside down, you dope!'

Bernie turned the page up the other way.

'So I have. I thought for a moment liquor was giving me some culture. This guy's over six foot, lean, suntanned with an eyebrow moustache. He wears dark glasses, even at night. He had on a camel hair coat, a white nylon shirt and a polka dot bow tie. He wore a gold link bracelet on one wrist and a gold strap watch on the other. Trust Dawn to spot the gold fitments. At a guess he's around thirty-five. That's not a bad description, is it?'

I took the paper from Bernie's unsteady hand, folded it and placed it on the bedside table.

'It's good. Well, we're certainly getting places. The cops didn't turn this guy up. Did you find out anything else?'

'Isn't that enough for one night? Besides, after she'd told me that, she started to tell me how much she liked money, and once she starts on that subject nothing on earth can stop her.'

'Well, okay. You'd better go to bed. Your room is next to mine on the left in case you don't remember.'

'What about you? Didn't you find out anything?' Bernie said, peering at me. 'What have you been doing all this time?'

'I've been doing plenty, but you're in no condition to concentrate. Go to bed. I'll tell you in the morning.'

'That's not a bad idea,' Bernie said, getting to his feet. 'I could do with some sleep. Don't start work too early. I have an idea I'm going to have a

hangover.'

'Go to bed!' I said and turned out the light.

II

At nine-thirty the following morning, I opened Bernie's bedroom door and looked at him as he lay on the bed, still dressed, his mouth hanging open, dead to the world. I decided there was no point in waking him. He wouldn't be in a fit state to work. I shut the door softly and went down to the lobby. I told Larson not to disturb him, then went over to the garage, collected the Buick and drove over to Joan Nichols's apartment house.

The house was in a quiet street on the other side of the town: a tall, grey building with faded green curtains at the windows and a flight of stone steps to the front door.

Leaving the Buick, I mounted the steps and paused to examine the row of mailboxes in the lobby. Failing to find Joan Nichols's card on any of them, I crossed the lobby to the janitor's office and rapped on the door.

A fat man in shirtsleeves, a dead cigar clamped between his teeth, opened the door and looked at me without interest.

'Full up,' he said curtly and began to shut the door.

'I'm not looking for a room,' I said, wedging my foot in the door. 'I'm looking for Miss Nichols. I understand she lives here.'

'Joan Nichols, do you mean?' he asked, staring at me.

'That's right. I couldn't find her name on any of the mailboxes.'

'You won't. You won't find her here either. If you really want to find her you'll have to go out to the Welden graveyard. That's where she lives now.'

A chill crawled up my spine.

'Are you telling me she's dead?'

'Well, I hope for her sake she is. They put her in a coffin and buried her.' He frowned. 'She gypped me out of a month's rent. She didn't have a nickel and the cops took her luggage.'

'Did she get sick or something?'

'She fell downstairs.' The janitor jerked his head to the steep flight of stairs that faced him. 'Those stairs. I guess she was drunk although the cops said, she wasn't, but they don't know everything. She certainly fit hard. I thought the house was coming down.'

'When was this?'

‘Last August.’

‘Do you remember the date?’

The janitor moved restlessly. I could see the conversation was boring him.

‘Why should I? I’m not that interested. The cops will tell you if you must know.’ He began to close the door. ‘I’ve got to get on.’

I was too shaken to think of anything else to ask him and I let him shut the door in my face. I walked slowly back to the car, got in and lit a cigarette. I stared through the windshield at the dingy street ahead, my mind busy.

Was this a coincidence? Two people connected with Fay Benson were now dead: both of them had died soon after the girl had disappeared; both of them apparently had met accidental deaths.

‘Very, very fishy,’ I said, half aloud, then treading on the starter I drove back to Main Street, and getting my bearings from a cop, I headed for Bay Street. No. 27 turned out to be a delicatessen store. I assumed Jake Hesson had a room above, but as there was no street door at the side, I went into the store.

A dark, heavily built girl in a grubby white overall looked at me over a mountain of cooked food, sandwiches and bowls of gherkins.

‘What’s yours?’ she asked as I came to rest before her.

‘I’m looking for Jake Hesson,’ I said, giving her my boyish smile. ‘I was told he hangs out here.’

She gave me a quick, appraising stare.

‘What do you want him for?’

‘I’ll get him to tell you if he wants you to know,’ I said, smiling to take the curse off it. ‘Is he still in bed?’

‘No. Are you from the cops?’

‘Do I look like a cop?’ I asked indignantly. ‘What’s it to you who I’m from? Are you Jake’s pal or something?’

She made a face.

‘I’m not all that hard up for pals.’ She suddenly smiled. ‘I can see you’re not a cop. Jake’s gone.’

‘You mean he’s gone to work?’

‘No, I don’t. He’s skipped; packed and scrambled. Don’t you understand English? He went late last night. I guess he’s in some kind of trouble. It won’t be the first time.’

I lit a cigarette, put the match carefully in the ashtray on the counter while I

looked at the girl.

‘Did he say where he was going?’

She shook her head.

‘No. He paid his rent, packed his bag and beat it. You don’t ask Joe questions unless you want a new set of teeth.’

‘How long has he been staying here?’

‘About a couple of years.’

I took out my wallet and produced a five-dollar bill. ‘I would like to look at his room. Would five bucks cover your expenses?’

Fingers with grubby knuckles and nails stained dark red snapped up the bill. The girl turned, took a key from the cash register and handed it to me.

‘Through that door, upstairs. Second door on the left. If my old man catches you, you’ll have to talk yourself out of it. He’s got a mean disposition.’

‘You might not guess it to look at me,’ I said as I moved to the door, ‘but so have I.’

I walked into a passage, mounted dirty, uncarpeted stairs and stopped outside the second door on the left. I slid the key into the lock, turned it and pushed the door open. The room showed every sign of a hurried departure. The doors of the wardrobe hung open, drawers had been pulled out of the bureau and left on the floor. There was dirty, soapy water in the bowl on the washstand.

I shut the door and looked around. I was sure now I had started something. Hesson had panicked. He had lied about knowing Fay Benson, probably because he was off guard and said the first thing that came into his head. Realizing his mistake, he had packed and bolted.

I went over the room methodically and carefully. It wasn’t until I moved the bed from the wall that I found anything to excite my interest. I caught a glimpse of something that gleamed through a thick layer of dust. I bent and picked it up. Moving over to the window I examined my find.

It was a miniature replica of an apple, made of gold; the kind of thing you might find on a charm bracelet women wear.

Engraved on one side of it in letters so small I could scarcely read them was the following: F.B. from H.R. June 24th.

F.B. - Fay Benson?

I rolled the tiny apple across my palm, then I dropped it into my pocket. As

I turned to renew my search, the door pushed open and a thickset man, his dark swarthy face set in a hard scowl, stood in the doorway.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ he growled.

‘Looking for Hesson,’ I said, guessing he was the girl’s papa. He looked as if he had a mean disposition. ‘Know where he is?’

‘You can see he’s not here. Get out before I toss you out!’ He looked tough and strong enough to do it so I moved to the door.

‘I want to find him. I’ll spring five bucks for his address,’ I said.

He looked less hostile.

‘It’ll cost you twenty.’

I shook my head.

‘I’ll pay ten, but not a nickel more.’

‘Okay, ten.’

I groped in my wallet without taking it out of my pocket, found two fives and folded them.

‘Where is he?’

‘He’s gone to Sam Hardy’s place. 3, Lennox Street, Frisco.’

‘Would you be sure of that?’

‘That’s where he told me to send his mail.’ He reached for the bills. ‘If he isn’t there, he’ll be there sometime.’

I handed over the ten dollars. I wasn’t sure if I were parting with the money for nothing, but as it was Fayette’s money and not mine, I thought the risk was justified.

‘If I don’t find him, brother,’ I said, pushing past him, ‘you’ll be seeing me again.’

I went down the stairs to the street.

III

It was a little after one o'clock by the time I got back to the Shad Hotel. I found Bernie sitting in the lobby, hollow eyed and pale, glass of whisky and water within reach.

'Still tippling? I should have thought you had had enough last night to last you a lifetime.'

Bernie closed his eyes, then opened them and shuddered.

'Would you mind keeping your voice down?' he said pathetically. 'The least noise sends stabbing pains through my head.'

'Serves you right. Come on; let's eat. I've got news for you.'

Bernie recoiled.

'Don't talk to me about food. I couldn't touch a thing.'

I grabbed him by the arm and hustled him into the dingy restaurant.

'Then you can watch me,' I said.

While I ate, I gave him a detailed account of what I had discovered the previous evening and of my work during the morning. He became so interested, he even forgot his headache.

'We're doing all right,' I said. 'We already know more than the police did when they dropped the case, and that's not bad going. We know Fay was in touch with this guy in the camel hair coat. The police didn't manage to turn him up or if they did, they didn't think he was of sufficient interest to mention him. I think he's worth investigating. Anyone who wears dark glasses at night is my idea of a suspect. And another thing: who is this girl Joan Nichols? Where does she fit in? She called here three days after Fay had disappeared and asked for her. Then she promptly falls downstairs and breaks her neck. Farmer is the only guy who could have seen Fay leave the club and he gets himself conveniently run over. Looks to me that Joan Nichols and Farmer were got rid of because they knew too much.'

Bernie's eyes popped.

'Hey! Has it occurred to your master mind we also know something?' he said, lowering his voice. 'Suppose someone starts trying to knock us off?'

'Don't drivel. Investigators never get knocked off. Don't you read thrillers?'

‘I don’t like it. Maybe we’d better drop this case, Chet. I’m serious. I wouldn’t like anything to happen to you - nor to me, come to that.’

‘Skip it!’ I said. ‘This is going to be our best story. I’m going after Hesson. I want you to find this guy in the camel hair coat. The chances are he’s already left town, but it’s worthwhile calling on all the hotels here and seeing if anyone recognizes his description. His car might help you.’

Bernie nodded reluctantly.

‘Well, okay. I’ll do what I can. There can’t be many hotels in town - I hope!’

I pushed back my chair.

‘Well, come on. I’ll need the car. I should be back from Frisco tonight. See you here.’

Bernie got to his feet and we went into the lobby.

‘Hang on a moment,’ I said and stepped into the telephone booth. I called the Florian club and asked to be put through to the stage door office.

‘Is Spencer there?’ I asked.

‘This is Spencer talking. Is that Mr. Sladen?’

‘Yeah. Do you know if Miss Benson owned a charm bracelet? You know what that is, don’t you?’

‘Sure, Mr. Sladen. She did have one. It had a lot of charms on it. She showed it to me.’

‘Was there a gold apple among the charms?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Fine, and thanks,’ I said and hung up. I left the booth and joined Bernie. ‘I was right. The charm came off her bracelet, Spencer saw it. Hesson will have a job to explain how it got into his room.’

‘We’re not bad for amateurs, are we?’ Bernie said.

‘If we were amateurs we’d be good. See you tonight.’

It was four o’clock and growing dusk when I drove over the Oakland Bay bridge and stopped on Harrison Street to inquire the way to Lennox Street.

The cop told me to make for India Basin.

I left the Buick in a vacant plot and walked down the dirty street, at the end of which was Lennox Street. Tenement houses, faced with iron escapes, stood starkly against the darkening sky. Here and there lights showed in upper windows.

I paused outside No. 3. It was a narrow high building with a bunch of dirty,

ragged kids sitting on the bottom step. They stared fixedly at me, nudging one another.

I said, 'Sam Hardy live here?'

'Yes, but he's out,' one of the boys said. He shifted a little to let me pass, and as I walked up the dirty, worn steps, the kids turned to stare after me. The front door was ajar and I pushed it open and entered a bare, dirty hall.

A thin negro was sitting on an upturned box with his back against the wall, reading a racing sheet. He looked up and stared at me, his eyes tired and bored.

'Where do I find Jake Hesson?' I asked and showed him a dollar bill.

His eyes lit up.

'Third floor, boss. Room 10.' He reached for the bill and I let him have it.

'Is he in?'

'Sure, boss. He hasn't been out all day.'

I nodded and began to climb the stairs. I kept on until I reached the third floor. A radio was blaring from behind one of the doors. I went quickly along the passage to room 10, paused to listen with my ear against the panel, then hearing nothing, I rapped.

No one told me to go in.

I turned the door handle and gently pushed. The door swung inwards.

Jake Hesson lay across the bed. His dirty white shirt had a crimson patch just below where his heart was. Growing out of the patch was the handle of a knife. From the look of his waxen, yellowish face, he had been dead some hours.

CHAPTER THREE

I

Lieutenant Marshall of the Homicide Squad, a big, red-faced man with a neat moustache and a jutting, aggressive chin, stuck a cigarette on his lower lip and set fire to it. He looked across at me as I leaned against the wall, keeping out of the way of the fingerprint men as they worked in the small room. All that now remained of Jake Hesson was a splash of blood on the dirty bed cover.

‘Tom Creed will want to take care of this,’ Marshall said. ‘If what you say is right, it starts from his end.’

‘Who’s he?’ I asked.

‘Captain of police, Welden. Last year he asked us to check the Swallow Club where this girl Benson was supposed to have worked, but we didn’t turn up anything.’ Marshall gave me a hard smile. ‘Looks like you’ve managed to make a monkey out of me this time.’

I had worked with him in the past and I had a certain respect for his intelligence and capabilities.

‘I should have said your father was more responsible for that than I am,’ I said gravely.

Marshall laughed. He turned to Sergeant Hamilton, his second in charge.

‘I’ll leave you to it, Dick. Me and the bright boy will go and talk to Creed. Drive over when you’re through. You can take me back.’

Hamilton nodded.

‘Okay, Lieutenant.’

‘Come on,’ Marshall said, taking my arm. ‘You can run me to Welden. Creed will be interested to hear your story. He was worked up about the girl’s disappearance, but as he didn’t find a body, he had to drop the case.’

‘Let me have a photograph of the remains,’ I said to Hamilton. ‘I’m staying at the Shad Hotel.’

Hamilton looked at Marshall for confirmation.

‘Let him have it,’ Marshall said. ‘I’m in the picture too. It’ll be good

publicity.'

'Don't rely on it,' I said. 'Fayette may block you out. We have to be careful how much horror we print.'

'Come on - you!' Marshall said, and we went down the stairs together.

On the way to Welden, I went over my story again so Marshall could be sure he hadn't missed a point.

'Well, we seem to have a few new leads to work on now,' he said when I was through. 'I always thought there was something phoney the way Farmer died. Where does this Nichols girl fit in?'

'I wish I knew,' I said. I swerved past a truck, then went on, 'What's Creed like? Think he'll let me work along with him?'

Marshall shrugged.

'I guess so. There isn't a cop on the coast who doesn't want his picture in your rag. He's a good guy, but he doesn't like being kept out of things. You should have seen him before you went after Hesson.'

'For the love of Mike!' I exclaimed. 'I only arrived yesterday. I was going to see him as soon as I had talked to Hesson.'

'Just watch your step with him. By the way, you still working with that fat script writer from Hollywood?'

'I wouldn't call it working. He's still drinking at the magazine's expense.'

'He's a smart guy. You'd have thought he could have done something better than hack for Crime Facts.'

I laughed.

'Everyone thinks that. It's just the way his head's shaped.'

It was around eight in the evening when I pulled up outside the Welden police headquarters.

'I expect Creed will have gone home by now,' Marshall said, getting out of the car. 'Let's see.'

But the desk sergeant said the captain was still in his office, and after he had put through a call, he told us to go on up. Police Captain Tom Creed was a tall, powerfully built man in his late fifties with a strong, hard face, piercing blue eyes and a shock of greying hair.

He shook hands with Marshall, and when Marshall introduced me, he smiled, seemingly pleased to meet me. 'Your magazine does a fine job,' he said. 'You report from our angle, and that's what I like.'

I grinned.

‘If we don’t keep in with the cops, we don’t eat. You want to hear what we think of you lot when we’re away from a typewriter.’

‘Don’t pay any attention to him,’ Marshall said. ‘He’s a great kidder. Captain, this guy has been doing our work for us. He’s turned up some new dope on the Fay Benson case.’

Creed sat down, motioned us to chairs and looked hard at me.

‘My editor thought it might be an idea if we did an article on the case,’ I explained. ‘I came down here to pick up the background and was lucky to stumble on something you haven’t got in the dossier. You probably know about it by now.’

‘Tell me,’ Creed said, and taking a pipe from his pocket, he began to fill it from a worn pouch.

I went over the story again.

Neither Creed nor Marshall interrupted, and when I had finished there was a long pause. I could see Creed didn’t like being scooped.

‘You should have reported this to me right away,’ he said. ‘I would have grabbed Hesson before he left town.’

‘I hadn’t anything on Hesson nor had you,’ I said. I took the gold apple out of my pocket and rolled it across the desk towards Creed. ‘By the time I found this, he was dead.’

Creed looked at Marshall.

‘What time did he die?’

‘Last night. He arrived at Hardy’s joint at one o’clock in the morning. He was knocked off between three and four.’

‘Any line on the killer?’

Marshall shook his head.

‘It’s a professional job. No fingerprints. No noise. No one saw anything. At four o’clock in the morning even the bums in Hardy’s place sleep.’

Creed picked up the miniature apple and studied it. Then he put it down and puffed smoke at it while he brooded.

‘Yes, it seems you’ve started something,’ he said, looking over at me. ‘Let’s go through the dossier again.’ He picked up the telephone and asked for the Benson dossier.

‘I’m sure Farmer was lying,’ he went on as we hung up. ‘I couldn’t see how the girl could have disappeared unless she had gone out past Farmer’s door. She had only eight minutes in which to do her disappearing act, and the

stage door exit was the nearest to her room. That's why we hammered away at Farmer, but we couldn't move him from his story. It looks as if he and Hesson were working together.'

A tap came on the door and a policeman brought in a thick file which he gave to Creed.

'Farmer and Hesson could have kidnapped the girl and have taken her to Hesson's room. The charm under his bed points to it,' Creed said as he opened the file. After turning some pages he read for a moment, then said, 'She was wearing the charm bracelet when she disappeared.'

'They wouldn't have taken her to Hesson's room,' I said. 'The only way up to the room is through the shop. They couldn't have taken her there unless the owner of the shop was in it too, and I don't think he was. He gave me Hesson's address. It's my guess. Farmer and Hesson were hired to kidnap the girl. Farmer got her into his office by telling her she was wanted on the telephone. She was expecting a call. He probably hit her on the head and bundled her into a waiting car. There must have been someone beside Farmer and Hesson in this to handle the car. Both Hesson and Farmer would have to stay in their jobs to alibi each other. Maybe the bracelet fell off Fay's wrist when Farmer knocked her out. He might have given it to Hesson or he might have gone to Hesson's room later with it.'

Marshall nodded.

'Yeah, it could have happened like that.'

'We'll start a hunt for the bracelet,' Creed said. 'It's pretty hopeless after fourteen months, but we'll have a try.'

'Who's this guy in the camel hair coat?' Marshall asked. 'We have a good description of him. We should be able to turn him up.'

'Low's looking for him right now,' I said. 'He may have already got on to him.'

Marshall grinned.

'The two-man police force.' He looked over at Creed. 'I think this guy in the camel hair coat is important. We should get after him.'

Creed nodded.

'Then there's this Nichols girl,' he said. 'Where does she fit in?'

'Anything on her death?' I asked.

Creed reached for the telephone and called for the Nichols dossier.

'I can't remember what the coroner's verdict was. We didn't know she was

connected with Fay Benson otherwise I'd have been a lot more interested.'

I picked up the miniature apple.

'Who's H.R.? Maybe he could tell us something about the girl. We don't know a thing about her, do we? It seems to me she must have been hiding from someone.'

'I thought so too,' Creed said, leaning forward to take a file the policeman had brought in. He turned a page, glanced at it and put the file on his desk. 'The coroner was satisfied Miss Nichols died accidentally. She apparently stepped on her dress while going downstairs, fell and broke her neck.'

'Who was she?'

Creed looked at the file again.

'She was in show business. She had just returned from a trip to Paris. She and nine other girls had gone out on a cabaret engagement, but the act flopped. She came back here broke, and was looking for work.'

'Fay couldn't have been one of the other nine girls, could she?' I asked. 'Might be worth checking.'

Creed nodded.

'I'll do that.'

'I think Joan Nichols was murdered,' I said. 'I think Farmer was murdered too.'

Creed smiled grimly.

'That's because you write for Crime Facts. There's not a shred of evidence either of them was murdered.'

'When did Joan Nichols die?'

Creed glanced at the file again.

'August 20th.'

'She called at the Shad Hotel on the 20th inquiring after Fay. Then she goes home and falls downstairs. Come to that, wasn't the 20th the night Farmer died?'

Creed looked sharply at me, consulted the Fay Benson dossier and then nodded.

'Correct,' he said, frowning.

'It smells to high heaven to me; doesn't it to you?'

'You're right, it does,' Marshall broke in. 'I think he's got something, captain.'

Creed lifted his shoulders.

‘There’s still no evidence, but I agree there’s no harm if we dig some more.’

‘You have a picture of Fay Benson?’ I asked.

‘I have several in the dossier - why?’

‘When she disappeared did you cover the national press or just the local press?’

‘The local papers only.’

‘I think it might be an idea to get the national press on the job. Print a picture of her in every paper in the country and ask if anyone knows her. We’ll go to town on it too. We might get something that way. She’s been in show business for some time according to Al Weiman. She’s probably been working under another name. Let’s see if we can find out something more about her.’

Creed nodded.

‘Okay. I’ll see what I can do.’

I got to my feet.

‘I’d like to work with you on this,’ I said. ‘I won’t get in your way, and anything I find out I’ll pass to you. This has the makings of a sensational story, and I want to be in on it from the beginning. How about it?’

‘Sure,’ Creed said. ‘You carry on. Come and see me whenever you want to.’

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘If my partner’s turned up anything, I’ll give you a call.’

I shook hands with him, exchanged winks with Marshall and then went down to the car.

II

When I walked into the lobby of the Shad Hotel, Larson told me Bernie was in his bedroom.

‘There’s been a guy in here asking for you,’ Larson went on. ‘I told him you’d be back sometime tonight.’

‘What did he want?’ I asked, pausing as I was about to cross the lobby for the stairs.

‘He didn’t say. He struck me as a tough character. Do you want to see him if he comes in again?’

‘Not tonight. Tell him to come in tomorrow morning. If it’s urgent call my room and I’ll speak to him on the ‘phone. I want some sleep tonight.’

‘I’ll do that,’ Larson said.

I went upstairs, along the passage to Bernie’s room. I found him sitting in an armchair, his feet in a basin of hot water. By his side, on a table, stood a bottle of Scotch, two glasses, one of them half-full, and a bottle of charge water. He gave me a wan smile as I stood in the doorway, gaping at him.

‘What do you imagine you’re doing?’ I asked, coming in and shutting the door.

‘Resting my dogs,’ he said. ‘Have you forgotten you had the car? I’ve been tramping my feet into the sidewalk. You wouldn’t believe it, but there are fourteen hotels in this dump. Think of it! Fourteen! They’re spread out all over the town. I’ve called on the lot.’

‘Did you find him?’

Bernie laughed bitterly.

‘There’s not a sign of him. I wore my feet out for nothing.’

I lit a cigarette and poured myself a drink.

‘You didn’t miss one hotel? You’re sure?’

‘I’m sure. I got Larson to make out a list. He swears it’s complete. The guy didn’t stay at a hotel in Welden. I’m telling you. It’s now an established fact. He either lives in an apartment

or a house or else he came in from Frisco or some place, but he didn’t stay at a hotel!’

‘The cops are looking for him now,’ I said, and went on to tell Bernie of

my visit to Welden's police headquarters. I broke the news as gently as possible that Hesson had been murdered.

'You see what I mean?' Bernie said, starting to dry his feet. 'That's three of them knocked off. If we keep sticking our noses into this, we'll get knocked off too.'

'Relax,' I said. 'The police are taking care of it now. I'm disappointed you didn't find that guy in the camel hair coat, Bernie. I would have liked to have talked to him before Creed got on to him.'

'Well, he didn't stay in any of the hotels in this town,' Bernie said. 'You'd better let the cops hunt for him.'

'You asked Larson if he stayed here, of course?' I asked casually.

Bernie started as if someone had touched him with a red-hot poker. He turned the colour of an overripe tomato as he stared at me, his eyes bulging.

'Why should he stay here?' he demanded hoarsely.

'Why shouldn't he? Did you ask Larson?'

'No, I didn't!' Bernie clutched at his hair. 'Mercy! If he did stay here. . .! To think I've been tramping the streets all day, wearing myself to a shadow and it never crossed my mind to ask Larson.'

I picked up the telephone.

'This is Sladen,' I said when Larson answered. 'Do you remember if a guy stayed here around August of last year who wore a camel hair coat? He's tall, suntanned and has a small moustache.'

'Sure,' Larson said. 'I remember him well. What about him?'

'I'll be right down. I want to talk to you about him.' I hung up and looked accusingly at Bernie. 'You big mutton head! He did stay here!'

Bernie closed his eyes.

'How was I to know?' he wailed. 'To think of the miles I've walked!'

I left him and ran down the stairs.

'Tell me about this guy,' I said, coming to rest at the reception desk. 'What was his name?'

Larson opened the register.

'He booked in on August 9th. His name's Henry Rutland. Here's the entry. He came from Los Angeles. What's the excitement about?'

'He arrived the same day as Miss Benson did?'

'Yes. Miss Benson booked in at noon. Rutland booked in at six in the

evening.'

'Did he own a green and cream Cadillac?'

'That's right. He garaged it across the way.'

'Would they have the licence number?'

'They might. I wouldn't know.'

'When did he leave?'

'The morning of the 17th.'

'That's the day Miss Benson disappeared.' I ran my fingers through my hair. 'I believe this guy had something to do with her disappearance. Did you ever see them together?'

'I don't think so. He went out early and Miss Benson didn't leave her room until late.'

'Where was his room? Near Miss Benson's?'

'Their rooms were opposite on the second floor,' Larson said after consulting the register.

'So they could have got together without you knowing it?'

'I guess so. We haven't any permanent floor staff. After eight, none of the staff goes upstairs.'

'Did Rutland say why he had come to Welden?'

'No. He didn't mention what his business was.'

'Did he have much luggage?'

'Just a suitcase.'

'Any visitors, mail or telephone calls?'

'I don't think so. I'm sure he didn't.'

'Would there be anyone at the garage now?'

'Joe will be there. We don't shut down until one o'clock.'

'I'll have a word with him.'

But the garage attendant didn't remember the licence number of the Cadillac. He remembered the car and he remembered Henry Rutland.

'He had plenty of dough,' he told me, 'and he was pretty free with it. He took the car out every morning around ten and brought it back any time between midnight and one o'clock. He wanted it cleaned every day. He was fussy about how it looked. Sorry I can't remember the licence number. It's fourteen months ago, and I get a lot of cars through my hands.'

I gave him half a buck and went back to the hotel. I found Bernie lying on his bed, a look of anguish on his fat face.

‘His name is Henry Rutland and he came from Los Angeles.’

‘I couldn’t care less who he is,’ Bernie groaned. ‘I could kick myself. To think I’ve been walking five solid hours when all the time I could have been resting in the bar.’

I laughed. It struck me as funny.

‘Forget it. It’s probably done you good. It’s time you had some exercise. It’s too late to tell Creed tonight. I’ll see him tomorrow. Well, I guess I’ll turn in.’ I broke off as I saw Bernie’s eyes open very wide as he stared past me towards the door.

I looked over my shoulder and my heart skipped a beat. Standing in the doorway was a short, thickset man whose round heavy face was the colour of cold mutton fat. He had on a dirty trench coat and a black slouch hat pulled down over his right eye. A two-day growth of beard darkened his jowls, and there was a cold viciousness in his slate-grey eyes that sent a chill of apprehension up my spine.

In his right hand he held a .38 automatic, and it pointed at me.

III

For a long moment we stared at each other, then he said, 'Stay just as you are.' His voice was low pitched and nasal. His lips scarcely moved when he spoke. 'Which of you is Sladen?'

'I am,' I said and I was annoyed my voice sounded unsteady.

'Okay; now listen: you two get out of town tomorrow. We don't want you in Welden. You're to be out by eleven tomorrow morning. We shan't tell you again. If you think we're bluffing, stick around and see what happens to you. Get it?'

I drew in a deep breath. I was over my first shock and now I was angry.

'What's the idea?' I demanded, glaring at him. 'Who are you, anyway?'

'Never mind what the idea is. This is a tipoff.' He suddenly began to shake and twitch. He put his left hand against the wall to steady himself, and it was only with an effort he got himself talking again: 'If it wasn't for the boss, I'd knock you two punks off now! You know what happened to Hesson. I'll do it to you two if you're not out of Welden by eleven o'clock tomorrow morning.' He took a step back into the passage, his hand on the doorknob. 'And don't kid yourselves the cops can protect you. There ain't enough cops in this town to keep us from getting at you. Pack up and get out!' He stood in the doorway, twitching and glaring at us, then he reached for the handle and slammed the door.

Bernie and I remained motionless, listening to the quick, light footfalls going along the passage. Then when they had died away I got slowly to my feet and looked at Bernie.

'A hophead! He was coked to the eyeballs.'

'My goodness!' Bernie quavered. 'I told you what would happen if we went on with this case.' With a shaking hand he grabbed his glass of whisky and drained it.

'He had me scared for a moment,' I said, scowling. 'I guess my nerves aren't as good as they were.'

'Mine were never good,' Bernie said, scrambling off the bed. 'Good grief! No one's ever pointed a gun at me before.'

He crossed the room to where his suitcase was standing; picking it up, he

set it on a chair and began throwing his clothes into it.

‘What do you imagine you’re doing?’ I asked.

‘What do you think?’ Bernie said, without pausing. ‘I’m packing. We may as well be ready for a quick takeoff tomorrow morning. Come to that, why not go tonight?’ He threw socks and handkerchiefs into the case and then crossed the room for a pair of shoes. ‘Don’t stand staring; get packing yourself.’

‘You don’t think I’m going to let a hophead scare me off a good story, do you?’ I asked heatedly.

Bernie put his shoes in the case.

‘I don’t know. I’m not all that interested,’ he said, looking around for further belongings. ‘You heard what the guy said: get out or else. He’s already knocked off Farmer, the Nichols woman and Hesson. You heard him, didn’t you? He didn’t strike me as a kidder. Did you see his eyes? Gee! I’ve got goose pimples the size of marbles all over me. If you want to stay here and play the tough guy, that’s okay with me. I’m a married man with responsibilities. I have a wife and dog to think of. I always take a hint, and brother! was that a hint!’

I poured more whisky into my glass and drank some of it.

‘I was under the impression you liked working with me.’

Bernie shut the lid of the suitcase.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘Well, if you walk out on me you won’t be working with me, and you can bet your goose pimples, you won’t be working for Crime Facts either. Remind me to give you a dime when I see you begging for bread.’

Bernie paled.

‘You don’t think Fayette would throw me out, do you? He wouldn’t want me killed, would he?’

‘So long as he got a good story, he wouldn’t care a hoot. And if you walk out now, he’ll blacklist you. You know how vindictive he is.’

Bernie sat on the bed.

‘Can’t we tell him there’s nothing to this story?’

‘There’s a heap to it! I’m going after that hophead. Didn’t you hear what he said about Hesson? If we catch him, we’ll crack the case.’

‘Can’t you relax?’ Bernie pleaded. ‘We’re not cops. We’re writers - artists. Our job is to write for a magazine; not to catch killers. We’ve got to be

reasonable about this. Leave him to the cops. That's what they get paid for. I'm scared. I don't care who knows it. Besides, I don't carry any insurance. I've got to think of Clair.'

'She'd be better off if you died,' I said brutally. 'Fayette would have to give her a pension.'

Bernie licked his lips.

'Suppose I go back to the office right now and start writing the story? I've got plenty to get on with. We don't both have to be shot, do we?'

'For the love of Mike, pull yourself together. No one's going to shoot us. The cops will look after us until they catch this punk. And when he's caught, we'll bust the case.'

Bernie tried to sneer.

'How you kid yourself. You don't imagine he's behind any of this, do you? He's just carrying out orders. He said so. If the cops do manage to catch him, there'll be a flock of others to come after us.'

I reached for the telephone book, turned up Creed's home number and put a call through.

Creed's growling voice came over the line.

'This is Sladen,' I said. 'We've just had a visitor with a gun. He was full of hop and admitted killing Hesson. He's given us until eleven o'clock tomorrow morning to get out of town or else. He said there weren't enough cops to keep him from putting a slug into us.'

'Did he?' Creed growled. 'Stay right where you are. I'll get a couple of my men over to you right away,' and he hung up.

'That's the kind of police captain I like,' I said, replacing the receiver. 'No questions, no fuss, but lots of action. Protection is on its way over.'

Bernie finished his drink. By now he was a little tight.

'I don't like it, Chet. I think we should clear out.'

'Don't be a dope! Can't you see we're getting places? We've got someone rattled. That means we must be on the right track.'

'A fat lot of good it'll do us if we're dead,' Bernie said, adding more whisky to his glass. 'Now, listen to me. . .'

He was still trying to convince me to leave town when the telephone bell rang and Larson told me there were two police officers in the lobby waiting to see me.

'Send them right up,' I said. As I turned from the telephone I said to

Bernie, 'You're safe now. The law's arrived.'

Bernie gave a wild laugh.

'Safe? That's funny. Some chance. Can you imagine any cop stepping between me and a bullet?'

CHAPTER FOUR

I

I put the pack of photographs on Creed's desk and shook my head.

'He's not among that lot.'

Creed puffed at his pipe, his blunt fingers tapping on the worn surface of his desk.

'He's a new one on me. None of the boys know him. You think he meant business?'

'No doubt about that. He's junked to the eyeballs. I'm surprised he didn't shoot us there and then.'

Peters, a tall guy with a lean, tough looking face, showed tobacco stained teeth in a hard smile. He was one of the police officers Creed had assigned to me as a bodyguard.

'I'll take care of him if he starts anything.'

I looked at my wristwatch. The time was ten minutes past eleven.

'Well, keep your eyes open,' I said. 'He's due to start any minute now.'

Creed said, 'Maybe you'd better stay here until we pick him up.'

'The quickest way to get him is for me to show myself on the street. Then your boys can take him when he starts something.'

Creed didn't seem to think much of this idea.

'You stick around here until it's dark. Showing yourself in daylight will make it too easy for him. We may have picked him up by then.'

I saw the sense of that.

'Well, okay. You wouldn't give me a gun, would you?'

'Sure, you can have a gun.' Creed looked over at Peters. 'Get him a gun and watch him. You're responsible for him.'

'Yes, sir.'

Peters didn't look as if the responsibility was weighing him down. He got to his feet.

'What do you want - a .45 or a .38?'

'I'll have a .45,' I said. 'I want something that'll stop him dead in his

tracks.'

'Have an elephant gun,' Peters said humorously. 'We've got one in the armoury.'

'A .45 will do.'

While he was out of the room, I told Creed about the guy in the camel hair coat.

He listened attentively, made a few notes and said he would send a man down to talk to Larson.

'We should be able to get a line on him,' he said. 'The boys are after the charm bracelet and we're getting the girl's picture in the papers. By the way, she wasn't one of the girls in the Paris troupe. We located the agent who got Joan Nichols and the other girls the job in Paris, and he couldn't identify her picture.'

He looked at the pile of papers spread out on his desk.

'I'll have to get on with my other work, Sladen. You stick around downstairs. The boys will fix you up. Come and see me around five o'clock, and we'll work out a campaign for tonight.'

I said I would and went downstairs where I ran into Peters coming from the armoury. He handed me a .45 and a clip of ammunition.

'Have you handled one of these before?'

'Sure,' I said, 'but give me lots of room. I haven't done any serious shooting since I was in the army.'

'Well, be careful,' Peters said. 'You better leave him to me.'

'Only if you see him first.'

I found Bernie in a room with a high barred window, sitting at a table, scowling at his portable typewriter. Sitting by the door was Scaife, Bernie's bodyguard; a tough looking cop with sandy hair and a thick, short nose that someone had tried to push through his face at one time.

'How are you getting on?' I asked Bernie.

'How can a guy concentrate when he's expecting to be shot at any moment?' Bernie complained. 'I'm not getting on.'

Scaife laughed.

'He thinks I can't look after him,' he said. 'Why, there's nothing to it. I keep telling him he's safe, but he won't believe me.'

'I've never trusted a cop,' Bernie said, 'and I never will.' He looked suspiciously at me. 'What's cooking?'

‘We’re waiting until it’s dark, then we’ll go out and set a trap for this gunman.’

Bernie’s eyes popped.

‘What do you mean - a trap?’

‘Well, we’ll walk, arm-in-arm, around town, hoping he’ll spot us, and when he starts something, these two guys will fill him with lead.’

‘That’s nice. Suppose they miss him?’

I pulled out the .45 and flourished it.

‘Then I’ll take care of him. I used to be pretty good with a rod. They didn’t call me Killer Sladen for nothing.’

Scaife and Peters laughed, but Bernie recoiled.

‘Put it away. That’s how accidents happen.’ He leaned forward and shoved his fat chin at me. ‘Where do you get this “we” stuff from? You won’t catch me on the streets after dark. I’m going to stay right here until he’s caught. If you want to be a hero, go ahead and be a hero. I’m staying right here.’

I looked helplessly at Peters and Scaife.

‘See what I have to put up with? The guy’s got no enterprise.’

‘What are you worrying about, kid?’ Scaife asked Bernie. ‘I’ll take care of you.’

‘I’m staying right here,’ Bernie said firmly.

I sat down.

‘Relax,’ I said. ‘Let’s do some work.’

‘I don’t mind working, that’s what I get paid for, but I’m not going to be used as bait for a trap,’ Bernie said. ‘I want that understood.’

‘Okay, okay,’ I said. ‘I’ll do it on my own.’ I lit a cigarette. ‘Now come on, let’s get this story on the mat.’

II

Around five o'clock I went up to Creed's office with Peters tagging along behind.

'Any ideas?' Creed asked, shoving aside a file he was working on and waving me to a chair.

'I'm doing this solo,' I said. 'Low doesn't like the idea, and I can't say I blame him. Anyway, it'll make it easier for your men to cover one of us instead of two. As soon as it's dark, I'll leave here in a taxi and go to the hotel. I want to get out of this light suit and put on something that won't show up in the dark. Then I'll walk from the hotel to the restaurant on the corner. I'll have dinner there. You can have a couple of men posted in the bar. The restaurant is through the bar at the back. I'll sit with my back to the wall. If he starts anything in there, we'll have him. If he doesn't, I'll walk from the restaurant to the Gaumont cinema. If still nothing happens, I'll walk on to Mike's bar at the back of the Florian. From there I'll walk back to the hotel.'

Creed was making notes as I talked.

'It'd be better if you walked from here to the hotel,' he said. 'Taxis can get lost in the traffic. We don't want to lose sight of you, but at the same time, we don't want this guy to know we're following you. It's got to be a trap, Sladen, if it is going to work at all. You'll be on your own. Peters is a dead shot, but he'll have to keep out of sight. This could be tricky; you might get hurt.'

I suddenly realized I was sticking my neck out recklessly, and perhaps Bernie wasn't such a dope as I thought he was. But it was too late now to pull back.

'Just so long as Peters wings him before he starts anything, I'm not grumbling,' I said.

'Peters won't be the only one,' Creed said grimly. 'I've got forty men on the job. They'll be covering every twenty yards of the route. You won't know them. Some of them will be in cars; some got up as loafers, some will be hidden. If this punk starts something, he'll wonder what's hit him.'

'Fine,' I said, immensely relieved. 'In about a couple of hours, it should be dark enough.'

‘I’ll go and fix the details. You take it easy,’ Creed said.

I spent the next two hours playing gin rummy with Bernie.

Bernie said it was customary to play cards with a condemned man, and although cards bored him, he felt it his duty to try to take my mind off the immediate future. He wasn’t much of a card player, and I pretty soon won three dollars off him.

‘This dough might not be of any use to you, Chet,’ he said when I asked him to pay up. ‘I’ll give you an I.O.U. if you like.’

‘I’ll take cash,’ I said, holding out my hand. ‘My estate might not be able to collect from you, Bernie.’

He handed over the money.

‘Talking about your estate, Chet,’ he said, ‘have you made a will?’

Peters came in.

‘You all set?’ he asked. ‘We’re ready when you are.’

I got to my feet.

‘So long, Bernie,’ I said. ‘I’ve left everything to you if I don’t come back.’

‘Honest?’ Bernie asked, his face brightening. ‘Your television set too?’

‘Yes, even my television set, you vulture!’

‘Let’s go,’ Peters said, grinning.

We went down the corridor to where Creed was waiting.

‘I’ve got it all fixed,’ he said. ‘You won’t be out of sight of my men for the whole walk. Keep in the middle of the sidewalk and keep to your schedule, then you should be all right.’

‘I hope so,’ I said, looking beyond him through the open door into the street. ‘Well, so long.’

Peters said, ‘I’ll give you sixty seconds, then I’ll come after you.’

I nodded and walked through the entrance, down the steps on to the dark, lonely street. I put my hand on the gun butt in my pocket and felt a little more courageous.

‘Don’t shoot me in the excitement,’ I said as Peters came to the door.

He laughed.

‘You worry too much. I’ll take care of you.’

He sounded a trifle too confident. I wished now I had thought up a safer idea to catch this gunman.

‘Watch it,’ I said and, feeling naked and pretty scared, I started to walk along the badly lit street, keeping a tight grip on the gun butt.

About thirty yards down the street I saw a big guy, leaning against the wall, smoking. He gave me a casual glance and as I passed him, he murmured, 'I bet your knees are knocking.'

I didn't look at him, but kept on.

The walk to the hotel seemed endless. Every time a car passed me, my hair stood up on ends. Whenever a man appeared, my heart skipped a beat. Even a black cat running across the road made me jump. When I crossed the road and climbed the steps to the hotel lobby, I was sweating: I paused for a moment to wipe my face, then walked in.

Larson was thumbing through his magazine. He glanced up and nodded. A thickset man sat in one of the basket chairs, reading a newspaper. As I passed him, he said, 'Scaife's in your

room. Don't shoot him as you go in.'

I nodded, climbed into the ancient elevator and was dragged up to the first floor. Before getting out, I peered cautiously up and down the passage. I couldn't see anyone lurking there, so I crossed the passage, rapped on my door, pushed it open and stepped cautiously to one side.

'This is Sladen coming in,' I said into the darkness.

The light snapped on.

'Come on in,' Scaife said. He was sitting in my armchair. I saw he had found my bottle of Scotch. Half of it had gone down his throat from the look of the bottle.

I entered and shut the door.

'Quiet as the grave,' he said. 'Maybe the guy was bluffing.'

'If you had seen him you wouldn't be drinking my whisky so nonchalantly. He wasn't bluffing.'

Scaife grinned.

'A two cent gunman doesn't scare me off whisky.'

I went over and poured myself a large drink.

'You'll have a pretty good story to write, won't you?' Scaife went on. 'What are you going to call it - my death grapple with a hophead?' And he laughed.

I drank half the whisky at a swallow and felt a little better.

'You guys can afford to laugh: you're not out on a limb,' I said as I began to strip off my suit.

'Oh, I don't know,' Scaife returned. 'It's all in a day's work. I hope we get

this punk.'

'So do I,' I said, putting on a dark suit. 'That's better. I don't show up so well now.' I finished my drink. 'Well, I guess I'd better buy myself a dinner. Can't say I'm hungry.'

'We've got two of our boys in the bar and one's stuffing his guts in the restaurant,' Scaife said. 'You buy yourself a good blow out. Nothing will happen to you there.'

'I'm not there yet,' I said, making for the door. 'Well, so long.'

'I'll be right behind you with Peters. Don't walk too fast.'

'I won't.'

I went down the stairs, nodded to Larson and walked to the hotel door. I looked into the street. There was a car parked opposite. I could see two men sitting in it.

'Those two are okay,' said the man who was sitting in the basket chair. 'They're our boys.'

I nodded, walked down the steps and moved off towards the Bell Tavern that was on the corner, some hundred yards from the hotel.

I had to force one leg in front of the other as I walked down the deserted, dark street. My eyes were everywhere. A car swung into the street and I nearly dropped in my tracks, but as it pulled up outside a tobacconist store and the driver got out, I kept on with an effort. I had my gun half out of my pocket as I passed the car, and I was ready to duck, but nothing happened. Breathing heavily, I pushed open the restaurant door and stepped into the brightly lit bar.

There were some twenty people drinking and talking in there, none of them even looked my way. I shed my coat, transferring my gun to my jacket pocket, then I went over to the bar and ordered myself a double Scotch. While I was waiting, I glanced around. Two beefy men with glasses of beer in front of them sat by the restaurant door. They looked at me and one of them winked. My eyelid felt stiff as I returned his wink.

Apart from these two, the rest of the drinkers looked harmless enough. I finished my whisky and went into the restaurant. I got a table with my back to the wall facing the entrance, and sat down. I spotted the third cop at a table across the room. He was munching contentedly and he gave me a cheerful grin. He seemed to be appreciating his assignment. I hoped he had his gun handy. I ordered a steak and trimmings. As I waited for it, I wondered if I

were going to get it down. I felt damp behind the ears, and my stomach was fluttering like a flag in a breeze. But when the steak arrived it was so tender and good, I worked through it without trouble and felt a lot better for it. All the time I ate I kept looking at the restaurant entrance, half-expecting to see the gunman appear, and knowing I was alarming myself for nothing. He wouldn't get past the two guys out in the bar, I told myself, and wished I believed it.

I paid my bill and sat staring at the tablecloth for a few minutes. I had to keep to my schedule, but it was nice and comfortable and safe in this restaurant, and I wasn't looking forward to another walk in the dark.

The detective across the way was staring at me and, as I met his eyes, he glanced at his watch and then at the door. It was a gentle hint for me to get moving. I reluctantly shoved back my chair and walked to the bar entrance.

'Here I go,' I said to one of the beefy men sitting by the door.

'About time,' he growled. 'I want to get home sometime tonight.'

I thought it was pretty heartless of him, but could see his point of view. I went over and collected my hat and coat and went out on to the street.

I had taken seven steps towards the Florian club when it happened.

III

A big, black car without lights shot out of a dark turning. As soon as I saw it had no lights, I knew it was coming for me. I had no chance to duck back into the restaurant; it was coming too fast for that. There was no sheltering doorway at hand. I was right out in the open and I felt as naked as a fly on a wall.

I got the gun out and started running towards the car with the crazy idea of running past it before it could get at me. I caught a glimpse of the driver: a little man with his hat pulled down low over his face, crouching down behind the wheel. There was another man in the back of the car with what looked like a riot gun in his hands. The barrel was resting on the top of the open window.

I lifted the .45 and pulled the trigger. The gun went off with a crash that deafened me and its kick back nearly had the gun out of my hand. It was a lucky shot. The slug smashed the windshield of the car which swerved crazily as the riot gun opened up with a deafening clatter.

If the car hadn't swerved, I should have been cut down by the stream of slugs that smashed into the sidewalk about a yard ahead of me.

I threw myself face down in the gutter. The car lurched across the road, the on-side wheels missing me by about three feet. It crashed into a lamp standard.

I rolled over. The dark night lit up with the revolver flashes as my bodyguards came into action. Slugs hummed through the air, more glass in the car smashed. I hugged the road, feeling sweat on my face, scared silly. I listened to the thud of running footfalls. Lying still, my gun hand thrust forward, I looked over at the car.

The offside door hung open. I caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure, crouching behind the car, then the riot gun opened up again and a stream of slugs passed just above me. I took a snapshot at the crouching figure. My bullet must have winged him for he dropped the gun and flopped on the sidewalk. His sharp yelp of pain made sweet music in my ears.

Peters and Scaife came running up.

'He's behind the car - watch out!' I gasped.

Peters darted across the road while Scaife, taking no chances, sprinted up the road, crossed to the other side so he could get a safe, long shot at the gunman.

I saw the gunman snatch up the riot gun and I yelled a warning to Peters, who swerved. The gun chattered and Peters went down, his gun falling from his hands.

Scaife fired three times.

The gunman dropped the riot gun, tried to straighten, then dropped limply.

‘I got him!’ Scaife called.

Stiffly I got to my feet. My legs felt wobbly. The three detectives from the restaurant who had been crouching in the doorway, came over. The four of us joined Scaife on the far side of the car.

I looked at the dead man as he lay, still clutching on to the riot gun, on his back on the sidewalk. It was my hophead all right. His white face was a snarling mask of death.

‘There’s another guy in the car,’ I said.

Scaife looked in the car.

‘You got him with your first shot,’ he said, then went around the car and over to Peters, who was sitting up holding his arm and cursing.

Two patrol cars came roaring down the street, their sirens blasting. Creed got out of one of the cars and joined Scaife. They bent over Peters, then leaving Scaife to look after him, Creed came over to me.

‘You okay?’

‘Just about,’ I said, leaning against the wrecked car. ‘Is Peters badly hurt?’

‘He’ll be okay,’ Creed said and stared down at the dead gunman. ‘Is this your man?’

‘Yes. Ever seen him before?’

‘Can’t say I have.’

An ambulance came up and two more squad cars. By now there was a big crowd, gaping from the sidewalks.

Scaife came over.

‘Seen him before?’ Creed asked, nodding at the dead gunman.

‘He’s a new one on me,’ Scaife said.

‘Well, okay: the show’s over,’ Creed said. ‘You’d better get back to your hotel.’ This to me. ‘Go with him, Scaife. I don’t reckon they’ll try again, but we won’t take any chances for tonight.’

‘Come on, hero,’ Scaife said. ‘The excitement’s over. I told you it wasn’t going to be as bad as you thought.’

‘It was bad enough. Anyway, it’s given me something to throw in Bernie’s face for the rest of his life.’

I went with him to one of the police cars.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

Nothing happened of interest during the next three days. I knew there was bound to be a time lag before any results of Creed's investigations bore fruit. He had given various police officers assignments to cover, and we had to wait for them to turn up something. He had men hunting for Henry Rutland and his cream and green Cadillac; other men digging into Fay Benson's background; a squad hunting for the charm bracelet, and yet another bunch of men digging into the gunman's past.

We couldn't expect to learn anything immediately, and while we waited I sent Bernie back to New York to report in full to Fayette and to begin the first installment of our story. He went off with indecent haste, insisting on a bodyguard to the train.

I took the Crime Facts photographer, a guy named Judson around and got him to take pictures of Spencer, Mike's bar, Joan Nichols's apartment house, the miniature apple I got from Creed and pictures of the various police officers working on the case. All this took time, but when I was through I was satisfied I had a good collection of art to help Bernie's article.

Judson flew back to New York on the evening of the third day after the shooting, and I drove over to police headquarters to see if any information had come in.

Scaife was in the charge room as I entered.

'I was going to call you,' he said. 'The captain wants you.'

'Has he got anything?'

'He's got something. He'll tell you. Come on up.'

Creed was sitting at his desk, smoking a cigar when I entered his office. His heavy, hard face looked tired.

'Come in,' he said, fighting a yawn. 'Well, we're getting somewhere. Sit down.'

I sat down and Scaife leaned against the wall.

'The gunman's name's Hank Flemming. He came from Frisco. He had a

bad record, including six killings. He's known to have hired himself out for shootings and beatings-up. For fifty bucks he'd have shot his own father. I guess someone hired him to knock you off. He's a junky, and Doc says he was full of dope when he staged the shooting the other night. You were lucky to have come out of it alive.'

'So we have to find the guy who hired him?'

'That's right, and it won't be easy,' Creed said, tapping ash off his cigar. 'We've a pointer that might do us some good. Flemming had a return railroad ticket to Tampa City in his pocket. He left Frisco five days ago for Tampa City, then came on here. It could be he got his orders from someone in Tampa City.'

'Do the Tampa City police know anything about him?' I asked.

Creed scowled.

'They say they don't, but from past experience I've learned not to take much notice of what they say. They're the most inefficient, uncooperative police force in the country. The

Commissioner, Ed Doonan, is hand in glove with the rackets, and believe me, the city is crawling with them. We're not going to get any help from him.'

'Did you get a line on Henry Rutland?'

Creed shook his head.

'Not yet. The Cadillac distributing agents in this district tell me they have sold four hundred green and cream convertibles in the past three years. I have a list of the buyers, but it will be a job tracing them. Rutland's name doesn't appear on the list, but then that doesn't surprise me. The name's probably a phoney. My men are working on it, but it'll take some time to check everyone on it.' He fought back another yawn. 'We've got a line on the charm bracelet. It was hocked three days after Fay Benson disappeared. Tierney's, the local hockshop, handled it. Hesson sold it to them. The clerk recognized Hesson's picture. The bracelet was sold again to an actress who is in Hollywood now. We're contacting her. There's no doubt that Hesson sold it.'

'Nothing on Fay Benson yet?'

'A little: could be something. You saw the pictures we had printed in the national papers? We got a heap of letters and they are still coming in. People claim to know her, but I guess most of them will turn out to be cranks. One

guy says he thinks he recognizes her, although she was dark haired when he knew her. He's not at all sure, and it might be a false lead, but I'm hoping it isn't. He says she did a job for him once. Guess where.'

'Tampa City?'

'That's right.'

'Well, that's not bad for three days' work. What are you going to do? Will Tampa City police dig further for you?'

'I doubt it,' Creed said, scowling. 'I've never known them yet to work with me. They'll promise the world, but nothing ever gets done.'

'Suppose I go out there and see what I can dig up?'

Creed nodded.

'I was going to suggest that. We'd get on quicker. You'll have to watch your step. Doonan hates private investigators worse than he hates poison. They are a tough bunch of boys, and they might discourage you if they know what you're up to.'

'I'll watch out,' I said. 'Know anyone there who could be helpful?'

'You might do worse than call on Don Bradley. He used to be chief of police at Tampa City before he retired. He's a good guy; one of the best police officers in the country. He was retired two years before his time. He had trouble with Doonan about some murder case. I never did hear the details, but he would be helpful. I'll give you a letter to him.'

'Fine. I'll get off today.'

'There may be nothing in this, Sladen. This guy who's written to us has probably made a mistake. If it wasn't that Flemming had a return ticket to Tampa City I'd say he had made a mistake.'

'Who is he?'

'His name's Lennox Hartley. He lives at 246, Cannon Avenue, Tampa City.'

I made a note of the name and address. 'I'll talk to him.'

A tap sounded on the door and Scaife opened it. A policeman said something to him; Scaife nodded and turned to Creed. 'There's a guy outside, captain, who says he knows something about Flemming. Want to see him?'

'You bet,' Creed said, pushing back his chair. 'Shoot him in.'

A minute or so later, a short, fat man came in, uneasily twirling his hat between red, roughened fingers. He was wearing brown corduroy trousers, and an old, stained coat and a cowboy shirt.

‘My name’s Ted Sperry, captain,’ he said, nervously. ‘I saw the picture of the gunman in the paper. He came to see me about a year ago. I thought I’d better come along, but if I’m wasting your time.’

‘Sit down, Mr. Sperry,’ Creed said. ‘What’s your line of business?’

Rather surprisingly, Sperry said he was a market gardener.

‘I have a nursery out on Dalmatian Road, captain. I sell fruit trees and garden equipment. I have a pretty nice little business. Me and the wife run it between us.’

‘You say Flemming called on you? You’re sure it was Flemming?’

‘I’m sure it was the man in the picture, captain. As soon as I saw him I wondered what he wanted. He struck me then he wasn’t any good.’

‘What did he want?’

‘I’ve been working up a new line, and it’s paid off pretty well: growing strawberry plants in barrels. I’ve been selling the equipment, and I’ve advertised widely. This guy said he’d read my advertisement and he was interested. I supply the plants, the barrel with the necessary holes in it, and the soil. It’s been a pretty fast selling line: saves space and keeps the slugs off the fruit.’

‘Sounds fine,’ Creed said a little impatiently. ‘But Flemming didn’t want strawberry plants, did he?’

‘No, he didn’t. He just wanted the barrel. We got into an argument. I told him I didn’t sell the barrel without the plants or the soil. I make my profit on the plants and soil. The barrel I put in at cost.’

The three of us were listening now with interest.

‘What happened then?’ Creed asked.

‘We argued back and forth. He said he had strawberry plants. I didn’t believe him. A guy like him wouldn’t even have a garden. I can tell a gardener a mile off. Well, in the end, he agreed to pay me for the whole outfit and just take the barrel. He collected it in a truck the next day.’

‘Do you remember the exact date, Mr. Sperry?’

‘Yes. I looked it up before I came here. It was August 17th.’

Creed looked over at me: the date Fay Benson disappeared.

‘You didn’t get the number of the truck?’

‘I’m afraid I didn’t. Was it important?’

‘Maybe not. What kind of truck was it?’

‘A green, open truck; a one tonner. I didn’t notice much about it.’

Creed looked at Scaife.

‘Take Mr. Sperry to the morgue. Let him see Flemming, I want to be sure he identifies him.’ He got up and shook hands with Sperry. ‘Thanks for coming. If every citizen acted the way you’ve done, my work would be a lot easier.’

When Scaife had led Sperry, beaming and perspiring, from the office, I said, ‘A barrel - that doesn’t look too good for Fay Benson, does it?’

‘That was what I was thinking,’ Creed said, his eyes thoughtful. ‘I wonder if anyone in town sold him cement.’ He picked up the telephone and gave instructions for all cement sellers in the district to be checked. When he hung up, he went on to me, ‘That’s probably why we never turned up her body. She’s somewhere in a cement overcoat.’

I got up and went over to the wall map.

‘Is there any local water around where he could have dumped her?’

Creed joined me. He tapped the map.

‘Here; that’s Lake Baldock. There’s about sixty foot of water in the middle. It’s a favourite spot for picnic parties, and it’s only two miles from here.’

‘Anywhere else?’

‘Only the reservoir, and he wouldn’t try there because they are continually dragging it. Besides, there’s a high fence all around it. If she’s anywhere in water, she’ll be in Lake Baldock.’

‘Do we go and look?’

Creed scratched his head as he stared at the map.

‘I guess so. One of my men has a frogman’s outfit. He can take a look, and if he sees anything we’ll have to rig up some kind of hoist. That barrel’s going to be heavy.’

‘I’ll stick around, captain, until he’s had a look,’ I said. ‘No point in leaving town with this coming up. It’ll make headlines if we find her. When will you do it?’

‘Not before tomorrow. It’s too late in the day now. We don’t want a crowd watching us. I’ll start at six o’clock tomorrow.’

It meant my getting up at five o’clock and my instincts recoiled at the thought, but I could see it wouldn’t be wise to argue about it.

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘I’ll be there at six.’

II

The sun was climbing above the belt of trees as I drove up to the two cars parked near the stretch of water, known as Lake Baldock. It was a pretty spot, surrounded by weeping willows that leaned over the still water which reflected their leafy, green heads. I got out of the car and joined Scaife who was leaning against a tree, placidly smoking.

‘Pretty nice spot, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘I bet you hated getting up at this time in the morning.’

‘Well, I did, but it’s worth it. I didn’t know the day could smell so nice.’ I looked over to where Creed, two cops and a guy who was putting on a frogman’s outfit were standing.

‘I’d leave them alone,’ Scaife said. ‘The old man is never at his best in the mornings, and he didn’t get to bed until three o’clock.’

I sat on the bank, nursing a miniature camera I had brought along.

‘I want some art for my rag, but I’ll wait until they come back.’

We watched Creed, the two cops and the frogman embark in a small rowing boat. The two cops rowed out to the middle of the lake, then the frogman lowered himself into the water and disappeared.

‘I bet it’s cold,’ Scaife said, huddling further into his overcoat. ‘I’m glad I didn’t tell the captain what I did during the war. He’s got a long memory. Harris thought he would get promotion if he told the old man what a hero he had been, but all he’s getting is a cold bath. Ugh!’

I reached down and dipped my fingers in the water.

‘Oh, it’s not that bad. I wouldn’t say it is more than ten degrees below freezing.’

Scaife laughed heartlessly.

‘It’ll do him good.’

We sat side-by-side, smoking and watching the little boat for twenty minutes or so, then suddenly Harris’s head appeared above the surface. He swam up to the boat, hauled himself in. He and Creed talked for a moment or so, then the two cops began to row towards shore.

‘Think he’s found something?’ I said, getting to my feet.

‘Must have. Creed would have sent him down again if he hadn’t,’ Scaife

said, joining me.

We walked along the bank and waited for the boat to reach shore.

‘There’s a barrel down there,’ Creed said, his heavy face excited. ‘No doubt about it, and it’s full of cement.’

I took a photograph of Harris who was trying to stop his teeth from chattering. I had already taken a couple of the lake.

‘Going to get it up right away?’ I asked.

‘We’ll get it tonight,’ Creed said. ‘I don’t want everyone in town here. Keep your traps shut about this. I think the girl’s down there, but I don’t want any publicity until we know for certain.’

I got in his car and drove off.

‘I told you he wasn’t too sweet this morning, didn’t I?’ Scaife said, grinning. He looked over to Harris. ‘Like your dip?’

Harris’s reply was unprintable.

I drove Scaife back to town.

‘Even if we do bring her up,’ I said, as we drove along, ‘we’re a long way from finding her killer. Okay, Flemming did the actual job, but it looks as if someone paid him to do it, doesn’t it?’

‘Yeah. He had no reason to kill her as far as we know. Well, it’s not my headache, thank goodness,’ Scaife said. ‘There’s a lot to be said for just being a police sergeant. I wouldn’t want Creed’s job right now. We’ve got to find out more about this girl. We’ve got to find out if anyone had a reason for getting rid of her. From what we do know, she doesn’t sound the type to cause trouble, but then one never knows. Still waters run deep so they say.’

‘You talk like that and you’ll turn into a writer,’ I said, grinning. ‘Then you’ll have to work for a living.’ I pulled up outside headquarters. ‘I’ll see you tonight.’

‘Come out to the lake about nine. I’ll be there. Getting that barrel up is going to be hard work. You might come in useful,’ Scaife said, getting out of the car. ‘So long for now.’

As I had nothing better to do, and as the night ahead threatened to be a long and hard one, I drove to the hotel and went back to bed.

I slept until three in the afternoon, then I drove down to the police headquarters.

I found Scaife in his cubbyhole of an office, going through the Benson dossier. An ashtray, crammed with cigarette butts, told me he had been

working most of the morning on it.

‘Found anything?’ I said, sitting down.

‘You again?’ he said, pushing back his chair. ‘No, not a thing. I hope we don’t find this girl. It’ll be tough if we do. There’s no link I can see that makes sense as to why Flemming was hired to kill her.’

‘Don’t you think he killed Joan Nichols and Farmer as well?’

Scaife nodded.

‘I guess so. Anyway, it looks like it, although we’ve got no evidence.’

‘I can understand Farmer getting knocked off,’ I said. ‘He had something to do with the kidnapping; Hesson too, but I can’t see why Joan Nichols died.’

‘The coroner said it was an accident,’ Scaife said patiently.

‘I don’t believe it. She inquired about Fay Benson, then went home and broke her neck. It’s too smooth. You people working on her?’

‘We haven’t anything to work on. Creed is leaving her lie until we can hook her into the case if we ever can.’

‘What about these other eight girls who went to Paris? Are they local girls?’

‘One of them is.’ Scaife flicked over the pages of the dossier. ‘Her name’s Janet Shelley. She lives at 25, Arcadia Drive.’

‘Have you seen her?’

‘Not yet. We’ve more important leads to cover. We’ll get around to her.’

‘I think Joan Nichols may be important. I’ve got a spare afternoon. I guess I’ll go and talk to this Shelley girl. Any objection?’

‘I haven’t, but don’t quote me,’ Scaife said, grinning. ‘Go and see her if you want to. I’ve got to get on. The old man is still sour tempered. He wouldn’t be pleased if he knew I was spending all my time talking to you.’

I got to my feet.

‘If I turn up anything, I’ll let you know.’

‘My pal,’ Scaife said sarcastically and settled down once more to brood over the bulky file.

III

Arcadia Drive was a quiet street on the outskirts of the town. A row of bungalows faced a large vacant lot, overgrown with weeds and dead grass, and on which stood several large advertising hoardings.

The bungalows might have been attractive when they had first been erected, but now they were past their prime. They had the dejected look of a man with a shrinking income, trying to keep up appearances and knowing he won't be able to hold on much longer.

Already some of the owners of the bungalows had given up the pretence of being middle class. Two of the front gardens of the bungalows displayed a line of washing, and the gardens were competing in appearance with the vacant lot opposite.

No. 25 was still making a brave show. The lawn had been recently cut, and although the paintwork was at its last gasp, the curtains were bright and clean.

I dug my thumb into the bell push. There was a delay before the front door opened. A girl, blonde, bright looking, with the standard prettiness you would expect from a girl who earns her living in show business, looked inquiringly at me. She had on a blue housecoat, pulled in tight at her waist, and her small feet were in quilted satin blue bed slippers.

'Miss Shelley?' I said, raising my hat.

'Yes. If you're hoping to sell something you're wasting your time,' she said briskly. 'Don't tell me I haven't warned you.'

'I'm not selling anything. I'm Chet Sladen from Crime Facts. Ever read our paper. Miss Shelley?'

'I don't like crime.'

'That's as good a reason as any. I want to ask you a few questions. Would you mind? I'm trying to get some background dope on Joan Nichols.'

She lifted blonde, nicely shaped eyebrows.

'But Joan's dead. She died more than a year ago.'

'That's right. Would it be convenient if I stepped inside? I won't keep you long.'

She stood aside.

‘If this is a stunt to rob me,’ she said, smiling, ‘it’ll be a waste of time. I haven’t anything of value in the house.’

I took out my billfold and gave her one of my business cards.

‘If that doesn’t set your mind at rest, you can call up Sergeant Scaife at police headquarters. He’ll vouch for me.’

She laughed.

‘Well, you do read odd things in the papers. Come in. I’m sorry I can’t offer you a drink.’ She led the way into the sitting room that was spick and span, but austere. It contained only the bare necessities. ‘Do sit down. I hope you won’t keep me long, I’ve got to go out in a little while.’

‘I won’t keep you long,’ I said, sitting down in an armchair that looked comfortable, but turned out to be far from it. If she had told me it had been stuffed with rocks I shouldn’t have been surprised. I took from my billfold the photograph of Fay Benson and offered it to her. ‘Ever seen this girl before?’

She took the photograph, studied it, shook her head and handed it back.

‘I don’t think I have. Her face is familiar, but that doesn’t mean anything. So many girls in show business look like that.’

I thought about this, studied Fay Benson’s features and was inclined to agree with her.

‘You’re sure she wasn’t one of the girls in your troupe when you went to Paris?’

‘Oh no, I’m quite sure of that.’

‘Joan Nichols went with you?’

‘Yes. It would be much more fun for me, Mr. Sladen, if I knew what this was all about.’

‘Sorry; briefly, this girl, Fay Benson, disappeared fourteen months ago under mysterious circumstances. Joan Nichols seemed to have known her. Anyway, she called at Fay’s hotel three days after Fay had disappeared. Miss Nichols asked the reception clerk to let her know if Fay showed up. She then returned to her apartment, fell downstairs and broke her neck.’

‘I know she fell downstairs,’ Janet Shelley said, looking questioningly at me. ‘It was an accident, wasn’t it?’

‘The coroner said so; the police think so, but I’m not so sure. She could have been pushed.’

‘But why - why do you think that?’

‘It’d take too long to go into now, Miss Shelley. I may be wrong, but I don’t think so. I’m trying to find out if Miss Nichols was a friend or just an acquaintance of Fay’s. Would you know?’

She shook her head.

‘She never mentioned Fay Benson to me.’

‘Were you and Miss Nichols friends?’

‘Not particularly. She was rather difficult. None of the girls got on well with her.’

‘In what way - difficult?’

She hesitated, then shrugged.

‘I don’t like gossiping about people, but as she’s dead, I don’t suppose it matters. She was always short of money. She tried to borrow from us. After all, we were all hard up, and we had to make do with what we were paid, but Joan would never stint herself. She was always in debt, always worrying someone for a loan. If she didn’t get it, she could be rather horrible. She had a very sharp tongue.’

‘What did she spend her money on?’

Janet Shelley shrugged.

‘What do girls spend their money on? She never went without a thing. Of course, she had to dress better than we other girls. She moved in a better circle. She had an amazing talent for making friends with people with money. When she was in Paris she got friendly with Mrs. Cornelia Van Blake, the millionaire’s wife. Don’t ask me how she did it, but she did. Twice she went to Mrs. Van Blake’s hotel and had dinner with her. She borrowed a dress from me for the occasion, and somehow she squeezed twenty dollars out of some of the girls to put on a front. They never did get their money back, and I had a lot of trouble getting my dress back.’

All this wasn’t interesting me very much, but I let her talk in the hope she would say something eventually that would be news to me.

‘Did you ever see her with a tall, suntanned guy around thirty-five who has an eyebrow moustache?’ I asked hopefully.

She shook her head.

‘No. She didn’t have any young boy friends. All her male friends were old: business men; sugar daddies if you like.’

For a girl who didn’t like gossiping about people she was doing all right, I thought.

‘Have you ever met a guy who fits that description? His name might be Henry Rutland. He owns a cream and green Cadillac.’

She laughed ruefully.

‘I wish I had. He sounds fun. My boy friends never run to more than a Ford.’

There didn’t seem any use my wasting her time or mine any further. I was getting nowhere fast.

‘Did Miss Nichols have any enemies, do you know?’ I asked as a final question.

‘I should say she had a flock of them, but none of them would want to kill her. All they’d want to do would be to avoid her.’

‘Okay,’ I said getting up. I was glad to be out of the armchair. ‘I’m sorry to have taken up your time, but it’s been nice to meet you.’ I looked around the austere room, then at her. ‘I’m going to embarrass you, Miss Shelley. My editor doesn’t expect me to waste people’s time asking all sorts of questions for nothing.’ I fished out two tens, folded them and put them on the table. ‘That represents a fee for information.’

If Fayette could have heard me he would have blown his top, but I liked this girl and it was pretty obvious she was having a thin time.

She blushed prettily.

‘Gee! I didn’t expect.’ She stopped short. ‘I haven’t told you anything.’

‘Call it a rain check. I might be back for more information,’ I said. ‘So long for now.’

Before she could protest further, I went into the hall, opened the front door and legged it down the path to the car.

CHAPTER SIX

I

I picked Scaife up at headquarters at seven-forty. It was a warm evening and the sky was cloudless. It looked as if we were going to have a nice night for the barrel-lifting job.

‘Did you see the Shelley girl?’ Scaife asked as he settled comfortably on the bench seat of the Buick.

‘I did, but I didn’t get much out of her.’ I gave him the gist of our conversation. ‘Do you know if any of your boys took Joan’s fingerprints before she was buried?’

Scaife shook his head.

‘I don’t know. I’d say they did, but I wouldn’t swear to it. Why?’

‘It might be an idea to check to see if she had a record. A girl who is always after money more often than not gets into trouble.’

Scaife nodded.

‘That’s an idea. Okay, when I get back, I’ll see if we have prints. If we have, I’ll get them checked.’

‘She interests me. She’s the only one so far in this setup who doesn’t make sense,’ I said. ‘Rutland could have been Fay’s boyfriend. Hesson and Farmer kidnapped her. Flemming killed her. Do you think Rutland paid those three to do the job? Do you think he’s the guy behind the killing?’

‘I don’t know. It doesn’t pay to make wild guesses,’ Scaife said. ‘I prefer to wait until the facts fall into line. We don’t even know the girl’s dead.’

‘Like to bet she’s not at the bottom of the lake?’

Scaife shook his head.

‘No, but until we find her, I’m keeping an open mind on the subject.’

‘There seems a lot of traffic heading this way,’ I said, slowing down as I came upon a long line of cars moving slowly towards Lake Baldock.

Scaife swore under his breath.

‘I wonder if someone’s talked? My stars! The old man will bust his truss! Look at this mob!’

There was no hope of overtaking the procession of cars ahead of us. We had to follow along behind them. About a quarter of a mile from the lake, the cars slowed to a crawl.

We could see three cops ahead in the road, holding up the traffic.

‘Let me get out a moment,’ Scaife said.

I stopped the car and waited while he spoke to one of the cops, then he came back, scowling.

‘There are about a couple of thousand sightseers around the lake and more coming every minute,’ he said, getting back into the car. ‘We’ve had to call out the reserve to handle them. Someone’s talked all right. We can go through. Mind how you go.’

I edged out of the stream of traffic and drove on until we reached the lake.

Six police cars and a couple of trucks stood under the trees. The ground around the water’s edge swarmed with pressmen and cameramen. There were even two units of the newsreel hawks busily setting up their cameras.

A squad of police was working on three powerful searchlights, directing their white, glaring beams on to the still surface of the water.

Harris was climbing into his frog outfit when Scaife and I joined the group at the water’s edge.

Creed glared at me.

‘Is this your doing?’ he demanded in a voice you could cut ham on.

‘Not guilty, captain. I haven’t said a word.’

‘That’s what everyone is saying. Well, I hope for someone’s sake we find this girl.’

He turned to Harris who was shivering in the still night air and snarled at him to hurry up.

Harris got into the boat; two cops shoved it off, scrambled aboard and began to row to the centre of the lake. Nearby was a powerful winch, anchored to a tree. At the end of the steel cable was a set of clamps. Three policemen were loading the clamps into another rowboat. They pushed off, and as they rowed after the first boat, two other policemen paid out the cable. Scaife and I kept away from Creed. We stood under the trees watching the two boats as they slowly neared the centre of the lake.

A couple of newspaper cameramen tried to put out their own boat with the view of getting photographs of Harris as he entered the water, but a squad of police blocked them off. One of the cameramen went over to Creed to

protest, but he didn't get anywhere. Creed vented his spleen on him, and the cameraman retreated, shaken.

'If that barrel only contains cement,' Scaife said out of the corner of his mouth, 'you're going to see the nearest thing to an earthquake you're likely to see. It's my bet Harris has been shooting his mouth off. There's nothing he likes better than publicity.'

Harris had gone into the water and the waiting crowd watched, silent and tense. After ten minutes or so he reappeared and waved to the boat that carried the tackle. The oarsmen rowed over to him and lowered the clamps over the side.

'Won't be long now,' Scaife said restlessly. He lit a cigarette, took an impatient draw, then tossed the cigarette into the lake. After what seemed an age, Harris's head again appeared above the water and he waved.

Creed turned to the two men on the winch.

'Okay, start winding,' he snapped.

The two men bent to their task. It was as much as they could do to turn the handles and Creed shouted to two other cops to help them.

Slowly the drum turned, winding in the cable. After ten minutes, Creed changed the four men who stood back, sweating and panting.

'I think we might get back a little,' Scaife said under his breath. 'If the old man spots us, he'll get us to do some of that, and it looks like hard work to me.'

We moved further back into the shadows.

It took more than an hour of slow winding before the barrel broke surface.

A wild, frenzied cheer broke out from the crowd as the four policemen slopped into the water and manhandled the barrel ashore. A beam from one of the searchlights was directed on to it, and there was a rush of cameramen to photograph it.

They wanted Creed to pose beside it, but he wouldn't do it. I could see he wanted to, but he was scared the girl wasn't inside the barrel, and he wasn't taking the risk of making a fool of himself.

A black, closed truck, like an ambulance, edged to where the barrel lay.

'That's the mortician's truck,' Scaife said. 'Creed's not taking the risk of opening the barrel here. Come on, let's get out of here. We'll go to the mortuary. That's where they'll open it.'

We pushed our way through the excited crowd, and once clear of them, we

ran fast to the Buick. I had trouble in turning the car, so congested had the road become. I got the car turned at last, and drove fastback to town.

The mortuary was behind police headquarters. I parked the Buick in the police park, and we walked over to the mortuary building.

A fat little man, wearing a rubber apron and rubber gloves came out of a room as we entered the tiled passage.

‘Evening, sergeant,’ he said, his badly shaven face lighting up. ‘How’s it coming? Did they get it up?’

‘Hello, Joe,’ Scaife said. ‘They got it up all right. They should be along in about half an hour.’

‘Anything in it?’

‘Cement. I don’t know what else. The old man’s opening it here.’

‘The last cement job I did,’ Joe said scowling, ‘was a horror. The guy had been in the water for six months. You should have seen him.’

‘She’s been in for fourteen months. Think there’ll be anything left to see?’

Joe shrugged.

‘It depends on how much of the cement has covered her. If she’s right inside the cement shell, she might be all right. She won’t last long: just long enough to identify her.’

Listening to this talk made me feel a little sick. I wasn’t sure now if I wanted to be present when they opened the barrel.

‘Come into the office,’ Joe said. ‘I’ve got a bottle in there that’ll put you in the right mood. I always have a shot before I tackle a job like this.’

We went into a small office and stood around while Joe got three glasses and a bottle of Scotch from a cupboard.

‘This is Chet Sladen, the guy who writes for Crimes Facts,’ Scaife said. ‘He’s working on the case.’

Joe nodded at me.

‘I’ve read some of your stuff, mister. You should have a good story here. Going to take photographs?’

‘I guess so.’

He beamed and moved over to the light.

‘Maybe you’ll be wanting my picture?’

‘I don’t suppose his camera’s insured,’ Scaife said, grinning.

I took a couple of shots of the little man. The light was poor and I didn’t expect to get good pictures, but as I was going to make a hole in his whisky, I

thought it only fair to do something in return.

We had several drinks: taking the whisky straight without a chaser.

I was feeling less squeamish when I heard the truck come into the yard.

Joe hastily put the bottle and glasses away, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and went to open the double doors leading to the morgue.

‘Come on,’ Scaife said. ‘This’ll be a good test for your stomach.’

Creed came in scowling, followed by the Medical Officer.

‘You here already?’ Creed said, glaring at me.

‘Why not? It was my idea you found her,’ I said.

‘Yeah.’ He snorted and turned to snap orders at the squad of cops who were manhandling the barrel on to a four-wheel trolley.

‘I had a sweet time shaking off those vultures,’ he went on. ‘If I could find out who talked, I’d break his neck.’

‘Well, you should be able to find out; you’re a cop,’ I said, needling him.

Scaife nudged me, shaking his head warningly.

We all trooped into the mortuary behind the truck. Joe and two of his assistants, also in rubber aprons and gloves, stood waiting.

‘Get going,’ Creed said. ‘Let’s see what we’ve got.’

He waved the four policemen who had wheeled in the truck, out of the room. I moved back against the wall, and fitted a flashlight bulb into the flash socket. My hands were unsteady and I nearly dropped the bulb.

It didn’t take Joe and his assistants long to strip off the outer casing of the barrel.

While they worked, Creed said to me, ‘It’s the barrel Sperry sold to Flemming. Do you see the strawberry plant holes? She must be in it!’

Joe forced the last of the sodden lathes out of the iron hoop that bound them together. The block of cement, shaped like the barrel, looked gruesome in the hard light.

‘Whoever fixed this, did an expert job,’ he said, stepping back to wipe his forehead. ‘Get me a couple of wedges, Tom.’

I took a flashlight photograph of the cement block as Tom fetched the wedges.

‘Let’s take it easy,’ Joe said, and the two of them began to drive the wedges into the cement. Ten minutes of steady hammering cracked the cement. Joe peered into the crack.

Creed shoved him aside, looked into the opening, grimaced and stepped

back.

‘It’s her,’ he said. ‘I can see the spangles on her getup. Okay, Joe, get it open.’

A few more blows with the hammers caused the cement suddenly to fall apart the way an Easter egg will open. I took one look and turned away.

I heard Creed say, ‘She’s all yours, Doc: what’s left of her.’

I was on my way out by then. I have a pretty good stomach, but what I had seen turned me sick. I went into the office, took out the bottle of Scotch and gave myself a big shot.

‘Me too,’ Scaife said, coming in. He took the bottle and half-filled his glass. ‘Phew! I wouldn’t be a croaker for all the money in the world. Well, that settles it. It’s her all right.’

After a few minutes, Creed came in.

I made him a drink; he took it silently and went to sit on the desk by the window. He drank some of the liquor although he didn’t look as if he needed it. His eyes were alight with excitement and satisfaction.

‘Well, at last we’re getting somewhere,’ he said. ‘You two stick around. I’m going to talk to the press. There’s no doubt it’s Fay Benson. The body in there’s got a crooked little finger and so had Fay.’ He finished his drink. ‘Now, we’ll have to find out why she was killed.’

He went out to where a gang of pressmen were waiting impatiently in the yard.

Scaife lit a cigarette.

‘We’re heading for some hard work,’ he said gloomily. ‘We’ve got to find this guy Rutland.’

I reached for the telephone and put through a personal call Bernie in New York. After a ten-minute delay, I got Bernie on the line. The time was now twenty minutes past midnight and I was surprised to catch him in.

‘I can’t stay long,’ he said. ‘Clair’s throwing a party, and I’ve got to keep feeding these vultures with my best whisky. What’s cooking?’

‘Get your notebook,’ I said. ‘I’ve got something hot for you so snap it up.’

‘Won’t it wait until tomorrow morning?’ he asked plaintively. ‘Clair doesn’t like me to leave our guests. Guests, did I say? That’s funny! They’re more like wolves.’

‘Listen, you drink sodden baboon; get your notebook and pin your ears back! We’ve found Fay Benson!’

‘You have? Well, that’s something. How is she?’

‘Wet, cold and very dead. Get your notebook!’

After an infuriating delay, he came back on the line again.

‘Clair’s livid with me,’ he said. ‘For the love of Mike, hurry up.’

‘Shut up about Clair!’ I exclaimed. ‘Listen to what I’m going to tell you.’ I began dictating the story. One of Bernie’s major accomplishments was being able to take down in his own peculiar shorthand, dictation at an incredible speed. I gave him the facts and told him I was putting more photographs on the morning plane. ‘Get someone to meet the plane. This stuffs going to be sensational,’ I concluded.

‘I’ll fix it. I’ll have the whole thing doped out by tomorrow. Nice work, Chet.’

‘Glad you think so. Keep close to the telephone. I’ll have something more for you in a little while. We’re waiting for the doctor’s report.’

‘Don’t call me up any more tonight,’ Bernie said, alarm sounding in his voice. ‘Clair . . .’

‘I know: Clair won’t like it. Phooey to her!’ I snarled and hung up.

Creed came into the room, looking pretty pleased with himself.

‘This is just the story those ghouls like,’ he said, sitting down. ‘We’re going to hit the headlines all right. Doc been in yet?’

Scaife shook his head.

We had to wait another ten minutes before the Medical Officer came in. He looked completely unperturbed as he began to fill his pipe and he shook his head when I offered him a drink.

‘She was killed by a blow on the back of her head. I’d say she was struck by the butt of a revolver: I’ve got nothing else for you. She’s been in the water too long to tell us much. She was dead when the cement was put in.’

Creed got to his feet.

‘Thanks, Doc.’ He looked over at Scaife. ‘Come on; we’ve got work to do.’

As the M.O. followed them, I reached for the telephone and called Bernie again.

II

I looked in to see Creed the next morning soon after eleven o'clock. I had paid my bill at the Shad Hotel, packed my bag and was now ready for the two hundred mile run to Tampa City. Scaife told me Creed was tied up, but he wanted to see me before I left.

'He won't be more than twenty minutes. Come in my office. I've news for you.'

When I had sat down, Scaife said, 'You were right. Joan Nichols had a record. She served two years in 1948 for blackmail.'

'Any details?'

'It was a particularly mean type of blackmail. One of the girls she was working with in a show had a brother who was in a criminal asylum. His background was pretty grimy and Joan found out about it. She threatened to tell the other girls if this girl didn't pay her five dollars a week. That was about all the girl could afford as she was keeping her mother. The girl paid up. It went on for six months, then her brother died, and she went to the police. Joan Nichols collected two years.'

'That's interesting,' I said. 'I wonder if she was blackmailing Fay.'

'More likely she was blackmailing Rutland. Maybe she and Fay were working together to put the bite on Rutland and he knocked them off.'

I shook my head.

'I don't see it that way. Joan's death was accidental. So was Farmer's. Following your argument, why wasn't Fay's? Why was it so important to get rid of her body so no one would ever find it? You don't go to the trouble of giving a body a cement overcoat unless it's urgently necessary for the body not to be found. Why shouldn't her body be found?'

Scaife stared at me. He hadn't thought of this angle.

'Yeah, that's right,' he said. 'They could have knocked her off accidentally just as easily.'

The buzzer on his desk sounded and he got up.

'That's the old man. Come on, I know he wants to see you.'

Creed was sitting at his desk, chewing on a cigar. He didn't look as happy as he had the previous night after he had told the pressmen what a smart guy

he was. He was scowling, and he stared at me as if he wasn't sure if he liked me or not.

'You've certainly started something, Sladen, with your ideas. I'm hanged if I know if I can finish it.' He waved Scaife out of the room. 'Okay, we've found the body; we've killed the killer, but where does that get us? Even the press can see Flemming was hired to kill her, and in a day or so, they'll begin to put some pressure on me. I've got no lead now.'

'I might turn one up in Tampa City. I'm off right now.'

'In a way I hope you don't. It won't get us anywhere,' Creed said. 'I've already told you: we have no jurisdiction in Tampa City. We can't send our men in there. Doonan isn't cooperative. Ever since he's been there, Tampa City has been used as a sanctuary for criminals. You wouldn't believe a town of two hundred and fifty thousand people could be so law abiding. Fifty percent of their convictions are motoring offences. The rest of them are for pilfering, shoplifting, stuff like that. There hasn't been one major robbery or murder there for four years; just small time stuff among the lower working class: the folk who can't afford to buy protection. Even if you get a lead, you'll have to be careful how you use it.'

'It can't be as bad as that,' I said. 'If I get direct proof that the guy who hired Flemming is in Tampa City, surely we can put pressure on Doonan to pass him over to you?'

Creed lifted his shoulders.

'It'll depend on who the guy is and how much protection he can pay. But it's my bet you'll never get the evidence. You'll be thrown out of town long before that.' He took his cigar from between his teeth and tapped ash into the ashtray. 'I'm not kidding, Sladen. I'll tell you something: six months ago, a private eye resident here worked on a divorce case. The wife he was watching went to Tampa City. He followed her and kept after her. She had a lot of dough. It's my guess she went to Doonan and complained. I wish you could see what they did to that guy. His wife has to shove him around now in a wheelchair. He doesn't know who beat him up. He doesn't care, anyway. He's slap happy. After a little trouble - he doesn't talk so well now - I managed to get from him that three men cornered him an alley. He couldn't see what they looked like. He didn't have much time before they slugged him unconscious. I spoke to Doonan about it.

He said he would get after the three guys. He even promised to have them

for me in a week. I still haven't got them, and I never will.'

I stared at him, feeling a sudden chill run up my spine.

'They wouldn't treat me like that, would they?'

Creed smiled grimly.

'If I sent Scaife to snoop in their territory, they would do it to him: why not to you?'

'I represent Crime Facts,' I said, but with no confidence.

Creed laughed.

'Tell that to Doonan. It might amuse him.'

'Maybe I'd better keep away from Tampa City.'

'Please yourself. I wouldn't ask you to go there, but if you want to get a story as badly as you seem to, that's where you may find one. It's up to you.'

I laughed uneasily.

'You sound like my editor, only he would order me to go there. Okay, I'm a sucker: I'll go, but I'll take care to be cautious.'

'Have you that gun I lent you?' Creed asked, holding out his hand. 'I want it. You need a permit from Doonan to carry a gun in his territory, and if they catch you with one without his permit you'll spend six months in one of the toughest jails in the country.'

I reluctantly handed over the .45.

'I was hoping to hang on to that,' I said. 'No one would put me in a wheelchair if I had that gun to show them.'

'You're safer without it. You can't pull a gun on a cop. You should know that.' He picked up an envelope lying on his desk and tossed it over to me. 'That's a note to Don Bradley, Tampa City ex-police captain. He and I used to be old friends. I haven't seen him for a long time: too long. He's a good guy. He might be able to steer you right. Anyway, he'll bring you up-to-date on who to see and who to avoid. Go talk to him as soon as you hit town. He'll tell you where to stay, and he'll give you the geography of the place.'

'Thanks,' I said, put the envelope in my pocket and stubbed out my cigarette. 'I'll also go along and see Lennox Hartley and find out what he knows about Fay Benson. Any other letters come in about the girl?'

'Sure, we've had a couple of dozen new ones. They don't mean much. The writers only think they recognize her. None of them is as sure as Hartley seems to be. None of them come from Tampa City anyway. We're working on them, and if we turn up anything, I'll let you know. As soon as you're

settled in, call me, and give me your address.' He stared thoughtfully at me. 'I hope you stay long enough in town to get an address.'

'So do I,' I said, feeling he wasn't encouraging. 'Well, I'll get off.'

He shook hands.

'So long, Sladen, and good luck.'

He said it as if he thought I needed a lot of luck.

'Thanks,' I said and left him.

Scaife was still in his office as I passed and I put my head around the door.

'I'm off to Tampa City. Be seeing you,' I said.

He looked long and seriously at me.

'You know I think your pal Low's got a lot more sense than you have,' he said, pushing back his chair. 'Maybe you are the brains of the combination, but he's got the sense. Me – I wouldn't go to Tampa City if my wife was dying there - if I had a wife, which I haven't.'

'I've not only got the brains,' I said with dignity, 'but I have also the courage.'

As I walked down the passage to the exit, I heard his mournful hoot of laughter. It wasn't an inspiring sound.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

Around four o'clock in the afternoon, I hit the approach road to Tampa City: a four track highway that ran as straight as a foot rule alongside golden sands and the sun swept ocean.

At this hour, the road was fairly clear of traffic, and I coasted along at a steady sixty miles an hour until I saw ahead of me a forty foot hoarding whose blood red letters on a glittering white background made me snatch my foot off the gas pedal.

YOU ARE APPROACHING TAMPA CITY. SLOW DOWN OR SPEND A NIGHT IN OUR JAIL!

A mile further on I spotted two speed cops, sitting astride their motorcycles by the side of the road, their gauntlet covered hands resting on their handlebars as if they were itching to go into action: two beefy, red-faced men with eyes like sun baked pebbles. They both stared hard at me as I passed them at a sedate thirty-five miles an hour.

Another mile further on, the road dipped sharply and began to run downhill, and I had my first sight of Tampa City. It sprawled out around a sheltered bay: a white, glittering town of skyscrapers, beach huts, plushy looking hotels, gay sun umbrellas, tropical shrubs and trees. It looked as immaculate and as contented as a showgirl who has just been given a diamond bracelet.

A closer inspection, as I reached the long, busy main street, told me this was a rich man's town. Rolls Royces, Bentleys, Cadillacs and Daimlers cluttered up the parking lots. Well fed, well-dressed men sat in the cars, drumming impatiently on the steering wheel while they waited for their wives to have done with their shopping, or sat at cafes, staring insolently at the lightly clad lovelies who displayed their charms with equal insolence.

I told myself Bernie would like this town. I didn't dislike my first look of it myself. I spotted an empty place in one of the parking lots and swung the Buick into it, cut the engine and got out.

The sun beat down on me as I walked across to a drug store to ask the way to Havelock Drive where Don Bradley lived. The clerk told me as if he were doing me a favour. His sharp eyes appeared to have the facility of peeping into my wallet and counting my money. From his expression I gathered he didn't think much of me, and it was obvious my arrival gave him no pleasure.

A tall girl in a backless blue swimsuit, doughnut sized sunglasses and a straw hat the size of a cartwheel drifted into the store as I was leaving. She had a bracelet of diamonds around her left ankle that must have set some sucker back a small fortune. The clerk went over to her with a deference that's usually reserved for royalty. Money in Tampa City obviously talked. I went back to the car.

A cop who from the rear could have been mistaken for Primo Camera, leaned against the car and stared at me as I approached with a stolid, impersonal expression and with cold, unfriendly eyes.

'This yours?' he asked nodding at the car as if it were beneath his dignity even to notice it.

'That's right,' I said mildly.

I didn't know what his grouse was going to be, but I didn't have to be psychic to see he had a grouse.

'You're in Tampa City now,' he said, biting off each word. 'We like cars parked straight here. Your rear wheels are over the white line.'

I looked over at the glittering Rolls Royce parked next to my car. Its offside wheels were over the white line by three feet, but after all it was a 1954 Rolls and not a 1940 Buick.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I'm a stranger in town.'

He held out a hand that could have been mistaken for a bunch of bananas in a poor light.

'Licence.'

I gave him my licence. He brooded over it as if he wasn't too sure of the longer words, then took out a leather case containing a pad of forms and began to write laboriously.

'Staying long?' he growled at me without looking up.

'I don't imagine so. I doubt if I'll be able to afford to.'

He let that one drift, ripped out the sheet he had written on and poked it at me.

'Five bucks.'

I gave him the five dollars without blinking an eyelash and accepted the receipt. I had been warned by Creed, and Fayette was paying, so why should I care?

The cop seemed surprised there was no fuss.

‘Be careful next time.’

‘I’ll buy myself a spirit level and a T-square,’ I said. ‘I’ll see she’s properly lined up next time I leave her.’

He licked the stub of pencil and wrote down my number. His eyes were no warmer than an iceberg. I could see he would look out for me in the future.

I got into the car.

‘Okay for me to move on?’

He gave me a long, hard stare and walked away. He looked from the back like a small mountain that had grown legs. A nudge from him would have shoved in my ribs.

I drove away, aware that I was sweating slightly and not because of the heat. If this kind of thing was going to happen often, I thought, my temper and nerves would almost certainly become frayed.

Lincoln Drive was in the poorer quarter of Tampa City: that is to say the houses were smaller, and didn’t stand in a couple of acres of screened estates as ninety-nine percent of the rest of the houses in Tampa City did. It was a tree lined street tucked away as if ashamed of itself, but a street that I would have been glad to live in.

A big, fat, solid looking man was fussing over a row of sweet peas a professional would have been proud to have grown in the garden of No. 24. I guessed he must be Bradley. He glanced up as I swung the Buick to the kerb.

He looked every inch a cop; but not a bad cop. His fat weather-beaten face had a half humorous expression that went well with a pair of alert blue eyes. A straggling moustache, a sunburned, balding head and an aggressive chin gave him character plus toughness instead of just plain toughness. I got out of the car and he wandered down the garden path to meet me.

‘Captain Bradley?’ I asked, resting my hands on the gate.

‘Sure, come in,’ he said.

‘Will the car be all right? I’ve already been pinched for parking out of line.’

He laughed.

‘The car’s fine. They don’t make pinches outside my house. Come on in.’

I followed him up the path.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen sweet peas like those before,’ I said, not to butter the old boy, but because I meant it.

‘They’re pretty good. You a gardener?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Yeah.’ He nodded. ‘Gardening’s for the middle-aged and the old. I’d be lost without a garden now.’

He led me into a neat, comfortably furnished sitting room with casement windows opening out on to the lawn.

‘I didn’t get your name.’

‘Chet Sladen.’

He lifted a bushy eyebrow.

‘You the fella who writes in Crime Facts?’

‘That’s right.’

He beamed.

‘I’m glad to know you. I read all your stuff. Sit down. How about a drink?’

‘Thanks.’

While he was making drinks he said, ‘This is your first visit to Tampa City?’

‘Yes; pretty nice looking town. Looks as if it’s loaded with dough.’

‘It is. Some say there’s more loose money here than in Hollywood. We have thirteen millionaires living here right at this minute. Anyone with less than a five figure income is trash in Tampa City.’ He came over with the drinks and lowered his bulk into an armchair. ‘Well, here’s to you.’

We drank, then I handed him Greed’s letter.

‘This is an introduction, Captain,’ I said. ‘From Captain Creed.’

Bradley’s face lit up.

‘Well, well, I haven’t heard from Tom for years. How is he?’

‘He’s fine. He and I have been working on a case. A lead has turned up here. He thought it might be an idea if I investigated it.’

Bradley looked sharply at me, opened the letter, read it, then returned it to the envelope before saying, ‘Hmm, so you’re thinking of investigating a lead here, are you?’

‘That’s the idea. I understand Doonan doesn’t encourage that kind of thing.’

‘That’s an understatement. If you’ll take the advice of an old man, Mr.

Sladen, you'll get in your car and go back to Welden. The atmosphere in Welden, as far as I remember is a lot healthier than here.'

'I know, but I have a job to do. I was hoping for a little help from you.'

'I'm out of the running now. I haven't been inside headquarters for over a year. There's not much I can do. Care to tell me what it's all about?'

I made myself comfortable and took him through the whole story.

He sat still, his eyes half closed, listening intently. I had an idea by the time I had finished, he hadn't missed a word.

'That's an interesting case,' he said. 'I think you're on to something coming here. It may be a coincidence, but you might be interested to know there's a smart nightclub in Tampa City that's called the Golden Apple.'

I sat up.

'Golden Apple? Well, what do you know? What sort of club is it?'

'A very exclusive one, Mr. Sladen. It's run by Hamilton Royce, who is a very smart operator indeed. When I was in the saddle I made it my business to check on him. He started life as a card sharper, working the Atlantic liners. From sharpening he graduated to share pushing, and he only skipped out of Miami one jump ahead of the law. He got his money out and he settled here. The Golden Apple has two big gambling rooms, and I know for a fact at least two of the roulette wheels are crooked. No one can get near the place without a membership card. Commissioner Doonan, by the way, was one of the first life members, and I hear his entrance and subscription fees were on the house. The club has five hundred members and they come straight out of the Blue Book. None of them has less than a six figure income. It's quite a place.'

'It must be. You don't think I could get myself made a member?'

Bradley laughed.

'It would be easier to get yourself made the President, Mr. Sladen: a lot easier.'

'Well, then I guess I'll have to grin and bear it. Do you know Lennox Hartley? Does the name mean anything to you?'

'Can't say it does,' Bradley said. 'He's the fella who claims to recognize the Benson girl?'

'That's right. He's my first port of call.'

'Take my advice and go slow,' Bradley said seriously. 'You don't have to worry much about the cops in this town; not the boys who are pounding the

beat. Of course they are on the lookout for an easy buck. They get a cut on all fines made on the spot, and they're keen. Pay up, don't talk back and you'll be okay, but take care you don't run up against the plainclothes boys. They're tough, and believe me, when I say tough, I mean tough. Police Captain Mathis was my lieutenant when I was in charge. I had trouble with him when I was in office, and I wish now I had got rid of him. He's not only a bad policeman, but he's a brutal one. His lieutenant's name is Joe Carson. He's bad too, but the worst of the three is Sergeant Carl Lassiter. Run up against him and your best bet is to get out of town fast. I'm not fooling, Mr. Sladen. There was a private eye from Welden.'

'I heard about him from Creed.'

'It was Lassiter who fixed him. So watch out.'

I was beginning to feel apprehensive, and I wished I had Bernie with me. He would have been so scared to hear all this, in comparison, I should have felt brave.

'I'll take it easy,' I said. 'Thanks for the tip. I'm looking for a convenient, but not too expensive hotel. Can you put me on to one?'

'Try the Beach Hotel on Palm Avenue. They'll look after you and they won't rob you. And take my tip, don't tell anyone you've been to see me. I'm not popular in this town. Strangers calling on me aren't popular either.'

I got up.

'Thanks. If I need advice, can I come and see you?'

'Sure, but call me first. It would be better if you didn't leave your car outside, and safer if you came here when it was dark.'

I stared at him.

'Are you serious?'

'Yes, I'm serious all right.'

'You mean they really don't like you having visitors?'

'That's the idea. Since I retired about a year ago, I don't reckon I've had a visitor until now. People are a little shy about calling on a cop who had to retire. But don't think I mind. I don't. I've a fine wife and a garden, and that's all a man of my age needs.'

'You had to retire?' I said. 'Why, I thought . . .'

'I was kicked out. Maybe one of these days when we've both got more time, I'll tell you about it, I've got a lot of work to do and I guess you have too.'

‘Yeah.’ I was startled. ‘Okay. Thanks for seeing me, Captain. So long for now.’

I left him and walked down the path to my car.

A beefy, red-faced patrolman was wandering along on the opposite side of the road. He paused when he saw me and gaped. I ignored him, although my heart skipped a beat. I got in the car and drove away.

The last view I had of the cop in my rear mirror, didn’t ease my fluster. He had his notebook out. It wasn’t hard to guess he was writing down my number.

II

I got fixed up at the Beach Hotel which turned out to be what Bradley had said it would be: comfortable and not over expensive, and the management seemed pleased to see me.

My room on the third floor faced the beach and ocean and had a private bath. The bellhop who carried up my bag asked me if I wanted a bottle of Scotch sent up and when I said it was an idea, he brought it himself without the usual irritating wait.

‘Anything else, mister?’ he asked. ‘Any little thing?’

‘Tell me where Cannon Avenue is,’ I said.

‘That’s easy. Turn left when you leave the hotel, drive to the main street, first intersection right, continue up to the fourth set of traffic lights, turn left and that’ll bring you to the foothill road. Cannon Avenue is the fourth on the left. It’ll take you fifteen minutes by car.’

I gave him a buck and my blessing, and when he had gone, I stripped off my clothes and had a shower. Then I took another drink, put on my best summer weight suit and a gaudy tie, checked myself in the full length mirror to make sure I wouldn’t disgrace Tampa City when I showed myself on the streets, and then satisfied, I went down to the car.

It took me fourteen minutes by the dashboard clock to reach Cannon Avenue. It was one of those smart Californian residential streets that will give anyone except a five figure income man an inferior complex.

Small luxury houses, set in perfectly groomed gardens, stood in isolated tree surrounded plots and sneered at one another. Every house was different. You could see that each successive architect had tried to wipe the eye of his rival by putting up a better, more modern, more gadget equipped building than the one next door.

Number 246 was at the far end of the avenue, and was probably the last of them to be built. It was a two-storey Swiss chalet type of house with an overhang roof. A flight of wooden steps with a carved handrail led up to the front door which was of dark oak with a bear’s head in wood for a knocker. Overhead hung a tricky wrought iron lantern that could have been fifteenth century Florentine but was probably something run up by the local

blacksmith in an artistic moment.

The garden was too tidy for comfort. If I owned a garden like this one I would be afraid to walk in it.

I left the Buick, pushed open the gate and walked up the path, flanked on either side by standard rose trees. I climbed the steps to the front door, lifted the bear's head and knocked.

There was a pause while I leaned against the carved rail, feeling the sun hot on my back. As I was about to knock again, I heard footsteps and the front door opened.

A tall, lean man stood in the doorway; a muscular, hairy hand resting against the doorpost. He looked as if he had just stepped from the glossy pages of a movie magazine. His long suntanned face was handsome if you like the actor type of face which I don't. His dark hair, thinning at the forehead, was slicked back and shone like patent leather in the sunlight. He had on a dark blue shirt, open at the throat, a pair of white slacks and his feet were in doeskin white shoes. He was a sight to make any bobbysoxer's heart flutter, but he didn't do anything to mine.

'Hello,' he said. 'What do you want?'

A blast of whisky laden breath nearly took the skin off my face. He hadn't been drinking whisky; he had been bathing in it.

'Mr. Harley?'

'Yes.' He leaned a little more heavily against the doorpost. I saw then he was drunk.

'I'm Chet Sladen. I write for Crime Facts. I wanted to talk to you.'

He frowned and half closed his eyes.

'Crime Facts? You mean the magazine?'

'That's right. Can you spare me a moment?'

'My dear fella, of course. Come in and have a drink.' He stood aside. 'I'm glad to see you. As a matter of fact I was getting as bored as a louse. Do you ever get bored?'

I moved into a hall full of fancy carvings, ski-sticks, a Swiss grandfather clock and ornate rugs.

I said I couldn't remember ever being bored.

'Lucky guy.' He sounded as if he meant it. 'Come on in.' He crossed the hall, went down three steps into a large lounge. He only just made the steps. If he hadn't clutched on to the back of a chair as he arrived he would

probably have sat on the floor. The lounge was comfortable but ornate. The architect had got the Swiss motive firmly in mind when he had set about this room.

With snow heaped against the windows and the sound of an avalanche breaking loose somewhere it might have got by, but in a hot, sunny Californian town it was just crazy.

I had only time to take the room in with one quick glance before I became aware of a girl sitting on a divan looking at me as if I were some unpleasant casualty in a car smash. She was tall and willowy; dark, haughty and very, very lovely. She had on a green sunsuit that failed to disguise her good points, and her long bare shapely legs were the nicest I had seen so far in Tampa City.

She got slowly to her feet. Her lips were parted in a cold, half smile, but her eyes glittered with well controlled rage.

‘But Hart dear,’ she said, ‘we were talking.’

‘This is Mr. - what did you say your name was?’ Lennox Hartley asked, screwing up his eyes and peering at me.

‘Sladen,’ I said, ‘but if I’m in the way . . .’

‘Of course you’re not.’ He put a hot, heavy hand on my shoulder. ‘Suzy dear, this is Mr. Sladen. He has important business to discuss with me. Shall we meet tomorrow? Suppose I pick you up?’

The girl stared at him, then walked past him, up the steps and into the hall.

Hartley turned slowly to watch her. She went to the front door, opened it, passed on to the stoop, then slammed the door so violently one of the skiing sticks on the wall in the hall fell down.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t . . .’ I began.

Hartley laughed.

‘Forget it. You don’t know how glad I am you turned up. That girl drives me nuts.’ He went over to a cocktail cabinet loaded with bottles, and poured two enormous whiskies. He added ice and steered himself back with some difficulty to where I was standing, handing me one of the glasses, then he dropped languidly into an armchair and waved his glass at me.

‘Skool!’ he said and drank deeply. He set down the glass, sighed and waved me to a chair. ‘Sit down, Mr. Sladen. Relax. Do you like women?’

‘I take them or leave them,’ I said, sitting down.

‘I wish I could,’ he said gloomily. ‘If I take them, they get in my hair. If I

leave them, I'm lonely. It's a hell of a life, isn't it?'

I said it might be worse.

'I guess so.' He saw I was taking another look at the room and said hurriedly, as if he were anxious I shouldn't think he was responsible for the decor, 'The owner must be nuts. Don't think I did this. I only rent the dump. One of these days I plan to go to Switzerland and put up a Californian sun bungalow. That'll shake them as much as this dump shakes me.' He ran fingers across his forehead, frowned, then went on, 'What did you want, old fella?'

'I understand you wrote to the Welden police about the photograph of Fay Benson that appeared in the press.'

He stared at me, blinked, then nodded.

'That's right. How did you know?'

'I'm working with the police. We want to find out something about this girl's background.'

'Why have the police sent you for heaven's sake? Why didn't they come themselves?'

'Tampa City is out of their jurisdiction. I said I would see you to avoid complications.' I took Fay Benson's photograph from my wallet and offered it to him. 'That's the girl. Do you still recognize her?'

He took the photograph, screwed up his eyes and peered at it. Then he reached out, turned on the table lamp to see it better.

'That's the girl,' he said, 'I'd know her anywhere. Mind you, when I knew her she was dark; but it's the same face. I'm an expert on women's faces: I have to be. I'm a magazine cover designer.' He waved the photograph at me. 'This girl modeled for me. That haughty piece who went out just now also models for me. You've no idea what I have to put up with with these girls.' He waved the photograph again. 'This one cost me time and money. You wouldn't believe it to look at her, would you? I thought when I met her she would be easy to handle, but no, she turned out just like the rest of them.'

'Was her name Fay Benson?'

He shook his head.

'No. Her name was Frances Bennett. She was one of the showgirls at the Golden Apple. That's the plush nightery on Roosevelt Boulevard in case you don't know.'

'You say she modelled for you?'

‘That was the idea. She did quite a lot of work for me. I spotted her at the club way back in June of last year. She seemed to me to have just the right face and figure for a good cover design. I fixed for her to come out here and pose. She used to come regularly. Then suddenly, she was fixed to come one day and didn’t show up. I haven’t seen her since.’

‘When was this?’

‘Sometime in August last year.’

‘Could you give me the exact date? It’s important.’

‘I guess so.’ He groaned as he hoisted himself out of the chair and went unsteadily across the room to a big cupboard. He took from it a cardboard folder and returned to his chair. ‘I’ve the last drawing I did of her somewhere here. It’s not finished, but I’ve got the date on the back.’ He thumbed through a pile of half-finished sketches, pulled out one and handed it to me.

‘That’s it. The date’s on the back.’

I looked at the sketch. He certainly could draw. Although the drawing was only half finished I recognized the girl. There was no doubt she was Fay Benson. I looked at the back of the sketch. The date was August 2nd. Fifteen days after she had posed in this room, she had disappeared from Welden. She had arrived in Welden on August 9th. What had she been doing between August 2nd and the 9th? I wondered.

‘Yes, that’s her all right,’ I said, handing back the sketch. ‘Can you remember if she gave you any hint that she might not turn up to finish her modelling?’

He shook his head.

‘No, it was a complete let down. She was pleased with the sketch as she should have been. She said she was looking forward to seeing it finished. I told her I’d only be one more day on it, and it was she who suggested she came the next day. She fixed the time too. Then she never turned up.’

‘Do you remember what time she left you on August 2nd?’

‘Around four o’clock. I don’t like working long hours. She came at twelve thirty. We worked until two, then we had a sandwich lunch, and she left at four.’

‘Did she show up at the Golden Apple that night?’

‘Yes. I happened to be there and I saw her. She took part in the show.’

‘Do you know where she lived?’

‘I can tell you. I’m a methodical cuss, Mr. Sladen. You might not think it

to look at me, but I've got method.' He produced a card index box from the cupboard, flicked through it, found a card and tossed it over to me.

I examined the card.

BENNETT. Frances, Lucy, 256, Glynne Avenue. T. C. 4475. Showgirl. Golden Apple Club. Age 26. Brunette. Blue eyes. Height 5ft. 6. Bust 36. Hips 36. Weight 120 lbs. Photogenic. Good for cruise, vacation, outdoor, candy box subject. Good patient model.

'I keep tabs on them all,' Hartley said. 'Then when I want them again, I run through the cards until I find them.'

I made a note of the address.

'Any idea if she had a boyfriend?' I asked.

'I've no idea. I'm careful not to get personal with my models. When I do, I run into trouble. Suzy is an example. She's a swell model, but she imagines she can throw her weight about: slams doors, goes haughty on me, won't do as she's told. My fault. I got personal with her.'

'I wouldn't mind getting personal with her myself,' I said.

'Ever heard of a guy who calls himself Henry Rutland? He's tall, handsome and runs a cream and green Cadillac?'

Hartley shook his head.

'Nope.' He closed his eyes. I could see he was fast losing interest in me. 'Well, brother, if I can't help you anymore, I guess I'll take a little nap. I'm not feeling as bright as I did when I got up this morning.'

'Well, thanks,' I said, getting to my feet. 'Maybe I'll call on you again. Don't disturb yourself. I can find my way out.'

I was talking to the air in the room. By the time I reached the hall, he had begun to snore.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

It was coming up for seven o'clock by the time I had tracked down Glynne Avenue, but I decided to keep on working while I could. I remembered Creed's warning. If he were right, then the chances were I would get slung out of town before very long, and I wanted to find out as much as I could before I did run into trouble.

Glynne Avenue was a modest tree lined street at the eastern end of the promenade: a street of apartment houses and tourist pensions, and No. 256 turned out to be a brown stone apartment house.

Having located it, I drove the Buick to the nearest car park some hundred yards down the street, left the car, and walked back.

I climbed the steps to the front door and stared at the five name plates which told me nothing. It was obvious that someone had taken over Fay Benson's apartment, but I had no idea which apartment she had occupied.

The situation called for thought. I wasn't anxious to advertise the fact that I was inquiring for her, and yet I had to take a chance, if I was to find out who her successor was. I was about to thumb the bell to the first floor apartment when the front door opened and a girl appeared.

She was dark and pale with nice eyes; not a beauty, but pleasant on the eye. She was the kind of girl you'd take home for your mother to see; that kind of girl. She started when she saw me, not expecting to see anyone, then smiled nervously.

'You gave me a fright.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, taking off my hat. 'I was about to ring the bell.' She looked safe enough to confide in, so I went on, 'I'm looking for Miss Bennett. I understand she lives here. Miss Frances Bennett.'

The girl looked sharply at me. I could see the surprise in her eyes.

'Why, Frankie's been gone months. She left Tampa City in August.'

'She has? Well, what do you know? That's a big disappointment. I promised to take her out the next time I was in town.'

She smiled then.

‘What a shame. No, Frankie’s left. I don’t know where she’s got to. I was hoping she’d write, but she never has.’

‘Are you a friend of hers?’

‘Oh yes. We shared the apartment together.’

‘My name’s Sladen,’ I said. ‘This is a big letdown for me. I was hoping she would have dinner with me.’

She looked at me with sudden interest, mixed with caution. What she saw apparently reassured her for she said, ‘I’m Irene Jarrard. I don’t know if Frankie ever mentioned me. I’m sorry, Mr. Sladen, but she’s gone: that’s the way it is.’

‘Yeah, too bad.’ I gave her my best boyish smile. ‘I guess you would be dated for tonight, Miss Jarrard? You couldn’t take pity on a stranger? I was hoping for a little company tonight.’

‘Oh well, I don’t know.’ she stopped, hesitated, then laughed nervously. ‘You see, Mr. Sladen, I don’t really know you. I’ll be honest. I was going out to supper on my own, but I don’t think . . .’

‘I’m harmless,’ I said. ‘I’ll prove it to you if you’ll join me. I can’t very well, if you don’t, can I?’

She laughed again.

‘That’s fair. Well, all right. I’d love to.’

‘Fine. My car’s at the end of the road. Where shall we go?’

‘There’s Lodoni. It’s a little expensive, but the food’s marvellous: that is if you like seafood.’

I said I was crazy about seafood.

By the time we reached Lodoni’s restaurant, I had got her confidence, and we were talking away as if we had known each other most of our lives.

She was telling me she worked for Ryman Thomas, the advertising man, as I drove up a sand covered drive that led directly to the neon plastered restaurant, and she broke off to say: ‘Perhaps we shouldn’t have come here. It’s going to be expensive. I don’t want you to have to spend a lot of money.’

I laughed, thinking what a favourite she would be with Fayette.

‘I’m in an expensive mood tonight. Think nothing of it.’ I pulled into the parking lot, and together we walked over to the restaurant entrance.

It was a pretty nice joint. The big restaurant overlooked the ocean, and although it was fairly crowded, we managed to get a table on the balcony that

gave us a fine view of the sea, the bathers frolicking in the moonlight, and the wonderful sweep of the promenade.

Irene told me she had heard the turtle steaks at Lodoni's were out of this world, so we had turtle steaks. We started with two very dry martinis, followed by scampi, then the turtle steaks. While we ate, we talked. When we got to the coffee and cigarette stage, I brought the conversation around to Fay Benson.

'Why did Frankie leave town, Miss Jarrard?' I asked. 'Did she give you any reason?'

Irene shook her head.

'I just can't think. I went off to work as usual and when I got back she had gone. She left no note; she had just gone.'

'She took all her things?'

'Oh, yes; otherwise I should have been much more worried than I was. As it was, I couldn't understand it. I called the Golden Apple, but they were just as surprised as I was.'

'Who did you speak to at the Golden Apple?'

'The stage manager: Mr. Hewlitt. Frankie hadn't said anything to him about leaving.'

'Do you remember the exact date?'

'It was August 3rd. I remember because my brother's birthday is on the 4th and I had got him a tie. I wanted Frankie's opinion of it, but she had gone.'

'She gave you no hint at all that she was leaving?'

'No.'

'Did she pay her rent?'

'Yes. I found the rent money on the mantelpiece. That's why I was so surprised. I thought at least she might have written a note. We were good friends, Mr. Sladen. We had shared the apartment for eight or nine months. We got on well together.'

I ordered more coffee. When the waiter had refilled our cups and had moved away, I said, 'She worked at the nightclub on the night of 2nd?'

'Yes. She had been modelling for Mr. Hartley, the cover designer, during the afternoon. When I got back to the office about six, she told me what a good drawing he had made of her and that she was looking forward to seeing him again the following day. She went out to do some shopping, then when she came back, she got ready for the nightclub and left at eight o'clock.'

‘She didn’t seem flustered or upset?’

Irene shook her head.

‘She was in great form. She wasn’t worried a bit.’

‘Did she get back at her usual time?’

‘I think she was later than usual. She more or less got back every night around two. We didn’t share bedrooms, but I generally heard her when she came in. I thought it was later, but I can’t be sure. I was sleepy, and I didn’t look at the time. It felt later to me. I think it must have been nearly daylight.’

‘Did you see her before you went to work?’

‘Oh no. I didn’t disturb her. She didn’t get up any morning before eleven, and I have to leave the apartment around nine.’

‘Was she alone when she came back that night?’

She looked sharply at me, frowning.

‘It’s funny you should ask that. I had an idea at the time there was someone with her. I was only half awake when I heard her unlock the door, but I thought I heard a man’s voice. I can’t be sure. I was sleepy, but I did think a man was with her.’

‘Did she often bring men back to the apartment?’

‘Only once that I remember: towards the end of July. She said she was having a friend in for supper, and would I mind keeping out of the way. We had agreed to do this when we shared the apartment together. If I wanted my friends in, she kept out of the way. As it happened I had a movie date, and I didn’t get home until late. They had gone by then, but there were a lot of cigarette butts in the ashtray: Egyptian cigarettes. I don’t like the smell of them much and I particularly noticed they were Egyptian.’

‘It might have been a woman, of course?’

‘Well, there were no lipstick marks on the butts.’

I smiled at her.

‘You’d make a good detective; Miss Jarrard.’

‘I was thinking that about you,’ she said seriously. ‘Why are you asking all these questions?’

‘I’ll tell you: I think Frankie’s in trouble.’ I took out Fay Benson’s photograph from my wallet and put it on the table.

‘That’s her, isn’t it?’

Irene looked at the photograph.

‘Yes, of course, but she’s blonde in this picture. She was a natural brunette,

Mr. Sladen. Why has she gone blonde? When was this picture taken?’

‘From what you tell me, I’d say it was taken a couple of weeks after she left here. This girl,’ I went on, tapping the photograph, ‘called herself Fay Benson. On August 9th, she arrived at Welden and got a job at the Florian nightclub as a solo dancer. On August 17th she suddenly vanished and the police think she was kidnapped. I’m going to be frank with you, but I want you to promise me that what I’m going to tell you goes no further. It’s important.’

She was looking a little scared by now.

‘Of course I won’t say anything.’

‘The Welden police have asked me to find out what I can about the girl. They have an idea an investigation won’t be encouraged by the Tampa City police so I have to work cautiously. There’s some mystery going on, and I want to find out what it is.’

‘But if she was kidnapped, surely she must have been found by now,’ Irene said, her eyes opening wide. ‘You say she disappeared on August 17th? That’s more than fourteen months ago?’

‘She hasn’t been found yet,’ I said. I thought it wouldn’t be wise to tell her the girl had been murdered. She might get scared and clam up on me. ‘Maybe she hasn’t been kidnapped. Maybe she’s scared of something and is in hiding. Did she have a boyfriend; someone she went regularly with?’

‘No. You see, her work made it difficult. She didn’t get up until late, and she went to the nightclub at eight. She often said how dull it was having the afternoon free with no one to spend it with.’

‘And yet there was a man who came to your apartment for supper, and who was with her on the last night before she left.’

‘Yes, but she never said who he was and I never saw him.’

‘Are you quite sure she didn’t leave that night? You didn’t go into her room the next morning, did you?’

‘No. Of course, she might have left that night. I overslept and I was in a hurry to leave. It was only when I got back I noticed the money on the mantelpiece. It might have been left there overnight.’

‘She never mentioned a guy named Henry Rutland to you, did she?’

Irene shook her head.

‘No.’

‘She had a charm bracelet. Did you ever see it?’

‘Yes. I’ve often seen it.’

‘Did you notice a golden apple among the charms?’

Irene looked surprised.

‘Oh yes. Mr. Royce gave it to her. It was soon after she had got the job at the Golden Apple. She had made a hit on her first night, and Mr. Royce gave it to her as a memento.’

‘Hamilton Royce? He owns the club, doesn’t he?’

She nodded.

Hamilton Royce - Henry Rutland, I was thinking. Could he be one and the same?

‘Have you ever seen him?’

‘Oh no. Although Frankie didn’t talk about him much, I think she liked him. I’ve never seen him myself.’

‘Did she ever say what he looked like?’

‘I don’t think she did, but I have the impression she thought he was very good looking.’

I decided I should have to take a look at Mr. Royce. He interested me.

We talked on for another half hour, but I learned nothing further. Irene had just so much information to give me, and no more. But I had one more lead to follow. My next move was to take a look at Royce.

I took Irene home, promised I would let her know if I made any startling discoveries, then drove back to the Beach Hotel.

I went up to my room, got into bed and lay in the dark, considering my progress.

Fay obviously had a mysterious man friend. For some reason or other she had kept quiet about him to Irene. If the association had been straightforward the most natural thing would have been for her to discuss him with Irene. But she hadn’t done so. Why? Was he Royce? At least I had one small clue. This guy smoked Egyptian cigarettes: a little unusual, but not all that unusual.

Had Fay left on the night of August 2nd? If she had, it was possible she had gone with her boyfriend. I wasn’t forgetting that she and Henry Rutland booked in at the Shad Hotel, Welden, on the same day.

The time lag between August 2nd, when she left Tampa City and August 9th, when she arrived at Welden, puzzled me. Seven days - where had she been and what had she been doing during those seven days?

‘Work at it, Sherlock,’ I said to myself. ‘This time lag may be the key to

the whole mystery, so work on it.'

It was after two o'clock before I fell asleep.

II

A little after noon the following day, I drove out to Lennox Hartley's house.

The Filipino boy who opened the door showed me into the lounge and said he would ask if Mr. Hartley was free to see me. I waited half an hour before Hartley appeared, in a red and white striped dressing gown over pearl grey pyjamas. He looked rather the worse for wear, but at least he had shaved and bathed.

'You again,' he said and laboured across the carpet to the cocktail cabinet. 'Scotch or gin?'

I said Scotch sounded right.

He made two large highballs, handed me one with a hand that was no steadier than an aspen leaf, then sank into an armchair, took a swig from his glass, shuddered and closed his eyes.

'Sunlight and early callers are hell,' he said mournfully. 'I sometimes wish I lived on the moon. Have you ever thought of living on the moon?'

I said since, from what I had heard, there was no air worth mentioning up there and also it was pretty cold, I had never given it serious consideration as an asylum.

He stared up at me and shrugged.

'Maybe you're right, but think how isolated you'd be.' He took another drink, then asked, 'Well, old fella, what is it this time?'

'You are a member of the Golden Apple club, aren't you?'

He looked surprised.

'That's right, but don't hold it against me. Why?'

'I want you to take me there tonight.'

He gaped at me, then smiled and set his glass down on the occasional table at his side.

'You are quite a guy, aren't you? So you want me to take you to the club, do you? This is very interesting, Mr. Slade - is that your name?'

'Sladen,' I said.

'Sorry.' He groped for his glass, found it and held it close to his chest. 'Mr. Sladen, this is very interesting. What makes you imagine for one moment that

I want to take you to the Golden Apple tonight? I don't want to sound boorish, but let's be reasonable about this. I met you for the first time yesterday, and now you are suggesting I should take you to the most expensive dive on the coast and spend my good money on you. Don't take offence, Mr. Sladen, but when I go out and spend my money recklessly I like to spend it on a girl who will be duty bound to pay off in return. See what I mean?'

I laughed.

'Sure, that's the way I like to do it too, but this is business and important. I have reason to think Frances Bennett has been murdered.'

He spilled some of the whisky on his dressing gown, but he didn't even notice.

'Murdered?'

'Yes. It's important I get into the club and take a look around. You're the only person I know in town who is a member. You'll be doing the police a service if you'd take me in tonight.'

He stared down at the carpet while he thought. The process seemed to be painful to judge by his screwed up expression.

'Someone belonging to the club kill her?' he asked.

'It's possible.' I was on the point of asking him for a description of Royce but decided against it. He would probably jump to the conclusion that I thought Royce had killed the girl. If he spread that rumour I knew I would be in real trouble.

'No point in me taking you to the club, Mr. Sladen,' he said, shaking his head. 'It wouldn't be good for you nor for me. I'll tell you why. I go to the club pretty often, but I've never taken a man there as my guest. Not once. There's a guy on the door who's about the toughest egg I've ever run into. If you don't want to look suspicious, you won't go to the club with me.'

'But it's urgent,' I said. 'If it wasn't I wouldn't bother you.'

He thought some more, then snapped his fingers.

'I'll fix it for you. I'll ask Suzy to take you,' he said. 'She's a member, and she's always taking her boyfriend's there. How would that work?'

'It'd be okay with me, but I had the impression she didn't take to me. I don't think she'd play.'

Lennox waved an airy hand.

'You're kidding yourself. You don't know Suzy. She'll take you. She's

always on the lookout for something new in trousers. You leave it to me. I'll fix it. Have you any spending money?'

I stared at him.

'Why sure. Is it going to cost me something?'

He laughed unpleasantly; a sound that would have made Fayette's blood run cold if he could have heard it.

'That's one of the greatest understatements I've ever heard. Cost you something? I'll say it will. You don't take Suzy out unless you're prepared to sell up your home, hock your car and empty your bank balance. That's why I see her here. I can't afford to take her out.'

'Go ahead and fix it,' I said recklessly. 'What do I have an expense sheet for?'

'Now you're talking,' he said and reached for the telephone.

III

The entrance to the Golden Apple club was guarded by high walls and a couple of beefy men in white drill uniforms and black peak caps.

They stood either side of the open double wrought iron gates. Above them were two powerful flood lamps that lit up the road and the cars that moved slowly past the guard's scrutiny.

'They take good care they don't get gate crashers here, don't they?' I said to Suzy who sat at my side.

'My dear man, this is an exclusive club,' she said. 'We don't want anyone who is nobody in it.'

I suppose that should have been a compliment to me, but I felt like slapping her. Snobbery of any kind makes my hackles rise.

I slowed down to a crawl as the cars ahead crept forward at a snail's pace while the drivers waved their membership cards out of the open window.

I looked at Suzy from out of the corner of my eye. She certainly was something to look at. She had on a gold lame evening dress; over it she wore a black silk, scarlet lined wrap. Around her lovely white throat was a diamond collar that must have cost someone a heap of jack.

Hartley had told her I was a wealthy businessman from New York, foot loose, with plenty of money to spend. The introduction appeared to be interesting enough to make her forget her first opinion of me, and although I couldn't say she was exactly cordial, she was at least fairly sociable.

As I came within sight of the gates, one of the guards came up, and I stopped the car. He peered in, his hard, cold eyes going over me with the intensity of a blow lamp.

'Hello, Hank,' Suzy said. 'It's only me.'

The guard touched his cap.

'Okay, miss, go right ahead.'

He again stared at me, then stepped back and I drove on through the gateway and up a long, curving, sand covered drive.

'He'll know me again,' I said.

'Of course. That's his job. He never forgets a face. Are you going to become a member? I'll put you up if you like.'

‘I don’t know how long I’m staying in Tampa City, but thanks for the offer. If I have to stay longer than I think I’ll be glad if you would.’

A sudden sharp bend in the drive brought me my first sight of the Golden Apple club. It was quite something. Floodlit, the building reminded me of Addison Mizner’s Everglades Club in Palm Beach. Looking more closely at it, I saw it was a pretty fair imitation of the famous Palm Beach club. It was a stucco building with a red tiled roof, medieval turrets and wrought iron grill work in the style of a Spanish monastery. It was pretty obvious someone had spent a lot of money on it at one time or the other. A plush, purple carpet ran down the shallow steps from the lighted entrance hall to where the cars were decanting their occupants.

Everyone getting out of the cars looked well fed, rich and immaculate. Diamonds glowed like fireflies. I could see if you couldn’t rise to a string of diamonds you had best keep away from this joint.

‘Where’s the car park?’ I asked.

‘My dear man, they’ll take the car,’ Suzy said with a touch of impatience.

‘Forgive me: I’m just a New York hick,’ I said.

We left the car in the hands of a uniformed attendant and walked up the carpeted steps into the hall.

A big thickset man in an immaculate tuxedo appeared from nowhere and barred my way. His hard, cruel face looked as if it had been carved out of old ivory. His black still eyes had a glitter in them that reminded me of naked knife blades. He looked Spanish, but could have been Mexican or even Cuban. He looked questioningly from me to Suzy.

‘Good evening, Juan,’ Suzy said, obviously suddenly anxious to please. ‘This is Mr. Sladen. I’ve brought him along to see the club. He’s from New York.’

‘Will you please sign the book, Mr. Sladen?’ he said in a voice you could scour rusty iron on. There was no welcoming smile. He seemed sorry he had to admit me.

He led me across the hall to a reception desk where a girl in a tight black silk dress offered me a quill pen and a cool, appraising smile.

I signed my name, using my initial and not my full name just in case this dago was a reader of Crime Facts.

‘Ten dollars please,’ the girl said while Juan stood close, his warm breath fanning the back of my neck.

‘Ten - what?’ I said, staring at her.

‘Ten dollars, Mr. Sladen, for your temporary membership card,’ Juan said curtly.

I remembered in time that I was supposed to be a wealthy businessman from New York and I paid up. I was given a neat card with my name on it and the date. In minute printing the card told me that for ten bucks I could use the amenities of the club for one night only. I hated to think what it would cost me to use the amenities for one month.

A hat check girl relieved me of my hat and Juan relieved me of his presence as he swooped away to prise another ten bucks from a guy who had been unwise enough to bring a guest. Suzy took me into the bar which was the longest and plushiest room I have ever seen. I paid out a small fortune on champagne cocktails and then settled down to make pleasing conversation. I hadn’t got far before a stocky little man came over with a bundle of menu cards and asked if we would care to order dinner.

We ordered dinner, or at least Suzy did. She said she would start with oysters, and I betted myself they would cost a buck piece, then she decided to take the grilled river trout, pheasant and French salade, ice cream and Brie cheese to follow. I said that would do me too. The stocky man scribbled the order down on a pad and went on to the next group.

‘For a girl with your shape you eat pretty well,’ I said. ‘How do you manage it?’

‘Do you think I have a nice shape?’ she asked languidly.

‘Sure, and you have a nice appetite to go with it. Don’t you diet or something?’

‘Sometimes,’ she said. The subject didn’t seem to interest her. ‘Shall we have one more?’ and she lifted her empty glass. This went on for half an hour and I was beginning to wonder if I had brought enough money with me when she finally decided it was time to eat. We went into the restaurant.

Two skimpily dressed girls were doing a song and dance routine on a dais near the band as we took our seats. They were good, and so was the band. It was while we were working through the river trout that a party arrived at a table near ours. I could tell they were important by the way the maître d’hôtel brought them down the aisle. He walked backwards and flourished his arms. If he had had a flag he would have waved it.

There were two girls and two men. The girl who led the way caught my

attention. She was around twenty-six: small, compact, with a shape under her flame coloured evening gown that made my eyes pop. She was dark, and her glossy black hair was piled up on her perfectly shaped head. Her face was as lovely as a greek sculpture; cold, perhaps a little hard, and very, very haughty. But there was a flame burning within her that made her more than a beautiful woman: it made her alive, desirable, seductive and feminine as Helen of Troy must have been feminine.

She was magnet to men. There wasn't a man in the restaurant, including the band and the waiters, who didn't look as if he wanted to be her escort. You could see the expressions on their faces change when they caught sight of her: they were hungry for her; very, very hungry. I caught myself wondering if I looked like that too. I felt maybe I did.

The other girl with her was nothing to look at; pleasant, a little too plump, wealthy of course, but the dark Helen of Troy need never worry about her as a rival.

The two men were the usual rich, well fed, middle-aged guys you can see any day after ten-thirty a.m. controlling large syndicates, banks or chain stores. You could almost hear their ulcers creak as they moved, and their port wine faces told of their fiery tempers.

'Don't you know better than to stare?' Suzy asked crossly.

'Am I the only one?' I said and grinned at her. 'Who is she? Not the one with the big bosom, but the dark, little one.'

Suzy raised her lip scornfully.

'I can't imagine why men go for her. I think she's nothing but a horrible, oversexed animal.'

'I like animals,' I said, 'I once got a medal for saving a dog from drowning. Who is she?'

'I thought everyone knew her. My goodness! Even if I did have her money, I would know better than to make an exhibition of myself the way she does. Why Piero doesn't go down on hands and knees when he shows her to her table I can't imagine. He does everything else.'

I leaned forward and trying, without a lot of success, to keep my voice from shouting, repeated, 'Who - is - she?'

'I'm not deaf,' Suzy said, recoiling. 'Cornelia Van Blake if you must know.' She lifted her elegant shoulders. 'I should have thought even someone from New York would have known that.'

‘Cornelia Van Blake?’

I stared at Suzy, frowning. Where had I heard the name before? In what connection had I heard it?

‘Does she live in Tampa City?’

‘Of course. She has a house on West Summit and an estate of ten acres. In case you don’t know, West Summit is the high tone district of Tampa City. Only millionaires can afford to live there.’

Millionaires.

I felt a sudden creepy sensation crawl up my spine.

Of course! I remembered now. Cornelia Van Blake was the millionairess Joan Nichols had met in Paris. I remembered Janet Shelley’s exact words: *Joan had an amazing talent for making friends with people with money. When she was in Paris she got friendly with Mrs.*

Cornelia Van Blake, the millionaire’s wife. Don’t ask me how she did it, but she did. Twice she went to Mrs. Van Blake’s hotel and had dinner with her.

I looked again at the dark girl who was scanning the menu that the maître d’hôtel was holding for her. She didn’t look the type to me who would fraternize with an unsuccessful showgirl: she didn’t look the type to fraternize with anyone. If she ever sat next to an iceberg I would bet even money the iceberg would be the first to stoke up the fire.

‘Which one of those well fed guys is her husband?’ I asked.

Suzy wriggled impatiently.

‘My dear man, she is a widow. Her husband died last year. Don’t you know anything?’

‘That was his hard luck,’ I said, and making an effort, I dragged my eyes away from Mrs. Cornelia Van Blake and continued to bone my river trout.

I found I wasn’t hungry any more - anyway, not for the trout.

CHAPTER NINE

I

It wasn't until Suzy and I had been dancing for some little time and had broken off to go to the bar for a drink that I brought Mrs. Cornelia Van Blake up again as a subject for conversation. Suzy had discovered I could dance. I haven't a lot of talent beside concocting a good yarn, but dancing is one of my specialities. Suzy was pretty good herself, and after we had done one circuit of the floor, she unbent enough to say I was good. A second circuit found her unbending even more, and at the end of a particularly dashing tango, she was behaving almost like a human being.

'Let's get outside two big highballs,' I said, 'then we'll come back and show them how it really should be done.'

'Where did you learn to dance like that, Chet?' she asked, linking her arm through mine.

Chet.

Well, it takes different ways and means to break them down. I wondered under what conditions, if any, Cornelia Van Blake would break down.

'My dear woman, it's not something you learn; it's something you're born with,' I said airily.

Suzy giggled.

'That serves me right. All right, I apologize for being high hat, but the men Hart asks me to take out sometimes are really the limit. You can't imagine.'

'Think nothing of it. A girl's got to keep her dignity if she doesn't keep anything else.'

She gave me an old-fashioned look.

'And don't think because you can dance, there's anything else to it, because there isn't.'

I pushed open the bar door.

'Don't start screaming for help until you're being crowded,' I said. 'Who said I wanted anything else?'

'I know an opening gambit when I hear one,' she returned and climbed up

on a stool and flapped her hands at the barman.

‘Two highballs,’ I said, climbing up on the stool beside her. I took a quick look around the crowded bar in the hope of seeing Mrs. Van Blake again, but she wasn’t in the room. ‘I’ve often thought it would be nice to be a millionaire. If I wasn’t naturally lazy, I’d do something about it,’ I said after I had paid three times too much for the highballs. ‘Take that Van Blake girl. How much did you say she was worth?’

‘I didn’t say. No one knows. Her husband is supposed to have left her five million, but everyone thinks there was more than that. He invented some gadget to do with oil drilling, and they say the royalties on that alone are worth thousands a year. She’s lousy with money. Van Blake put the money up for this club. He had a controlling interest in it, but when he died, Cornelia sold out to Royce. He owns and runs it now.’

‘I wonder what he paid her?’ I said, looking around the plush bar.

Suzy shrugged.

‘Plenty. She wouldn’t part with anything for nothing.’

‘You said her husband died last year?’

‘That’s right. He was murdered.’

I nearly dropped my highball.

‘Murdered? How come? How did it happen?’

She stared at me.

‘The papers were full of it. Why don’t you read them if you have such an inquisitive nature?’

‘Never mind my nature. I bet the New York papers weren’t full of it. Anyway, I have better things to do than bother to read newspapers. I listen to the radio and let it go at that. Who murdered him?’

‘A poacher. Van Blake hated poachers. He used to ride over his estate every morning before seven o’clock, believe it or not and if he caught a poacher after his game, he set about him with his riding whip. Well, he did it once too often. He got shot, and served him right.’

‘He sounds like the Feudal type. What happened to the poacher?’

She shrugged. The subject obviously didn’t interest her.

‘I don’t know. He got away. The police never found him.’

She finished her highball and slid off the stool. ‘Come on; let’s dance. I can’t be too late tonight. I’ve got to pose for Hart tomorrow around noon, and I don’t want to look like a corpse.’

‘That, madam, you could never do,’ I said gallantly, and followed her back to the restaurant.

We danced until one o’clock, and then Suzy said she had to go home.

All the time I had been in the club I had kept my eyes open for Hamilton Royce, but I didn’t see anyone who looked remotely like what I imagined he would look like.

As we were leaving the restaurant, I asked, ‘Isn’t Royce on show tonight? I wanted to catch sight of him.’

‘I haven’t seen him. He’s not always on show,’ Suzy said indifferently. She paused in the lobby. ‘Wait for me here. I won’t be long.’

I watched her disappear into the Ladies retiring room. Quite a crowd were leaving by now, and the lobby was pretty congested. I backed against the far wall to get out of their way. To my right was a passage, and at the far end, I saw an oak-panelled door. It was a pretty plush looking door, and it aroused my curiosity. Behind such a door the owner of a nightclub as gaudy as the Golden Apple might conceivably dwell. I had come to the club for the express purpose of getting a look at Mr. Hamilton Royce and so far I had been unlucky.

I didn’t hesitate for more than a couple of seconds. I could always say I thought the door led to the gentlemen’s retiring room.

I looked quickly around the lobby. The receptionist was busy totting up the night’s loot. The hat check girl was surrounded by departing members, all clamouring for their hats. Juan, still flashing the knife blades in his eyes, was bowing to a fat, important looking man, obviously a Senator, who was leaving. Three flunkeys were occupied on the steps of the entrance, whistling up cars.

No one was paying me the slightest attention.

I edged to the opening of the corridor, then walked, not too quickly and as nonchalantly as I could, towards the oak paneled door. I turned the door handle and pushed gently. The door swung inwards as silently as a leaf settling on the ground.

I looked into a big, luxuriously furnished room: a man’s room; a man with plenty of money to spend on his comforts, and who hadn’t missed a trick in satisfying those comforts. I didn’t let my eyes roam around the room longer than a split second.

The man and woman struggling silently by the fireplace caught and held

my attention.

The woman was Cornelia Van Blake. The man was tall and thin and handsome, with an eyebrow moustache and the beautiful tan of a sun lizard.

He had hold of Cornelia, the way Rudolph Valentino used to get hold of his women in the silent movie days. He held her two wrists in one hand, his right arm was around her waist, and he was bending her back while he tried to clamp his mouth down on hers.

She was struggling to break free, and she must have been stronger than she looked for I could see he was having his work cut out to hold her.

When a man forces his attention on any woman it has always seemed to me that he is presenting himself as a target for violence.

I don't often use violence as I'm too lazy to make the effort, but during the war, when I was unfortunate to get drafted into the Marines, I was the undisputed lightweight champion of my battalion, only because I found it less exhausting than getting on the wrong side of my battalion commander who was a boxing fanatic.

Without considering the consequences, I took two quick steps into the room.

The tall man let go of Cornelia and faced me, his eyes glittering with fury. To ease his embarrassment, I hung a right hook on the side of his jaw. It was a nice punch, and the results on him were devastating.

He shot backwards, thudded against his desk, swept some costly gewgaws to the floor and slid down on top of them.

'I'm sorry I didn't appear sooner,' I said to Cornelia who was adjusting the top of her topless dress that had slipped a few inches during the infighting.

She didn't even thank me.

I've seen angry women in my time, but never one as angry as she was at this moment. She was as white as a fresh fall of snow and her eyes blazed like red hot embers as they say in Victorian novels.

She looked at me as if I were transparent, then looked at the tall man who was still lying on his back, although he was shaking his head and trying to get life back once more into focus, then she went out of the room, and as she passed me I felt scorched by the white-hot blast of her rage.

I sought relaxation by dipping into the gold cigarette box on the desk. I took a cigarette and lit it. One drag sent a tremor up to my memory. Egyptian Abdulla. I looked at the cigarette to make sure, then I looked at the tall man

who was by now dragging himself to his feet. I remembered Bernie's description of the mysterious Henry Rutland: over six foot, lean, suntanned, eyebrow moustache and a gold link bracelet on one wrist and a gold strap watch on the other.

This guy had a gold bracelet on his left wrist and a gold strap watch on his right. Even without the gold ornaments, the description fitted him like a glove.

But this seemed scarcely the time to step up, shake him by the hand and say, 'Henry Rutland I presume.'

This seemed to me to be the time to ease myself out of the room, turn my discovery over in my mind at leisure and decide how best to make use of it.

As Royce staggered to his feet, clutching on to the desk for support, I took two steps towards the door, then paused.

The door had opened silently. Standing in the doorway, his swarthy, cruel face hard and set was Juan. In his right hand he held a .38 automatic and it was pointing at me.

II

For a long moment we stared at each other, then he stepped into the room and closed the door, setting his back against it. Royce sat down behind his desk. His fingers touched the side of his jaw. His eyes brooded death.

‘Find out who he is,’ he said.

Juan held out his left hand.

‘Wallet,’ he said, ‘and snap it up.’

I took out my wallet and handed it to him. He found he couldn’t examine it and keep me covered by the gun, so he lowered the gun which was a foolish move. He also took his eyes off me. He was either full of confidence or a bonehead. I didn’t pause to inquire. I hung a right hook on his jaw. I don’t think I’ve ever hit a guy as hard as I hit Juan. The jar that ran up my arm as my fist connected pained me a lot more than it pained him. He went out like a light and I just managed to grab the gun before he hit the carpet.

I turned the gun on the tall man and smiled at him.

‘We seem to be having an exciting evening, don’t we?’ I said.

He looked at me, his face tight with rage.

‘Get out of here!’ he snarled.

‘I’m on my way. I’ll leave the gun with the guy at the gate. I’ll feel safer with it until I get clear of this joint,’ I said, scooped up my wallet and backed to the door.

He sat motionless, his hands on the desk, his face pale under the suntan. What with one thing and the other, he couldn’t have had much of an evening.

I opened the door, edged into the corridor and walked quickly to the lobby.

Suzy was waiting for me.

‘Where have you been for goodness sake?’ she said impatiently. ‘I was about to go home without you.’

‘That’s just what you are going to do,’ I said. ‘I haven’t time to explain why. Get one of the flunkies to grab a taxi for you. I’m not even waiting for my hat.’

I stepped past her and went to the entrance and down the steps, leaving her gaping after me, too surprised even to speak.

‘Your car, sir?’ the doorman asked sharply.

‘It’s okay. I’ll collect it myself,’ I said, shoved past him and ran down the avenue to where I could see a row of cars.

I didn’t know how long it would take Mr. Royce to come into action, but the quicker I was past the guards at the gate, the safer it would be for me. I located the Buick, gave the attendant a buck and got in. As I drove fast down the drive I took the gun from my pocket and tossed it through the open window into a clump of laurels. I was remembering what Creed had said about being caught with a gun on me without a gun permit. It was a sound move for as my headlights picked out the main gates I saw they were shut.

The two guards, plus a tall, beefy looking man in a slouch hat, stood silent and still, waiting for me to arrive. I slowed down, honked on my horn in the hope they would open the gates, but they didn’t. The headlights of the car lit up the man in the slouch hat. He had cop written all over him. His red, coarse face was a mass of brutality. If you took a lump of brick-red clay, squashed it into the vague shape of a face, stuck a lump on it for a nose, carved a slit in it for a mouth and stuck two match heads in it for eyes you would have a fair portrait of this guy.

An inch or so over six foot, there was a massive power about him in the way he stood, his hands in his trench coat pockets, his great legs apart, his head a little on one side.

I wondered if this was Sergeant Carl Lassiter, who, according to ex-Captain Bradley, was the toughest cop on the Tampa City police force. If he wasn’t, then I didn’t want to meet Lassiter.

This guy was tough enough.

I pulled up.

The two guards moved forward, their hands resting on the butts of their guns. They came each side of the car and opened the doors simultaneously.

‘Keep your hands on the wheel!’ the guard nearest me rapped out.

‘What’s the idea?’ I said, not moving so much as an eyelash.

‘What do you think you’re up to?’

‘Get him out,’ the cop said. He had a husky low voice that came strangely from his bull throat.

The guard on the offside now had his gun in his hand.

‘Get out,’ he said, ‘and keep your hands still.’

I slid out.

‘You guys crazy?’ I said. ‘I’m a temporary member.’

‘Shut up!’ the cop snarled. ‘Look in the car,’ he went on to one of the guards; to the other, he said, ‘Get him inside.’

The guard with the gun jabbed my spine.

‘Move,’ he said, and I walked around the car and into the lodge by the gates; into a large room with a desk, and a rack of rifles, two chairs and an unlit coke stove.

The cop followed me in and looked me over in the harsh light. He took a police badge from his pocket and flashed it, then he said, ‘I’m Sergeant Lassiter. Who are you?’

‘My name’s Sladen,’ I said. ‘What’s the big idea?’

He held out a hand the size of a bath chap.

‘Wallet.’

I gave him my wallet. He took it over to the desk, hooked one huge finger inside it and shot out the contents. He sat down at the desk, shoved his hat to the back of his head, and went through my papers slowly and with police thoroughness.

After he had gone through everything, and there wasn’t much except my business cards, some money, my driver’s licence and a list of my expenses I had jotted down on an odd scrap of paper, he shoved the lot back to me.

While I returned the papers and money to my wallet, he sat staring at me. His scrutiny was the most uncomfortable experience I have ever had. I put the wallet back into my pocket and looked up and met the granite hard pig eyes.

‘Satisfied?’ I asked.

‘You a peeper?’ he asked, biting off each word as if he hated them.

‘I’m a writer.’ I took out one of my business cards and put it down in front of him. ‘Haven’t you heard of Crime Facts? We cooperate with most police forces.’

‘Must be nice for them.’ He heaved his bulk out of the chair and came around the desk. I’m not exactly a midget, but his height and size made me feel like one. The second guard came in at this moment and shook his head at Lassiter.

The sergeant stared at me.

‘Let’s have the rod,’ he said and held out his hand.

‘What rod?’ I asked blankly. ‘What do you mean?’

His coarse brutal face went a deep purple and his eyes gleamed.

‘Lift your arms.’

I did so, and he ran his hands over me quickly and expertly. It was like being patted by a sledge hammer.

‘Where did you dump it?’ he snarled.

‘Dump what?’ I asked, trying to keep the blank expression on my face.

He reached out his huge hand and took hold of my shirtfront.

He breathed garlic and whisky fumes in my face.

‘Where did you dump it?’ he grated, and gave me a little shake. He nearly broke my neck.

I kept still. I knew if I gave him the slightest excuse he would start some rough stuff, and I wasn’t fool enough to imagine I could handle him.

‘I haven’t a gun; I’ve never had a gun. Isn’t that clear?’

He lifted his left hand and slapped me across the face. It was like being whacked with a baseball bat.

I very nearly hit back, but just stopped myself in time. I might have taken him if he had been on his own, but not with the other two guys to step in and hold me while he worked over me.

‘Go on - hit me!’ he snarled into my face. ‘What are you waiting for?’

‘I don’t want to hit you,’ I said. ‘You crazy or something?’

He gave me another shake that loosened most of my wisdom teeth, then he let go of me.

‘What are you doing in this town?’

‘Having a look around. Trying to pick up material for a story. Anything wrong in that?’

He hunched his huge shoulders as he glared at me.

‘What material?’

‘Anything that might crop up,’ I said. ‘What are you getting so excited about? Can’t a writer visit a town for background material without the cops getting tough?’

A look of exasperated disgust came over his face.

‘We don’t like peepers in this town,’ he said. ‘Watch your step. I won’t tell you a second time. Now get out and keep away from this club. Understand?’

I shrugged myself back into my coat.

‘Okay, sergeant,’ I said. ‘I understand.’

‘Beat it!’ he snarled. ‘Go on - get out of my sight.’

I went to the door.

I half expected it, but I didn't think a guy of his size could move so fast. Before I could dodge, his great boot caught me on my tail and lifted me out of the hut and sent me sprawling on hands and knees in the drive.

Lassiter came out slowly and stood looking at me, his teeth showing in a snarling grin.

'Write about that, peeper,' he said. 'And I'll give you something more to write about if I see you again.'

I could have killed him: I would have killed him if I had had the gun on me.

I got slowly and painfully to my feet.

The two guards opened the gate.

Lassiter swung his great boot and caught the fender of the car a kick that dented it and flaked off the paint.

'Get this heap out of my sight too,' he said.

I got in the car and drove away.

I was shaking with rage.

I was still shaking when I got back to the hotel.

III

Around ten o'clock the following morning, after I had had a late breakfast, I borrowed a telephone book from the reception desk and turned up Mrs. Cornelia Van Blake's number and address. The address was simply: Vanstone, West Summit.

I asked the clerk how I got to West Summit.

'You know the Golden Apple club?' he asked.

I said I knew the Golden Apple club.

'You go past the club, along the sea road and you'll come to a finger post. West Summit covers the whole of the cliff top to the San Francisco highway.'

I thanked him, collected the Buick from the garage, paused at a florist to send Suzy a half a dozen orchids and a note apologizing for my hasty retreat, then I drove down to the promenade.

The Golden Apple was fast asleep when I drove past. The gates were shut; the door of the guard house was shut. No one took a potshot at me.

I kept on along the lonely beach road that climbed steadily to the cliff top.

A finger post with West Summit on it showed up at a fork and I turned left, leaving the sea road and climbed steeply up a wide, snake back road that brought me up on the cliff top.

Vanstone was the last of the estates down the broad tree-lined avenue. It partly overlooked the sea and its grounds sloped away at the back into wooded country and then, I assumed, down to the Frisco highway.

I knew it was Vanstone because of the nameplate on the high wrought iron gates. High walls, heavily guarded by wicked looking spikes, arranged along the top of the walls like vicious daggers, their points heavenwards, hid the house. A guard house by the gates told me there was no question of just driving up the carriageway, ringing on the bell and asking for Mrs. Van Blake. When one becomes a millionaire, one has to take precautions.

A lot of spontaneity must go out of one's life, I thought.

I drove past the gates and turned left, following the wall.

After a mile or so, the road dipped and I could see the Frisco highway a half a mile ahead of me.

I stopped the car, got out and took off my shoes. Then I climbed up on to

the roof of the car. From this vantage point I could see over the wall and had a good view of the garden and house.

It was everything that a millionaire's place should be; with set gardens, lush, billiard table lawns, masses of flowers, a sanded carriageway and a regiment of Chinese gardeners working in the sunshine.

The house was big and white with a green roof, green sun shutters and a magnificent terrace, equipped with sun blinds that stretched either side of a flight of stone steps that led down to the carriageway.

Apart from the gardeners, there was no sign of life, no one taking a constitutional on the terrace or even looking out of the windows.

To me it looked a lonely house; a house I shouldn't care to live in on my own.

I got off the car roof, put on my shoes and climbed into the driving seat. I wasn't ready to call on Mrs. Van Blake just yet so I drove back to the hotel for lunch.

Before going into the restaurant I called up Captain Bradley and asked him if I could see him that evening.

'Sure,' he said. 'I've been wondering how you've been getting on. Don't leave your car outside, will you?'

I said I'd take care of that, and I'd be around after nine o'clock.

After lunch I went up to my room to write a report for Bernie.

As soon as I opened the bedroom door I knew someone had been in there while I had been out.

I shut the door and looked around.

My suitcase that I had left on the luggage stand was now on the floor. My overcoat that I had left in the cupboard was tossed on my bed.

I went over to the bureau, pulled open a drawer. Some big hand had stirred up my shirts and socks and hadn't bothered to put them back as he had found them. Other drawers also showed signs of a quick frisk. Whoever it was who had been poking around didn't care if I knew it or not.

I guessed my visitor was Lassiter, but I had to be sure. I crossed the room to the telephone and asked the reception desk to send the house dick up.

He came after a short delay: a fat, stolid man with a hangover moustache and cold, fishy eyes. I had a five-dollar bill on the table where he could see it, and he saw it before he even saw me.

'The cops been here?' I asked and moved the bill a couple of inches

towards him.

I could see he had been told not to talk, but the bill proved too much for him. After a moment's hesitation, he nodded.

'Sergeant Lassiter?' I asked.

Again he nodded.

I handed him the bill.

'Sorry to have brought you up.'

He slid the bill into his hip pocket, nodded again and drifted out of the room: the strong, silent, corruptible type. Well, Lassiter hadn't discovered anything that would tell him why I was here. I had no notes on the Benson case with me. I had put nothing down on paper. He must be still wondering what, if anything, I was up to.

I sat down, took a pack of notepaper from the desk and wrote Bernie a long letter, bringing him up-to-date on the case so far. The effort nearly killed me, but it had to be done. It took time, and it was around six o'clock before I had finished. I went downstairs and walked to the corner of the street to post the letter. I wasn't taking any chances on the hotel mail box. On my way back across the lounge I spotted a thickset man in a basket chair, reading a newspaper. He had cop written all over him.

As I passed the house dick, who was decorating the reception desk, looked at the thickset man and then at me, then he closed one eyelid slowly. He raised two thick fingers to scratch his neck and looked at me again, slightly nodding his head towards the street.

That told me there was another of them outside. The five bucks was earning its living. For a man who could tell a story without words, this house dick was in a class of his own.

I returned his wink and took the elevator up to my room. I put a phone call through to Suzy. There was a very faint click on the line just before Suzy's receiver was lifted. That told me that someone was listening in on my line. Suzy's maid said Suzy was out, and she wouldn't be back until late. I thanked her and hung up.

I wondered how long the line had been tapped, and tried to remember if I had heard the click when I had called Captain Bradley. I didn't think I had, but I couldn't be sure. Maybe Lassiter had only just got around to tapping my line; I hoped so. I didn't want him to know I was calling on Bradley this night. With two trained cops waiting for me downstairs, my trip to Bradley's

house wasn't going to be easy. I decided to make a start now to be sure I had plenty of time in which to lose them before I reached Lincoln Drive.

I had a shower and changed. My strap watch told me it was ten minutes past seven as I let myself out of my room and walked to the elevator.

I gave up my room key to the desk clerk.

'Will you be in for dinner, sir?' he asked as he took the key.

'No, I'll eat out,' I said, loud enough for the thickset man to hear. He still sat in the basket chair near the revolving doors. I crossed the lobby, pushed my way through the doors and paused at the top of the steps. I looked at the crowded promenade, but I couldn't spot the other dick.

'Cab, sir?' the doorman asked.

I shook my head and strolled down the steps and along the promenade. I walked for some minutes, then turned off into the town. I went into a bar and ordered a highball.

The bar was nearly empty. The barman looked intelligent so I leaned forward and said to him in an undertone, 'My wife's having me tailed. Any way out the back way, pal?' and I showed him a dollar bill.

He grinned cheerfully.

'Sure,' he said. 'Go through that door. It'll take you to the back entrance on Dorset road.'

The buck and I parted company. I was throwing Fayette's money away like a drunken sailor.

'Thanks,' I said, finished the highball at a swallow, then walked quickly across the bar, opened the door he had indicated and stepped into a passage. On the right was a big cupboard. Ahead of me was a door. I opened the cupboard. It contained brooms and mops, but there was room enough for me, and I stepped inside, closed the door and waited.

I didn't have to wait more than a few seconds. I heard the door leading from the bar jerked open and heavy feet pound down the passage. I opened the cupboard door a crack and peered through.

The thickset cop, his face red and his eyes gleaming, was opening the street door. He stepped outside, looked up and down, then started off to the right.

I leaned against the wall of the cupboard and waited. I was in no hurry. There was the second cop to think of. He might be covering the bar. I waited twenty long, weary minutes, before I opened the cupboard door and peered

out. Hearing nothing, I tiptoed over to the street door and eased it open.

Right opposite me was a cab. The driver was lighting a cigarette before moving off. I jumped across the sidewalk, jerked open the cab door and got in.

‘Take me to the station,’ I said, ‘and snap it up.’

He drove me to the railroad station that was on the far side of the town: Captain Bradley’s side. When I saw the station ahead of me, I told him to stop and I paid him off. I looked at my watch. I still had an hour before I could call on Bradley. A movie theatre nearby offered the solution. I went in and sat in the back row and watched Jane Russell display her curves for the next three quarters of an hour.

When I came out, it was dark. As far as I could remember Lincoln Avenue was only a five minute walk from the station. I started off keeping my eyes open. Fifty yards from the movie house I spotted a patrolman, and I ducked into a tobacconist store to let him pass. I bought a pack of Camels, took my time getting out a cigarette and lighting it, then I went out on to the street again.

A four minute quick walk brought me to the corner of Lincoln Avenue. I paused and examined the long road before starting down. It was as deserted and as silent as a graveyard at midnight.

CHAPTER TEN

I

I've got Lassiter's boys on my tail,' I said as soon as I had sat down in one of Bradley's worn armchairs, 'but I shook them off before coming here.'

'You managed to get on the wrong side of him fast, didn't you?' Bradley asked as he fixed two whiskies. 'How come?'

I told him what had happened at the Golden Apple. He stood, holding his glass, looking at me, his face hard.

'What do you know about Cornelia Van Blake, Captain?' I asked when I had finished my tale.

'She got me slung off the force,' Bradley said, sitting down. 'At least, it was through her, and I'm pretty sure it was on her say-so.'

'To do with her husband's murder?'

'You've been getting around since last we met, haven't you? Who told you about the murder?'

'A gilded lily. Care to tell me more?'

He stretched out his massive legs and made himself comfortable.

'Don't think it has anything to do with your case, because it hasn't,' he said. 'But I'll tell you: do you want the outline or details?'

'I want the details. It may not have anything to do with my case, but some of the characters appear in both cases, and there may be a hook up. Tell me about it.'

He screwed up his eyes and stared up at the ceiling while he marshalled his facts.

'Van Blake was shot on August 6th of last year. He went riding over his estate early in the morning. After a while his horse came back to the house without him. The staff searched for him and found him on the top of a hill in open country. He had been killed by a shot gun.' He paused to look at me. 'It was a big shakeup. Van Blake was rich and well known. The press and the political boys raised all hell. I knew I had to make good fast or lose my job.' He sucked at his pipe reflectively. 'As it turned out, I lost my job.'

I didn't say anything, and after a pause he went on, 'Van Blake's wife was in Paris at the time of the murder. Van Blake had business in Paris, and a month before he died, he had made arrangements to go over there with her. At the last moment he had to attend two important board meetings which delayed his departure, but his wife went on ahead of him. Van Blake's secretary cabled the news to her and she flew back.'

'Who's the secretary?' I asked.

'His name's Vincent Latimer. He quit after the funeral and he's working with the Hammerville Engineering works now. If you're planning to talk to him, save your breath. He's tighter than a clam.'

'Did you come across any clues?'

'It was an odd murder. The shotgun puzzled me. If it was a planned killing, why a shot gun with only a killing range of thirty yards? I've always thought it was a planned murder, and the explanation of the shot gun pointed to the killer being known to Van Blake. He was murdered out in the open: he wasn't ambushed. He must have known the killer or he wouldn't have got within range. Anyway, that's how I figured it.'

'My gilded lily said it was a poacher.'

'I know. They all said it was, but I wasn't sold on the idea.'

'You thought it was the wife?' I said, looking at him.

He shrugged.

'I work on motives. She had a hell of a motive. She was twenty-two years younger than he was. They couldn't have had anything in common. Before she married him she was a model and lived in a two room apartment. She came in for most of his money. Maybe she got impatient. You've seen her, haven't you? She isn't the type to be bossed around, and Van Blake could be like that. She'd want to handle the money herself, as she's handling it now. I liked her for the job.'

'But she was in Paris when he was shot!'

'Yeah; a sweet alibi, wasn't it? I'm not saying she shot him, but she could have planned it with someone's help.'

'Was there another man in her life?'

'She saw a lot of Royce. A guy with his background must kill sooner or later. I liked him for the job too. When she got control of the estate, she sold the club to Royce. He had always wanted it, but Van Blake wouldn't part or else his price was too high. That was a nice motive. She might have bribed

Royce with the club to get rid of Van Blake.'

'Did he have an alibi too?'

Bradley laughed mirthlessly.

'I'll s say! It was cast iron. He was in New York playing poker with three of the most respectable men in town: one of them was a judge. They swore he was with them all the time. I don't say he did it himself, but Juan Ortez or any of his thugs could have done it on his say-so.'

'You didn't get anywhere on that angle?'

'No. As soon as I began to poke around, Doonan pulled me off the case and tossed me off the force. Doonan happens to be a great friend of Mrs. Van Blake. He thinks she is a sweet, lovely girl.'

'What made the newspapers go for the poacher angle?'

'Mrs. Van Blake had that all tied up. Her story was that a couple of weeks before the murder, Van Blake caught a poacher in the wood. She named the poacher: a guy who lived a few miles from the estate on the Frisco Road. His name was Ted Dillon. We knew him. He was a tough customer, lived on his own, only worked when he had to and had been in trouble off and on for stealing and fighting. He was the ideal guy to pick on. She said her husband horsewhipped him, and she was positive Dillon had come back to even the score. The papers liked the idea, and they liked it still more when we couldn't find Dillon. Doonan liked the idea too, but it looked too much of a plant to me. Van Blake couldn't have handled Dillon alone. Anyway, we hunted for Dillon. We found traces of his flight. He was seen around the time of the killing riding his motorcycle away from the back entrance to Van Blake's estate: at least, a man on his machine, wearing a crash helmet and goggles was seen, and the witness swore it was Dillon. A crash helmet and goggles make a good disguise, but no one bothered to consider that angle except me.

We finally found his motorcycle. It was in a shed near the harbour, but we never found Dillon.'

'Did this guy on the motorcycle have a gun with him?'

Bradley shook his head.

'We found the gun later in the wood, and we traced it. It had been stolen a couple of months ago from Abe Boreman, the local banker. He and four friends had gone out shooting. They left their guns and bag in the cars when they had lunch at a hotel. When they returned to the cars, the gun was missing.' He looked over at me. 'Hamilton Royce was one of the party. He

left the restaurant during lunch to make a phone call. He could have gone to Boreman's car, taken the gun and hidden it in the boot of his own car. Work it out for yourself.'

'So what did you do?'

'I started to check Mrs. Van Blake's alibi. I asked her for her passport. There's no doubt she went to France on the day she said she did. The passport proved it. That was as far as I got. She must have called Doonan and told him I had been asking questions. Before I knew it, I was retired and through. They never found Dillon and they've never cracked the case.'

'So you think Mrs. Van Blake persuaded Royce to have her husband knocked off. Is that it?'

'That's my theory and I still like it.'

'But you haven't any proof?'

'No. The motive's there. Royce could have stolen the gun, but that's all except a hunch, and my hunches are usually right.'

'Any idea what could have happened to Dillon?'

'Your guess is as good as mine. I'd say he was at the bottom of the sea now in a cement overcoat, but that's only my guess.'

'Well, thanks, Captain, for telling me. I guess you're right. I'm hanged if I can see how this murder hooks up with my case. If I could only hook Fay Benson with Van Blake. Suppose, while Mrs. Van Blake was in Paris, Van Blake got Fay over for the night? It's been done before and it'll be done again. She might have seen the killing, got scared and bolted. That might be the reason why she took another name. The killer - your pal Royce - traced her to Welden and knocked her off. I don't say it happened like that, but that's the kind of hook up I'm looking for.'

'Forget it; you're wasting your time. Van Blake wasn't that kind of man. Get it out of your mind; it'll only confuse you.'

I shrugged.

'Maybe you're right. Well, I'll be moving along. I've still things to do.' I got to my feet. 'I'll keep in touch.'

He went with me to the front door; before opening it, he turned off the light.

'Watch your step, son,' he cautioned. 'If ever you want a good bolt hole go to Sam Benn. He runs a bar on Maddox Street and he'll keep you under cover if you mention my name. You may need to duck out of sight in a hurry.'

‘I hope not,’ I said, and stepped into the dark, warm night.

II

The night was still young. There seemed to me no point in returning to the hotel where the cops could pick up my trail. I decided to have a few more hours to myself before I went to bed.

On the way back to the centre of the town, I decided I was now ready to have a talk with Mrs. Van Blake if she would have a talk with me, which I doubted. Time was running out for me, and I wouldn't be staying much longer in this plush city. There was still a lot of ground to cover. I found a telephone booth, dialled her number and waited expectantly.

After a few moments a man's voice said, 'This is Mrs. Van Blake's residence.'

That would make him the butler, and to judge from the deep, fruity tone, an imported English butler at that.

'This is Mr. Sladen of Welden calling,' I said. 'Put me through to Mrs. Van Blake if you please.'

'Will you hold the line?' the voice said and there was silence. Time stood still, and then as I was beginning to wonder if he had forgotten me, Cornelia Van Blake came on the line.

'Yes?' she said. 'Who is that?'

'My name's Sladen,' I said, 'I am a writer. Could I bother you for some information? It's to do with a girl you met in Paris last year.'

There was a pause. I imagined I could hear her quick breathing, but I could have been wrong.

'Information? What girl?' The voice was as cool and as crisp as a refrigerated lettuce and as impersonal.

'Could I see you? I could be over in twenty minutes.'

'Why, no . . . ' She stopped short as if a sudden thought had dropped into her mind. 'Well, I suppose you could,' she went on. 'I can't give you very long.'

'Ten minutes will cover it. That's fine. I'll be right over,' I said and before she could change her mind, I hung up. Why had she granted me an interview? I wondered as I left the booth. I had expected to be turned down flat. This was almost too easy.

A cab crawled past and I waved.

‘Vanstone, West Summit,’ I said and got in. It took a little under twenty minutes to reach the high wrought iron gates that guarded the house.

A guard in a black uniform and peak cap came out of the lodge, opened one of the gates and walked up to the cab.

‘Mrs. Van Blake is expecting me,’ I said. ‘I’m Sladen.’

‘Got a card on you, sir?’ he asked.

I couldn’t see much of him in the darkness, but his voice sounded tough and alert.

I offered him my driving licence. He snapped on a flashlight, examined the licence, nodded and handed it back.

‘Thank you.’

He opened the other gate and the cab drove through.

‘First time I’ve been here,’ the driver said over his shoulder. ‘How the rich live! Guards, gates and all. Well, well!’

‘I’d sooner live my way,’ I said, peering through the open window into the darkness. I couldn’t see anything from the window, but the headlights of the cab picked out trees, a lot of shrubs and bushes, and the white, sand covered drive. There was no clear view of the gardens nor of the house from the approach. After a four minute drive, we swung on to a big stretch of tarmac at the foot of the steps leading to the house.

The cab door was opened by another black uniformed guard who had appeared from nowhere. I told the driver to wait for me, nodded to the guard and went up the steps to the main entrance. The door stood open. A tall, elderly man got up like a Hollywood butler, stood waiting.

The soft light from the hall lit up his aristocratic features. He was gaunt, and nudging seventy. He looked like a dignified statesman about to dine with Molotov, and he carried with him an atmosphere of baronial halls and lighted candelabra.

‘If you will follow me.’

His figure and voice were stiff with disapproval. He took me down a wide corridor, through a glass-panelled door, down some steps and into a vast lounge that ran the length of the house. There were enough sofas and lounging chairs to seat fifty people, and the ornate richly coloured Turkish carpet that covered the entire floor gave the room the millionaire’s touch.

‘If you will wait, I’ll inform Mrs. Van Blake you are here,’ the butler said

as if reading from the script of a successful play. He went away as silently and as unobtrusively as an incarnate spirit.

The first thing that caught my attention when he had gone was a large oil painting of Mrs. Van Blake that hung over the fireplace.

She was sitting on the balustrade, looking at the distant garden, wearing a pale green summer frock. It was an extraordinarily good likeness, and the detail of the landscape had been worked in with incredible patience and care.

There was something about the style of the figure that was familiar to me, and moving closer to the picture I saw in the right hand corner the artist's name: Lennox Hartley. I stepped back and examined the painting with closer attention.

I had no idea Hartley could paint as well as this. From the sketch of Fay Benson I had seen, I had assumed he was just a competent cover designer, but this painting showed he was a highly skilled artist.

He had caught the feeling I had had when I had first seen Cornelia Van Blake. Although, in his portrait, she looked as cold and as remote as she had done when I had seen her, there was that suggestion of a flame burning behind the impersonal mask that I had sensed. The picture was alive and compelling.

Then I saw her standing close to me. She gave me quite a start. She was within touching distance of me before I even knew she had come down the steps and crossed the vast expanse of carpet to where I was standing.

'Mr. Sladen?'

She was in a topless white evening dress, and around her throat blazed a magnificent collar of emeralds. She really was something to look at. Her big green eyes, that glittered like her emeralds, looked right into mine, giving me an odd creepy sensation of uneasiness.

'That's right,' I said, and as she didn't appear to recognize me I decided not to mention the Golden Apple club. 'I'm hoping you can help me, Mrs. Van Blake. It's kind of you to see me.'

The butler came in with a tray of drinks which he set on a table.

'Won't you sit down?' she said. She waved to a lounging chair and sat down nearby.

The butler asked me what I would drink. I asked for a highball, and while he fixed it, we sat in silence. He gave her a brandy in a balloon glass and then went away.

‘What is it you want?’ she asked as soon as he had shut the door behind him.

‘I’m a crime writer,’ I said, aware of her hostility. ‘I’m interested in the movements of Joan Nichols. I understand you met her in Paris last year?’

She looked down at her brandy glass, her face expressionless, then she looked up at me and her eyes told me nothing.

‘I meet so many people. I don’t remember anyone called Joan Nichols. Are you sure you’re not making a mistake?’

‘You were in Paris in August last year, Mrs. Van Blake?’

‘I was.’

‘Joan Nichols was a showgirl, working in Paris at that time. I understand she had dinner with you at your hotel more than once.’

She frowned and moved impatiently.

‘It’s possible. I really don’t remember,’ she said, giving an irritable little shrug. ‘How do you know this?’

I couldn’t make up my mind if she really didn’t remember or if she were lying. I had an idea that behind the expressionless mask there was tension, but it was only an idea.

‘Miss Nichols told her friends she had dinner with you,’ I said, ‘but it isn’t important. I don’t want to bother you with this. I was hoping you would remember, but of course you must meet a lot of people. I can easily check at the Paris hotel.’

A little of the brandy suddenly jumped out of her glass and made a spot on her skirt. I didn’t see her start, but the splash of brandy was a giveaway. She looked up.

‘But you wouldn’t go all the way to Paris to find out if she dined with me or not, surely?’ she said, staring.

‘It’s the policy of the magazine I work for to check every fact before we print it. I was hoping you would remember the girl and save me the time of going to Paris, but as you can’t, I’ll have to go.’

‘How extraordinary. Why is it so important?’

‘I’m trying to fill in the girl’s background. It seems she had a talent for making friends with rich people. I’ve no proof of this. Her friends tell me she claimed to know you and dined with you. That’s quite a story, Mrs. Van Blake. After all she was just an ordinary showgirl, and to have become friendly with you shows she must have had a lot of talent. On the other hand,

she may have been lying. If I go to Paris, I might dig up other wealthy people who met her.'

'I would like to help you,' she said, passing her slim fingers across her forehead. 'Let me think now. I do vaguely remember meeting a girl. She was rather pretty if she's the one. Yes, I think I do remember her.'

'You did meet her then?'

'I suppose I must have. I don't recall her name, but I'm not good about people's names.' She drank a little brandy before saying, 'Yes, I'm sure I met her. I can't remember just how. I was on my own in Paris. I was waiting for my husband. I dare say the girl amused me. I do vaguely recollect asking her to dine with me.'

It was quite nicely done, but not well enough to fool me. She had remembered Joan Nichols as soon as I had mentioned her. I was sure of that. Why had my bluff about going to Paris suddenly smoked her out?

'What was your hotel, Mrs. Van Blake?'

She looked up and for a brief flash there was a wary, angry expression in her eyes.

'I stayed at the George V.'

'You don't remember how this girl made friends with you?'

'I don't. We probably met in a shop. I believe that was it.' I could almost hear her thinking. 'Yes, of course. I do remember. She didn't speak French and was in trouble with a shopkeeper. I came to the rescue. Yes, that was it.'

I was sure now she was lying, and I had trouble in keeping my own expression deadpan.

'Did you like her?'

'For goodness sake!' Her eyes flashed. 'I must have liked her to have invited her to dinner, Mr. Sladen. I scarcely remember the girl. I meet so many people. Is that all, because if it is . . .'

She got to her feet and stood looking at me.

I got up.

'I guess that is all. It was just a matter of checking. It was nice of you to see me.'

'Why are you interested in this girl? Didn't you say you were a crime writer? Is she in trouble?'

'Not now: she's dead. She was murdered on August 20th of last year: a few days after her return from Paris. The police tell me she was a

blackmailer,' I said, watching her closely, but she didn't bat an eyelid.

'I see. It just shows how careful one should be in making acquaintances of strangers.'

'That's right,' I said and as she moved towards the wall bell, I went on, 'That's a fine portrait of you. I had no idea Lennox Hartley, could do work like that.'

For some reason known to herself, this chance remark registered. She turned quickly and her eyes were suddenly as hard as the emeralds at her throat.

'Do you know Mr. Hartley?' she asked, and I saw her small hands turn into fists.

'I've talked to him,' I said. 'I can't say I know him. In my job, I talk to a lot of people.'

'Yes, I suppose you do. Well, good night, Mr. Sladen. Jameson will show you out,' and again she moved to the bell. Then I had a sudden idea and as she rang the bell I acted on the idea without thinking.

'I nearly forgot,' I said and took out my billfold. 'I have a photograph of Joan Nichols right here. Maybe you could identify her for me.'

I took Fay Benson's photograph from the wallet and handed it to her. She took it and moved to the light, turning her back on me. Although I couldn't see her face, her reaction startled me. If I had put a hairy tarantula into her hand she wouldn't have reacted more violently. She dropped the photograph and I saw a shudder pass through her. For a brief moment, she stood motionless, then with a tremendous effort of will, she pulled herself together, bent quickly and picked up the photograph. She turned and handed it to me. Her face was as white as porcelain. She looked less lovely, older, and the look in her eyes wasn't pleasant to see.

'I don't recognize her,' she said, and the words came out of stiff, bloodless lips. 'All these showgirls look so much alike. Good night, Mr. Sladen.'

She turned and walked out of the room, a little unsteadily, but with her head held high.

She left the door wide open.

I stood there for a long moment, feeling a surge of triumph run through me. I had got my hook up! I was sure of it. She knew Fay Benson. In some way the hook up was between Fay and her and not as I had imagined between Fay and her husband. Before I could begin to wonder what it was all about

the butler came in and escorted me to the waiting cab.

III

In the cab there was a faint but persistent smell of hundreds of other fares who had been driven to unknown destinations and who had left in the cab a thin strata of their presence to keep me company on my way back to the Beach Hotel.

I sat in a corner, a cigarette between my fingers, and I thought about my discovery. The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were falling into place. They didn't make sense yet, but I had a feeling they soon would.

For some reason or other Hamilton Royce and Fay Benson had left Tampa City and had gone to Welden. There someone had paid Hank Flemming to kidnap and murder Fay, and Royce had returned to Tampa City on the day she died.

I liked him for the role of the man who had paid Flemming to kill Fay, but until I found out why she had been killed, I could take no action against him.

Then suddenly out of the blue Cornelia appears in this so far motiveless drama. According to ex-Police Captain Bradley she was his suspect No.1 for Van Blake's murder. If she had murdered her husband even by proxy she would be wide open to blackmail. She had dined twice in Paris with an unsuccessful showgirl, and that showgirl had been a blackmailer. Blackmail could be the only reason, so far as I could see, why Cornelia had met Joan Nichols twice. It would explain too why she had hesitated to admit knowing her, and why she was anxious that I shouldn't go to Paris to stir up more trouble for her. But where did Fay Benson fit in? Why had her photograph been like the cold finger of a ghost on Cornelia's conscience? People don't show fear the way she had done unless there was a pretty powerful reason.

I had wanted a hook up between Fay Benson and the Van Blakes and I had got it. Now I had it, what was I going to do with it? My time was running out. I couldn't continue the investigation with a flock of police on my heels.

I was still brooding over the problem when the cab pulled up outside the Beach Hotel. I paid off the driver and walked up the steps and into the lobby.

The time by the clock above the reception desk was twelve twenty-two. There was no sign of the thickset cop who had been sitting in the basket chair when I left the hotel. The reception clerk handed me my key. He looked past

me, remote and distant, as if I hadn't settled my account for the past six months.

As I crossed the lobby to the elevator the house dick materialized from behind a pillar.

'Have they gone home or are they waiting for me in my room?' I asked him out of the corner of my mouth.

'They've gone home,' he told me. 'They've put a tap on your telephone line. This hotel has got a reputation. I guess you'll want to move out tomorrow.'

'Don't tell me you want my room?'

'I don't, but the manager does.'

'Okay, so I move out.'

I rode up in the elevator, unlocked my door and turned on the electric light. I was a little jumpy and wouldn't have been surprised to find a couple of tough cops waiting for me, but the room was empty. I shut the door, crossed over to the bottle of Scotch and poured out two fingers of liquor. I took the drink to the armchair and sat down. There was no point in trying to find another hotel. I wouldn't be allowed to stay. The pressure was on. I was being firmly eased out of town. If I bucked, I would run into trouble.

The memory of Sergeant Lassiter's methods of persuasion made me feel lonely. I wished Bernie was with me to give me some moral support. I spent a hide time nursing my drink and turning the situation over in my mind. I finally decided to leave town in the morning and sneak back when it was dark. Bradley had said Sam Benn would hole me up if I wanted to go underground, and that seemed my best bet. I couldn't hope to get anywhere if I worked in the open. From now on, I would have to do my investigating the hard way.

The sudden clamour of the telephone bell made me start so violently I slopped my drink. I reached for receiver.

'This is Sladen,' I said.

'There you are,' a voice I recognized said. 'Suzy gave me your telephone number. If you've got nothing better to do, old fella, come out here and have a drink. I've a theory that might interest you.'

I had a mental picture of a hard-faced cop straining to catch every word, and I said sharply, 'Don't mention your name, and don't say anything more. I'll be out right away.'

‘What’s the excitement?’ Lennox Hartley asked, mildly interested. ‘Is someone listening on the line?’

‘Could be,’ I said. ‘I’ll be right over,’ and I hung up.

On my way down to the lobby, I wondered why he had called me at this hour. It was quite a run out to Cannon Avenue. I decided to take the Buick. If the police tailed me I stood a better chance of losing them if I did my own driving.

The garage was at the back of the hotel. A solitary light in the rafters made a yellow halo that was surrounded by shadows and darkness. The garage attendant came out of his office, sleepy eyed and surly. He told me where I could find the Buick, then went back to his disturbed doze. I drove out of the garage with only the parkers on and headed along the beach road. I drove for a half a mile, my attention focused on the driving mirror. No headlights came after me. I turned off the beach road and drove into the town.

The traffic was light now. A few nightclubs, an all night movie house and several cafes still showed signs of activity. The clock on the dashboard showed ten minutes past one. I drove aimlessly around, keeping to the back streets, until I convinced myself no car was following me, then I headed out to Cannon Avenue.

As I drove up the long, sedate avenue, the lights in the houses I passed told me night life in Tampa City was spent at home. There were cars parked outside most of the houses and the night air was full of the sound of dance music from overworked radio sets.

I reached the end of the avenue, made a U-turn and drove slowly back, passing Hartley’s Swiss chalet. No lights showed from the windows, but that didn’t mean anything. I had noticed on the two occasions I had been in his lounge that the window drapes were thick and heavy.

I stopped the Buick behind a Packard convertible, parked outside the house next to Hartley’s. I got out and walked back, pushed open his gate and walked up the drive-in.

When I came to rest before the front door, I paused to look back over the dark garden. The only sounds I could hear now were from the distant radio sets down the road. I lifted the bear’s head and knocked. I felt the door move. I pushed and the door swung open. I looked into darkness and silence.

Steadying the door, I knocked again. Nothing happened. The darkness moved out towards me. I leaned against it, listening, suddenly uneasy.

‘Anyone in?’ I asked and moved forward, my fingers groping in my pocket for my cigarette lighter.

The busy ticking of a clock nearby was the only sound I could hear. I got my lighter out and snapped it alight. The small yellow flame showed me a light switch near the door and I turned it on. I closed the front door, crossed the hall and peered into the dark lounge. As I reached forward to grope for the light switch I heard a sound that made me spin around: the sound of slow, dragging footfalls that came from above; sounds that made the hair on the nape of my neck bristle and my heart skip a beat.

‘Is that you, Hartley?’ I said, stepping into the light and looking up. My voice sounded little better than a hoarse croak. Only the sound of the dragging footfalls answered me, then I saw a small figure come out of the darkness and stand motionless at the head of the stairs. It was Hartley’s Filipino houseboy. His hand clutched on to the banister rail. A bright red trickle of blood ran down his chin from the corner of his mouth. There was a patch of blood about the size of my fist on the left side of his white coat.

I stared up at him, my mouth turning dry.

His small yellow face tightened, his legs went rubbery, his knees hinged, his hand slid off the banister rail.

Then he fell.

He hit the middle stair with his shoulder and slithered the rest of the way on his back to land at my feet.

I didn’t have to touch him to know he was dead.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

Outside and nearby a car door slammed and a car engine started up. A man shouted, 'It's been a wonderful evening. I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years.'

I stared down at the dead yellow face. It hadn't been a wonderful evening for him, I thought, aware that my shirt against my back felt damp and cold.

The car drove away; its noisy roar dwindled into the distance and silence came down on this dark, still house. There was nothing I could do for the Filipino and I backed away from him. My mind jumped to Lennox Hartley: had he been shot too?

I moved across the hall to the lounge, reached for the light switch and turned it down.

For a brief moment I thought the big room was empty, then I saw a foot in an elegant doe skin sandal protruding from behind one of the lounging settees.

I went around the settee.

Lennox Hartley lay on his face, his fingers hooked and sunk into the pile of the carpet, a little patch of blood showing on the gay yellow silk dressing gown he wore: a patch in the centre of his back.

I bent and touched one of his hands: his flesh was still warm. My fingers went to the artery in his neck: there was no pulse beat. He couldn't have been dead for more than ten minutes or so. My first reaction was to get out of this house of death. If the police found me here I wouldn't have a leg to stand on. As I straightened up I saw the doors of the cupboard in which Hartley kept his files of sketches stood open. One of the files lay open on the floor: some of the sketches spilled out on to the carpet.

To the left of the cupboard was a small wall safe; a key was in the lock and the safe door was half open. I went over to the safe and peered in. A thick packet of fifty-dollar bills lay on top of a pile of papers, neatly tied with white tape. I took out the packet of currency to look at the papers.

‘Don’t move,’ Sergeant Lassiter said from the doorway.

I remained motionless, the bundle of bills clutched in my right hand, my shoulders hunched, my heart hammering.

‘Okay, turn around and keep your hands still.’

I turned very slowly.

Lassiter stood in the doorway of the lounge, a .38 police special dwarfed in his big hand. The black nosed barrel pointed at my chest.

He looked at me and I looked at him. His small, hard eyes opened a trifle as he recognized me and his thin lips came off his teeth in a wolfish grin.

‘Hello, peeper,’ he said. ‘You’ve certainly found yourself some material to write about this time.’ He moved slowly into the lounge, his gun continuing to cover me. ‘Two killings and a robbery: pretty nice going.’

I cursed myself for touching the money. I opened my fingers and the packet of bills dropped with a little thud on the carpet. I was in the worst kind of jam, and I knew I wasn’t going to talk myself out of it.

‘I know it looks bad,’ I said, trying to keep my voice steady, but I didn’t kill them. Hartley called me at my hotel. He wanted to see me. I came over and found him dead.’

‘Yeah? I knew he called you. I traced the number and came over to see what was cooking,’ Lassiter said, grinning. ‘Looks like it was a good idea I did. Where’s your gun?’

‘I haven’t got a gun. I didn’t shoot him!’

‘Who’s going to believe you?’ Lassiter said. ‘This is the easiest pinch I’ve ever had. Back up against the wall!’

I did as I was told, keeping my hands above my shoulders. He went to the telephone, bent over it without taking his eyes off me. He lifted the receiver with his left hand.

‘Give me police headquarters,’ he said, ‘and snap it up.’

My shoe touched an electric light plug in the wall. Keeping my eyes on his I cautiously raised my right heel until it rested on top of the plug.

‘This is Lassiter,’ the sergeant barked into the receiver. ‘Get a patrol car out to 246, Cannon Avenue fast. Tell the lieutenant I’ve a guy here who’s just shot Lennox Hartley and his servant. I caught him red handed.’

I shifted the whole of my weight on to the plug. I felt it rip away from the wall. I gave it a quick side kick: there was a flash and the lights went out.

I dropped down on hands and knees as Lassiter’s gun roared, rattling the

windows. Plaster came down on top of me as the slug smashed into the wall where I had been standing. Luckily for me the hall lights had gone out too. Thick darkness gave me a brief feeling of security, then Lassiter fired blindly again. The bullet nearly parted my hair.

I threw myself sideways where I knew a settee stood. I was behind it when he fired again. The gun flash showed me he was right by me. I reared up and hit out where his head should be. It wasn't a bad shot. My fist caught him on the ear and sent him staggering. I dropped on hands and knees as he fired. The slug smashed one of the big windows.

I scrambled away, still on hands and knees, my breath whistling out through clenched teeth. I heard him blunder over to the door. Moving slowly, my hands outstretched for obstacles, I made my way towards the window.

In the distance I could hear the faint sound of a police siren that grew in intensity as the prowler car rushed towards the house. My groping hands must have passed over the top of a low table. My knee caught it and sent it over with a thud on the carpet I jumped wildly to the left, cannoning into a chair, sending that over too.

Lassiter fired and the slug whined close, then he came blundering forward, cursing savagely. He was on top of me before I could get out of his way. His left hand grabbed my sleeve. I jerked away, stepped sideways and hit out. My fist scraped along the side of his jaw at the same time as his gun went off. The flash scorched my face and scared me half silly. My punch made him reel back. He must have got snarled up with an armchair for he went over with a crash that shook the room.

I bolted over to the window, dragged back the drapes and let in the moonlight. Headlights of a fast moving car made two fingers of light in the dark road. The police siren was screaming now and I could see the red spotlight on the roof of the approaching car. I shoved my foot through the window and kicked out the glass.

The police car pulled up with a screech of tortured tyres. Two policemen spilled out of the car, guns in hand, leaving the car doors hanging open.

One of them vaulted over the gate and ran up the path. I could hear Lassiter cursing as he disentangled himself from the chair. I had intended to bolt out of the window and into the garden, but I saw now it was too late. The cop running up the path would be certain to see me as I dropped into the garden. I stepped back and got behind the window drapes.

I stood motionless, my heart hammering, and waited. Lassiter came blundering to the window and leaned out. He was so close to me I could smell the stale tobacco smoke in his clothes.

‘He went this way!’ he bawled. ‘He can’t have got far.’

Then to my utter relief, he swung a great leg over the windowsill and dropped into the garden.

‘I can’t see him, sarg,’ one of the policemen called.

I didn’t wait to hear Lassiter’s cursing. Moving quickly, I made my way in the darkness across the room and into the hall. I groped my way up the stairs until I reached the landing, then I paused to listen.

More sirens howled in the night. More cars screeched to a standstill outside the house. I could hear Lassiter’s bull voice shouting, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying. I flicked my cigarette lighter alight. A door faced the head of the stairs. I crossed the landing, turned the handle and stepped into Hartley’s bedroom.

The curtains were drawn. I shut the door and flicked down the light switch. The lights came on. There was blood on the white carpet. A .38 automatic lay on the blue cover of the bed. The blood told me this was where the Filipino had been shot and the gun on the bed was the murder weapon. I took out my handkerchief and dropped it over the gun, lifted it and sniffed at the barrel. It reeked of exploded gunpowder. I felt I needed a gun so I shoved it into my hip pocket. Then turning off the light I pulled aside the curtain and looked down into the garden.

The moonlight made the close cut lawn look white. Three policemen, guns in hand, were moving cautiously in a line away from the house. There was no escape that way. Then I heard the front door slam open and a tramping of feet in the hall.

I tiptoed across the room and eased open the door.

‘Get some lights on here,’ a voice growled.

I could see the beams of several flashlights stabbing into the darkness below. There was a short pause, then the lights flashed up.

A short, thickset man, his face brick red, a black fedora set squarely on his head, stood over the dead Filipino.

Lassiter stood by the front door; his brutal face was shiny with sweat.

‘You’re sure he went by the window?’ the short man asked without looking at Lassiter.

‘Yeah. I saw him go. He can’t get far,’ Lassiter snarled. ‘He kicked out a wall plug and fused the lights, Lieutenant.’

I guessed then that the short, thickset man was Lieutenant Joe Carson, ex-Police Captain Bradley had mentioned.

‘The captain will love this,’ Carson said. ‘If we don’t pick up this guy, you’ll be back pounding a beat.’

Lassiter moved uneasily.

‘We’ll pick him up all right,’ he said savagely.

‘Why didn’t you bring some men with you, you dope?’ Carson asked, moving away from the Filipino.

‘How was I to know he’d start a shindig like this?’ Lassiter snarled. ‘I was on my way home. When they told me he was going out to see Hartley I thought I’d look in and see what was cooking. I caught him robbing the safe.’

‘Then you let him go,’ Carson said and walked into the lounge.

Lassiter made a grunting noise, took out a soiled handkerchief and wiped his face, then he followed the Lieutenant into the lounge.

Two patrolmen, guns in hand, came up the steps and stood guard at the front door. More sirens wailed. A car pulled up outside, a car door slammed and three men came into the hall. The patrolmen stiffened to attention and saluted the tallest of the three who I guessed would be Police Captain Mathis.

Carson came out of the lounge.

‘We haven’t found him yet,’ he said to the tall man. ‘All the roads are being watched. He left his car. His name’s Chet Sladen: he’s a writer for Crime Facts.’

Mathis, lean faced with a black moustache in odd contrast to his chalk white hair, took out a cigarette pack and put a cigarette between his thin lips.

‘Crime Facts?’ he repeated. ‘You sure?’

‘I’ve read some of the stuff the guy’s written myself.’

‘We’ve got to be careful, Carson. That rag has plenty of influence. Why should he knock Hartley off?’

‘Search me,’ Carson said, shrugging. ‘Lassiter caught him taking money out of the safe.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

Lassiter came out of the lounge.

‘I saw him, Captain. It’s my bet he’s digging into the Van Blake murder. Maybe Hartley caught him poking his snout into the safe and Sladen lost his

head and shot him.'

'What makes you think he's digging into the Van Blake murder?' Mathis asked, his voice sharp.

'Mrs. Van Blake had a visit from him tonight. He's been talking to Bradley,' Carson said. 'He called on the Golden Apple club.'

'You'd better let me have a detailed report in writing,' Mathis said. 'The Commissioner will want to hear about this.'

'Yes, Captain,' Carson said.

Mathis turned on his heel and went to the front door. He looked back over his shoulder.

'You'd better find Sladen,' he said, 'or there'll be trouble.'

He went down the steps into the night.

'While we're waiting for the doc,' Lassiter said, 'I'll take a look upstairs. The guy didn't have a gun. Maybe he left it in one of the upstairs rooms.'

Carson grunted and walked back into the lounge.

I moved quickly across the landing and into Hartley's bedroom.

I heard Lassiter come up the stairs.

II

With my back against the wall, the window drapes concealing me, I waited.

I heard Lassiter pound across the landing and go into the next door room. He spent a few minutes in there, then I heard him come out and go into another room.

I was in a bad state of nerves. From where I stood I could see into the garden. The three patrolmen were still moving aimlessly about and there was no out there for me that way. My only hope now hung on the fact that Lassiter seemed convinced I wasn't in the house. I hoped his search wouldn't be thorough.

The door jerked open and I heard him come in. The light snapped on, then I heard him grunt. He went out again, leaving the door open.

'Hey, Lieutenant! Will you come up?' he called.

I moved the curtain aside. He was leaning over the banister rail, his back turned to me. But even as I watched him, he turned and I hurriedly let the curtain fall into place. A moment or so later I heard Carson come in.

'This is where the servant got shot,' Lassiter said. 'He bled on the rug. And look, the killer put his gun down on the bed, you can see the impression.'

'Better get Maxwell up here for prints,' Carson said. 'I'm going back to headquarters. I want to be sure this guy Sladen doesn't slip through our fingers. You stick around until I call you.'

The two men went out of the room, leaving the door open. I watched them go downstairs, then leaving my hiding place, I swiftly crossed the room, opened a door across the landing and stepped into a front spare bedroom. I shut the door, groped my way across to the uncurtained window and looked down into the street below.

Three police cars and an ambulance stood outside. There was a fair sized crowd of men and women, some of them in evening dress, standing on the opposite sidewalk. Four or five patrolmen stood with their backs to the crowd, looking up at the house.

There was no chance of climbing down the stack pipe to the garden with that audience to watch me, and I went back to the door, eased it open an inch

or so and waited.

Lassiter and another plainclothes man came up the stairs and went into Hartley's bedroom.

'Get all the prints you can find,' Lassiter said. 'It doesn't look as if anyone's been in the other rooms. I gotta talk to the press. Let's have some action, Max.'

The other man grunted and Lassiter went down the stairs again. I waited in darkness for more than half an hour, then Lassiter came up again and went into Hartley's bedroom.

'I'm through now,' the fingerprint man said. 'I've only found Hartley's and the servant's prints.'

'Well, okay. Carson wants us back,' Lassiter said. 'They haven't found Sladen yet.' His voice sounded worried. 'He can't get out of town. The lieutenant wants a report in writing tonight - my luck! I'm leaving a couple of men here. We'll go over the place again in daylight.'

They went downstairs together.

I crept out on to the landing and peered down into the hall. The body of the Filipino had been taken away. Lassiter and three plainclothes men stood in a group by the front door. Lassiter said to the beefy patrolman who had just come in from the street, 'Okay, Gesserter. I'll be back around nine. You stick around and keep your eyes open. Lock up after us and don't let anyone in. Webb's patrolling outside. I've told him to keep the press away, but some of those punks are so smart they may try to get in when he's at the back. No one's to come in here until I get back. Understand?'

'Yes, sarg.'

'If anyone does get in, I'll make you sorry,' Lassiter growled.

He went down the steps followed by the other three detectives. Gesserter closed the front door and locked it. He stood listening. When the sound of the police cars had died away, he shoved his cap to the back of his head, took out a pack of cigarettes and wandered into the lounge. After a few moments, dance music came softly up the stairs from a late broadcasting station.

I went back to Hartley's bedroom, groped my way to the window and looked into the garden. A patrolman paced slowly up and down the flagged path that led from the terrace to the lawn.

I went into the front bedroom and looked into the street. The crowd had gone home. There were no cars to be seen. The Buick had gone. I decided it

was time to go myself. I went to the head of the stairs and listened. Gesserter was still in the lounge. It looked a long way down the stairs to the front door.

With my left hand on the banister rail, I started down. Halfway down, I heard the patrolman clear his throat and my heart skipped a beat, but I kept moving. I stopped at the bottom stair. I had to pass the open doorway of the lounge before I could reach the front door. I edged forward so I could just see into the lounge.

Gesserter was smoking, his back turned to me, his right hand beating time to the soft swing music. I took a step forward, then another. I had the .38 automatic in my jacket pocket, my hand on the butt. Two more steps and I would be out of his range; then he suddenly turned.

I stopped dead.

We looked at each other across the space of the hall and the lounge. His fleshy, weather-tanned face turned a rich purple, and his small eyes grew as round as marbles. It flashed through my mind that if I threatened him with the gun I would be fixed. I still had a remote chance of proving I didn't kill Hartley, but threatening a cop with a gun was something I wouldn't be able to talk myself out of.

I took my hand from my pocket slowly, and somehow managed to smile at him. I watched his hand grope feverishly at his gun holster. His movements were slow and confused.

'Hello there,' I said as casually as I could, 'where's everyone?'

He got the gun out and pointed it at me.

'Don't move!'

'Take it easy,' I said hurriedly. 'I was hoping to find Lieutenant Carson. Isn't he around?'

'Who are you?' he demanded and came forward slowly, his thick finger on the gun trigger.

'My name's Sladen. I'm a staff writer for Crime Facts,' I said, hoping he didn't know I was the guy they were looking for. 'You've heard of me, haven't you?'

I saw him relax a trifle, but the gun continued to cover me.

'Let's see your press card.'

I took out my billfold, flicked it open and handed it to him.

He examined the press card, then handed back the wallet.

'How did you get in here?'

‘Webb let me in the back way,’ I said. ‘I wanted to take a look around. That okay with you?’

‘Webb let you in?’ The barrel of the gun sagged so it was no longer pointing at me. ‘It’s against orders. He should have known that. You can’t come in here.’

‘Who’ll know? Is this where Hartley was shot?’ I wandered into the room. ‘He lived in style, didn’t he?’

The patrolman shoved his gun back into his holster.

‘Come on! Outside! I’ve got my orders.’

‘I’m only doing my job,’ I said, backing away.

‘Yeah; and I’m doing mine.’ He moved past me and went into the hall. ‘Come on - get out of here!’

I followed him into the hall and watched him unlock the front door.

‘Beat it!’ he said, holding the door open.

‘I’m on my way,’ I said and stepped cautiously past him.

I started down the drive-in, making an effort not to break into a run. I was expecting the other patrolman to show up, but he didn’t.

At the gate I paused to look back.

Gesserter stood in the lighted doorway watching me. For a brief moment we looked at each other, then he stepped back and slammed the front door.

III

Once clear of the house, I broke into a run. The long, empty avenue stretched away into the darkness. I avoided the pools of yellow light thrown by the widely spaced street lamps. I had no idea if the two patrolmen would get together. If they did, it wouldn't be long before they reported to headquarters.

I had a good two miles to cover before I reached the centre of the town. My one chance was to get under cover as quickly as I could before the prowling cars came after me. Bradley had told me to go to Sam Benn's place on Maddox Street if I had to duck out of sight. This seemed to me now to be sound advice, but I had no idea where Maddox Street was. I might be running away from it for all I knew.

Still keeping to the shadows and walking now, I turned the corner and started down the street that led directly to the town. A faint haze hung over the town from the lights of the all night neon signs: they seemed a long way off. I peered at my strap watch. It was coming up for three o'clock. It wouldn't be long now before it was light.

At the bottom of the street, bright lights suddenly cut up the darkness as a car swung out from a side turning. I was passing a house when I saw the lights. I put one hand on the low garden wall, vaulted over and crouched down. The car roared up the street: its headlights raking the wall, making me duck lower. I heard the car brake violently, then turn into Cannon Avenue.

I straightened, vaulted back on to the sidewalk and started to run again. I was breathing like an asthmatic by the time I reached the bottom of the street which led into the outskirts of the shopping centre. Here I knew was danger: this was the territory of the patrolling cop, and every one of them would have my description. Keeping to the back streets I made my way past the dark faces of small shops, dingy eating houses and apartment houses. This was the district, tucked away as if ashamed of itself, that housed the workers who were at the beck and call of the rich of Tampa City.

Ahead of me a shadow moved, bringing me to an abrupt stop. I silently stepped into a shop doorway as a bulky patrolman walked to the edge of the sidewalk and balanced himself on the kerb while he swung his nightstick and

stared up at the grey-black canopy of the sky. He rested his feet for five minutes or so while I watched him, then he moved on, going away from me.

At the next intersection I turned right. Across the road a yellow light shining through a glass panelled door made a rectangle pattern on the greasy sidewalk. A neon sign above the door read: Good Eats. Open All Night.

I crossed the street, made sure no one was in sight before I stepped into the rectangle of light and looked through the glass panel of the door.

A fat man with black greasy hair, his chin bristly with black stubble, his hairy arms resting on the counter, stared vacantly at a newspaper spread out before him. There were no customers and most of the lights were off.

I pushed open the door and walked in.

The fat man glanced up, his eyes heavy with boredom.

'May I use your phone, bud?' I asked.

He jerked a dirty thumb to the end of the room.

'Go ahead and help yourself,' he said and yawned, showing big white teeth.

I shut myself in the pay booth and leafed through the telephone book. I found Sam Benn's number and I dialled. While I waited, listening to the calling tone, I stared through the glass panel of the door at the fat man.

A voice heavy with sleep said, 'Hello?'

'Is Sam Benn there?'

'You're talking to him. What do you want?'

'Captain Bradley told me to call you. I have a flock of buttons hunting for me and I've got to get under cover fast.'

The man at the other end of the line sighed.

'Well, okay, if Cap Bradley said so, who am I to object? Where are you?'

'At an eating house on Sherratt Street.'

'Know where I am?'

'No. I'm walking and dodging cops as I go.'

The man groaned.

'That means I've got to come and fetch you, does it?'

'It would be an idea.'

'Yeah; an idea for you, but not for me. Well, okay. The things I do for Cap Bradley! Stick where you are. I'll be along in half an hour; maybe sooner.'

'Thanks.'

The line went dead. I replaced the receiver. As I turned to open the booth

door I saw a shadow fall across the rectangle of light on the sidewalk. A moment later the door pushed open and two big men came in. They walked heavily over to the fat man who looked up. He slowly straightened and placed two big, hairy hands on the counter. His face was expressionless.

Faintly through the glass panel of the pay booth I heard one of the men say, 'Police. We're looking for a guy. Anyone been in?'

I felt a cold dampness on my face as I squeezed myself into the darkness of the booth.

'No one's been in for the past two hours,' the fat man said woodenly.

'You sure?'

'I'm telling you, aren't I?' the fat man said curtly. He put a cigarette between his lips and began to search for a match.

The policeman who had spoken leaned forward and smacked the cigarette away, catching the fat man's cheek with his thick fingers as he did so.

'Don't smoke, punk, when I'm talking to you,' he snarled.

The fat man stiffened; his deepset eyes glittered, but he didn't say anything nor did he move.

'This guy's tall, dark, around thirty-three or four,' the policeman went on. 'He's wearing a dark grey suit and a matching slouch hat. If you spot him call headquarters - understand?'

'Yes,' the fat man said.

'You'd better understand.'

The two policemen turned and walked out, leaving the door open. They went on down the street. The fat man came from behind the counter, crossed to the door and looked out, then he shut the door and went back to the counter. He didn't look once in my direction.

I took out my handkerchief and wiped my sweating face, then I opened the pay booth door and came out.

The fat man said, 'They may be back. There's a cop at the corner. Go in there,' and he jerked his thumb to a door near the pay booth.

'Thanks,' I said, opened the door and walked into a comfortably but shabbily furnished sitting room. A big black cat lay sleeping in an armchair. It opened its eyes to examine me, decided I was harmless and went back to sleep. I took out my pack of cigarettes, lit one and drew in a lungful of smoke. My knees felt as if I had been running hard for a couple of miles and my breath was laboured.

The fat man came in with a cup of coffee which he put on the table. He opened a drawer in the table and took out a half pint bottle of Haig.

‘You got friends?’ he asked, pushing the bottle towards me.

‘Someone’s coming to pick me up. Thanks for what you did.’

‘That’s nothing. I wouldn’t help the cops in this town even if it cost me money.’ He moved back to the door. ‘You’ll be okay here. Stick around,’ and he went out.

I poured a slug of whisky into the coffee and drank it. I felt a lot better for it. Then I sat down. This was the first moment of quiet that I had had since I had found Hartley shot to death. Even now my mind was still too uneasy by my own predicament to give much thought to the reason why he had been murdered. I remembered his last words to me: ‘I have a theory that might interest you.’ He knew I was hunting for information about Fay Benson and it seemed

reasonable to assume that the theory he had mentioned had to do with Fay Benson. Had he been killed because of this theory?

Unless the killer had been with him when he had telephoned to me, how could the killer have known Hartley was going to talk? It looked as if the killer was someone Hartley knew. I took out the .38 automatic and examined it. It looked either new or else it had been well looked after. Its serial number was 3347890. I took out the clip. Only two shots had been fired from the gun. The killer was either a first class shot or else the killing had been done at close quarters.

No doubt Creed would be able to get some information from the gun. As soon as I could I would send the gun to him. I put the gun, carefully wrapped in my handkerchief, back in my jacket pocket.

What was my next move to be? The solution of Fay Benson’s kidnapping and murder was to be found in Tampa City: I was sure of that. But every hour I remained in the city increased the risk of my being arrested. I was now Suspect No.1 for Hartley’s killing and unless I found the killer, there would be no town in the country where I would be safe.

The thought made me sweat. It seemed to me whatever happened I had to stay in Tampa City. It looked as if I would have to dream up some kind of disguise if I was to have any freedom of movement. If I dyed my hair a darker shade, wore dark glasses and a change of clothing I might get by. Tampa City was teeming with visitors. I should be able to lose myself in the

crowd.

I was still making plans when the fat man put his head around the door.

‘Benn’s out here asking for you - okay?’

I got up.

‘Sure. Can he come in?’

The fat man nodded and went away. A moment or so later Sam Benn came in.

He was a little man, small boned, with a shock of iron-grey hair, a thin pointed face and deepset, expressionless eyes. He was wearing a leather windcheater, zipped up to his chin and a pair of dirty grey slacks. He came over to me and shook hands.

‘Just how bad is it?’ he asked. How hot is the heat?’

‘I was caught in a house with two dead men in it,’ I said. ‘The police are convinced I did the killing.’

Benn grimaced.

‘That’s nice. What do you want me to do? Get you out of town?’

‘No. I want somewhere safe where I can operate. I’ve got to find the killer if I’m to beat the rap.’

‘You’re kidding yourself. You’d better get out of town.’

‘Not for a day or so. Captain Bradley said you could take care of me. Can’t you?’

‘Oh, I guess so. The things I do for that man.’ Benn suddenly grinned. ‘I’ll hide you up for a while, but not for long. I’m sticking my neck out. Now listen, my car’s parked at the end of the street. I’ll go and fetch it and come past here slowly. Fats will give you the tip when to move. I’ll have the car door open. Dive in quick. Okay?’

I said it was okay.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

It was after eleven o'clock before I rolled out of the wall bunk in Benn's hideout, and walked, yawning, to the toilet basin to sluice water over my face.

The hideout was a professional job and I wondered what its history was. Located under Benn's barroom and made of concrete and steel, it had an elaborately concealed entrance, an emergency exit that led to an alley behind the bar, a refrigerator full of food, a radio, a television set, a telephone, a table, three armchairs and a comprehensive stock of liquor.

While I shaved I had the radio on to the short wave police signals, but the routine stuff that came out of the speaker wasn't concerned with me.

Benn came in as I was cleaning the razor. He had a couple of brown paper parcels which he put on the table. From his pockets he produced four small packages and a folded newspaper.

'I guess I haven't forgotten anything,' he said, wandering over to plug in the electric kettle.

I unfolded the newspaper. The double murder had been given a spread. Lieutenant Carson said in his statement that the police had a number of important clues and they were anxious to interview a tall, dark, well-built man, wearing a dark grey suit and dark hat who they thought might be able to give them information that would lead to the solution of the murders. They didn't mention my name, and I was surprised that the description was so vague.

'That you?' Benn asked as he put two eggs in a saucepan.

'Yeah,' I said and taking the hair dye he had got me over to the toilet basin I started to tone my hair down to a darker shade. By the time he had soft boiled the eggs, made some coffee and toast I was through. The extra shade made a difference. He had brought me a twist of black hair and a small bottle of spirit gum, but before I made myself a moustache I sat down to breakfast.

Benn leaned against the wall, a cigarette between his fingers and watched

me eat.

‘Have you known Captain Bradley, long?’ I asked him as I decapitated an egg.

‘Twelve years. He was my commanding officer during the war. He saved my life twice, talked me out of a court martial, got me three weeks leave when my wife was dying and when the General said no one was to have leave,’ Benn said, staring at the glowing end of his cigarette. ‘I’d cut my right arm off for him if it would do him any good.’

‘Some place you have here.’

He grinned.

‘Don’t get wrong ideas, Bud. This was here when I bought the joint. It used to be one of Capone’s liquor dumps. Now and then someone wants to cool off and it comes in handy. When Cap Bradley was in charge I kept it shut, but now these skates are running the police force I oblige where I can.’ He took a drag from his cigarette. ‘It’ll cost you twenty a day. I’m saving up for a trip to Europe, otherwise I wouldn’t charge you.’

I grinned at him.

‘That’s okay. Make it thirty. I run an expense sheet.’

He sighed enviously.

‘That’s something I’ve always wanted to do. You’ve got nothing to worry about as long as you stay here.’

I decapitated the second egg.

‘Take the weight off your feet.’

He reached for a bottle of beer, levered off the cap with his teeth, then sat down, nursing the bottle.

‘I can’t stay long. I’ve work to do.’

‘How do I get hold of you when I want you?’

‘Use the telephone. I’m the only one who answers it.’

‘Have you got anyone to run messages for me? There’s a package I want taken to Welden.’

‘I’ve got a boy, but he might talk. Can’t you mail it?’

‘It’s got to get there today.’

‘Safer to mail it.’

‘Okay. Now can you get me some writing paper? A lot of it?’

‘There’s some in the table drawer.’

‘Fine. I guess for the moment that covers it.’

He took a long pull at the bottle of beer, sighed, wiped his lips on the back of his hand and stood up.

‘You’ve got plenty of food. Just help yourself. I’ll be down again.’

I took out my billfold, checked my money, then gave him two fifties. I had already given him the money for the things he had bought me, and when he took the tray and left me, I undid the parcels and put on the brown sports suit he had got for me. It was a good fit without being over smart. I could be one of a crowd in it without attracting attention.

I spent half an hour making myself a moustache. It was a hair-by-hair job, and when I had trimmed it, it looked the genuine article. With the new suit, the toned down hair and the moustache I doubted if even Bernie would recognize me. I had trouble in recognizing myself.

I made a parcel of the .38 automatic, disguising its shape as well as I could. Then I sat down by the telephone and called police headquarters at Welden. When I got through I asked for Police Captain Creed.

‘This is Sladen,’ I said when he came on the line. ‘I’ve got a report and a gun for you. I want you to have them today. Can you send someone over to pick them up?’

‘I could do,’ Creed said. ‘What’s this about Hartley? Who rubbed him out?’

‘Your pals here think I did. That’s my description in the papers. They’re looking for me now. Until I get things straightened out I’m keeping out of sight, and out of your sight too. You’ll get all the details in the report. The gun did the killing. I want it checked for prints and ownership. I’ll leave it with Sam Benn who runs a bar on Maddox Street. Get someone over fast for it.’

‘How do they hook you into the killing?’ Creed asked sharply.

‘I was there a few minutes after it happened. Lassiter caught me nosing around. I ducked out fast.’

‘Look, Sladen, if they want you . . .’

‘I know; I know. I’m not asking for help. I can handle this myself. Get the gun checked for me. That’s all I want. I’ll be calling you again. So long for now,’ and I hung up.

I spent the next hour writing a full report of the situation to date. Benn came in as I was putting the report in an envelope.

He started and stared.

‘For crying out loud!’ he exclaimed, moving around me. ‘I wouldn’t have known you. You can relax, Bud. There’s not a cop in town who’d spot you.’

‘It’s not bad, is it?’ I said, fingering my moustache. ‘I should get by. I’ve fixed for someone to pick up this package and letter. He’ll be from the Welden police and I’ve told him to pick them up from you. Okay?’

‘Sure.’ He took the package and the letter. ‘Feels like a gun.’

‘That’s what it is.’ I tilted back my chair and went on, ‘Have you been in this town long?’

‘Since the war.’

‘Then you’d know most of the characters.’

‘I know some of them.’

I produced Fay Benson’s photograph and showed it to him.

‘Ever seen her?’

He examined the photograph, then shook his head.

‘I don’t think so. These girls all look alike, but I don’t remember her.’

I retrieved the photograph and put it back in my billfold.

‘Know anything about Cornelia Van Blake?’

His face hardened.

‘She’s the one who got Cap Bradley tossed off the force. I know her. What’s she to you?’

‘I don’t know, but I have an idea she’s at the bottom of most of my troubles.’

‘She’s in solid with Doonan’s flock of buttons. If you’re in wrong with her, you’d better watch out. Lassiter’s on her payroll.’

‘Is that a fact? How do you know?’

‘A barman hears things. Lassiter may only be a sergeant, but he’s got plenty of influence. Money talks in this town and he’s got it. You should see the Packard he runs, and his house.’

‘Think he gets it from her?’

‘That’s what I hear. It’s my bet he’ll be Lieutenant next year, and Captain the year after.’

‘Why?’

He showed his teeth in a mirthless smile. ‘She wouldn’t give anything away for nothing. He’s worked for it all right.’

‘Bradley thinks she murdered her husband. What do you think?’

‘I wouldn’t know, but I do know two days after he was shot, Lassiter

bought himself the Packard.'

'They say Ted Dillon did the shooting. Did you ever run into Dillon?'

'Are you digging into this murder?' Benn asked, lowering himself on the arm of a chair.

'It may be hooked up to another killing I'm investigating. Did you ever run into Dillon?'

'He and I served in the same battalion during the war. He was my sidekick. He didn't kill Van Blake.'

'What happened to him?'

Benn shrugged his shoulders.

'He was taken care of. When you plan to kill a guy with as much dough and influence as Van Blake, it's a good idea to have a fall guy. That's what Ted was.'

'How does Hamilton Royce fit in with all this?'

Benn looked blank.

'Does he? I didn't know that.'

'Bradley thinks Royce arranged the killing on Mrs. Van Blake's say-so. The payoff was with the club.'

'That's an idea, but I wouldn't know. A joint as plush as the Golden Apple is out of my territory. Why not talk to Royce's ex-girlfriend? She strikes me as being ready to stick a blade into him if she can be sure there'll be no blow back. About the time Van Blake was murdered Royce and she quarrelled. He threw her out of the nest.'

'Who is she and where do I find her?'

'Her name's Lydia Forrest. She works at the Hey-Day club on Tampa Boulevard.' He got to his feet. 'When I've more time and if you want to talk, I'd like to hear more about this setup. Dillon was my pal.'

'Sure,' I said.

He took the letter and the package. When he had gone, I reached for the telephone and put in a personal call to Bernie in New York. After some delay he came on the line.

'How are you making out, pal?' he asked. 'Long time no see.'

'I'm managing without you,' I said. 'It's about time you did some work for a change.'

'I thought that was in the wind,' he said. 'The story's coming along fine. Even Fayette likes it. Give me another couple of weeks on it.'

‘Couple of weeks - nothing. You’ve got a long trail ahead of you. You’re going to Paris.’

‘Paris?’ His voice rose in a yelp. ‘Hot dog! Is that good news! Do you think Fayette will stand for it?’

‘He will after he’s read the report I’m mailing him. I want you to check on Cornelia Van Blake’s movements while she was there. I’ll send you all the dope. Take a photograph of Fay Benson with you and show it around in the hotels I’ll give you.’

‘Did she go to Paris then?’

‘I don’t know, but I want to find out. Check up on Joan Nichols too.’

‘Say, this sounds like hard work,’ Bernie protested. ‘There are other things to do in Paris besides work.’

‘Listen, you good-for-nothing punk! I’m in a jam here. The cops think I’ve knocked off a couple of guys and they’re hunting for me. They’re a tough, rough bunch, and if you don’t give me what I want, I’ll go to Paris myself and you can handle this end!’

‘Relax,’ Bernie said hurriedly. ‘I’ll give you what you want. Just tell me and you’ll get it.’

II

I left the hideout around nine-thirty, using the emergency exit. It was a dark, moonless night with a hint of rain in the air, and the darkness gave me a sense of security. I was glad to stretch my legs. The report I had written to Fayette was as complete as I could make it, and it had taken the best part of four hours. Getting it all down on paper had helped to clarify my mind on several points I had to clear up.

I had an idea that if I could find out why Lennox Hartley had been murdered I would find the solution to most of my problems. I had had time to think over the events of yesterday, and I recalled Cornelia's reaction when I had remarked on the picture of her that Hartley had painted. I recalled too her reaction when I had given her Fay Benson's photograph. Fay had been one of Hartley's models. There was a hookup somewhere between the three of them. It occurred to me that Fay's friend, Irene Jarrard, might be able to supply the key to this hookup. It was possible Fay had said something to her that might put me on the right lines. I told myself that at the first opportunity I would talk to her.

Hamilton Royce was another loose end that needed tying up. If his ex-girlfriend was willing to talk, she would be my best bet for tonight.

The Hey-Day club had a gaudy, neon decorated entrance that led down steep stairs into one of those airless, dark cellars that save rent and attract the tourist trade. I descended the stairs to where a hard-faced bouncer signed me in for a three dollar entrance and temporary membership fee and promptly lost interest in me.

I pushed aside the curtain that guarded the entrance to the bar and dance floor and made my way through the smoke laden air and the closely set tables to the bar. There weren't more than twenty people in the club: most of them were over made up and underdressed girls on the lookout for male company. I could feel their eyes boring into me as I made my way to the bar.

The rat-faced barman nodded to me as I came to rest in front of him. He looked me over and didn't seem to know what to make of me.

I ordered a straight whisky.

'If you want company,' the barman said as he set the whisky before me,

‘all you have to do is to smile at one of those babies and she’ll break her neck getting to you.’

‘Which one of them is Lydia Forrest?’ I asked, reaching for the whisky. ‘Or isn’t she on show?’

The barman touched his thin lips with the tip of a white coated tongue. His deepset eyes took on a sleepy look.

‘You want Miss Forrest?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘You a friend of hers?’ he asked and I could sense his hostility like a wall between us.

I leaned my elbows on the bar and smiled at him.

‘If you must know I am a friend of a friend of hers,’ I said mildly. ‘Is she around?’

‘No, and if you took my tip, you’d skip it. She has friends who are touchy about guys asking for her.’

‘Is that a fact?’ I said and shook my head. I drank the whisky and pushed the glass towards him. ‘Don’t let us get our lines crossed. I’ve plenty of girlfriends of my own. I don’t have to muscle in on someone else’s preserves. I have a message for her - that’s all.’

He refilled my glass and relaxed a trifle.

‘A lot of guys come in here pestering her,’ he said. ‘If it’s only a message.’

‘That’s it. Where do I find her?’

He took my money and accepted the dollar tip.

‘She’ll be doing her act in half an hour. Stick around, mister.’

I peeled off four more of Fayette’s dollar bills and showed them to the barman.

‘If I stay here for a half hour this atmosphere will put me into an iron lung. Can’t I call on her in her dressing room?’

He pulled at his right ear while he examined the four bills.

‘I guess so,’ he said finally. ‘Second door by the band. Don’t make it too obvious.’

He collected the four bills as easily as a vacuum cleaner picks up fluff.

I carried my drink to a table near the band, sat down and smoked a cigarette. A platinum blonde with a complexion like crepe rubber, jumped the gun and came over without an invitation.

‘Hello, honey,’ she said, flashing me a smile that might have been dazzling

if her teeth had been better. 'Going to buy me a drink?'

I said I was waiting for my mother. The sneer that distorted her face was something to see. She flounced back to the others and told them. Two men in tropical suits and hand painted ties came in at this moment, and the girls shifted their attention from me to them. When I had finished my drink I got up, wandered to the second door by the band, opened it and stepped into a passage.

There were two doors at the far end of the passage: one of them had a star painted on it. I rapped and waited.

A contralto voice told me to come in.

I pushed open the door.

The girl sitting before triple mirrors was blonde and lovely if you like features that could have been chiselled out of granite. She had the usual curves that you'd expect of a girl in show business. Three years ago she would have been sensational, but now the wear and tear of nightclub life had frayed the edges of her freshness. She was wearing a low cut scarlet and black gown.

A flat Turkish cigarette hung from her glistening lips.

She raised arched eyebrows as she said, 'Well? What is it?'

'Miss Forrest?'

'Yes.'

'The name's Low,' I said, borrowing Bernie's name. I eased myself into the room and closed the door. 'Can you spare me a minute?'

'About what?'

She twisted around in her chair, rested one slim arm on the chair back and examined me without interest.

'You and I may have things in common, Miss Forrest. I'm making inquiries about Hamilton Royce.'

Her eyelids narrowed and she tapped ash off her cigarette before saying, 'Why?'

'It's a long story: cutting corners, he's connected in some way with the disappearance of a girl. I'm looking for information and I'm authorized to pay for it.'

'What girl?' she asked.

'Fay Benson or Frances Bennett. Maybe you've heard of her?'

Her full lips tightened.

‘Who are you - a detective?’

‘A private investigator.’

‘Who are you working for?’

‘Someone who has lots of dough and isn’t scared of spending it.’

She stubbed out the cigarette, turned to look at herself in the triple mirrors.

‘We can’t talk here,’ she said and picking up a comb she ran it through her fine, silky hair. ‘I’ve an apartment on Lennox Drive: 246 C. I’ll be there just after one o’clock.’

I heard a door down the passage click open. She heard it too to judge by the way she put down the comb and by the way her face tightened.

A tap sounded on her door and she turned and looked at me.

Her eyes were scared.

‘You’ve made a mistake. I don’t know anyone of the name of Morgan.’ she was saying in a high-pitched voice when the door opened and the hard-faced bouncer came in.

He looked at me.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked in a hoarse croak.

‘What’s it to you?’ I asked, backing away.

‘Get him out of here, Sam,’ Lydia said breathlessly. ‘He’s pestering me.’

The bouncer reached out a huge hand and took in the slack of my coat front. I resisted the temptation to hang one on his jaw. He was wide open for a sucker punch, but I saw Lydia was anxious. She had given me the role of a Romeo and I was stuck with it.

‘I’m going,’ I said. ‘I don’t want any trouble.’

‘You don’t want it, pal, but you’re going to get it,’ the bouncer said and hauled me out of the room into the passage. He hustled me down the passage to the rear exit, opened the door and shoved me into the night.

‘If you show your snout in this joint again, I’ll take you apart and throw the bits to my dog,’ he said, giving me a push that sent me reeling across the sidewalk.

I got back my balance, straightened my coat and smiled at him. It’s not often I get mad, but right now I ached to sink my fist in his face.

‘You and who else?’ I asked and pushed out my jaw.

The temptation was too much for him. He started a swing from his left kneecap that was as ponderous and as slow and as violent as any slap happy bouncer could throw. I let his fist slide past my face, then stepping in, I hung

a right hand punch on the side of his jaw that jarred me down to my heels.

He gave a stifled grunt, his eyeballs rolled back and he spread out on the sidewalk.

III

With two and a half hours to kill, I went back to Benn's bar. He was going to bed, but came down to the hideout when I called him on the telephone.

He looked at my scraped knuckles, but didn't ask questions.

'I want a car,' I said. 'Know anyone who'll rent me one at this hour?'

'Take mine,' he said. 'The garage's at the end of the alley,' and he dropped keys on the table. 'It's a 1943 Lincoln, but I've taken care of it and it goes.'

'That's fine, and thanks,' I said, putting the keys into my pocket. 'One other thing: where's Lennox Drive?'

'You know Cap Bradley's house? It's the second turning past there.' He stifled a yawn. 'If there's nothing else, I'll turn in. I have to work for a living.'

I said there was nothing else.

When he had gone, I turned on the radio and listened to the tail end of a recorded Beethoven's fourth piano concerto.

Around twelve forty-five, I left the hideout, got Benn's car out and drove to Lennox Drive.

Captain Bradley's house was in darkness as I drove past. I was tempted to drop in and tell him the situation to-date, but I hadn't the time and from the look of the house he was in bed.

I left the Lincoln at the corner of Lennox Drive and walked to Lydia's apartment house. Her apartment was on the ground floor at the back. I dug my thumb into the bell push, wondering if she had got back yet. The sound of someone moving to open the door told me she had. The door opened.

I got the shock of my life.

Juan Ortez stood in the doorway, a .45 Colt in his right hand and a cold, vicious gleam in his eyes.

'Keep your hands still,' he said, 'and walk in. Make a wrong move and you'll get it.'

He stood aside.

I walked into a large room with gay curtains, lounging chairs, a table on which stood a bowl of roses, and in one corner was a walnut radiogram playing muted swing music.

Lydia sat on the settee. She didn't look at me. Her face was as white as a fresh fall of snow except for three red marks on her right cheek where someone, presumably Juan, had slapped her.

'Back up against the wall,' Juan said.

He didn't appear to recognize me, but for all that I was shaken. I backed up against the wall and tried to look more scared than I was.

'You've got me all wrong.' I began feverishly.

'Shut up!' he snarled.

He moved backwards so he could watch the two of us.

'Will you listen!' Lydia burst out. 'This fella pushed his way into my dressing room tonight. I've never seen him before. Sam threw him out. He must have followed me back here.'

'You gave him your address,' Juan said softly. 'Sam heard you.'

'Sam's a liar and you know it!' Lydia said hysterically. 'He's always trying to get me into trouble. I didn't give him my address!'

Juan looked at me.

'What do you want here?'

'Nothing,' I said, trying to look scared and sheepish. 'Not now anyway. How was I to know she wasn't alone? I thought we might get friendly if I had the chance to talk to her.'

'Yeah? So you're just a masher, is that it?'

'I just wanted to be friendly,' I said sullenly.

He looked at Lydia and then at me. He didn't seem so sure of himself.

'You make me sick, Juan,' Lydia said, getting to her feet. 'Throw this punk out and get out yourself. I want to go to bed.' She crossed to the table, poured a double whisky into a glass and picked it up.

'Shut up!' Juan snarled. 'I think you two are lying. I'm going to find out who this guy is.'

She shrugged and moved away from the table. She kept moving so she passed close to him. I had an idea what was in her mind and I moved a couple of steps towards the door.

'Hold it!' Juan exclaimed and swung up the gun to cover me.

Lydia threw the whisky in his face and caught his wrist in both her hands, dragging down the gun and wedging her finger in the trigger guard so he couldn't fire. I crossed the room in two jumps and slammed a right to his jaw. His head snapped back, and as he fell, I hit him again.

Lydia straightened, holding the gun. Her eyes burned feverishly as she looked down at Juan. I reached forward and took the gun out of her limp fingers. She gave a little shudder, walked unsteadily over to an armchair and sat down.

‘I shouldn’t have done that,’ she said in a small, thin voice. ‘I shouldn’t have done it!’

‘This guy isn’t going to remain quiet for long,’ I said. ‘You’ve got things to tell me. I can take you somewhere where they won’t bother you. Do you want to come?’

‘There’s nothing else I can do now,’ she said, ‘not after this.’

‘Go and pack. I’ll take care of him.’

She got up and went slowly into the inner room.

I opened Juan’s coat, pulled it down over his elbows and fastened his wrists together with the belt I found around his waist. He opened his eyes as I rolled him over on to his back and he began to mumble. I took the Colt and gave him a sharp rap on the top of his skull. His eyes snapped shut and he went limp again. I tied his ankles together with a curtain cord and gagged him with his handkerchief.

Satisfied he wouldn’t make a nuisance of himself for a while, I went into the inner room to see how Lydia was making out. She was tossing garments into two suitcases; her movements showed her growing panic.

‘Take it easy,’ I said. ‘Nothing’s going to happen.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she said, her voice shaking. ‘I was a fool to have listened to you.’

‘Relax. I’ll take care of you. Here, let me help you.’

‘No! I can manage.’ She shut the lid of one of the cases and began feverishly to complete the packing of the other. ‘I’ve got to get out of town. He’s been waiting for something like this to happen.’

‘Who’s been waiting? Royce?’

‘Yes.’ She shut the second case. ‘Where are you taking me?’

‘I’ve got a car outside. If you think you’ll be safer out of town, I’ll take you. Have you anywhere you can go?’

‘I’ve friends in Frisco. I should have gone to them before. Can you take me there tonight?’

‘Sure,’ I said, thinking I could talk to her on the way. I moved to the door. ‘While you change, I’ll watch Juan. Don’t be long.’

I went out and shut the door.

Juan was still unconscious. I sat down where I could see him and waited.

After twenty minutes or so, Lydia came out of her room. She was wearing a dark grey suit and she had a fur coat over her arm. Her face was fine drawn and white. She glanced quickly at Juan and then her eyes shifted.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ she said.

I went into her room and collected her two suitcases. As I reentered the sitting room, Juan gave a muffled groan and moved uneasily.

‘He’ll be all right,’ I said. ‘Come on.’

I went to the door, set down the cases, opened the door and stepped into the passage. At the far end I could see the front door. A man’s shadow lay across the glass panel: a short bulky man with shoulders that looked as wide as a house.

I stepped back quickly into the sitting room, motioning Lydia to stay where she was. My warning gesture made her catch her breath sharply.

I peered cautiously into the passage. The front door was opening. I quickly shut Lydia’s apartment door.

‘What is it?’ she whispered.

‘There’s a guy out there.’

Softly I turned the key in the lock and waited, listening.

I heard soft footfalls coming down the passage. They stopped outside the door. Then I saw the door handle turn. Lydia backed away, her face ashen, her hand to her mouth. In the silence of the room, knuckles rapping on the door panel made a loud, startling sound.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I

I stepped away from the door as knuckles rapped again. Lydia asked in a voice no louder than the rustle of leaves, 'Who is it?'

'I don't know. A short, thickset guy.' My voice matched hers.

Her eyes dilated.

'It's Borg. He won't be alone.' She looked around the room wildly. 'Don't let him in.'

I saw the door handle turn, and a weight leaned against the door, making it creak.

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her into the bedroom, shut and locked the door.

'You'll have to leave your cases,' I said, going over to the window. I raised it and looked out on to a strip of garden of dark shadows and shrubs. 'We'll go this way.'

She joined me. I picked her up and swung her through the window into the garden, then scrambled out after her.

'My car's at the corner. Can we get around to it?'

'Yes. I'll show you.'

She ran down the strip of lawn to a gate.

'Let me go first,' I said, pulling out Juan's gun.

I opened the gate and stepped into a deserted alley that stretched away into darkness.

I started down the alley, moving quietly. Lydia followed, almost treading on my heels. I could hear her quick, frightened breathing. The end of the alley led out into a side street. At the top of the street I could see the gleam of my parking lights. The street seemed empty. Taking Lydia's arm and keeping in the shadows, I started towards the car.

'Who's this guy Borg?' I asked her.

'One of Royce's men,' she said. 'They won't let me get away.'

'They haven't got you yet.'

We reached within twenty feet of the Lincoln, then I stopped.

‘I’ll go first. You wait here. Be ready to move fast.’

I stepped away from her and cautiously moved to the street corner. I looked up Lennox Drive. A big car stood outside Lydia’s apartment house. A man stood by it, looking towards the house. I crossed the sidewalk to the Lincoln, opened the door and slid into the driving seat.

‘Come on!’ I called softly.

I had the engine running as she darted into the car, and the car moving as she slammed the door.

Maybe Benn had looked after the Lincoln, but as soon as I started to feed gas into the engine, I knew I wasn’t going to get much of a performance from it. This wasn’t a car to be in to shake off a fast pursuit.

The driving mirror remained dark: no telltale headlights showed behind me, and I hoped that our getaway hadn’t been spotted.

I swung the car on to the main road leading out of Tampa City and gradually built up the Lincoln’s speed to fifty-five. At that speed the car began to rock.

I took out a pack of cigarettes from my pocket and dropped it into her lap.

‘Light me one and have one yourself,’ I said, my eyes shifting to the driving mirror again to make sure no car was following us.

‘Can’t you go faster?’ she asked.

Her hands were shaking so badly she had trouble getting the cigarettes out of the pack.

‘I might at a pinch, but this is fast enough so long as they’re not following us.’

She lit the cigarettes and gave me one.

‘Let’s talk,’ I said. I didn’t want to scare her, but I wasn’t too sure how much time we had before they came after us. What do you know about Frances Bennett?’

‘What has happened to her? Where is she?’

I gave it to her without gloves.

‘She’s dead. She was fished out of a pond in Welden. Royce stayed with her at a hotel in Welden. She was working at a club there. The night she disappeared, Royce left the town.’

I saw Lydia clench her fists tightly in her lap.

‘So she’s dead. Well, I warned her, the little fool. She wouldn’t listen. I

told her Royce was using her for his own convenience. He wouldn't fall for a stupid little fool like her.'

'Don't cut the corners,' I said. 'Let me have it from the beginning. What was Royce to you?'

She hunched her shoulders and leaned forward to stare at the two pools of light thrown by the Lincoln's headlamps as they raced ahead of us.

'What was he to me? Everything. We were fixed to be married,' she said in a cold, flat voice, and I didn't believe her.

'We were happy; he was crazy about me. Then suddenly it blew up in my face. He started to cool. He wasn't subtle about it either. I thought at first it was the Van Blake woman. She was always coming to the club. You know the club belonged to her husband?'

I said I knew.

'But I found out it wasn't her. It was the Bennett girl. She and Royce were meeting secretly. I had them watched. When he was supposed to be at the club in the morning, he was driving her around. When he told me to go back to the apartment as he had things to do at the club, he was taking her to dinner at Lodoni's where no one knew either of them.'

'Was this before Van Blake's death?'

She turned her head to stare at me. In the dim light from the dashboard I could see her eyes were glittering with unshed tears.

'What's Van Blake's murder to do with her?'

'I don't know; nothing perhaps. I was trying to fix the time.'

'It was just before; two weeks.'

'You said they were meeting secretly. How secretly? Did anyone know what was going on?'

'No. I wouldn't have known if I hadn't hired an investigator to watch her.'

'But why should Royce bother to keep it quiet? Was he scared you'd make trouble?'

She laughed; it wasn't a pretty sound.

'With the thugs he has to look after him, he didn't have to be scared of anyone.'

'Then why keep it secret?'

'I don't know. I tried to find out, but I didn't get anywhere. I talked to the girl. She was crazy about him. I could see that by the way her silly face lit up when I mentioned his name, but she denied ever going out with him. I was

fool enough to tell her I had had her watched. That was the worst mistake I've ever made.' Again her fists closed into tight, white knuckled fists. 'She told Royce. He came back to the apartment, and I could tell by his face it was my finish with him. I thought he was going to kill me. He told me to pack up and get out. I was too frightened even to speak. I think that's why he didn't kill me. He stood in the bedroom doorway and watched me while I packed. When I was ready to go, he got hold of my arms and held me while he talked. I had bruises from his fingers on my arms for weeks. He said I was not to leave town. I was to work at the Hey-Day club and I was never to talk about his affairs. He said Juan was going to be my jailer. If I ever talked about him, tried to leave town or came near him, Juan would take care of me. I could see he meant it. That's how I've been living for the past eighteen months. I haven't seen him to talk to for all that time. He never gave me a thing: not a nickel. And now look what I've done. If they catch up with me, they'll kill me.'

'They won't catch up with you,' I said, urging the car up to fifty-seven. I still had a little in reserve, but not much. The engine was so noisy we were practically shouting at each other now. I drove for a minute or so while I brooded over what she had told me. It hadn't taken me far. At least, I had a witness now to prove Royce and Rutland were one and the same, and that put Royce in the middle of Fay's disappearance. That was something, but I knew there must be a lot more to this than I knew. 'Ever heard of a guy who called himself Hank Flemming?' I asked abruptly.

She shook her head.

'No. Why?'

'He's hooked up in this. Maybe you've seen him. He's short, thickset with a round, heavy face. The last time I saw him he wore a dirty trench coat and a black slouch hat. Remember seeing anyone like that?'

It was a shot in the dark, but it scored a bull.

'Andrews saw him.'

'Andrews?'

'He was the investigator I hired. He gave me a description of a man just like that.'

'Where did he see him?'

'He was at Lodon's restaurant one night when Royce and the Bennett girl were there. Andrews spotted this man in a car outside the restaurant. Royce

took the Bennett girl past the car and as they passed, he dropped back a little and pointed to the girl. The man left the car after a while and went to the door of the restaurant and watched her. Andrews said it was as if Royce had put the finger on her, but I didn't believe him. He wasn't much of an investigator. He was always trying to chisel money out of me. I thought it was just a story he had made up to make me think he was doing more than he was.'

Now I was learning something. So it was Royce who had hired Flemming to murder Fay.

I started to ask her if Andrews had seen the man again when I happened to glance in the driving mirror. I had been listening so intently to what Lydia had been saying, my attention had strayed from the thought of pursuit. What I saw in the mirror gave me a jolt. Two big yellow blobs of light hung in the darkness behind me. Maybe they were half a mile in the rear, but they were coming fast.

Lydia saw them at the same time as I did.

I heard her catch her breath as I shoved my foot down on the gas pedal.

II

The four lane highway was as straight as a yard stick and as dark as a chimney. With a flat out speed of sixty miles an hour I knew I had no chance of shaking off the pursuing car. The yellow blobs of light crept closer.

Lydia, looking over her shoulder through the rear window, watched them, hypnotized, her face pallid in the light of the dashboard, her eyes wild and staring. I nudged her with my knee.

‘Can we get off this road?’ I shouted above the noise of the engine.

She came alive with an effort.

‘There’s a turning somewhere ahead.’

I snapped off the headlights. The following car was still a quarter of a mile or so in the rear. I searched the darkness for an intersection sign and nearly missed it.

‘Just ahead now,’ Lydia cried, clutching my arm.

‘Watch out!’

I stamped on the brake pedal as the turning loomed up. The car tyres screamed in protest. Lydia, her hands on the dashboard, swayed forward and sideways against me as the Lincoln slewed around, the back wheels locked. The car wobbled, the offside wheels lifted as I released the brakes, then we shot down the turning on to a snake back road that forced my speed down to a dangerous thirty.

Without headlights and with the twists and bends I had all I could do not to run off the road. After I had driven three hundred yards or so, Lydia who was staring back through the rear window gasped, ‘They’ve passed! They’ve missed us!’

‘Where does this road lead to?’ I asked, turning on my headlights. I edged the speed up to thirty-five.

‘Glyne Bay. It’s a small beach town.’

‘Can we get back on to the Frisco road from there?’

‘No. This is the only road in and out. They’ll come back.’ She beat her fists together hysterically. ‘They’ll know we’ve taken this turning.’

I thought that was likely but I didn’t say so.

‘Take it easy. We’ll ditch the car and hide up somewhere. If I can get to a

telephone I'll call the Welden police. Glyne Bay's in their district.'

The road straightened, and ahead I could make out the haze of street lights. I increased speed.

Lydia's grip on my arm tightened.

'They're coming!' she gasped.

I looked into the driving mirror. In the rear, on the snake back road, I could see the blaze of headlights. I pushed the gas pedal to the boards and the Lincoln surged forward. Ahead, I saw a neon sign that ran: Turn left for Glyne Beach Motel.

I turned off my headlights, swung the car left, banged and rocked down a narrow drive-in that led to a large car park where forty to fifty cars stood in two long rows. I slammed on brakes, nailed the Lincoln beside a dusty Ford, opened the car door and slid out.

'Come on!'

I could see the headlights of the following car turn into the drive-in. Catching Lydia by the wrist, I ran with her across the car park, through a double gateway, along a cinder path that opened out on to a big grass covered lot around which were fifty or so cabins.

The cabin that housed the renting office stood in the middle of the lot. It was in darkness. I had Juan's gun in my hand now. Looking back I saw the car park was alight from the following car's headlamps.

I paused long enough to try the office door, but it was locked. There was no time to fool around. We had to get under cover. We had only seconds to do it in.

I heard someone running down the cinder path towards us. I bolted with Lydia across the grass towards a row of dark cabins. One of them had a 'vacant' sign hanging on the front door handle. I let go of Lydia's hand, jumped up the two steps, took off the sign, stepped off the stoop, caught her hand again and pulled her around to the back of the cabin. I tossed the sign into the darkness.

'We'll get in here,' I panted.

One of the back windows was unlatched. I got my fingers under the window frame and pushed the window up. Then I put one arm around Lydia's waist, the other under her knees and swung her through the window. I climbed in after her, shut and latched the window.

'They'll find us here,' she said. 'They'll trap us.'

‘Maybe they won’t,’ I said, crouching by the window while I looked into the darkness.

She came near me. I could hear her quick, light breathing. I didn’t see anyone. I didn’t hear anything.

‘Stay here while I see if there’s a telephone,’ I said.

I groped my way across the room, found a door, opened it and stepped into darkness. I scratched a match alight. Down a passage, on the left was a door. Flicking the match out, I turned the handle and moved into what appeared to be a sitting room. Crossing to the window I looked out, keeping to one side. Right in the middle of the neatly cut lawn I saw the dim outline of Borg. His wide shoulders and squat body were unmistakable. His back was turned to the cabin. The faint light of a cloud-covered moon reflected on the steel barrel of a gun he held in his hand.

I pulled the curtains across the windows, struck another match and spotted a telephone standing on a table near the window. I went over to it, lifted the receiver and dialled emergency.

The operator sounded eager to be of service.

‘Give me the Welden police,’ I said.

I waited in the darkness, my shirt sticking to my back, my heart thumping while I listened to the clicking on the line.

A voice growled, ‘Welden police headquarters.’

‘Captain Creed there?’

‘No, he isn’t. Who’s calling?’

‘Give me Sergeant Scaife.’

‘Hold a moment.’

More clicking rapped against my ear, then Scaife’s voice said, ‘Scaife talking.’

‘This is Sladen. I’m in a motel at Glyne Beach. A couple of gunmen are looking for me and I want help. What can you do?’

‘I’ll fix it,’ he said briskly. ‘I’ve a prowler car in that district. It’ll be over to you in ten minutes.’

‘Hey! Make it faster than that. These guys mean business.’

‘I’ll fix it,’ he said and rung off.

I groped my way back to the other room. Lydia was standing against the wall by the window, looking out into the darkness.

‘The police are on their way,’ I told her. ‘They’ll be here any moment.’

Seen anyone out there?’

‘No.’

I could feel her trembling.

We waited, side by side, watching and listening. Suddenly her hand closed over my wrist. Her flesh felt cold.

‘Did you hear something?’ she whispered.

I listened, holding my breath.

Somewhere in the cabin a board creaked. In the silence it sounded loud and startling.

Lydia shivered, and her grip tightened.

‘Take it easy,’ I said, my lips close to her face. ‘Move as quietly as you can,’ and I led her across the room to the door. I stood her against the wall so that if the door opened she would be behind it.

Another board creaked outside, then I heard the door down the passage open.

‘They’re here,’ Lydia gasped.

‘Leave it to me,’ I said, not feeling anything like as confident as I sounded.

A soft scraping noise outside in the passage set my heart thumping. Then I heard the door handle creak as a hand closed over it. Stepping in front of Lydia, my finger on the trigger of the gun, I waited.

The door swung open, pinning us behind it. Lydia’s fingers were digging into my wrist. I hoped feverishly she wouldn’t panic and start to scream.

Through the crack between the door and the door jamb I caught sight of a squat, wide-shouldered shadow. For some moments Borg stood in the doorway, peering into the dark room, then he took two steps forward that brought him into the room. I was tense and waiting. I heard him cross to the window. His next move must be to look behind the door, and then it would be a question of who would shoot the faster. I wasn’t going to wait for that moment. The advantage was too much on his side. I pulled my wrist from Lydia’s grip, slid past her and out from behind the shelter of the door.

Borg had opened the window and was leaning forward to peer into the darkness.

With my heart in my mouth, I rushed him.

He was jerking back and turning as I reached him. I had the gun by its barrel and I struck at his head. He was badly placed, startled and off balance, but he did manage to shift his head enough to avoid absorbing most of the

blow. The gun butt scraped down the side of his face, dazing him. His gun dropped out of his hand as he lurched into me, his great arms instinctively closing around mine. It was like being caught in the hug of a bear. I tried to shove him off, but I might just as well have shoved against the Empire State building. He was half a foot shorter than

I was, and he used that advantage to drive the top of his head, that felt like a slab of concrete, under my jaw.

The impact was like being hit with a rock and I felt my knees buckle. He tried the same dodge again, but this time I managed to get my jaw out of the way. I hooked my heel around the back of his leg and heaved forward. He lost balance, and we went to the floor with a crash that nearly brought in the roof of the cabin.

It was my luck I fell on top of him. The jolt sent my gun out of my hand and away into the darkness. The fall broke his hold. I was scrambling to my feet when a fist whistled out of the

darkness and caught me on my bicep. He could punch like a professional and the force of the blow sent me down.

Grunting he came at me. I swung up a foot, got it in the middle of his barrel of a chest, grabbed one of his arms and heaved. He went over me like a heaved sack of coal and crashed against the wall.

I got to my feet, grabbed up a chair and slammed it down on his head as he got up on hands and knees. He flattened out, heaved up again and caught me under the knees before I could hit him again.

I took a toss that beat most of the breath out of me, and he was on top of me by the time I got my head clear. I shoved my open hand into his face, holding him back, but I took a chopping blow on the side of my neck that turned me sick. I shoved him away and as he scrambled towards me again, I kicked him in the chest.

He rolled over on his back, but he could take any amount of that kind of stuff. He was getting to his feet as my hand closed around the leg of the bedside table. His head was outlined against the window, and it made a nice target. I hit him on the exact top of his head with the table which flew to pieces under the impact.

He flattened out and stayed out.

Panting, I bent over him, turned him on his back to make sure he wasn't foxing. I felt as if I had been snarled up with a bulldozer. I looked across the

room for Lydia, but I couldn't see her.

'Lydia!'

She didn't answer.

I fumbled my way across to the electric light switch and turned the light on.

She wasn't in the room.

As I ran out into the passage, shouting her name, I heard the sound of an approaching police siren.

III

I jerked open the cabin door and ran out on to the verandah. Away through the trees I could see the blaze of approaching car headlights.

A yellow flash of flame came from across the lawn, something zipped past my face and carved splinters from the front door. The crash of gunfire shattered the silence of the night, and I hurriedly ducked back under cover.

I had forgotten the second gunman, and he had nearly fixed me. I bolted down the passage into the back room for my gun. The sight of the empty room made my nerves crawl.

Borg had made a pretty quick recovery. He was either hiding in the cabin or he had left by the window. I snatched up the gun, jumped across the room and turned off the light.

Cautiously I made my way down the passage to the front door again.

I heard a car pull up with a screeching of tyres. Car doors slammed, then two policemen, guns in hand, came running down the cinder path. From across the lawn, behind the shelter of a cabin, there was a flash and a bang of gunfire.

The two policemen scattered like startled hens, diving behind trees. One of them fired at the cabin. There was a crash of glass and a woman screamed.

Lights began to flash up in the cabins, spilling through the windows on to the lawn.

I caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure, squat and thickset moving stealthily towards the trees. It was Borg. Lifting my gun, I fired at him. He broke into a run, but before he could reach the shelter of the trees, one of the policemen fired at him, and his shooting was more accurate than mine.

Borg went down on one knee, struggled up, then came slowly out into the open. The gun in his hand blazed. The two policemen both fired at him. Staggering back, he dropped his gun and spread out on the grass.

The second gunman made a dash for the cinder path. One of the policemen spun around, jerked up his gun and fired. The gunman dropped, rolled over, tried to get up on hands and knees, then slumped down on the cinders.

‘You’ve got both of them now,’ I shouted and moved out on to the verandah.

The two policemen came cautiously towards me, covering me with their guns.

‘I’m Sladen,’ I said, careful not to move. It struck me these two might be trigger happy.

‘Drop that gun!’ one of them rapped out.

I put the gun on the verandah floor.

‘Okay; now identify yourself.’

I gave him my press card and driving licence.

‘Okay, Mr. Sladen,’ the policeman said. ‘Looks like we turned up about right. Sergeant Scaife’s sending another car. It should be here any moment.’

‘Did you see a girl around?’ I asked.

‘Didn’t see anyone except those two punks.’

Then I caught sight of Lydia as she came out of the shadows.

She walked unsteadily and slowly towards me.

‘There she is,’ I said and ran over to her.

Before I could reach her, she folded at the knees and dropped on the grass. The two policemen joined me as I bent over her. For a moment I thought she had been shot, but there was no sign of blood. One of the policemen felt her pulse.

‘She’ll be okay,’ he said. ‘She’s fainted.’

By this time people were crowding out of the cabins and were forming groups around the two dead gunmen. Approaching sirens brought two more squad cars bouncing down the drive-in.

‘I’ll get her to my car,’ I said, picking Lydia up.

With the two policemen either side of me, I carried her to the car park where the squad cars were unloading.

A sergeant came over to me.

‘Sladen?’

‘That’s right.’

‘The Captain wants you back at headquarters. Who’s the girl? Is she hurt?’

‘No; just fainted.’ I got Lydia into the Lincoln. ‘She’s part of the story. Are you going to give me an escort?’

‘I’ll send someone with you.’

He told one of his men to drive us to headquarters, then calling to his men, he went off down the cinder path.

It took us under an hour to reach headquarters. On the way, Lydia came out of her faint. She seemed pretty badly shocked and after I had assured her she had nothing to worry about, she relaxed against me, her head on my shoulder.

Scaife was waiting as we pulled up outside headquarters. He stared blankly at me as I helped Lydia out.

‘The guy hiding behind this moustache is your old pal Sladen,’ I said.

‘Pretty smart,’ he said, grinning. ‘You had me foxed for a moment. Looks as if you’ve been having fun. Come on in. The Captain’s just shown up. I got him out of bed. Better watch your step. He’s as mad as a bear with a boil.’

While he was talking he looked curiously at Lydia who leaned against me and stared at him with scared eyes.

‘Let’s go on in,’ I said.

We climbed the stairs to Creed’s office.

‘While I talk to the Captain, will you look after Miss Forrest?’ I said. ‘She’s had a shock and needs a rest.’

‘Sure,’ Scaife said. ‘You come with me.’ He went on to Lydia. ‘I’ll fix you up.’

Leaving them I rapped on the police captain’s door, pushed it open and walked in.

Creed sat at his desk. His heavy face was drawn and tired. The wall clock told me it was twenty minutes past three. I felt quite a wreck myself. For a moment he stared hard at me.

‘Sladen reporting,’ I said.

‘You seem to have got yourself into a pretty fine mess,’ Creed growled.

‘I guess I have,’ I said, hooking a chair towards me with my foot. ‘Mathis is after me, and I had to change my appearance to keep my freedom of movement. I’ve brought a witness along with me. Her name’s Lydia Forrest. She’s the ex-girlfriend of Hamilton Royce. Have you read my report?’

He nodded.

‘Let me bring you up to date,’ I said, sitting down. I gave him a detailed account of what had happened since writing the report and concluded by saying, ‘Miss Forrest can prove Royce and Fay knew each other, and I can get hold of this private investigator, Andrews, who can prove Royce fingered Fay to Flemming.’

Creed took out a cigar, bit off the end before saying, ‘That won’t do us

much good. So long as he remains in Tampa City we can't touch him. I've checked the gun you sent in. It was stolen from a gunshop in Frisco eight years ago. It could have belonged to anyone. There're no prints on it.' He lit his cigar, then asked, 'What's the motive behind Hartley's murder?'

'As far as I can make out the motive behind all these murders is panic,' I said, shaking a cigarette from the pack and lighting it. 'Since Fay disappeared there have been five murders that can be linked to her. Let's look at them in rotation: first was Joe Farmer. He helped kidnap her. He was a lush; the kind of guy who might talk when he was drunk. He was dangerous, so he was knocked off by a hit and run car. Joan Nichols was next. She was a blackmailer, and it's my bet she picked up some information when she was in Paris and tried to cash in on it. She too was silenced. Then fourteen months later, just when everything had quietened down, Jake Hesson made a mistake. He admitted to me he knew Fay. He was promptly knocked off before I could put pressure on him. Hartley offered you information. When I first called on him he hadn't much to tell me, but later, he may have thought of something. Anyway, he called me and said he had a theory that might interest me. But he was knocked off before I could get to him. Probably his servant saw the killer and he had to go too. The whole setup smells to me of panic. Someone is desperately trying to keep a murder quiet. I have an idea it's Van Blake's murder and not Fay's that the killer is trying to cover up. There must be a pretty good reason why six people have been murdered, and five million bucks is a good reason. That's what Van Blake left his wife.'

Creed ran his fingers through his hair while he scowled at me.

'You think Royce and the Van Blake woman are behind all these killings?'

'I'm sure they are.'

'But you're guessing. Where's the hook up between Van Blake's murder and Fay Benson?'

'If I knew that the case would be solved. There is a hookup. There must be. Look at it this way: Royce dropped his girlfriend for Fay. But he went around with Fay in secret. Why in secret? If Miss Forrest hadn't had Fay watched no one would have known Royce and she had teamed up. Royce fingered Fay to Flemming. He then took her to Welden where no one knew her and he was careful not to be seen with her there. Flemming, Farmer and Hesson kidnapped her, and Flemming killed her. He took a lot of care about hiding her body. Mrs. Van Blake knew her. She must have done. You should have

seen how she reacted when I showed her Fay's photograph. Hartley employed Fay as his model. I think he remembered something about her that was dangerous to either Royce or Mrs. Van Blake. He got shot before he could talk. Of course there's a hookup. We've got to find out what it is.'

'Yeah,' Creed said, impressed in spite of himself. 'Well, how are we going to do it?'

'There's an essential clue missing,' I said, getting to my feet. 'Maybe Low will dig it up in Paris. I've sent him over there to trace Mrs. Van Blake's movement. I'm hoping he'll find out what Joan Nichols found out. I'm now going back to Tampa City. Royce was pretty anxious to silence Miss Forrest and he's failed. He and Mrs. Van Blake might panic, and I want to be there if they do.'

'You're sticking your neck out, Sladen,' Creed said seriously. 'If Mathis arrests you for murder, there's nothing I can do about it.'

'I'll chance it. The solution to this case is in Tampa City. Until we crack the case, don't let Miss Forrest leave here. She'll be an important witness, and we can't afford to lose her.'

'I keep telling you,' Creed said impatiently, 'we haven't any say-so in Tampa City. Royce and the Van Blake woman could get away with this even if you got proof. I can't see Doonan putting a millionairess on trial.'

'He'll put her on trial if I can prove she killed her husband,' I said. 'You might not be able to do anything about it, but I can. We'll print the whole story with statements and photographs in Crime Facts. That'll smoke Doonan out. He'll have to put her on trial.'

Creed's face brightened.

'That's an idea, but you'll have to get proof that'll stand up.'

'When I get it, my proof will do more than stand up: it'll jump right at him and bite him,' I said as I made for the door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I

A girl in a grubby white sweater looked at me from over a portable typewriter and raised pencilled eyebrows.

‘If you want Mr. Andrews,’ she said distantly, ‘he isn’t in.’

The office was big enough to swing a cat in, but only just. Behind where the girl sat was a door marked Private. A fireproof filing cabinet stood by the window. An armchair for clients, its headrest greasy from the impact of hair oil spread over many years faced me.

‘I did want to see him,’ I said, closing the door. ‘Will he be long?’

She looked at the fly blown clock on the wall. It told her it was twenty minutes past ten.

‘He’s usually here by now.’

‘Then I’ll wait.’

I sat on the arm of the chair which creaked ominously under my weight and set fire to a cigarette. The girl looked doubtfully at me, decided I was no business of hers and turned her attention to the typewriter. Time drifted by, punctuated by the clicks of the typewriter keys. I mentally dozed.

I had got back to Tampa City around five-thirty this morning and had gone to ground in the hideout. I had slept until nine-thirty, then after a cup of coffee and a brief word with Benn, I had driven over to Murrow Street where Benn had told me Andrews had his office.

After seeing Andrews, I intended to talk to Irene Jarrard, Fay’s girlfriend, and if I could get any new information from her, to persuade her to see Creed. Then I thought a call on Vincent

Latimer, Van Blake’s ex-secretary, might pay dividends in spite of Captain Bradley’s warning that Latimer was no talker. The hands of the wall clock stood at ten forty-five when the outer office door jerked open and a lanky man in a light grey suit, much creased and spotted, entered hurriedly.

He looked sharply at me, and his small, close set eyes alerted. Then he smiled hopefully, revealing big plastic teeth. He looked exactly what he was:

a man who had spent half a lifetime sneaking up and down hotel corridors, listening at keyholes and standing out in the cold and rain with stoic patience.

‘You wanted me?’ he asked, looked at the girl and then back to me.

‘Mr. Andrews?’

‘That’s right. Come on in.’

His long thin legs took him to the door marked Private. He produced a key, unlocked the door, turned and said to the girl, ‘As soon as this gentleman has gone, Miss Fairely, I’ll have my mail.’

She stared blankly at him.

‘There isn’t any,’ she said.

He tried not to show how much he would like to slap her, and waved me into the office.

I walked into a room the size of a cupboard and squeezed against the wall to let him get around the battered desk.

‘I didn’t get your name,’ he said, waving me to an upright chair.

I sat down. My knees touched the front of the desk.

‘I’m a staff writer on Crime Facts, and at the moment I am working with the Welden police.’

The fixed smile vanished like a rat down a hole, and the small green eyes turned stony.

‘What’s that to do with me?’ he asked, resting his elbows on the desk and cupping his bony chin between his not too clean hands.

‘Some time ago you were hired to watch a showgirl who worked at the Golden Apple club: Frances Bennett.’ I took out Fay’s photograph and laid it on the desk in front of him. ‘This girl.’

He looked down at the photograph, then up at me, and his lips turned down at the corners.

‘Look, Jack,’ he said, his voice suddenly tough, ‘you’re wasting your time. I don’t talk about my clients. If that’s all you have to say, pull up your anchor and steam out of here.’

‘Your client, Miss Forrest, is with the Welden police right now, giving them a statement. We want you to support her statement. I can put some money and a lot of publicity your way if you will go to Welden and see Police Captain Creed. You’ll be the first private dick to have his photograph in Crime Facts.’

He pushed his hat to the back of his head while he stared at me.

‘What is all this?’

‘Frances Bennett was murdered in Welden. You say Royce fingered her to Flemming, a Frisco killer. That’s right, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t know any Flemming.’

‘But you saw Royce finger the girl to a guy in a car, didn’t you?’

‘Suppose I did?’

‘I want you to sign a statement to that effect.’

Andrews moved his plastic teeth while he did some fast thinking.

‘What’s it worth?’ he asked at last.

‘Publicity and thirty a day expenses.’

He brooded some more then shook his head.

‘I’ve got to live here, pal. You’re after Royce, aren’t you? You’re kidding yourself. You won’t get him: he’s too smart. How long do you imagine I’d last if he found out I’d made a statement about him to the Welden police? Ten minutes, maybe fifteen, but not more. That guy’s dangerous. The cops in this town love him. No: you don’t get any statement from me.’

‘You don’t seem to cotton on,’ I said patiently. ‘The girl was murdered. If you withhold information from the police you become an accessory.’

He frowned down at his desk.

‘I don’t know she’s murdered. I don’t know anything.’

By now I was sick of him and sick of his dirty little office. I gave it to him without gloves.

‘You either go to Welden right now and give Creed a statement or I’ll print your refusal to cooperate in Crime Facts. If I do that you’ll lose your licence.’

That seemed to hit him where he lived.

‘Now, wait a minute,’ he said hastily. ‘If you did that I’d sue you and your rag.’

I laughed.

‘Go ahead and sue us. We’d love it.’

He sat staring at me for a long moment, then he shrugged his shoulders.

‘Yeah, I guess you would. Well, okay, I know when I’m beat. It serves me right. I should never have taken on that job. Watching Royce was asking for trouble. I’ll see Creed.’

I took out my billfold and put twelve five dollar bills on the desk.

‘That’s two days retainer. I’ll call Creed and tell him you’re on your way in.’

He snapped up the bills and put them out of sight as if he were scared I might change my mind.

‘How long did you watch Miss Bennett?’ I asked.

‘Three days and two nights.’

‘During that time she was mostly with Royce?’

‘The first day she wasn’t. She went out to the Van Blakes’ place in the morning.’

I stiffened to attention.

‘When was this?’

He thought for a moment, then opening a drawer in his desk he took out a thick notebook, flicked through the pages, studied an entry and put the book back.

‘The morning of July 27th.’

‘Did she go in a cab?’

‘No. Lennox Hartley, the magazine artist, called for her. They went together in his car.’

‘How long did they stay?’

‘I don’t know. There was a guard on the gate and I couldn’t hang around. I picked her up at her apartment again in the late evening.’

‘You’re sure it was Hartley who was with her?’

‘Yeah; I know the guy well by sight.’

I asked more questions, but he hadn’t any further information to give me that Lydia Forrest hadn’t already told me.

‘Okay,’ I said, getting to my feet. ‘Get off to Creed right away. He’ll be expecting you.’

From Andrews’ office I drove to a drug store and called Creed. I told him Andrews was on his way in.

‘I’ve got something for you,’ Creed said after I had told him Fay had been with Hartley to the Van Blakes’ house. ‘Two years ago, Mrs. Van Blake bought a green and cream Cadillac convertible from Manning and Howland, the San Francisco dealers. She traded it in on August 20th last year, three days after Fay’s disappearance, for a Bentley. Looks like she lent the car to

Royce, doesn’t it? No other car of that description has been sold in Tampa City. It must be the one Royce used in Welden.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Well, we seem to be making progress. I’m going after more witnesses now. I’ll keep in touch,’ and I hung up.

I turned up Irene Jarrard's telephone number and put through a call, but there was no answer. That didn't surprise me. She would be at work at this time in the morning.

I turned up the Hammerville Engineering Works and put through a call to Vincent Latimer. After a struggle, I persuaded Latimer's secretary to let me talk to Latimer. When I told him I had urgent and private business to discuss with him, he said he could give me ten minutes if I called within the next half hour.

At thirty-three minutes past eleven, I was ushered into his office by a dark, cool-eyed lovely who said in a well-modulated voice, 'Mr. Sladen is here, Mr. Latimer,' as if he couldn't see me, and went away, shutting the door as if it were made of icing sugar.

Vincent Latimer turned out to be a large-sized man, bursting with good living and self-importance, whose brick-red face and cold hard eyes put him into the top executive class even without the trappings of a massive desk and a battery of telephones. He waved me to a chair while he went through the standard formula of finishing reading a document, then jerking off his heavy shell spectacles, he stared at me and barked, 'Well, what is it?'

'I want your help, Mr. Latimer,' I said. 'I'm working with the Welden police. It may be possible you have information that will help solve a fourteen months old murder case.'

That took him out of his stride. For a moment his mouth fell open; then he snapped it shut and glared.

'What information could I possibly have?' he demanded.

'Whose murder?'

'A girl called Frances Bennett. Maybe you've heard of her.'

I could see by his expression the name struck a note.

'Frances Bennett? That couldn't be the girl who stood in for Mrs. Van Blake's portrait, could it?'

It was my turn to stare.

'This girl,' I said, handing over Fay's photograph. He studied the photograph, then nodded. He seemed a little shaken.

'That's the one. You say she's been murdered?'

'Yes. We found her body last week in a barrel of cement in a lake in Welden. She's been dead fourteen months.'

He grimaced.

‘I’m sorry, but I can’t see what this has to do with me.’

‘You said just now Miss Bennett posed for Mrs. Van Blake’s portrait. Was that the portrait painted by Lennox Hartley?’

‘It was, but that has nothing to do with her murder.’

‘Any light we can get on the girl is important. Why did she pose for the portrait?’

‘Mrs. Van Blake was always very occupied. This girl happened to have Mrs. Van Blake’s exact measurements. After Mr. Hartley had completed Mrs. Van Blake’s head, this girl posed for the rest of the picture.’

My heart began to thump with excitement.

‘Was Miss Bennett like Mrs. Van Blake then?’

‘Certainly she was. She was extraordinarily like her. Not in features, but in build and the way she moved. As a matter of fact I saw her sitting on the balcony in Mrs. Van Blake’s dress while Hartley was painting her and I thought she was Mrs. Van Blake. It was only when I got close to her that I realized she wasn’t.’

I sat back and stared at him.

So here was the hook up at last!

II

The discreet buzz of one of the telephones gave me a moment to calm down. Latimer located the telephone, snapped into the receiver that he was not to be disturbed and replaced the receiver with an ominous click.

‘How many times did Miss Bennett pose for the portrait?’ I asked.

He seemed to find this an irrelevant question for he frowned impatiently, shot his cuff and looked at his gold strap watch.

‘Three or four times I think. I can’t give you much longer. Was there anything else you wanted to know?’

I knew now I was on the point of breaking the case and I wasn’t going to be hustled away. I played a card I was sure would nail his attention.

‘There is a question,’ I said. ‘Who do you think murdered Mr. Van Blake?’

He stiffened; his fleshy face darkened and he leaned across the desk to glare at me.

‘What do you mean by that? What has Mr. Van Blake’s death to do with you?’

‘Are you aware that Captain Bradley thinks Mrs. Van Blake was responsible for her husband’s death?’

‘Captain Bradley had no right to say such a thing! He had no proof, and he lost his job because he was stupid enough to suspect her.’

‘Do you think Dillon killed Mr. Van Blake?’

He hesitated, then said curtly, ‘How do I know? It’s not my business to be a policeman. The police thought so: what more do you want?’

‘Mr. Van Blake was supposed to have horsewhipped Dillon. Captain Bradley thought this was unlikely.’

‘Of course it was: it was absurd. Mr. Van Blake was always extremely lenient with poachers. I caught Dillon several times on the estate, but Mr. Van Blake wouldn’t prosecute him. Of course it was utter nonsense.’

‘And yet Mrs. Van Blake said he horsewhipped Dillon, and that supplied the motive to the murder.’

Latimer moved uneasily.

‘I know that. I told Commissioner Doonan that Mr. Van Blake would never have done such a thing, but it was my word against hers, and Doonan

preferred to believe her.’ He frowned down at his snowy blotter, then went on, ‘Another reason why I thought it was unlikely that Dillon had done it was that he didn’t use a gun when he poached. He worked at night with a flashlight and a catapult, blinding the pheasants with the light and knocking them down with his catapult. In this way, he could work close to the house without us hearing him. Mr. Van Blake was murdered in a clearing beyond the woods where there were no pheasants. Dillon always poached by the summer house on the west side of the estate.’

‘Would that be far from where Mr. Van Blake was killed?’

He got up, went to a filing cabinet and took out a folded map.

‘This is a map of the estate,’ he said, spreading it out on his desk. ‘This is where Mr. Van Blake was shot. Here’s the summer house. It’s a good half mile between the two places as you can see.’

I studied the map.

‘How was it that Dillon could get into the estate? Weren’t there guards patrolling?’

‘We had a guard on the gate and a guard patrolling the gardens near the house. Dillon used to come in through this gate by the main road, up through the clearing, into the wood and down to the summer house,’ Latimer said, tracing the route with his finger on the map.

‘Then he did pass the place where Mr. Van Blake was shot?’

‘Yes, but he came only at night. He wouldn’t have been there at seven o’clock in the morning, when Mr. Van Blake was shot.’

‘I wonder if you would lend me this map for a couple of days?’

‘All right; you can have it, but I want it back.’

‘You’ll have it back. I think Captain Bradley was right. I’m convinced Mrs. Van Blake is responsible for the death of her husband.’

He sat down, stared at his hands for a long moment before saying, ‘She couldn’t have done it. She was in Paris at the time. I admit she has the motive. She didn’t get on well with Van Blake. Although he was extremely fond of her, he didn’t approve of her extravagance and they quarrelled. There were rumours that she and this fellow Royce were lovers. She tried to persuade her husband to sell the Golden Apple club to Royce, but Van Blake wouldn’t have it. I know he was planning to get rid of Royce before he died.’ He drummed on the desk with well-manicured fingers, went on, ‘At the time, I was in a difficult position. Van Blake left me in a position of trust. It was

difficult to contradict Mrs. Van Blake's statements to the press. Anyway, I didn't want to get mixed up in the case. I was glad to leave.'

As I folded the map, I said, 'Mrs. Van Blake tells me she stayed at the George V hotel in Paris. I suppose she and her husband often went to Paris?'

'At least twice a year.'

'They always stayed at the George V?'

'Well, no. They always stayed at the Ritz. I was surprised when Mrs. Van Blake asked me to book a suite at the George V. She said she wanted a change.'

'I see,' I said. 'There's one more question, Mr. Latimer. While Mrs. Van Blake was in Paris she met a showgirl named Joan Nichols. Does the name mean anything to you?'

He thought for a moment.

'A girl of that name did call on Mrs. Van Blake at her house two days after she had returned from Paris,' he said. 'The guard at the gate called me and asked if Mrs. Van Blake would see her.'

'Did she?'

'Oh yes. I didn't see her myself. I was busy with Mr. Van Blake's affairs, but she told me to ask the guard to send the girl up to the house.'

'You wouldn't happen to know if this girl gave her address as well as her name when she called?'

'It was in the visitor's book. The town I believe, not the address.'

'Was it Welden?'

'That's right.'

'Mr. Van Blake was killed on August 6th; on August 8th Miss Nichols called. Is that right?'

'Yes.'

'Miss Bennett, using the name of Fay Benson, turned up in Welden on August 9th and the same evening Royce, under the name of Henry Rutland, also appeared. On August 17th, Miss Bennett was kidnapped and murdered. The same evening Royce left Welden. On August 20th Miss Nichols, presumably pushed, fell downstairs and broke her neck, and the stagedoor keeper to a club where Miss Bennett was working and who helped kidnap her was also killed by a hit and run driver on the same evening. Interesting sequence of dates, don't you think?'

Latimer stared at me, his eyes bewildered.

‘I don’t understand. What exactly are you driving at?’

‘If I have any luck,’ I said, getting to my feet and sliding the map of the Van Blake estate into my hip pocket, ‘I’ll be able to tell you that in a day or two; but I’ll have to have some luck first.’

‘But look here.’

‘Give me a couple of days.’

I left him staring after me. He looked a little like a codfish caught on a gaff.

III

On my way back to Tampa City, I did some heavy thinking. At long last, I was getting the breaks. My visit to Latimer had paid heavy dividends. I now felt I was in the position to pry the lid off the case. When I reached Tampa City's main street, I parked the Lincoln outside a quick snack lunch bar, bought a midday newspaper and went into the bar. I ordered a chicken sandwich and a coffee, and while I was waiting, I looked over the front page of the paper.

The shooting at Glyne Beach had caused less sensation than I had expected. The account stated that two gunmen, thought to have come from Tampa City, had been cornered last night in a motel on the Glyne Beach road and had been shot to death. Police Captain Creed stated that the Tampa City police were being invited to cooperate in identifying the gunmen.

While I read the newspaper I ate my sandwich. I wondered how Royce was reacting to this news. He must have guessed that Lydia had slipped through his fingers, but he wasn't to know that she was in the hands of the police. After a little thought, I decided it might be a good idea to tell him.

'Give me another sandwich,' I said to the barman as I slid off the stool, 'while I use the phone.'

I shut myself in a pay booth, turned up the number of the Golden Apple club and dialled.

A girl's voice that sounded like thick honey, oozed over the line.

'This is the Golden Apple club: good morning; can I be of service?'

'Give me Royce, and snap it up, sister,' I said, making my voice sound tough.

The honey congealed.

'Who is calling?'

'Tell him it's an old pal of his from Sing Sing,' I said.

There was a long pause, then a man barked, 'Who's this?'

'Royce?'

'Yes: what is it?'

'This is a tipoff, pal. The Welden cops have got Lydia, and she's singing. She's tying you in with the Van Blake murder, so watch your foothold.'

The startled grunt that came over the line made music in my ears, but I didn't wait for more. I gently hung up. That should give him a little uneasiness.

I returned to the bar where my sandwich was waiting. The place was filling up, and a big man, with shoulders on him that a prize fighter would envy, jostled me as I took a bite at the sandwich.

I set myself to jostle back when I took a look at the big man's face. My heart skipped a beat and I nearly dropped the sandwich when I saw it was Sergeant Carl Lassiter.

He was leaning forward, glaring at the barman and rapping on the counter to attract attention. My first impulse was to nip smartly to the door and out into the Lincoln, but I hadn't paid for my meal and I still had the sandwich in my hand. The crush at the bar was pushing me against Lassiter who had caught the barman's eye.

'Gimme a beef sandwich and a coffee,' he barked.

The barman appeared to recognize him.

'Yes, sir,' he said, and had the order in front of Lassiter in a flash.

I got some money out of my pocket, shoved my way sideways to the bar, taking care not to touch Lassiter and laid the money on the bar. The barman swept it up, tossed it into the open drawer of the till and slapped down the change. As I picked up the change, Lassiter, his great rubbery mouth full of beef, turned his head and stared directly at me.

I met his eyes for a second, then I picked up my change and began to ease myself away from the bar. My shirt was sticking to my back and my mouth was dry. I expected him to reach out and grab me, but after scowling at me, he turned his back and went on munching. Still holding the sandwich in my hand, I got out of the bar and crossed to the Lincoln.

A police car was parked just behind the Lincoln and a bored faced detective at the wheel looked at me without interest. I climbed into the Lincoln, put the sandwich on the seat beside me, started the engine, and shifted into gear. As I drove away I looked into the driving mirror. The detective at the wheel of the police car was struggling with a gigantic yawn. I doubted if he had even seen me. Driving steadily, I headed for Benn's bar, and it wasn't until I had put the car in the garage and had got down into the hideout that my heart beats returned to normal.

I called Benn on the telephone.

‘Can you spare a minute?’

‘Not right now. Give me an hour, will you? This is my busy time.’

I said okay, hung up and poured myself a beer. I finished my sandwich, did a little thinking, and remembered Irene Jarrard had said she worked for Ryman Thomas, the advertising man. I turned him up in the book and put through a call.

Irene answered the telephone.

‘This is Sladen,’ I said. ‘Do you remember me?’

‘Of course I do.’ She seemed pleased I had called her. ‘Have you any news of Frankie, Mr. Sladen?’

‘Not yet, but I’m still trying. There was something I forgot to ask you: did Frankie ever mention Mrs. Cornelia Van Blake?’

‘Why, yes. Mrs. Van Blake was having her portrait painted and Frankie stood in for her.’

‘Do you know if Hartley did the painting at the Van Blakes’ residence?’

‘Oh, you know about it then.’

‘I heard.’

‘He didn’t finish the painting there. He made a number of sketches of Fay sitting on the balcony and he completed the portrait in his studio.’

I wished I had thought to ask her this when we first met, but I didn’t say so.

‘Did Frankie ever say how she got on with Mrs. Van Blake?’

‘Oh yes. She liked her very much. Mrs. Van Blake was very kind to her. She seemed to take a great interest in her.’

‘What kind of interest?’

‘Well, she wanted to know all about Fay’s background; who her parents were; whether she planned to get married: that sort of thing.’

‘Well, thanks, Miss Jarrard. I just wanted to check up on that. When I’ve got a little more time to myself, maybe we can have another sea food dinner.’

She said she would like that, and cutting her short, I hung up.

I lit a cigarette, sat down and did a little brooding. I was still at it when Benn came in.

‘Let’s talk about your pal Dillon,’ I said.

‘What about him?’ Benn asked, reaching for a can of beer and wrenching off the cap with his teeth.

‘I hear he used to go after the Van Blakes’ pheasants.’

Benn smiled.

‘I guess that’s right. Van Blake didn’t seem to give a damn. He’d got more pheasants than he knew what to do with.’

‘Van Blake was shot on August 6th. Where was Dillon on that morning?’

Benn shook his head.

‘I don’t know. The day before he told me he was going on a poach.’

‘That would be on the night before Van Blake was shot?’

‘Yeah. He asked me if I could use a brace of birds. I used to buy them off him sometimes. He said he’d be in after eleven, but he didn’t show up. I thought maybe he hadn’t had any luck.’

‘I want to get this straight,’ I said. ‘The last time you saw him was when he offered to get you a brace of pheasants, is that it?’

‘That’s right.’

‘He would have no reason to be on the Van Blakes’ estate at seven o’clock in the morning?’

‘Of course not. Ted poached with a flashlight and a catapult. He only worked in the dark. He didn’t even own a gun.’

‘He used his motorcycle when he went to the Van Blakes’ estate?’

‘Yeah. He went in by the gate on the Frisco-Tampa City highway, left his motorcycle in the bushes just inside the gate and walked over the hill, down to where the pheasants were.’

‘He wore a crash helmet and goggles, didn’t he? What else did he wear?’

‘Usually a leather wind cheater and corduroy trousers. Where’s this getting you?’

‘I think he was murdered on the estate.’

Benn shook his head.

‘Couldn’t have been. He was seen on the highway around eight o’clock coming from the Van Blake’s estate on the morning of Van Blake’s murder. I reckon he was murdered somewhere near the harbour where his motorcycle was found.’

‘A crash helmet and goggles makes a good disguise. Suppose it wasn’t Dillon who was seen, but the killer, laying a red herring?’

‘I hadn’t thought of that. You could be right.’

‘Was Dillon a big fella?’

‘No, he was like me; a shrimp, but tough and strong for all that.’

The telephone bell rang at this moment. I picked up the receiver.

‘New York wants you,’ the operator said. ‘Will you hold a moment?’ There were clickings on the line, then a girl said, ‘is Mr. Sladen there? Mr. Fayette wants him.’

‘Speaking,’ I said. ‘Go ahead.’

Fayette came on the line.

‘I’ve just had a cable from Low,’ he told me. ‘I thought maybe you’d want to know about it right away. I’ll read it to you.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Here’s what he says: Woman staying at George V on August 3rd last year, calling herself Cornelia Van Blake, positively, repeat positively, identified by reliable hotel witnesses as Fay Benson. Returning immediately with affidavits. Low.’ Fayette paused, then asked, ‘Is that any use to you?’

‘I’ll say it is,’ I said. ‘That’s the last nail in the coffin. I’ll have the case in the bag by tomorrow. Be seeing you then,’ and I hung up.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I

At ten-thirty, with a cloud covered moon spreading a faded light over the city, Benn and I drove fast along the Tampa City—San Francisco highway. It took us ten minutes or so to reach the gate to the Van Blake estate that Dillon had used on his last poaching expedition.

Benn stopped the car by the gate. The red spark of his cigarette lit up his face as he turned to look at me.

‘I’ll get rid of the heep and join you.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m going in there alone. You keep out of this, Sam. I may want you as a witness later on.’

‘What happens if you run into trouble?’

‘I’ll take good care I don’t.’ I got out of the car. ‘Leave this to me. I can handle it.’

He looked doubtfully at me.

‘Well, okay, if you say so. Are you sure?’

‘Yep. I’ll get back somehow on my own steam. If I don’t show up by dawn, report to Creed. But you’ve got to keep out of trouble. You know the setup now, and one of us has to be around to straighten out the kinks.’

Benn lifted his shoulders.

‘You’re the boss. Well, if you don’t want me I’ll scram.’ He engaged gear. ‘So long and good luck.’

I watched him drive away then, climbing the gate, I made my way along the path that led in a gently rising slope to the wood near where Van Blake had met his violent end. When I reached the top of the pimple in the middle of the clearing, I paused. Some fourteen months ago Van Blake had ridden up here to survey his estate. A killer had waited for him, shotgun in hand. Seconds later, Van Blake was lying on the ground, and his horse was trotting homewards to raise the alarm.

From where I stood I could see the white ribbon of the highway and the distant car lights as the cars drove towards Tampa City. It was silent and still

up on the hill, and there was an eerie atmosphere that made me feel spooked. I set off downhill, keeping to the path through the wood. The moon, floating behind hazy clouds, gave enough light for me to find my way.

After walking for some distance, I saw ahead of me the lights of the vast Van Blake residence that sprawled in the hollow below. I could see too in the moonlight the expanse of closely cut lawns and the packed flower beds that surrounded the house. As I walked I wondered if Cornelia was at home, and if she were, what she was doing. I wondered too if Royce had contacted her and had warned her that he had had a tip off that Lydia was talking.

I slowed my pace when I saw ahead that the path faded to a clearing. Sheltering behind a thicket, I took out the map I had got from Latimer, and using my small flashlight, I checked up on my bearings.

At the end of the path I had to turn right, cross the clearing, skirt the house and walk for a hundred yards or so to where the summer house was. The pheasantry was another fifty yards or so beyond the summer house.

I put the map back in my hip pocket and moved forward as Ted Dillon must have moved forward on the night he was murdered.

Keeping to the shadows, I crossed the clearing, passed within forty yards of the dark massive bulk of the house whose windows showed chinks of light, and kept on until I reached another wood, then I paused and once more checked my bearings. Somewhere to my right should be the summer house. The path led into the wood which was dark and silent. I moved forward, and it wasn't until I began blundering into trees, that I decided I'd better use my flashlight.

Shielding the light with my fingers, I moved forward more quickly. A sudden whirring sound made my heart skip a beat, and looking up I made out in the dim light row upon row of pheasants sitting on boughs of trees, staring down at me.

The sight of all these birds, sitting shoulder to shoulder, and looking down at me with their little ruby eyes gave me the shakes. I moved faster, and twenty yards further on, I came out into a clearing. Bang in the middle of the clearing was the summer house.

It was a verandah surrounded, knotty pine cabin; its dark windows, like sightless eyes, reflected the light of the moon. I crossed the clearing and mounted the steps that led up to the verandah. The door was locked and didn't yield to pressure. I decided it would be easier to get in by a window. I

moved silently around to the back of the summer house. I found two small windows and a casement window to choose from. A quick examination showed me one of the small windows was unlatched, and with the help of my pocket knife, I levered it half open. Before climbing in, I paused to listen.

The night was full of soft, eerie sounds. I could hear the slight wind in the trees, the creaking of the boughs under the weight of the pheasants, the sudden fluttering of wings, the tap of some climbing plant against the cabin: sounds that could mask the soft approach of one of the guards.

Feeling spooked, I pushed up the window, slid my leg through into darkness and stepped down on to a thick pile carpet. Shielding the light of my flashlamp I took stock of the room I was in.

It was a large room with lounging chairs and settees. I examined the heavy drapes; deciding they were heavy enough to shut in any light, I pulled them across the windows, then found the light switches and turned them on.

I could see then that the cabin hadn't been used for a long time. Dust lay everywhere, and a few cobwebs floated from the ceiling.

I began a careful search of the room. There was a small bar at one end, containing a comprehensive selection of bottles. A glass with a smear of lipstick on it stood unwashed by a bottle of Scotch. A bowl of salted almonds, thick with dust, was nearby. It looked to me as if this little summer house had been suddenly locked up, and no servant had been allowed in to clean up, before it was closed.

I surveyed the expanse of Turkey carpet. Was what I was looking for under the carpet? I pushed a settee out of the way and rolled back part of the carpet. Knotty pine planks stared up at me. There seemed nothing suspicious about them, but there was still quite an expanse of flooring I couldn't see.

Working quickly I moved the furniture back on to the part of the flooring I had examined, and investigated the rest of the planks. The right hand corner of the room rewarded my effort. A dark stain, the colour of old mahogany, roughly a foot square in size, marred the creamy white of the pine.

I knelt down and played the beam of my flashlamp on it. I had no doubt that it was an old blood stain. Someone had lain on these planks and had bled from a wound. I had no doubt either that the blood had come from Dillon's dying body.

I took out a pocket screwdriver I had brought with me. Looking closely I could see some of the screw heads that secured the planking looked newer

and less rusty than the others. Working quickly I took out all the newer looking screws. They came out easily. Then I dug the point of the screwdriver between two planks and levered one up. My mouth was dry and my heart was pounding as I turned the beam of my flashlamp down into the cavity.

Although I was expecting a gruesome find, the grinning skull, picked clean by rats, that stared up at me out of the darkness, made me catch my breath.

The glimpse I had of the dusty leather wind cheater told me I was looking at all that remained of Ted Dillon.

II

For perhaps ten seconds I stared down at the skull, then, with cold sweat on my face, I pulled up another plank so I could see more of him.

It was Ted Dillon all right. The wind cheater and corduroy trousers as well as a forked stick from which hung perished elastic that lay near him, made identification certain. There was a hole and powder burning on the left side of the wind cheater to tell me he had been shot at close quarters, and as I stared down at the telltale hole I wondered how it was the sound of the shot wasn't heard up at the house which was no more than a hundred yards or so from the cabin.

Working quickly, I replaced the two planks and screwed them down. Then I flicked the carpet back into place and shifted the furniture into its original position again. I straightened up and wiped the sweat off my face. I had seen what I had come to see, and there was no point in remaining here any longer.

As I crossed to the light switch, I heard a board creak somewhere on the verandah. I hurriedly turned off the light and listened.

Only the heavy beating of my heart and the faint sighing of the wind in the trees outside came to me.

I moved silently across the room to the window, drew the drapes and looked out on to the moonlit clearing. I could see only the dark trees and darker shadows: shadows deep enough for someone to be lurking there unseen.

I fumbled in my hip pocket for Juan's gun, pulled it out and slid back the safety catch. I didn't think anyone was out there, but I had an uneasy feeling there might be. I stood still, leaning against the wall, looking out into the darkness. Minutes ticked by and still nothing happened. I neither saw nor heard anything.

Then just as I was deciding to take a chance and climb out of the window on to the verandah, a pheasant gave a frightened squawk and rose out of a nearby tree with a great flapping of wings that scared me silly.

I peered through the window, my heart thumping, my gun thrust forward. Someone was out there, I thought. Someone who was sneaking towards the cabin and who had disturbed the bird. Then my attention shifted from the

dark shadows outside to a faint sound that seemed close to me. I felt the hair on the nape of my neck rise as I listened. It was as if someone near me had put their weight on a loose board and the board had given slightly.

I was so scared I couldn't bring myself to look over my shoulder. If someone was in the room, whoever it was could see me outlined against the window. I made a sweet target for a shot in the back.

I imagined now I could hear someone breathing, but maybe that was only my scared imagination scaring me still more. Close to me was a big settee. A quick jump would get me under cover, but I had left it too late. As I tensed myself to dive, Cornelia Van Blake said out of the darkness, 'Don't move and drop that gun!'

There was a bite in her voice that warned me to obey. Sliding the safety catch up, I let the gun drop on to the carpet, then the light clicked on and I slowly turned my head. She stood against the wall, a .22 automatic in her hand, her face ivory white, her scarlet lips too vivid against her pallor. She had on a black silk shirt, black slacks and crepe soled sandals. For a long moment we looked at each other.

I had no doubt now that she had murdered her husband and Dillon, and I could see no reason why she shouldn't murder me. How she had got into the cabin without my hearing her foxed me, but here she was, gun in hand, and if she recognized me, my chances of survival were slight. My life depended on her not knowing who I was.

'What are you doing here?' she asked, not moving, her eyes wary and watchful.

I tried to loosen the muscles in my face. I gave her what I hoped was a simpering smile.

'Lady, I'm sorry,' I said. 'I shouldn't be here. I know it, but I heard there was liquor in here and with all your money, I didn't think you'd miss a bottle.'

I could see that wasn't the story she was expecting and I went on, driving it home.

'Maybe you don't know what it means to crave for a drink,' I said, wiping my hand across my mouth. 'I gave my wife my word of honour that I wouldn't buy the stuff, but I didn't promise her I wouldn't steal it. I had to have a drink tonight. I didn't think anyone came here. It's when the craving gets me.'

I stopped there. If this act jelled, there was no need to drive it into the ground.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded.

She didn’t seem quite so hostile, but the gun remained pointing at me.

‘You don’t want my name, do you?’ I said, trying to look ashamed of myself. ‘If you’ll forget it this time, I promise I won’t come here again.’

‘Did you come here by car?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Give me your licence.’

‘I haven’t got it with me. I left it in the car.’

She studied me, then a puzzled look came into her eye that told me she was wondering where she had seen me before. I knew then I had either to rush her into letting me go or I’d lose the trick.

‘Sit down,’ she said curtly.

‘Now look,’ I said hurriedly, ‘I promise you I won’t come back. I haven’t touched anything. Let me go, won’t you?’

‘Sit down! I’m going to call the police.’

I moved towards her. I had a wild idea that if I could get close enough, I might grab the gun, but she moved away from me, sliding along the wall, the gun steady in her hand.

‘Sit down!’

I saw her knuckle turn white as her finger tightened on the trigger. I sat down.

I couldn’t let her call the police. Once I was in Lassiter’s hands I’d be in permanent trouble.

She backed away to the bar where the telephone was, and lifted the receiver.

I knew I had lost that trick. I had still one more to play.

‘I wouldn’t do it,’ I said quietly. ‘Even if Lassiter is on your payroll, he couldn’t do anything for you once he’s looked under the floor.’

Slowly she replaced the receiver. Her eyes turned into dark, expressionless holes in her face.

‘It’s Mr. Sladen, isn’t it?’ she asked in a polite, brittle voice.

‘That’s right. We’re both in a jam, aren’t we?’

‘I don’t think I am,’ she said, leaning against the bar, the barrel of the gun turned slightly away from me. ‘But you are, Mr. Sladen.’

‘I think we both are.’

‘You’re wanted for murder. I have only to call the police.’

‘You’re forgetting Dillon.’

Her lips came off her teeth in a mirthless smile.

‘No, I’m not. No one knows except you that he is here. My story will be that I saw a light here. I took my gun and came out to see who had broken in. I found you hiding here: a man wanted for murder. You attacked me, and I was forced to shoot you. Why should Sergeant Lassiter think to pick up the floor boards? He will be too occupied with your body to think of looking for another.’

‘You don’t imagine I was so crazy as to come here alone, do you?’ I asked, trying to sound more confident than I felt. ‘You’re through, Mrs. Van Blake. I’ve all the evidence I want. The case is written up, and if anything happens to me, my colleague will send the stuff to Crime Facts who will print it.’

She gave a harsh little laugh.

‘You don’t expect me to believe that, do you?’

‘I can convince you. We could make a deal. I’m not kidding myself you wouldn’t shoot me as you shot Dillon. It wouldn’t be difficult for you to lift the floor boards and drop me in alongside him for company.’

‘I don’t make deals.’

‘I can prove you killed your husband. Like to hear about it?’

‘You can’t prove it.’ A little white ring appeared around her mouth. I saw her finger tighten on the trigger of the gun. I had a sick feeling she was likely to shoot at any second.

‘But I can,’ I said, words spilling out of my mouth. ‘Get a load of this: Royce wanted the Golden Apple club, but your husband wouldn’t sell. You and Royce were lovers, and you wanted to help him. You also wanted to get your hands on your husband’s money. You thought it might be an idea to kill him: the old story of two birds with one shot.’

Her finger on the trigger relaxed. She was listening.

‘You knew you’d be the first to be suspected if your husband died violently,’ I went on. ‘You had the motive: five million dollars of motive. So you plotted and planned to kill him and yet be in the clear. It wasn’t until Lennox Hartley brought Frances Bennett to your house to stand in for your portrait that you saw the way you could do it. Frances was like you in size and colouring. In a few days you were going to Paris. You couldn’t swing it

on your own so you told your plan to Royce. His payoff was the club, so he came in with you. It is probable you had already tried to persuade him to do the job himself, but he hadn't yet arrived in the murder class and he faked it. If it was to be done, you were the one to do it because your alibi would be watertight.' I paused to ask, 'How am I doing, Mrs. Van Blake? Do you like it so far?'

'You don't imagine anyone will believe you, do you?' she said scornfully. 'You can't prove a thing.'

'Let's go on a step or two before we get to the proof,' I said, my eyes on the gun. 'Royce gained Frances's confidence. He kidded her he was in love with her. He had to be careful in case there was a slipup. He went around with her secretly so he couldn't be connected with her if things went wrong. If she were going to take your place in Paris, she would know, when the news broke, that you two had planned Van Blake's death, so she had to be taken care of once she had done her job. She had to disappear. It was to be a professional job: a barrel and cement job. Royce knew the guy to handle an assignment like that. He sent for Hank Flemming, a Frisco killer, and fingered Frances to him. When Frances came back from Paris, he was to do the job. The plan began to work. Royce cooked up some yarn that it was necessary for you to remain in Tampa City and yet appear to be in Paris. I don't know what the yarn was, but when a girl like Frances falls for a smooth operator like Royce she would be prepared to swallow any yarn. You supplied her with money, clothes and your passport. A pair of dark glasses and a floppy hat would turn her into Mrs. Van Blake, leaving for Paris. Millionaires' wives get preferential treatment at the passport barriers. No one looked at her twice. You took care to send her to the George V hotel instead of to your usual hotel, the Ritz. She was accepted at the George V because they didn't know her, and she stayed there for four days. What you didn't foresee was that a girl named Joan Nichols who had a talent for making friends with the wealthy, should force her company on Frances, thinking she was the famous and rich Mrs. Van Blake. You may be interested to know one of my colleagues has been to Paris, and we now have witnesses to prove Frances stayed at the George V under your name.'

'I see.' She moved restlessly. 'But that doesn't prove I killed my husband, does it?'

'It upsets your alibi. But don't let's rush this. Let's take it by dates. On

August 2nd, you appeared to leave for Paris. I guess you got no further than Royce's place where Frances was waiting. She went to the airport in your place and took off for France. You remained out of sight with Royce. You were pretty thorough in your plans. You and Royce had taken care to have watertight alibis. Who, then, from the police angle, had killed your husband? This is where you over played your hand. You supplied the killer. You knew Ted Dillon made a habit of poaching on the estate. On the night of August 5th, you came here with a gun and waited for him.'

'Do you imagine anyone would believe that?' she interrupted, her eyes glittering. 'How was I to know he was coming?'

That pulled me up short. This was a point a smart attorney would pick on. She would have to know for certain that Dillon planned to poach that night. The whole success of her plan relied on him coming.

I stared at her, then looked around the room, and the nickel dropped. There could only be one explanation: she and Dillon had been lovers. That was why he had come so often, knowing, with her behind him, he wasn't likely to run into trouble.

'Yes; I had missed that point,' I said. 'Why else would you have a place like this, buried in the wood, nicely furnished, even to a bar, unless it was a meeting place? Did Van Blake know?'

'You're very quick, Mr. Sladen,' she said. 'Yes, he knew, but there was nothing he could do about it. He wouldn't give me a divorce, no matter what I did. That was the main reason why I had to kill him.'

My hands suddenly turned clammy. She was now admitting she had killed her husband, and that meant she had made up her mind to silence me.

'How was it no one heard the shot when you killed Dillon?' I asked.

Her fixed smile began to get on my nerves.

'If you must know,' she said, 'I muffled the gun with a cushion.' She moved the gun so the barrel once more pointed at me. 'It doesn't make much noise.'

'Did you experience a pang when you killed him?' I asked. 'Or did you feel he had served his purpose and it was just one of those things?'

Her cold, lovely face was expressionless as she said, 'What else have you found out? You certainly seem to have been very busy.'

'Let's talk about your husband's murder. He was in the habit of taking an early morning ride,' I said. 'You spent the night here, with Dillon under the

boards.' I paused while I looked at her. 'I wonder if you had bad dreams that night or perhaps you don't dream?'

She shook her head.

'I'm one of those fortunate people who don't dream.'

Her cold bloodedness began to make me sweat.

'Early the next morning you were on the hill waiting for your husband,' I went on. 'He thought you were in Paris, and it must have been a shock to see you sitting there, apparently admiring the view. He was so surprised he didn't notice the shotgun, lying by your side. He only saw it when it was too late. Probably he leaned from his horse to ask you what you were doing there, when you shot him. You had to act quickly. You had probably got yourself a pair of corduroy slacks and a leather wind cheater like those Dillon wore. You hid the gun, then you put on Dillon's crash helmet and goggles, ran down the hill to where he had left his motorcycle and drove to the harbour. People saw you, as you wanted them to see you, and they mistook you for Dillon. All you had to do was to leave the motorcycle in a shed that was seldom used, change into clothes you had probably left in the shed, and catch the first train to New York where Royce was waiting for you. You knew Latimer would send a cable to the George V hotel with the news, and Frances had been instructed that if a cable did come, she was to return at once. Royce was there to meet her. You took her place outside the airport.'

Without taking her eyes off me, she reached for the whisky bottle, splashed whisky into the lipstick-smeared glass and drank some of it. I saw her hand was unsteady.

'Now Frances had to be taken care of,' I went on. 'Royce took her to Welden. He was a reluctant killer. He didn't want to wipe her out unless he had to. He wanted to make sure first that you were going to get away with it: that your nerve wouldn't crack if police pressure was put on you. So he persuaded Frances to alter her appearance, take another name and get work at the Florian club. By then Frances must have known she had made herself an accessory to murder. She was probably so scared she did what she was told to do. Then Joan Nichols called on you. It must have been a shock to you and to her when she found you weren't the girl she had worked on in Paris. She probably tried to put the bite on you. You told Royce what was happening, and he decided both Frances and Joan had to go. He gave Flemming the signal to go ahead, and Flemming went ahead.'

I paused and watched her set down her glass. She seemed suddenly relaxed now, and she rested her elbows on the bar, the gun held loosely in her hand.

‘And you can prove all this?’ she asked mockingly.

‘Yeah, I can prove it,’ I said. ‘You made it too complicated. The more complicated a case becomes the easier it is to unravel, providing you get the essential lead. I got it when I learned how alike you and Frances Bennett were. I could see then how you fixed your alibi. You had a big advantage: the police were on your side. If you had kept your head and done nothing after

Frances’s death you might have got away with it. When I started to stir up the past, you panicked. When Flemming called you and told you someone was making inquiries, and that Hesson had talked out of turn, you told Flemming to fix Hesson and me. When you heard I’d been to see Hartley you panicked again. In Hartley’s filing cabinet there were sketches he had made of Frances, sitting on your balcony. You thought I would see the likeness between you two, but you forgot I might get the information from Latimer. You went to Hartley and tried to get the sketches from him. Maybe he wouldn’t part. Maybe he realized that Frances had supplied your alibi. Anyway, he called me and asked me over. Were you hiding in the room when he called?’

She nodded. The fixed smile went away, leaving her face bony and old looking.

‘And you shot him,’ I went on. ‘His servant heard the shot and ran upstairs, trying to get away from you. You followed him and shot him too. You thought you’d get away with it as I was on my way over and you knew Lassiter was keeping tabs on me. You thought I was going to be your fall guy as Dillon was.’

‘And I have got away with it, Mr. Sladen,’ she said. ‘The police still think you killed Hartley; and they are still looking for you. This is where we came in, isn’t it? Have you quite finished?’

I had been talking solidly to gain time, and now I knew I had bought all the time I was going to get. In a second or so she would shoot. The range was about fifteen feet. Even with a .22 fifteen feet could be difficult shooting if the target was on the move.

While I had been talking I had also been frantically trying to find a way out of this jam. I was within ten feet of the light switch, and it looked an awful long way away. If I could get to the switch and turn off the light I had a

chance.

‘Let’s talk about a deal,’ I said, bracing my muscles. A big cushion lay on the settee by my side. As casually as I could I let my hand drop on it while I stared at her, trying to hold her attention away from my hand.

‘No deals, Mr. Sladen.’ She lifted the gun, her knuckle turned white as she took up the slack of the trigger. ‘I think you’re bluffing. Anyway, you’ll be safer dead.’

III

Time stood still while we stared at each other. I could see by the glitter in her eyes and the loose movement of her mouth that she was about to shoot. I snatched up the cushion and threw it at her with one movement, and at the same time, my heart hammering, I rolled off the settee and scrambled frantically to get behind it.

She fired as the cushion whizzed through the air at her, but she dodged at the same time. I heard the vicious little bark of the .22, and a big glass ashtray that stood on the occasional table near me flew into splinters.

I was behind the settee by now.

She fired again. The slug ploughed through the back of the settee, missing me by less than six inches.

This couldn't go on. I knew her next shot must get me. Sweat was pouring off my face. I saw her shadow, slim and long, moving very slowly across the carpet towards me. I got hold of the side of the settee and waited. She couldn't see me, but she knew I was there. She was within six feet of me when I heaved the settee up and towards her. I saw her jump clear; the settee crashed down, only just missing her.

I had thrown away my only cover. I stood facing her, and she smiled at me. She was out of my reach. I was still ten feet from the light switch; fifteen feet from Juan's gun, lying by the window. It seemed to me that I was within a heartbeat of death when a voice barked from the window: 'Drop that gun!'

I saw Cornelia's eyes dilate. She looked quickly towards the window, her gun swinging around.

The roar of a .45 swamped the bang of the .22. I only knew she had fired because I saw the gun flash.

The shock of the .45 slug as it hit her threw her backwards.

The .22 fell from her hand as she cannoned against the bar. She was dead before she reached the lush pile of the carpet.

'Don't move!' Lassiter said from the window. He thrust one long thick leg over the window sill, the smoking .45 pointing at me. He slid into the room, covering me with the gun. His coarse, brutal face creased into a jeering smile as he looked at me.

‘Hello, peeper,’ he said. ‘You seem to be having yourself a good time.’

I didn’t say anything. My tongue was as dry as scorched leather, and my knees were buckling. I watched him walk over to Cornelia, turn her over with his foot and look down at her.

‘Well, she won’t cash any cheques where she’s gone,’ he said, and to my relief, he shoved the .45 back into his shoulder holster. ‘Take a drink, peeper; you look like you could use one.’

I ploughed my way across to the bar, poured myself three fingers of Scotch and gulped it down. The liquor did something to unfreeze my panic.

‘You’re a lucky guy, peeper,’ Lassiter said, reaching for a glass. He poured himself a stiff whisky. ‘If I hadn’t showed up when I did, you’d have been playing a harp by now.’

‘That’s a fact,’ I said, wiping my face with my handkerchief. I kept my back turned to Cornelia’s body. ‘How did you happen to look in?’

He grinned at me, showing big white teeth.

‘I was keeping tabs on you like she said. I had an idea you were shacking up at Benn’s place. I figured it this way: you’ve been talking to Bradley. Benn and Bradley work together. Benn has a hideout; so that’s where you were.’

‘Pretty smart,’ I said. ‘Then why didn’t you grab me at Benn’s place if you knew I was there?’

‘What for? You don’t imagine I think you knocked off Hartley, do you? I’m not that dumb. Okay, it looked bad, but why should you knock him off? I figured if I kept near you, you’d crack the case and save me some trouble. I couldn’t crack it myself. She was in too close with Doonan for any Tampa City cop to handle her.’

‘Well, it’s fixed now. You won’t let Royce get away?’

‘He won’t get away.’ He reached out a huge hand for the telephone. ‘Give me police headquarters,’ he told the operator. While he waited he helped himself to another drink, then he said into the mouthpiece, ‘This is Lassiter. I want Royce picked up and fast. I’ll be right over to charge him. Just get him.’

He replaced the receiver, finished his drink, then taking out a pack of cigarettes, he offered me one.

‘You weren’t kidding when you told her you could prove she did the job?’ he asked, as we lit up.

‘I wasn’t kidding. The case is in the bag. Captain Creed is handling the

witnesses.'

'Creed, huh?' Lassiter grinned. 'Making sure of it? That's swell. And you're going to print the story in your rag?'

'That's the idea.'

'Then it's goodbye Doonan. I've been waiting for that punk to run into something he couldn't talk himself out of, and this is it. Do you know how our system works? I'll tell you. Doonan will take the buck: he can't avoid it, and he'll go. Mathis will move into his place; Carson will move into Mathis's place, and I'll move into Carson's place. In six months' time, Mathis will move out and I'll be the boss.'

'You've forgotten Carson,' I said.

'No, I haven't.' He showed his teeth in a wolfish grin. 'I'll take care of him. He won't worry me.' He reached out a hand that felt like a hunk of concrete and patted my shoulder. 'Go away and write your story. Make it good. Don't forget to tell them how I saved your life.' He turned to look at Cornelia. 'Baby, if you only knew the shakeup you're going to cause; if you only knew.'

'Then you don't want me for the Hartley killing?' I asked.

'Don't be a dope. You're as free as the air.' His huge hand reached out and took in the slack of my coat front. 'I've been looking at that rag of yours, pally. It's a nice layout. How's about a photograph of me on the cover when you break the story?'

'Do you think that's a good idea?' I asked, examining his pig face. At close quarters it was horrible. 'We don't want to get pinched for scaring the kiddies.'

He gave me a little shake that nearly made my disc slip.

'What's that again?' he growled, scowling.

'I said it was a good idea. Would you mind giving me back my suit?'

He shoved me away from him.

'Okay, you fix it. I've got you out of a jam, and I expect something from you in return: understand?'

'You'll get it,' I said, smiling at him. 'You'll get it all right.'

'Sit down and keep out of my way.' He reached for the telephone again. 'I've got to get the Captain down here.'

While he was telephoning I sat down and helped myself to another drink. I hadn't forgotten how he had booted me when we had first met. I didn't think

it would be difficult to prove he had been collecting money from Cornelia. Maybe he had shot her, but I wasn't kidding myself he had shot her to save my life. She had said I'd be safer dead, and he knew she would also be safer dead. He knew she'd talk if he was ever brought to trial. He had seen his way out and had taken the opportunity. All I would have to do was to drop a hint in Captain Mathis's ear. An investigation of Lassiter's bank account would fix him. No one kicks a Sladen in the pants without paying for it.

Lassiter got through telephoning. He went over to where Dillon's body was hidden and began getting up the floor boards.

'I'll take the credit for finding the stiff, pally,' he said. 'Your job is to collaborate with me. I'll tell the story. You sit still and keep quiet. Just say amen when I tell you to.'

'Sure,' I said. 'Anything you say, sergeant.'

His pig eyes went over me.

'Don't try anything funny or I'll make you sorry.'

'That's okay, sergeant.'

I lit a cigarette. Maybe it would be safer to tip Mathis off after I was back in New York. I decided I would do that.

While I waited for Mathis to arrive I began to straighten out in my mind the story as I would dictate it to Bernie. If anyone were going to have his face on the front cover of Crime Facts in the issue that carried my story I saw no reason why it shouldn't be mine.

But I was kidding myself. If there was one thing Fayette hated more than another, it was giving any of his staff writers publicity.