

STRANGER AT HOME



GEORGE SANDERS

Stranger At Home

George Sanders

(Leigh Brackett)

To Leigh Brackett, whom I have never met



Chapter One

THE street hadn't changed any. It lay curving in the shadows, the single street lamp lost in the soft heavy branches of a Chinese elm, and there was nothing different about it. Not a thing.

The same gates, spaced widely apart. The same distant gleam of windows screened from the world by the rich green of banknotes. If he walked forward, just up there where the pavement swerved out of sight, he would see his own house. He would not do that. Not yet. Not quite yet. His hands were shaking. He thrust them into his jacket pockets, and then laughed, because his fingers had come through the rotten fabric. He turned his back on the street, facing out the way he had come, and went on foot up the steep hill.

From here there was no hill, only what seemed to be a sheer edge, and beyond it was the city, very small and far away. He could look west to the dark sea, and south to the low slim line of the hogback where the oil wells were, and east to the rough knees of the mountains. In the hollow circle of these things lay Los Angeles, with Hollywood and Beverly Hills and all the swarming little suburbs tugging at her flanks like cubs around a wolf bitch. The lights were beautiful.

It hadn't changed, either. Even the soft veil of fog was there, the smell of the sea. He shivered as the sweat chilled on his body after the long climb.

He turned and began to walk up along the street. He did not hurry. He could hear his footsteps, one after the other, like the ticking of a clock.

He rounded the bend, and saw ahead where the pavement ended.

The jacaranda trees were still in front of the gate. Four times, he thought, they've blossomed since I saw them last. He could remember how the curling petals used to fall and drift the grass like blue snow. Four times. Four years.

He walked to the gate and reached out and touched it, and the spring catch was just the same as he remembered it. He swung open one side and went through and closed it again behind him. Then he stood still.

He could feel the smooth concrete under the broken soles of his shoes, and the ground under the concrete. It had a different feel from any other ground in the world. It was his ground.

He walked on up the drive, and the wolfhounds came roaring at him suddenly down the broad sweep of the lawn.

He stood quite still, his hands at his sides, and said, "Coolin." And then, "Dee." The larger of the two hounds broke stride, and his voice died away uncertainly. The smaller one, puzzled, stopped also, but she kept up a vicious snarling. They were Irish, two huge gray shadows, lighter than blown smoke.

The man said to the smaller one, "You're not Dee. She had a white rift on her chest." The one called Coolin shivered and moaned and then leaped. The man's arms went around him and they stood swaying, the hound erect and slightly taller than the man, crying like a woman in his throat, and the man saying idiotically over and over again, "It's me. Pappy. Remember me, boy? It's Pappy."

Suddenly, into the privacy of the rough gray neck, he said rapidly, almost savagely, "Pappy.

God-damned silly name. Where is she, boy? Four years I haven't seen her. Where is she?"

He thrust the hound away and began to walk, swiftly, across the grass. Coolin stayed beside him, his muzzle thrust under the man's hand, and his mate followed, grumbling. The man didn't see them, or hear them. All he saw now was the house, low and gracious along the crest of the rising ground, with the lamps burning in the long windows. He crossed the drive and went up the steps and across the terrace, and the door was open, as it had always been. It swung wide under his hand, and he was home.

To his right, in the sunken living room, a woman put down her book and rose. She was paler-blonde, well-built and handsome, with a rather smug air of authority. She wore a flowing hostess gown of oyster-colored silk and reading glasses with straight bows that didn't bother her coiffure. She removed these as she turned toward the door, and then, abruptly, in the act of turning, she stopped, the glasses held frozen in mid-air. Her dark eyes stared and did not blink, and around them her face broke apart like, something sculptured in dry sand.

The man in the hallway said quietly, "Hello, Joan. Where's Angie?"

The woman began to move toward him. Her mouth opened but no sound came out. Within ten feet of him she stopped and said, "Michael Vickers." She put out her left hand and caught the edge of a polished inlaid table and stood leaning against it.

"I'm alive," said Vickers. "Don't faint. Where's Angie?"

Again she did not answer. She looked at him, up and down, and he stood waiting, framed in the hallway arch, with the hounds beside him. A tall man, three inches over six feet, his big gaunt frame

covered with dirty odds and ends of clothing that, simply because they were on him, acquired a certain raffish dignity.

His face was neither handsome nor ugly, but it was a face you looked at. The pertinent adjective now seemed to be "hungry." A white scar ran from under his hairline across his right temple.

Joan whispered, "I don't believe it's you." Beads of sweat came through the face powder, made a glittering rim above the perfect line of her liprouge. She went on staring, senselessly.

Vickers said impatiently, "For God's sake, Joan! Come out of it."

She drew a deep breath, held it, let it out slowly, and moved away from the table, balancing herself carefully on her feet, her head drawn erect. "Where have you been, Michael? What's happened to you?"

There was a picture of himself as he had been four years ago. It stood on the table beside Joan. Himself, groomed and conditioned like a prize horse, his well-fed face half smiling and contemptuous. Vickers studied it briefly.

"I don't know," he said. "Where's Angie?"

This time she answered. She had folded her hands tightly at her waist and her face had a closed look, but there was nothing in her voice. "She's not here, Michael. She went down to the beach."

"Alone?"

"No. There's a party."

"Still the same bunch?"

"Just about."

"Good," said Vickers. His eyelids drooped, giving his face the look of a death mask. "Yes. That's good."

"Are my things still upstairs?"

"Yes. We--didn't know..."

"No. All right, Joan. I'm going up and see what I can do about myself. And don't call her, Joan. You understand? I'm going down there myself, and I don't want you to call her."

Her eyes widened. "But why? I should think..."

"Should you?"

He saw the curtain of subservience drawn back into place. She said, "Very well, Michael."

He laughed. "That sounded like the old Vickers, by God!" He turned away. Over his shoulder he said, "Get yourself a drink, Joan. You look horrible."

As he went upstairs he heard her say sulkily, "You might have let us know."

At the top of the stair he paused, then turned right to Angie's bedroom instead of left to his own. The house was silent. The servants, of course, would be at the beach. The hounds were still at his heels, and the bitch had finally stopped growling.

Angie was there as soon as he opened her door. The faint exciting spice of her perfume, herself in the bright draperies and the pictures and the yellow satin bedspread. He walked across to the huge double bed and touched the satin, and then he opened the closet

door--a vast closet, full of lovely colors and textures, empty now of shape, waiting. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath, and the picture of her came before him clearly.

He turned away and glanced down at the floor, and frowned. There had been a great soft rug before the fireplace. It was gone now, replaced by an unwelcoming broad-loom.

The cigarette box he had given her was on the bedside table. A silver trinket picked up in Mexico. He took one of her cigarettes and lighted it with her silver lighter that matched the box. The extension phone was also on the table. Deliberately, being careful not to make an audible click on the line, he picked it up.

Joan's voice, hushed and half hysterical, was saying, "I want Mrs. Vickers, you fool. Angie." Evidently she had said it before.

A man's voice answered. He was very drunk, and suddenly very happy. "Angie! Oh, you mean Angie."

"Yes."

"Well, Angie darling--hello! Where'd you go? I was looking all over..."

Joan cried out, "Listen! I'm not Angie, I'm Joan. Joan Merrill. I want to talk to Angie. Call her. It's urgent."

"Urgent, huh? Call Angie. Urgent Angie. Whoo-oo, lady! You shouldn't talk like that even if it is true.

And if you're not Angie, why did I call you up?"

"Please, for heaven's sake...!"

Vickers spoke quietly. "Joan. I don't think the gentleman wants to be

disturbed,"

From Joan's end of the line there was utter silence, but the man said very distinctly, "How right you are.

No lady should disturb a man on his way to where I was going when she disturbed me. Now look what's happened." The phone gave an earsplitting bang as he let it drop on the table. Presumably he went away.

From the noise there was quite a brawl going on. Vickers' mouth tightened.

"Joan," he said. "Why was that drunk answering the phone? Aren't the servants down there?"

"I--suppose so, they're probably busy..."

"You'd better go to bed, Joan." He sounded almost gentle. "You've had quite a shock."

Her voice came over strangely choked and thin. "All right, Michael. Yes, I'll go to bed. Good night."

He smiled as he hung up, briefly. The smile was neither humorous nor kind. He went out of Angie's room and down the hall to his own, and the hounds trailed after him.

His bedroom hadn't been touched, except for cleaning. Everything was as he left it. He liked his room. It was big and plain and comfortable, and there was nothing in it that was not his own. The bed was smaller than the one in Angie's room, quite hard, and without pillows.

He stripped in the middle of the floor. Ridding his body of these

garments was like ridding it of a disease.

He went into the bath and filled the shining porcelain with water that was close to scalding, and the cleansing pain of it as he slid in was the most pleasant thing he had ever felt in his life.

Later, clean from scalp to toe, tingling from an icy shower, fresh shaven, he looked at his naked self in the long mirror. Four years ago he had been proud of his body. Professional trainers had molded it in gymnasiums and tempered it at pleasant games--so much of this and so much of that, and sweats and salt rubs and massage, and the result was beautiful. Smooth and perfect and beautiful.

That was four years ago.

His muscles weren't smooth now. They were rigid and knotted, for use and not for play. The comfortable flesh had starved and sweated away. He rather liked himself better now. This whole business had its amusing side. He smiled.

"They will be amused, Coolin," he said. "They will all be very much amused."

He was astonished, a minute or two later, to find that his old clothes still fitted him.

When he was dressed he went downstairs again. Joan was not there. He left the house, drove the reluctant hounds away into the darkness, and went to the garage.

It was built for three cars. There was only one in it now. A long black convertible he didn't remember. Of course, in four years... He glanced at the registration card.

It didn't say anything about anyone named Vickers. The name was Harold Bryce, and the address was on North Bedford Drive in Beverly Hills.

Vickers stood looking at it, his forefinger moving lightly back and forth across the name.

Harold Bryce. Hello, Harold. It'll be nice to see you again, old boy. Very, very nice... And nice to know what your car is doing in my wife's garage. The keys were in the lock, there was gas in the tank, and he had not forgotten how to drive.

Chapter Two

VICKERS LEFT Harold Bryce's car well off the drive and picked his way through the haphazard mass of expensive machinery parked on the flat space below the cliff. It was near midnight. There was mist, and a late moon.

There were steps winding up the cliff, which was sheer but not high. The house lay along the top of it. It was low and rambling--Vickers liked comfortable houses--and the front of it was mostly windows.

He had designed it himself. Every light was on, the blinds were up, and the front door was wide open.

There was a great deal of noise coming out of it. Vickers paused at the top of the steps, facing west into the light wind.

Below him was the sea, this immediate part of it shaped into a serene little cove. He could make out the two boats riding quietly at anchor--the same Dolphin and the same cabin cruiser he had had four years ago. He could see the landing, with the dinghy tied up alongside, and on the beach, the boathouse that was half elaborate cabana.

There was somebody down there. The pale blue of the beach sand had splashes of gold on it under the cabana windows.

Vickers turned and went on to the house. In the doorway he stopped and leaned his shoulder against the jamb and stood watching.

There were two radios going full blast. One had a rhumba band. On the other, a woman with a bass voice was dying of a broken heart. No one was listening to either of them.

The living room was not particularly large, and it seemed to have several thousand people in it. The mass squirmed and shifted with a sort of yeasty unease, fraying at the edges into individual blobs. A man had gone to sleep under the big table, his feet tucked in carefully, his head pillowed on a cushion from the window seat, a handkerchief over his face. Over in the corner a woman had broken the thin rhinestone strap that held her dress up. Four men were helping her. From the way she was yelling they were making progress in some direction. On the broad window seat there was a couple that had forgotten about the party altogether. Everybody was shrieking with laughter. Some of them were just shrieking. Nobody noticed Vickers.

A few of the people he knew. Some of them he remembered vaguely. Most of them he had never seen.

There was no sign of Angie.

He moved forward into the room.

He was taller than anyone there, and he was sober, and he went through the mob like an ice breaker.

Nobody even cursed him. He reached the big alcove at the end where the bar was. A man was bent double over the little bar, pawing at something on the floor behind it.

"Charlie," he said. "Charlie." He began to cry. Vickers saw a man's arm sticking out across the floor. He went over and had a look. Somebody had been playing bartender and had gone to sleep on the job.

"Poor Charlie," said the man who was crying. "He's dead. And I want

another drink."

"Not only dead," said Vickers, "but stiff." He dragged the snoring carcass out and flung it unconcernedly into a corner. "What'll you have?"

"Double water and no scotch."

"Sure that's what you want?"

"S'what I been drinking all evening, and I never mix 'em."

"Right." Vickers poured a double shot of White Rock into a glass. He said casually, "Seen Angie around?"

"Angie?"

Vickers handed him the glass. "Angie Vickers. She's giving this party."

Light broke. "Oh, Angie!" He raised his glass, screwed up an enormous wink, nodded, and took the White Rock in one swallow, after which he exhaled loudly and made the usual I-hate-the-filthy-stuff grimace. Then he leaned forward confidentially.

"I haven't seen Angie for a long, long time. Nobody ever sees Angie for a long, long time. But I'll tell you a secret. You look for Harry Bryce, or Job Crandall, or Bill Saul." He laughed suddenly, which nearly caused him to fall on his face. "Or maybe all of 'em at once, I dunno. Anyway, Angie'll be there."

"Will she?" said Michael Vickers. His voice was almost unconcerned. "Will she really?"

The man was staring at him. "You're twins," he said accusingly. A

woman came up and took the man's arm. "You're drunk, Roddy," she said. "Look, people, Roddy's drunk." She thought that was very funny.

Roddy glared, then frowned and sniffed the glass with the remains of the White Rock in it.

"Drunk, huh? Well, no wonder, the dirty sonofabitch--he mixed drinks on me! I was stony cold sober ... where is the dirty..."

Vickers had gone.

He was back in the south wing now, where the bedrooms were strung along one side of a long passage.

The other side was glass, and beyond it the garden was dark and silent under the mist. He passed the first guest room. It seemed to be sacred to the ladies for this night. A burst of female cackling came through the half open door. The next one was ditto for the men. The third door was closed. Vickers went past it, to the door of the big room on the corner that had been his and Angie's. He flung it open.

The room was empty. The little portrait of Angie he had always liked so much smiled down at him from the wall. Her eyes had sunbeams in them, those odd clear eyes that were almost golden, and her lips were parted, and there was wind in her black hair. Vickers closed the door very quietly. He went to the third guest room.

It contained a pair of frail young men who screamed at him. He looked at them and went away, back along the hall. His face was quite empty of expression. He went into the kitchen. Job Crandall was there.

He was hunched over the white enamel table, drinking beer out of a quart bottle, and he was so near passing out that he was staring like

a blind man. He was nearly as tall as Vickers, loose-jointed and gracefully angular. His hair was snow-white, his face dark brown and handsome, his eyes deep blue. His red-headed wife sat on the edge of the table. She was beautifully gowned and coifed, but youth was not in her. Nothing was in her at this moment but fury and alcohol. She was cursing Job Crandall slowly and repetitiously in a low, hissing voice. Crandall drank beer and stared straight ahead of him.

Vickers said quietly, "Shut up, Harriet." He leaned across the table. "Job. Job, remember me?" Crandall blinked. His eyes were drugged and empty. Harriet went on cursing.

Vickers leaned on the table for a moment, watching them, then he went away. Just outside the door a crashing noise made him look around. Job Crandall had fallen forward across the table and the beer bottle had dropped to the floor. It didn't break. There was still some beer in it. Harriet picked it up and raised it to her thin, smeared mouth. Vickers went back through the living room. There was still sign of Angie there. Faces passed him. Strange faces, faces at he knew, all of them blurred and feverish with the immediacy of pleasure, unseeing. He looked into the garden. It was empty. He went out of the front door and along the terrace to the glassed-in sun deck. He found Bill Saul there, with a woman.

She was a bleached blonde with large breasts and a sultry, attractive face. She was standing in the corner, against the wall, and Bill Saul was standing against her, his hands placed one on either side of her head. He was a lean man with dark hair, and he wore a white jacket. His face was hidden against the woman's cheek. He moved it, slowly, down toward her throat, and she thrust her chin up and caught her breath aloud, and smiled.

Vickers went up and put his hand on Saul's shoulder. "Bill," he said. "Turn around."

Saul lifted a pale, predacious face to the moon and said three words and bent his head again.

Vickers tightened his hand and pulled. Saul was not little, and he was not weak, but he moved. "I told you to turn around."

Saul's face showed hollows at the temples and in the long cheeks. His hair grew to a peak on his beautiful forehead, and his eyes were as old and as colorless as the moon, and he looked like Lucifer, drunk and in rut. He said softly, "What the hell are you trying to do?" and struck.

Vickers stopped the blow before it was started. His left hand was holding Saul's soft shirt below the collar. He thrust Saul back until his head rapped sharply against an upright between the panes of glass.

"By Jesus," Vickers said, "somebody's going to say hello to me." He slapped Saul lightly across the face.

"Say hello, Bill. Welcome me home."

The moonlight fell between them. He saw Saul's eyes widening and he saw the woman rigid as a statue in the corner, and after a long, long time he heard Saul's voice say, "Michael Vickers."

.He let go of Saul and stepped back. He said politely, "Thank you, Bill. And now, perhaps you know where Angie is."

Bill Saul said nothing. He did not move. He stared at Vickers and his narrow head moved once from right to left and back again. Vickers waited, not long. He turned to the woman. She had sunk into a chair.

She was quite drunk and would soon be hysterical. Vickers looked

through the glass, down toward the quiet sea. The lights were still on in the boathouse.

"I'll see you later, Bill," he said, and went back to the steps. It was a long way down.

Bill Saul stood motionless. A thin film of sweat crawled over his face. The woman began to sob, but he paid no attention. He did not stir until, suddenly, the cabin cruiser woke noisily and swept out of the cove. Saul spun around and stared after it. The dinghy was bobbing now beside the mooring buoy.

Saul went to the steps and began to run down them. He found Vickers standing in the open doorway of the cabana. He was lighting a cigarette. His hands were steady and he was smiling. "Hello, Bill."

Saul's tongue seemed to be oddly stiff, as though he were not used to using it. "Find Angie?"

"In a way." Vickers pointed out to sea. "She's just taken the cruiser out."

"Alone?"

"She was alone in the dinghy. I saw her go aboard."

Saul said awkwardly, "She often takes the cruiser out."

Vickers nodded. "She always did."

Saul moved past him, into the room. He took a cigarette from a box on the table and lighted it. His hands were not steady. A glint of metal against the rough canvas cushions of the window seat caught his eye.

He went over and picked up a cigarette case. It was Mexican silver, with a thunderbird on it.

Vickers said, "That looks like the one I gave Harold Bryce for Christmas five years ago."

Saul said, "It is." He looked around the empty room, then out the window toward the house, frowning.

"Wonder where Harry's got to?"

Vickers stood quietly in the doorway, smoking, looking out to sea. "I don't know," he said. "Except that he's gone from here."

Chapter Three

VICKERS HAD not gone to bed at all. Quiet and detached, he had played host until nearly daybreak, and then had watched the party pour itself away. No one had questioned him. No one had said his name.

He was not surprised. Most of them could not have said their own names.

He stood alone on the terrace for a long time. The sun came up and touched the morning mist to opalescent warmth and then burned it slowly away. Down in the cove the dinghy looked small and lonesome beside the mooring buoy. It was very quiet. The cruiser had not come back.

There were only three cars left on the flat space below. One would belong to Angie, one to the Crandalls, and one to Bill Saul. Bryce's car was where Vickers had left it, down the drive.

Vickers flung away his cigarette and went inside. The house was buried under used and empty glassware.

In the kitchen he cleared away enough of the litter to make coffee. By the time it was ready the smell of it had begun to bring people out of their holes.

Bill Saul came first. His eyes were bloodshot and there were dark smudges under them, but otherwise he showed no signs of a hangover.

He said, "Hello, Vick," and nodded toward the huge Silex. "I can use about four gallons of that."

"Help yourself." Vickers took his own cup and sat down. He started violently as Saul clashed his saucer on the stove. Saul smiled. "Hasn't Angie come back yet?"

"No."

Saul walked over and sat down, not quite opposite Vickers at the kitchen table. He studied him obliquely. He had strange eyes. They seemed to suck every detail into themselves and drown it in some dark and quiet well, from which it could be resurrected at need. Like the corpses in the laboratory vats, Vickers thought.

Saul said, "Well, are you going to talk?"

"When I get ready."

Saul nodded. "I'll save my questions, then." He leaned back and suddenly he was laughing. "I'm glad you're back."

Vickers raised an eyebrow. "You sound as though you meant that."

"I do. This is going to be fun."

"You always did have a weird sense of humor."

"At least I have one, which is more than you can say. Unless..." He studied Vickers shrewdly.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you've acquired one in your travels, along with scar. You know, you really ought to change your name."

"Why?"

"Well, a name is a label. You associate it with a particular thing. Take your big hound, Coolin. Suppose he vanishes for four years and comes back with horns, a ridge of bony spikes down his backbone, a fine soprano voice and a passion for artichoke hearts. He's something, all right, but he isn't Coolin."

Vickers smiled. "Study your semantics, Bill. Coolin One is not Coolin Two. Coolin the puppy is not Coolin the hound. And yet it's all the same dog."

Bill Saul drank coffee, his eyes pale and intent and faintly malicious over the rim of the cup. "Which are you, then? Vickers One or Vickers Two?"

"Believe me," said Vickers, I've lost count." His smile went no farther than his lips. "Which do you think you'd prefer, Bill? You weren't overly fond of Vickers One, as I recall it."

"I don't like people very much," Saul said. "Even people I like." He glanced at the door, then rose.

"Good morning, you sweet bitch," he said pleasantly to Harriet Crandall. "Guess who this is? Or did you know?"

Harriet Crandall stood quite still, watching Vickers' body unfold lazily. Her eyes slid upward to his face and stayed there. In the clear morning light she looked pinched and waspish and old, and her red hair had no life to it. Her body was incongruously young and curved under the dove-gray housecoat she wore.

She put both hands over her face. "Bill," she said steadily. "I had a lot to drink last night. I may still be drunk. I seem to be looking at a man who looks like Michael Vickers. Not exactly like Michael Vickers.

Just enough to make me uncomfortable."

Vickers said pleasantly, "You go right on being uncomfortable, old girl, because I am Vickers. Have some coffee?"

"Coffee," said Harriet. "My God." She sat down. "I need something stronger than that." She was suddenly angry. "Well, if that isn't just like you, Vick! To turn up here without a word of warning and frighten the living..."

"Vick!"

The voice came from Job Crandall. It was like a grunt produced by being kicked fairly hard in the stomach. And Crandall's face had that kind of a look on it. He reached out blindly for the door jamb.

Vickers walked over to him. "Hello, Job. I spoke to you last night, but you were a little confused.

Coffee's just ready. Come on in."

Crandall didn't move. His eyes didn't waver from Vickers' face. He began to tremble, particularly along the right side and arm. His jaw lifted, and his head drew around toward his right shoulder. His face was quite calm, bronzed and handsome, almost boyish.

Harriet said between her teeth, "Oh, for heaven's sake, stop him!"

Vickers said to Saul, "Get some ice." Saul went off quickly. Vickers put his hand on Job's shoulder, and shook him gently. "Job. Here, now." Saul came back with ice cubes wrapped in a dishtowel. Vickers took the cold bundle and held it firmly against the back of Crandall's neck. Crandall caught a long shuddering breath and went rigid. Vickers led him to the breakfast nook and sat him down on the

padded bench. He began to rub the ice over Crandall's face and neck. Presently Crandall took the ice away from him, pressed it to his own forehead, and leaned forward over the table. His voice was uncertain, embarrassed, desperately unconcerned.

"Hello, Vick," he said. "How are you? When did you get back?"

Harriet flounced over to the stove. "He got back last night, he says. Just walked in. Just like that. Not a word to anybody." She splashed coffee into a cup and turned around. "If that isn't just like, him! Selfish son of a bitch... missing four years, nobody knows whether he's alive or dead, and then he just turns up. I suppose that warning people beforehand would have spoiled his dramatic entrance." She advanced toward Vickers. "And what I want to know is, what in hell happened to you? By God, if I were Angie, I'd cut your throat!"

Vickers said softly, "I'm just wondering if anybody made this much of a fuss when I went away."

A woman's voice said yawningly, "Who went away? You talking about my husband?"

A tall brunette came sleepily into the kitchen. She was strictly the showgirl type, long legs and a sharp, upthrusting bosom, all of which were displayed in a turquoise jersey sun-suit of the smallest possible dimensions. The bleached blonde who had been with Bill Saul on the sun deck was right behind her. She went over and draped herself quietly around Bill. The brunette looked around the kitchen, glanced incuriously at Vickers, and demanded.

"Where is that no-good louse, anyhow?"

Bill Saul said, "Mrs. Bryce, allow me to present Mr. Michael Vickers. Mr. Vickers, this is Jennie, who is not, I fear, as bright as a penny—the

fourth Mrs. Harold Bryce. And by the way, where is Harold?"

The brunette Mrs. Bryce smiled at Vickers, measured him up and down, added coquetry to her expression, and tossed her breasts ever so slightly. "Pleased to meet you."

Vickers bowed.

"I'm getting sliced from Harold," she said. "The bum." She walked to the stove, her hips swinging. The blonde had gone to sleep on Saul's shoulder. Job Crandall reached out suddenly and caught Vickers' hand.

"Vick," he said. "What happened to you? What did happen?"

Vickers looked down. His face was bland and innocent.

"You were with me, Job. You and Bill Saul and Harry Bryce. You should know what happened."

The kitchen was quiet. Very, very quiet. And then, creeping small into the stillness, came the distant hum of a motor. Vickers straightened and turned away from Crandall and went out, to the living room, to the front door that stood open to the sun.

He watched it come, a little roaring speck that grew across the blue water and made a clean white arc into the cove. It slowed and came daintily to rest by the mooring buoy, and the motor choked, bubbled, and died. The sharp waning cry of a gull sounded loud in the sudden silence. Vickers stood motionless, watched the lithe figure in striped jersey and dungarees make fast and then climb into the dinghy and start to row ashore. A vein began to beat in his temple.

He returned to the kitchen. The people in it had leaked out, little by

little, to watch. They fell back before him. Only Bills' nameless blonde didn't care. Jennie Bryce said plaintively, "Won't somebody for Chrissake tell me..." Saul slapped her bottom hard and said, "Be quiet, darling."

Vickers said, "Sit down, everybody. What'll you have for breakfast?"

Crandall said, "But Vick...!"

"What will you have for breakfast?"

"Bacon and eggs," said Bill Saul. "That's always easy." He sat down. His eyes were very bright, amused and cruel. Vickers got bacon and eggs from the refrigerator and set the heavy skillet on the stove. Jennie Bryce sat on the corner-of the table and drank coffee and looked hurt and sullen. Job Crandall was in the breakfast nook, leaning on his elbows, his face suddenly lined and very tired. Harriet sat opposite him, perched on the edge of the bench. Bill's blonde was happy, curled in Bill's lap.

Vickers tied a heavy apron around him and put the bacon in the pan.

Harriet rose behind his back and went quickly and quietly toward the door.

Vickers said, not turning around, "Harriet."

She stopped. She looked over her shoulder at Vickers, who was not looking at her. She looked around the room, and then back at Vickers. Then she went back and sat down. Bill Saul smiled.

Light quick footsteps came into the house. Vickers turned the bacon carefully. There was no sound in the kitchen but the hot sibillance of the fat. The vein lay like a knotted cord across his forehead, below

the white scar. A voice called out from the hallway, "Hi! Who's the good Samaritan? That smells wonderful –and am I starved!"

He could feel her behind him, a movement, an aliveness, even before she came into the doorway. He could feel the others, too. Silent, watching. He turned swiftly and looked at their faces, at the things caught naked behind their eyes, and the same thing was in all of them. Fear.

They tried to bide it from him, all but Bill Saul, who was enjoying himself and who never hid things anyway. And then Angie came, and she was just as he remembered.

He saw her walk into the kitchen. Black hair the color of smoke, without shininess, thick and tangled by the sea wind; her skin a glowing brown. He saw her stop, puzzled, and frown, and start to speak, half laughing, and he thought, Her mouth is just the same, her breasts are still lovely... Her eyes were golden, and as warm as the morning. She saw him.

He watched her. He could not see clearly. It was very hot, and there was sweat in his eyes. He did not know whether the others were still there or not. The kitchen was long, very long, as long as four years, and Angie was walking toward him. She came slowly. He pulled off the apron because he couldn't breathe, it was so tight around him. He watched her face as it came closer, and suddenly he could see it with a terrible clarity, and it had a quivering, defenseless look. It was like a small creature stricken suddenly, stunned, still not sure. He tried to look into her eyes, and could not.

She put out her hand and touched his chest. She said, "Vick," just once. He caught her as she fell.

She was very light in his arms. He carried her out of the kitchen, and

down the long hall, with the garden bright and fresh beyond the windows. He carried her into the big room on the corner and kicked the door shut behind them, and laid her gently on the bed. Her head moved restively. She whispered, "Vick! Vick!", half whimpering, and he bent and kissed her on the mouth, with a great tenderness. Her lips parted under his, not with passion but a sigh, and then she was looking at him, herself, Angie, awake and curiously still.

"Are you sorry, Angie? Sorry I came back?"

"Vick, I..." She shook her head, because the words wouldn't come. She lay and stared up at him. He sat on the edge of the bed, with one hand braced across her, close to her body, and he could feel the racing beat of her heart.

She whispered, "I think I always knew you'd come."

She put her hands up, slowly, and brushed her fingertips back along the sides of his jaw, back of his ears, into his hair. The palms of her hands folded in, cupping his head as though it were something infinitely precious and beautiful.

"I've missed you. Oh God, how I've missed you!"

Her eyes were wonderful. They had a light in them. Her fingers pressed his neck.

He bent again and lifted her into his arms, and they lay without moving for a long while. They did not kiss.

Her cheek against his was wet, and finally, when he straightened and looked down at her and touched her hair, she said wonderingly, "I never saw you cry."

He got up then, and turned away from her. There was a pressure in his temples. She said, "Darling, what happened? Tell me what happened!"

Vickers said slowly, "What did they say had happened? My friends-- Job Crandall and Bill Saul and Harry Bryce?"

"They didn't know. They wired me from Mexico that you had disappeared. They did everything, and they couldn't find you--not even any trace of you. Job and Harry flew back, and Bill got some men and brought the boat back himself." She sat up on the bed. "They didn't know, Vick. You were with them, and then suddenly you weren't. That's all." His back was toward her. He said nothing. She burst out, "Where have you been all this time? Why didn't you send word?"

He faced her. He took hold of the footboard and leaned over it.

"Are you sorry I came back?"

She did not try to evade. After a time she said quietly, "I don't know."

He nodded and turned away again. He lighted a cigarette, moving as he did so to the wide corner windows. He leaned his shoulder against the frame and looked out at the sea, and began to talk in a noncommittal way, as though none of it were very important.

"We had chartered the Lady B, remember? Job and Harry and Bill and I. A stag cruise down the coast.

It was a good cruise, as far as it went. We had a lot of fun, caught a lot of fish. We went ashore one night at a little port, way down the coast. I've forgotten the name of it now, if I ever knew it. And I was drunk.

"That's odd, if you'll remember, Angie. I never drank much, and I was never drunk. But that night I had one highball aboard the Lady B, and I got drunk. Very drunk. You know Bill and Job and Harry. We all went ashore very high and happy. I remember how funny everything looked. There was no shape nor size nor distance. The town was like something painted on water, and the streets were very dark. I don't know where we went, or what we did, or who was with me. I mean, whether it was all three or only one of them, at the end. A man's voice--it sounded like the voice of God--spoke to me out of a singing mist, my head was full of it, and it said, 'Turn around, Vickers. I've waited a long time for this--I want to watch your face as you go down.'

"I suppose I remember the words, because even when you're drugged you remember a sentence of death. By that time I was blind, I could hardly stand. I don't know what hit me. I don't know how long it was before I came to. When I did I was aboard a Portuguese tramp, headed south, nothing in my pockets to tell me who I was, and nothing in my head, either. Only a damn big hole. They told me they'd found me in an alley off at the edge of town, and they thought I was drunk. They'd had pox aboard the ship, and they needed men. After they found I was really hurt, they were sorry they'd bothered, and by Jesus they made me work! After that--well, it doesn't matter. Only it was three years before I could remember my name."

He turned to Angie, his eyes hooded and dark. "You see why I didn't write. A corpse doesn't write to the executioner and say, 'Hullo, old boy--I'm coming back.'" He waited for Angie to speak. She sat quite still, her face intent, somehow withdrawn, as though busy with her own thoughts.

"You don't seem very surprised," he said.

"I'm not. It's what I've been afraid of."

He smiled, with a certain gentle irony. "My friends."

Angie said, "You were never a man who could make friends, Vick."

"Even of you."

"No."

"You hated me, really."

"Sometimes. Sometimes--yes."

"So you were afraid one of them had killed me. Afraid--or glad?"

Her eyes flashed yellow like an angry, cat's. "That's rotten even from you, Vick!"

"They're here. You drink with them. From what I hear, you sleep with them. You can't have been too much afraid."

She said levelly, "I've been trying to find out. For four years I've been trying to find out." After a moment she said, "And I don't owe you any apologies."

He stood watching her. His face took on a still, half sleeping look. He said softly, "You owe me something, after four years." He waited, and saw the small movement of herself toward him, and then he went to the foot of the bed, and stopped. "Not unless you want it, Angie. I won't touch you, unless you want it."

Again the wondering question in her voice. "You'd never have said that four years ago."

"No."

"Oh Vick, if you'd ever let me love you as I could!"

"Why didn't you leave me?"

"You wouldn't have let me, even if I'd wanted to. And .. ."

"And what?"

"I kept thinking, something will change him."

"Have you wanted me back?"

"Oh, darling..." She had no more voice. Her eyes were huge and gentle and shining with the soft brilliance of tears. She lay back on the pillow and held out her arms.

The knocking on the door was very loud. Bill Saul was calling, "Vick! God damn it, Vick, get up! Harry Bryce..." He stopped, then went on in a different tone. "Well, he's come back, Vick. I think you'd better see him."

Chapter Four

HARRY BRYCE had come back, all right. He had come from the sea, and he had been in no hurry. He was never going to be in a hurry any more. He had all the time there was. He lay waiting, quite patient and relaxed, his feet still in the shadows, his body still a part of the lazy rhythm of the sea.

Job Crandall stood beside him. He was not doing anything. There was nothing in particular to do.

Vickers knelt in the wet sand.

Crandall said jerkily, "We went out on the terrace, the five of us. We were talking about Harry, wondering where he was. I was leaning on the wall, looking at the water, thinking about going for a swim, and I saw something. It seemed to float out from under the landing. I thought it was driftwood at first, and then—I called Bill, and we watched it..."

Bill Saul said, "He must have been caught under the landing, Vick. Look at his face."

Vickers nodded. "Barnacles." Bryce was lying partly on his right side, his head tipped comfortably over.

Vickers pointed at the back of it. "The description of that has nothing to do with barnacles. The phrase, I believe, is 'crushed like an eggshell.'"

Crandall said, "I wonder how it happened?"

Vickers glanced up, from Crandall to Bill Saul. He ran his fingers

along the side of his face where the scar was and said pleasantly, "Yes. I wonder."

For a long moment there was no sound, no motion on the beach, nothing but the whispered underscoring of the sea. Harry Bryce watched the tiny movement of a pebble on the very edge of macrocosmic force, and thought about it, whatever thoughts a dead man thinks. Michael Vickers looked up, half smiling, and Saul and Crandall looked down, and the sea wind went by and was not interested.

Bill Saul said dryly, "If I know Harry, he was making passes at a mermaid and she slapped him with her tail. We'd better go call the police."

"Police," said Vickers. He got up. "Oh, yes, the police. I'd forgotten there were such things." He leaned over and caught Harry Bryce by the sodden collar of his white dinner coat and dragged him without effort above the water line. "Poor old Harry."

"It must have been accidental," Crandall said.

"Why?"

"Well, it... He was drunk the last I saw of him. Really drunk. He walked out there and fell and hit his head...."

"Possibly."

"Well, Christ! He was our friend, Vick! Why...?"

Vickers said, "There were a million people here last night, more or less. They weren't all his friends.

Besides, Job," he went on, "we were all friends in Mexico, the four of

us..."

"What's Mexico got to do with it?" Crandall's face flushed. He was abruptly shaken with anger. "God damn it, Vick, you're just spoiling for trouble, aren't you? Coming back like that, scaring the bloody hell out of the lot of us, and then going around acting like something out of Macbeth, practically accusing us of..."

"Go on, Job," said Vickers softly. "Accusing you of what?"

"Christ knows! And now this has to happen. We'll be up to our necks in policemen and notebooks and newspaper reporters... Oh, Lord, what a mess!"

Vickers smiled. "You're right, Job. Fun and games for all." He looked over at Bill Saul and laughed.

"You said this was going to be fun."

"Uh huh." Bill Saul narrowed his eyes in speculative appraisal of Vickers' face. "But I'm beginning to wonder about that sense of humor I mentioned. I think I like yours even less than mine."

"Wait and see." Vickers started to turn away, then paused and looked down at Harry Bryce. "D'you realize that nobody has said a word about being sorry?"

Saul turned to Crandall. "Are you sorry?"

"Oh, for Chrissake!"

"I don't think he's sorry, Vick. I'm not sorry. Are you sorry?"

Vickers said slowly, "I don't know yet." He scowled at Harry Bryce a moment, then looked up again at Bill Saul. "But when you come right

down to it, Bill--isn't friendship a wonderful thing?"

"Perhaps. I suppose a lot depends on the friends."

"Yes. And we were none of us men who made friends, were we?"
Vickers' eyes were somber, far away.

"There was really only one thing that held the four of us together. One person."

Bill Saul said, "You've learned a lot in four years, Vick."

Vickers shrugged and walked back toward the steps. Bill Saul followed. Job Crandall stopped on the way and was sick.

The women were clustered around the top of the steps. Angie was with them, keeping them under control. Harriet screamed, "What is it? Who is it?"

At the foot of the steps Bill Saul said quietly, "Vick."

"Yes?"

"Did you see Harry last night?"

"D'you think I did?"

"I just wondered, after what you said at the boathouse."

"What did I say?"

"I asked you where Harry'd got to, and you said, 'I don't know, only that he's gone from here.'" Vickers' eyes were cold, quite empty of anything but a certain amusement. Saul tried to probe them, and gave it up.

Vickers said, "That's a fascinating thought, Bill. I can see that people are going to be duly fascinated." He went up the steps. The women closed in on him, shrilly vocal. Only Angie was pale and huge-eyed and quiet. He put his arm around her.

"It's Harry Bryce," he said. "Somehow he's got himself killed."

Angie looked up at him, quickly, and then away. He felt her tighten in the circle of his arm.

Harriet said loudly, "Oh my God. Oh, poor Harry!" She ran to the wall and stared down at the mortal driftwood that was Harry Bryce. Bill Saul's blonde echoed, "Poor Harry," and yawned.

The fourth Mrs. Harry Bryce, now Jennie Bryce, widow, sat down. She said, "You mean Harry's dead?"

"Quite," said Vickers.

"You mean now I don't have to get a divorce?"

"I shouldn't think that would be necessary."

"Jesus Christ," said Jennie reverently. "I'm worth nearly a million bucks."

Bill Saul had come up. Crandall was with him, looking green and shaky. Harriet turned away from the wall and rushed back.

"Aren't you going to do something for him? I mean, you can't just leave him there, sort of--well, thrown away!"

Vickers said, "I believe the police prefer not to have their corpses messed with, and I don't imagine Harry minds at all. Suppose you all

go and get a drink..."

"Police!" cried Harriet. "Police!"

"Harriet. Go get a drink. Bill, take over, will you?" Vickers leaned over briefly and patted Jennie's bare brown shoulder. "Bear up, old girl. I know it's a shock.", "Yeah." Her face was blank and rather dazed. "It sure is." As Vickers went away, taking Angie with him, he heard her murmur, "A million bucks!"

In the living room, Vickers paused long enough to telephone the police. Angie stood perfectly still beside him, waiting. When he was through she went with him to the bedroom and closed the door, shutting out the tense babble of voices from the terrace.

Vickers said, "You were with Harry last night, down at the boathouse."

"Yes. Not for long. He was very drunk and unpleasant, and I told him to go away. He did."

"Just before you took the boat out." It was a statement, not a question.

"No. Some time before that."

"How long before?"

"I don't know. I wasn't keeping any track of time." She studied Vickers. Her face was bloodless under the tan, drawn tight. "Were you down there, Vick?"

"I saw you going aboard the cruiser. It was too late to call you back. There was no sign of Harry then, except his cigarette case on the lounge." He paused. "Why did you take the boat out, Angie?"

"Because I wanted to. It's the only way I can sleep, sometimes. I anchored off the point and stayed there."

"Strange," said Vickers. "The hostess running out on her own party."

She made a gesture of disgust. "That wasn't a party."

"Quite. But it was in your house. You must have invited the people. And you evidently didn't want the servants around."

"Do you blame me?" Angie went over to the table and picked up a cigarette. "That was some of Harry's crowd. He inherited them along with Jennie."

Vickers said softly, "But they made such a lot of noise, didn't they? And they were all so beautifully blind drunk."

Angie put the cigarette down without lighting it. Her eyes were narrow and bright, hard yellow. She took two steps toward Vickers.

He said affably, "I'm only thinking of the police. They're going to ask all these questions too, you know."

He paused. "If I were you, darling, I shouldn't tell the constabulary about having been with Harry. Bill and I are the only ones who know you were, and I shall speak with Bill."

Angie had stopped, but she had not relaxed. "And if I were you," she said, "I shouldn't tell them I was there, either."

His mouth curved in a slow, one-sided smile. "Right." He looked at her. "You're angry." And then, softly, "You're marvelous."

She did relax, under his kiss.

"D'you think I killed him, Angie?" His lips brushed her neck, the tip of her ear.

"I don't know...." She was barely whispering. "Perhaps you heard his voice, and it was the same one. I don't know you any more, Vick."

"Nor do I know you." She was slender and small in the circle of his arms, but wonderfully alive, wonderfully strong. Her black hair was fragrant, her skin was sweet as a flower in the sun.

"You see, my darling," he murmured, "it's quite possible that four years ago you said to Harry Bryce, or Bill Saul, or Job Crandall, 'Look. You are going on a long cruise with my husband, whom I would like never to see again. If by chance anything permanent should befall the son of a bitch, you may have what you will in payment.'" His arms tightened. "Christ, that would be worth a murder..."

"Vick."

She pressed him back, thrust him away. Not harshly, not in anger. He could not read her eyes. Her face was like a page on which nothing is written.

"Vick," she said. "There's a car coming. That'll be the police."

But it wasn't. It was Joan Merrill and a short, shrewd, bald-pated man named Sessions. They came in Sessions' car, and the back seat contained a butler, a cook, and a shapely young person who appeared to be a maid, but only vocationally. She was blonde, and Bill Saul made sure that she got safely into the servant's wing.

Sessions caught Vickers' large lean hand in his two small plump ones and wrung it.

"Gosh, it's good to see you again! I'd about given up hope. What happened to you, Vick? Where have you been? Why didn't you let us know you were coming? How is everything? How are you?"

Vickers permitted himself a faintly cynical smile. "Don't overdo it, old boy. You can't be that glad to see me, not unless absence has made your heart grow much fonder than it ever was." He led the way from the terrace into the living room. Everybody was there, sort of milling about, roosting briefly on some bit of furniture, then rising to mill again. Vickers' deep voice carried clearly.

"Answering chronologically, I got a bang on the noggin that blanked me out for some time; I've been in South America; I preferred not to send word that I was coming; everything's lovely except that we've a corpse on our hands and no good explanation for it; and my physical condition seems to be adequate."

Joan Merrill said flatly, "A corpse." She did not seem to have slept at all. She did not seem particularly surprised.

Angie said, "Harry Bryce. Nobody knows how it happened."

"You got here just in time for the police, Joan," Vickers told her, smiling. Then, to Sessions, "Are you still my business manager?"

"Naturally. I've taken care of everything while you were gone."

"I still own a department store?"

"Of course. And I may say that business has improved nearly one third..."

"That's fine. Then you won't need me back for a while." Vickers went out to find Bill Saul.

Joan Merrill caught Angie's hand. Her eyes were worried and questioning and devoted. She did not speak.

Angie's fingers gripped hers. They were trembling. "I don't know," she whispered. "Everything's upside down. I... Joan..." The last was a cry for help.

Joan murmured, "Of course, Angie. Always." Her hand rose casually, almost furtively, to stroke Angie's hair.

A car came into the drive below. Two cars. Three, and one had a heavier motor and no windows in the back. The passenger who rode in that one would have no need of fresh air or a view. Feet began to climb the steps to the terrace. There was a sudden dead silence in the living room. Vickers came back with Bill Saul. A slight nod passed between them. There was something strangely alike about their faces, mocking, inscrutable, and somehow, vaguely, sad. The door chimes sounded. The . butler, whose name Vickers did not know, crossed to the door and opened it. He spoke briefly, then turned to Angie.

"Madam," he said. "The gentlemen from the police."

Chapter Five



DETECTIVE-LIEUTENANT Joe Trehearne, L.A.P.D., Bay Cities Division, Homicide, stood in the dry fine sand above the water line and looked at Harry Bryce. Trehearne was not a large man. He was lean and wiry and intensely dark--his hair, his eyes, his sunbrowned skin. His features were bold, almost harsh, and seemed at some time to have been pushed aside, rather roughly, toward the left.

"What do you think?" he asked.

The M.E. glanced upward. "Six, two, and even, it's murder. Look at that." He pointed to the back of Bryce's head. "See the shape of the wound? A round lacerated area here--the skull is splintered underneath--and this bruise that runs across the occiput. Looks to me like a bar, or pipe, with a bump at one end. Maybe a coupling, or a nut."

"You think he was hit?"

"Sure I think he was hit. But hard."

"But he could have done it falling."

The M.E. shrugged. "Maybe he could. If he did, he sure went to a lot of trouble to knock his brains out."

He stood up. "That's, of course, if he had any. He don't look too bright."

"Men in his condition seldom do." Trehearne smiled. His mouth was his one jarring note. It was almost beautiful, very gentle, almost sweet. "Know who that is? Or was?"

"All right. Who?"

"Harold Bryce. The Harold Bryce who cleaned up a nice warm million or so in Beverly Hills real estate and then had to scramble to keep off the county."

The M.E. looked knowing. "Dames?"

"Four wives, and the usual incidentals."

The M.E. looked down at Harry Bryce and shook his head. "A million, eh? And I'll bet he won't look one bit different from Joe Blow when I cut him open." He waved to the boys with the wicker basket.

Trehearne made a rude remark as to the probable condition of part of Mr. Bryce's anatomy. The M.E.

winked and said, "I'll let you know."

"Yeah," said Trehearne. "Do that. And check two things particularly. Could it have been a fall, and could a woman have done it. The knock on the head, I mean, and quit grinning. An active woman, strong, in good condition. The sort of female who sails boats and things."

"Aha!" said the M.E. "Enter the femme fatale."

Trehearne shrugged. "You never know," he said. "Women are so capable these days." He went down across the sand to the landing. The tide had come in and washed the beach clean of any tracks left from last night. It was liberally trampled now, by official boots.

He walked across the worn, weathered planks of the landing. There was a long sort of storage locker built on the right-hand side. It was about five feet high and heavily padlocked. In the lee of it was a bloodstain. It was not a large bloodstain and it seemed to have been messed about quite a bit. There were no recognizable prints of any kind. Trehearne turned around and yelled. The M.E. came back across the beach and joined him.

Trehearne said, "He doesn't seem to have bled a lot."

"A little from the nose, and some from the mouth and ears. The head wound wouldn't have bled much."

Trehearne scowled thoughtfully. "Then if he was murdered, the killer probably wouldn't have got any blood on him."

"I shouldn't think so. Not unless he dabbled in it afterward." The M.E. studied the shape and surrounding areas of the stain. "That's just a gently spreading pool. Looks like he lay there and dripped for a few minutes and then got up--it's amazing how a guy can live sometimes with his skull stove in--and fell over the edge."

"And that finished him?"

The M.E. grunted. "He was probably dead before he hit the water. Before he even finished getting up, maybe."

"Damn," said Trehearne. "Somebody might at least have stepped into that puddle, so we'd have a nice handy bloodstained shoeprint to check on. Not even a sign of a track. Oh, well. They told me detecting wasn't easy. It's my own fault." He went away, back toward the house.

By this time the reporters had arrived. Somehow the rumor had got around that Vickers had turned up silently out of the night, and that,

coupled with the honey-sweet smell of murder, had brought them swarming. There was a solid and highly vocal mass of them on the terrace, completely submerging the plump little Mr. Sessions, who was handing out a typewritten statement and screaming plaintively for mercy. Trehearne came up and was instantly besieged.

He shouldered through them good-naturedly. "Nothing to report until after the autopsy."

"Murder?"

"We don't know yet." He dropped a protective arm around Sessions and ploughed on to the door.

Somebody yelled, "What about Vickers?" Trehearne said, "I haven't seen him yet, to talk to." Sessions cried out indignantly, "We have given you a statement..."

Somebody told him what he could do with his statement. "We want to see Vickers!"

"You'll have to battle that out with him." Trehearne leaped nimbly through the door, pulling Sessions with him. The butler, displaying a keen sense of timing, slammed the door behind them one split second in advance of the rush. Trehearne took his hat off. The butler lifted it smoothly out of his hand and went off.

"Thank you," said Sessions primly. "Those men aren't civilized. They should be kept in cages."

He toddled off. Vickers was sitting on one of the twin couches that flanked the fireplace, his long legs sprawled out comfortably. Angie curled beside him in the crook of his arm. She wore a yellow frock that made her eyes more like sunbeams than ever. They looked a

very happy couple, with no important sins on their souls. Vickers glanced up at Trehearne and smiled.

"Sit down, won't you? What did you find out?" Trehearne sat down. Bill Saul, in the corner of the opposite couch, looked at Vickers and thought, That's the old Vickers there now. The complete I Am.

Looks funny with that scar.... The blonde was draped over the arm of the couch and from there onto his shoulders. She ran her forefinger idly up his cheek, and from the scraping Saul knew he hadn't shaved very well that morning.

Trehearne's quiet, rather diffident answer to Vickers' question was astonishingly loud in the room.

"I'm afraid it looks like murder."

Job Crandall, sitting as far away from Harriet as possible, took his right arm and held it tightly, against him under his left. He was breathing slowly and evenly, counting to each breath. The right side of his face twitched. With the sunlight on his thick white hair he had the appearance of a towheaded youth. Only his eyes were old and lost and pathetically questioning.

"Of course," said Trehearne, "there's a bare possibility that he struck his head in falling from the landing.

We'll know better after the autopsy."

"Autopsy," said Harriet Crandall. "How horrible."

Jennie Bryce reared up suddenly on the window seat. "Jesus," she said. "You aren't going to muck him up so we can't bury him decent."

Vickers said soothingly, "Don't worry, Jennie. They'll put all the pieces

back."

"My God," said Harriet. "With poor Harry lying dead...

"Harriet," said Vickers, "go get a drink. You might get one for Job, too. He looks worse than Harry did.

Trehearne?"

"No, thanks. Too early in the day for me."

Vickers nodded. "Murder, eh? I suppose that means we're all in for what is known as a grilling."

"Well, some preliminary questions." Trehearne settled back and crossed his legs. He kept glancing at Angie. He tried not to, but it didn't do any good. He wished she had not worn a yellow dress. Yellow did things to him; it was sort of an alive color. She had no business wearing yellow, really. Not with her hair and her eyes and her particularly gorgeous and bare brown skin. "Yes," he said. "Just some preliminary questions. For instance, exactly what happened last night?"

"Good lord," said Vickers, and laughed. "The man's really an optimist."

"Why?"

Job Crandall said, "There was a party last night. We all got drunk." He added dully, "All except Vick, I guess."

Harriet shoved a glass in his hand. "You passed out. I can remember that much."

"But you didn't remember me," said Vickers. He looked at

Trehearne. "I got here about midnight.

Frankly, I doubt that anyone will remember anything. Nobody recognized me but Bill Saul, and even that took a bit of doing."

Saul nodded. "It was a Grade Double-A, super-colossal brawl."

"Yes," said Harriet spitefully. "Even the hostess couldn't stand it. She disappeared in the motor boat and didn't get back until morning."

Trehearne raised a questioning eyebrow at Angie.

Angie said, "They were mostly Harry's friends. I hardly knew them. But you know how these parties are.

I was tired, I don't drink, so I went away for a while."

"Then nobody can remember anything about Harry Bryce last night? What he did, who was with him, anything at all?"

Jennie Bryce said, "Well, I don't know about the rest of 'em, but I didn't see him all night. Angie brought him down. I came with some other people. He and I had a fight...."

"A fight?"

"Oh," said Jennie airily, "we were always having 'em. I was just telling him it didn't look right for him to be spending so much time with Angie while he was still married to me. So of course he went right over to Angie's." She shrugged one perfect shoulder, left bare by the sundress she had put on. "I didn't care, you understand. It's just that it seems like a wife's got some rights as long as she's still a wife, even if she isn't going to stay that way long. Anyhow, I didn't see him again till this morning."

Her last words rang out with a deafening clarity. The living room had become abruptly silent. Jennie, having dropped her brick, smiled at Trehearne with a lazy droop of the lids and settled back. Bill Saul began to hum the song about Poor Jennie. Vickers said, "Why, Angie." He looked down at her and laughed. "Sometime soon we must get together and compare notes."

"Any time, darling." Angie smiled up at him. The smile was perhaps a little stiff around the edges. To Trehearne she said, "Harry did make a nuisance of himself, I'm afraid. He was drinking very heavily, and he seemed to find my house a quiet place to do it in. I drove him down here last night because he was in no condition to drive himself."

Trehearne nodded toward the drive outside. "But his car is here."

Vickers said, "I drove it down. It was the only one available."

"I see. Let me think, Mr. Vickers." Trehearne's face was relaxed and pleasant. He might have been a friend, dropped in for a chat. "You've been--missing for four years, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"As I recall it, you vanished during a cruise in Mexican waters. Harry Bryce and these two gentlemen were with you."

"Right."

"What happened?"

Vickers said ruefully, "I can see that that question is going to get monotonous." He touched the scar.

"This happened. I was ashore one night, quite drunk, and evidently

wandering where I'd no business to be, and I got knocked on the head. Result, amnesia, and four rather unpleasant years."

"Assault and robbery."

"Obviously."

Trehearne turned to Angie. He said admiringly, "You've certainly kept the news quiet, Mrs. Vickers."

She stared at him for a second, her eyes blank and startled. Then she dropped her head. She had opened her mouth to say yes, when Vickers answered for her.

"She had nothing to keep quiet. I sent no word that I was coming."

Trehearne seemed mildly surprised.

Harriet Crandall said, "He wouldn't. It was more spectacular this way."

Trehearne smiled. "Do you think your sudden return might have had any bearing on what happened?"

Vickers' eyes got a hard, bright look in them. "What bearing," he asked softly, "could it possibly have had?"

Trehearne said mildly, "I have no idea. That's why I asked you." He got up. "Well, thanks very much.

You're all free to go home, of course, but please don't leave the city. You understand-- we'll want more information, unless we're convinced the death was accidental. I don't hold much hope for that. And one other thing. I want everything in this house left just as it is. That means wearing apparel, personal effects, the works. They'll be returned to

you as soon as we're through with them. I assume that none of you are wearing the clothes you had on last night."

"No," said Vickers, "except myself. Afraid I can't let you have my things just now. I should feel so conspicuous."

"All right," said Trehearne. "But don't have them cleaned, pressed, or brushed. There'll be a man around to pick them up later on. That goes for the shoes and socks and the' rest of it." He bowed to Angie with unexpected grace. "Mrs. Vickers, could you make out a guest list? Everyone who was here last night?"

"I'll try." She smiled at Trehearne.

Vickers rose and went to the door with Trehearne. "Let us know, will you? We'll be at home, in town."

The butler had come up with his hat. Trehearne took it. "I'll let you know," he said. He went out.

Vickers walked back toward the fireplace.

Joan Merrill said in a high, quivering voice, "Michael, did you kill Harry?"

He turned around and stared at her. She was twisted forward on the edge of her chair, her handsome head erect and rigid. He had never seen her like this before. There was no servility about her, no apology, not even fear. He waited for her to break and she did not. She rose slowly. Her eyes did not turn aside from his.

"Did you, Michael?"

Vickers' left eyebrow made a cold, questioning arch. "Should I have done?"

Angie went over and put her hand on Joan's arm. "Please, darling," she said gently. "Come and help me pack." Joan stood still a moment, then allowed Angie to steer her toward the hall. Neither one glanced back.

Harriet Crandall said "H'm!" audibly. She tapped her husband on the shoulder. "Come on, Job. Let's get the hell out of here."

Job set his glass down slowly and stood up. Harriet was waiting for him, but he paid no attention to her.

He went instead to Vickers and stood facing him.

"Don't start. thinking things about Angie," he said. "No matter what anybody says, they're not true."

Vickers said nothing. His eyes were cool and impenetrable, faintly amused. Job flushed darkly.

Harriet said, "You might try standing up for your own wife sometime." She went off to get her belongings. Job Crandall turned on his heel and followed her.

Bill Saul kissed his blonde lightly and patted her up onto her feet. He motioned, and she trotted off obediently like a well-trained dog. Saul yawned, but his eyes, meeting Vickers', were anything but sleepy.

He nodded toward the door, apparently referring to Trehearne.

"I don't like him," he said. "Never trust a man with a mouth that should belong to a good woman. They're poison."

Chapter Six

IT WAS NOT A merry trip back to town. They went in Sessions' car. Sessions drove, Vickers sat beside him, Angie and Joan were in the back, and nobody spoke. Jennie Bryce was driving Harry's car.

The bay, when they left it, was still blue and calm and quite unperturbed by the recent dumping of a corpse into it.

Sessions was oppressed by the silence. He was also embarrassed. It was embarrassing to hate a man with all the strength of one's soul--a rather flabby and undersized soul, admittedly, but still one's only possession of that kind--to hate, and for four years to cherish the completely logical hope that this man is painfully dead and in hell, and then have him turn up sound in wind and limb and securely in his old place, which is neatly astride one's neck. It is even more embarrassing when the hated one knows all about it and is not even angry. Merely amused.

When he could stand it no longer, Sessions said heartily, "Well, Vick, when are you coming down to the store? Everybody will be delighted to have you..."

He was going to say, "-- have you back." But Vickers turned his head slightly and Sessions glimpsed the raised eyebrow and the smile. He did not finish. His eyes were on the road after that, and he did not see the expression that came gradually in Vickers' face. A somber look, and one that Sessions would have found completely unfamiliar.

"Business has improved, you say."

Sessions nodded. There was a very tiny, almost invisible imp of malice in his reply. "As I told you -- nearly a third."

"How odd," said Vickers. He slid down in the seat, made an effort to get his long legs arranged comfortably, and closed his eyes. "I would have thought the business would simply crumble away without me."

He appeared to sleep.

Sessions smiled. Quite brazenly. But it didn't, you son of a bitch, he said to himself. You conceited, overbearing bastard. Michael Jehovah Horse's-ass Vickers. The business got on just fine without you--and so did everybody else! He drove carefully, never exceeding thirty miles an hour. He made all signals punctiliously and yielded right of way without question. His only citation had been for overtime parking in Beverly Hills. He brought this up frequently in conversation, half bragging, half wistfully hoping that the violation might admit him into the bright company of daredevils who ignored boulevard stops and did ninety on the highway.

Michael Vickers had once owned a custom-built job that would do one hundred and ten.

Sessions brought the car finally to a gentle stop in front of Vickers' house.

Angie and Joan got out. Vickers stayed where he was. He reached out and patted Angie's shoulder.

"Try and get some rest," he said. "I'll be home for dinner." He turned to Sessions. "You can drop me off at Wilshire."

Angie went off with Joan. Her face had a set look. Sessions shrugged, and started the car.

At the foot of the hill he said, "I can take you wherever you want to

go."

"I'm not sure where that is. Just let me out..." Vickers saw a red sign ahead. "Here, Sunset will do." He got out as Sessions made the stop, waved, and went off. Sessions shook his head, and let himself cautiously into the stream of traffic along the Strip.

Michael Vickers walked slowly west, toward Beverly Hills. The sun was bright. There were cars and people and busses. There were open-front markets with bright pyramids of oranges and grapefruit and carefully artistic arrangements of vegetables. There were drugstores and liquor stores and art galleries and beauty shoppes and professional photographers and antique dealers and exclusive gown shops.

There were service stations and veterinaries. There were agencies, dozens of them, the plush-upholstered auction blocks whence bodies, and perhaps even an occasional soul, are consigned to wear the Yellow Kimono in the ice palaces of Hollywood. There was a large, convenient mortuary.

The remembered places. The Players. Ciro's, The Mocambo. The Troc. Bit of Sweden and the Tail of the Cock. The city spread out below the Strip. The stink of exhaust vapors, the noise of horns and motors, the drive-in restaurants with girls in tight pants serving cheeseburgers and malts.

Vickers thought, This hasn't changed. He looked at his reflection in a store window. The clothes were the same. He had worn them into these swank bars and peeled bills off of a thick wad held in a silver clip with his initials on it and been treated like the Shah of Persia. The clothes were the same. The street was the same. Maybe I'll forget these last four years. I forgot all the other ones quickly enough.

He walked on, and there was still a distance between himself and the street.

He boarded a red bus and stood in the crowded aisle and studied the faces around him. There was a tired young colored woman with a child asleep in her lap. There were housewives with bundles and a man with a lunch pail and a very old woman with sandals made of newspaper folded thick and tied on with rags. People who had never been near the Mocambo. When the bus stopped at Beverly Hills Station Vickers got out with the rest of them, and walked over to Bedford Drive. He pleased himself by not having to hunt for the house. It was colonial and pretentious, and the way Vickers thrust his finger against the bell managed to impart a quality of insolence even to the chimes.

The door opened.

Vickers said, "Hullo, Stokes. Remember me?"

The plump, healthy-looking butler obviously did remember him, and the remembrance seemed to be something of a shock.

"Oh, come now, Stokes," said Vickers, walking in. "It's not as though I were Mr. Bryce coming back."

Stokes shuddered. "Please, sir!" He closed the door. "Poor Mr. Bryce. I only heard the news when Mrs. Bryce returned home." He shuddered again. "Murder!"

"Frightfully ill bred," said Vickers. "And most inconvenient."

Stokes gave him a look. "You've changed, sir, if I may say so. But not much." No one could possibly have taken offense at his tone. He added formally, "May I offer my congratulations on your safe return."

"Thank you."

"I'll inquire whether Mrs. Bryce is able to see you now."

Vickers said, "What do you want to bet?" He smiled at the butler's stiffly retreating back and then went directly into Harry Bryce's study and closed the door.

Harry had been an untidy character. Vickers flicked through masses of irrelevant paper in the desk drawers, including used Christmas cards and old gin rummy scores. Vickers noticed on these latter that Harry had got blitzed with monotonous regularity. He was still pawing when Jennie Bryce came in.

She wore a black dress now. It had rather a low V-neck and a seductive drape around the hips. Her pumps were black suede and had a very high heel. One blood-red toenail peeped through the opening of each shoe. She wore a pearl choker and matching earrings and her hair was piled smoothly on her head.

She had a beautiful neck. Widowhood became her.

She shut the door and said, "You've sure got your nerve with you."

"Yes, haven't I?" Vickers smiled at her pleasantly, went back to what he was doing, did a studied take, and straightened, staring at Jennie.

She gave him plenty of time to look before she said indignantly, "What do you think you're doing in my husband's effects?"

"Looking for something." Vickers seemed surprised that she would not know that. "Shan't be a moment.

Suppose you sit down right over there, where I can see you, and then

we can have a little chat when I'm finished."

"Well," she said, "if you got something important to say." She walked slowly to the indicated chair, giving him the full-length profile. "A widow has things to do, you know."

"Yes," said Vickers. "I can imagine."

She sat down, watching him sulkily. He could feel her watching. The jumbled papers slipped through his hands rapidly, and then he found what he wanted. The things were in a leather zipper case at the bottom of the last drawer. He swept papers onto the floor and spread the contents out. Jennie got up and stood beside him. "What is it?" she asked.

"Harry's memory books." There were two of them, one a small leather-bound notebook with liquor stains on the cover, the other a big scrap book. Vickers opened the big book to cover the little one.

"Why," said Jennie, "that's you, isn't it?" She was pointing to a picture clipped from a Los Angeles paper.

It was the Vickers of four years ago. It carried a heading to the effect that Prominent Local Business Man had Disappeared. There was an article pasted beside it. It told Vickers nothing new. Only a repetition of what Angie had said. He turned the heavy pages slowly. There were pictures of Harry Bryce and Bill Saul and Job Crandall. There were pictures of Angie. There were interviews. There was one last item, very small, from a back page and unaccompanied by pictures, which said that the search for Michael Vickers, missing six months, had proved fruitless and been abandoned. Wherever the name of Harry Bryce appeared in print it was underlined in blue pencil.

"Harry never showed me that," said Jennie. "But then, we were only

married three months ago." She turned back to a picture of Angie, and studied it. "She don't take a very good picture, does she?"

Vickers glanced sideways and said, "I imagine you do." Jennie shrugged deprecatingly and moved away, ostensibly toward a small table with cigarettes on it. Vickers got a magnificent view of her back, undulant and graceful. "I oughta. I been in show business since I was a kid. You learn the tricks."

"Yes. I suppose you do." Vickers slipped the small leather book into his pocket, and then made a last quick search of the zipper case while Jennie was giving her artistic all to the lighting of a cigarette. There was an envelope. He had no time to look at it. It followed the notebook. Jennie said, "Cigarette?"

"Thanks." He went over and let her hold the lighter for him. Her eyes studied the shape of his mouth.

"Well," she said, "now Angie's got a man of her own, maybe the rest of us can relax. Not that I cared about Harry. Like I said. But Harriet's sure got the axe out for her, and I know one of Bill's babes split with him on her account." She walked away with a lazy swing of the hips. "Me, as soon as the funeral's over, I'm going to take a trip. A long one, with all the trimmings."

"You're forgetting the police."

"Oh, yeah." She reflected, then smiled. "Oh well, it won't be for long, and it's kind of exciting anyway."

That Trehearne guy—he's cute."

"Practically devastating."

She came back and stood in front of Vickers. "Were you and Harry real good friends?"

"What did Harry say about it?"

"Oh, he never said much. Nobody ever told me much about you. I guess they'd all sort of forgotten about you by this time. Only thing I remember him saying was once when he was crying on Bill's shoulder over some deal that was going sour on him and Bill said if you were here you could tell him how to swing it, and Harry said yes, you could, and that was the trouble with you. You were so goddamned sure of yourself, and so goddamn right." She laughed. "Are you?"

"I don't know, Jennie." He was looking at her, but not seeing her. He said slowly, "I've been a very unlucky man. I could always do everything too easily, and too well."

"Even love?"

He ran the tip of his finger from her ear down under her chin and tilted it up. "Even that." She stood waiting for his kiss, and he stood looking down at her. "In South America I had a woman," he said softly.

"She nursed me through the fever. It's not a nice kind of nursing. She stole food for me. Sometimes she sold herself for a few centavos--the men were all poor down there--to buy quinine, or some goat's milk for me. Would you do that, Jennie?"

She said angrily, "Why should I do it? You got Angie, haven't you? Besides, that's silly."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I suppose it is." He took his hand away from her chin and stepped back, "But then we're all silly at times, aren't we?"

Even you, Jennie." He bowed with courtly grace. "Good day, Mrs.

Bryce. Don't let widowhood sit too heavily upon you. Remember you're still young, and life goes on." At the door he paused and glanced back at her. "I'll give your love to Angie." He went out. She was still trying to think of something to say.

On the steps Vickers met Joe Trehearne. They stopped and eyed each other with friendly smiles that went no farther than the lips. Trehearne said, "I didn't expect to see you so soon again."

"Just offering further condolences to the widow, poor little thing. Be easy on her, old boy. She's the fragile sort."

"Yes," Trehearne said dryly. "I had her pegged that way."

"Any further news?"

"Not yet."

"Let us know."

"I'll do that."

Trehearne went in. Vickers walked down Bedford Drive to Wilshire and one block east to Roxbury and stood looking at his store.

It was a beautiful thing. It was functional and clean and proud. The windows glistened, the displays were the last and final word in swank. There wasn't a thing inside you could afford to buy if you made less than a hundred thousand a year. Vickers crossed the street and went inside.

It was just as it had been the last time he saw it. A new coat of paint, perhaps, but it was the same discreet and quiet gray. Thick

carpeting, indirect lighting, the floor space divided into salons presided over by handsome females with the faintly condescending air of grand duchesses come gracefully down in the world. Vickers wandered about, keeping in the background. Women in fantastic hats bought perfumes and cobwebby stockings and underthings no more substantial than a breath of fog. The whole place had the subtle smell of wealth.

One of the grand duchesses showed him her perfect teeth and said, "May I direct you, sir?"

Vickers started. "Thank you, no. I'm--looking for someone."

After that he went away.

At the Beverly-Wilshire he found a cab and had himself driven to the public library. He was fairly sure that he would not meet anyone he knew in that particular place. He found a seat in a far corner, pulled several books at random from the shelves, arranged them on the table, sat down, and pulled the leather-covered book from his pocket.

The fly leaf was hand-decorated--Harry Bryce had had a talent for hilarious, if rather rude, cartooning.

There was a motif of amorous mermaids with certain startling physical characteristics, and framed by their flirting tails was the legend: LOG OF THE LADY B. Below that was Harry's name, and an allusion to his rank and chief duties in the crew.

The next four pages had sketches of Vickers, Bill Saul, Job Crandall, and Bryce himself, all good-naturedly libelous caricatures. Then the log itself started.

He could remember reading each entry after Harry had written it. He

could remember the four of them laughing themselves sick over the description of Job Crandall's efforts to land a sailfish while mildly drunk, and embroidering with mounting improbabilities the tale of Bill Saul's encounter with the red light district of a particularly small and uninhibited port. Vickers skipped through these pages hurriedly, but the picture of himself came back vividly into his mind. The well-fed Vickers relaxing on his yacht, enjoying his own personal sunshine and his private ocean, seeing large-handedly to his guests. Including, he thought, the guest I didn't know was there--the little man called Murder.

He came to the last two entries. It was quite easy to tell from Harry's writing when he was drunk and when he was sober. On the first of these two entries he had been cold stone sober.

Vickers has gone. He didn't return aboard last night, and this morning we can find no trace of him. We've searched the town, but nobody has seen him. I'm afraid this is the end of the cruise.

The next, and last, entry was longer and written in Harry's sub-alcoholic scrawl.

One last bust, dear little log book. We're' all tight, the three of us--tighter than we were last night, when we lost Vick. Nobody can remember what happened. We went ashore, and after that I dunno. Neither does Job. Neither does Bill. Anyhow, Vickers never came back. Job says he's dead. Bill says Nuts, the son of a bitch is too ornery to die that easy, and besides we didn't find a body, did we? No corpus, no delicti. Me, I'll string with Job. There are sharks in these waters. You don't have to find a body. And who wants to find Vick's anyway? Just think, dear diary--this here leaves Angie a widow! Vickers noticed, quite casually, that his hands were shaking. He was dimly aware that someone had sat down quietly beside him. He should have been startled when Joe Trehearne's voice said, "Are

you finding some good books?" He was not startled. He was somehow not even surprised. He did not bother to close the log book.

He looked at Trehearne and smiled. "Are you following me?"

Trehearne seemed mildly hurt. "Of course not. I can read, you know. I often go into libraries."

"Aren't you a little off your beat?"

"I'm also off duty, and there's no law yet against a citizen of Los Angeles entering the township of Beverly Hills."

"What a pity." Vickers got up. He closed the log book and held it out to Trehearne. "Would you care to take this along and read it?"

Trehearne said, "You're just loaning it to me because you love me."

"Quite."

"Would you mind stepping over here?" Trehearne indicated the librarian's desk. They had already attracted her unfavorable attention by raising their voices above a whisper. Vickers shrugged and walked toward her with Trehearne. She watched their approach with marked dislike.

Trehearne stopped and leaned his elbow on the desk. "You're sure you want to loan me the book, Mr.

Vickers?"

"Why not?"

He held it out. Trehearne took it. He said, "Thanks very much, Mr.

Vickers. I'll take good care of it."

"I'm sure you will, Mr. Trehearne."

Trehearne started off. The librarian said sharply, "Here! Just a minute."

Trehearne stopped. He gazed at the librarian as one does at a rude child. Then the light broke. "Oh!" he said, holding up the book. "You thought the..." He laughed. "No, no. It's Mr. Vickers' personal book.

Here, I'll show you." He opened the cover to show her the flyleaf.

She took one good look. Things happened to her face. Trehearne received a premonition that all was not well. He turned the book around and had a look himself. The mermaids frisked merrily around the page, their marvelous anatomies betraying a distressing lack of inhibition. Trehearne looked back at the librarian. He turned scarlet. The librarian leaned forward.

"Get that filthy thing out of here," she said, "before I call a policeman."

Trehearne fled.

Vickers raised his head in the cathedral hush and roared with laughter.

Later, in the cab that was taking him home, Vickers took out the envelope he had found with the log book. There was nothing in it but a lock of soft black hair.

He held it in his fingers, and sat looking at it. He was dimly aware that the cab had turned and begun to climb the hill. He was dimly aware that it slowed and shifted into second at the place where the road twisted and became even more steep. He heard nothing but the

complaining snarl of the motor until something snapped past his head, close. Very close. Little stinging flies attacked his cheek. He saw a neat round hole in the window beside him, and as he went down quickly onto the floor he saw that there was another hole, less neat, in the rear window. He put up his hand to his face and pulled out a tiny sliver of glass. There was a little blood and he got out his handkerchief. The cabby drove on. He was thinking about hamburgers and cold beer, and the cute redhead who served them, and wishing he didn't have a wife and two kids.

He ground the cab to a stop in front of the house on top of the hill and said, "That'll be a dollar and thirty cents."

Chapter Seven

COOLIN THE hound lay on the rug beside Vickers' bed. He did not sleep. His eyes were deep-sunken and watchful under the rough gray ridges of his brows. His ears moved, delicately, testing the meaning of each sound. Once or twice he raised his head, but he knew that there was no need to rise.

His master slept, and dreamed.

The long windows were open. The night was cool. It had fog in it, and the damp bitter-sweet smell of the garden, and it was quiet. Michael Vickers lay on his hard clean bed that had no pillows.

His eyes were closed, but he could see the room. It was tall like the nave of a church, and dim, and wonderfully still. He could feel the coolness and smell the freshness of evergreens on the air. This is my place, he thought. I am safe here. The sheets of his bed were crisp and had a white feel against his body.

He pushed them back and rose.

The high room stretched before him. He walked slowly down the middle of it, and the moist air pressed against him. It was almost as heavy as water. He looked down and saw that it covered him like water, so that he could see only a warped and veiled reflection of his body. He was glad of the veil. He did not want to see himself. He ran his hands over his flesh. It was well-fed and strong, shaped into smooth beauty. He could feel it, and he thought, This is good. But he did not want to see. He walked on, gliding through the thick blue air.

There was a window, tall like the window of a church. White curtains fluttered from it. There was no glass in the window, and beyond it

there was darkness. Vickers knew that he must go to the window.

There was something outside that he must look at. He stopped. If I go, he thought, I shall be destroyed.

I will not go.

The window came to him. It moved quite easily, and it did not seem to be angry, only inevitable, like the next tick of a clock. He put his hands on the broad sill and looked out.

There was a street. It was narrow and crooked. It had no lights and no paving. There were little mud-walled houses. There was garbage and the odor of it, heavy and rank, and filth, and a dead rat lying in the dust, and a subtle breath of heat. Vickers drew back. He was afraid. He willed his feet to move, to go away, but the floor slid under them like a running stream. He cried out, loud enough for God to hear, and all that came from his mouth was a whisper: Angie! Angie! There was someone behind him, and he knew that there was no escape.

From a great distance a voice said, Turn around, Vickers. Turn around, Vickers. It came closer. Turn around Vickers Turn around Vickers Turn around Vickers. He turned. His lovely room was gone and there was only darkness as unstable as a cloud blown by the wind. There was someone hidden in it. He smelled of hate. That was all that betrayed him, the voice and the dark red smell of hate. Vickers waited.

The blow fell.

The window cracked and fell in tinted shards of sound. The darkness rolled away like thunder. A huge brazen sun clanged like a bell-clapper against a sky of sheet copper. Vickers' head was on fire. He could feel the flames rise and shoot out through the crevice in his

skull. His throat was filled with hot sand. It ran out of his mouth and trickled down his chest. He watched it. He could see his body now. It was gaunt and pinch-bellied, and there were marks on it. The long ribbon-shaped weals of the belt. The red-tinged blossoms of the fist. The spreading mark of the boot, like spilled ink. He thought, That's what I didn't want to see. He dropped onto his hands and knees.

Voices yelled at him. They yelled in Spanish and Portuguese and Dutch and German, but they all said Work! Faces swept past him, faces he knew but was too tired to name. Dark faces, oiled with sweat, cursing him. There was just one face that held steady. It was behind them, a long way off, and he couldn't see it clearly, but he knew that it was a good face and that it would help him and that he wanted it very much. He began to crawl toward it.

People beat and kicked and shouted at him. Green hides as stiff as iron were in his way, and torrents of coffee beans and mountains of burlap, and the choking stink of tanneries and guano and dirt and hot bilges and blood. The sun wrung him out and dropped him, so that he crept on his belly, but the face he wanted was still there, steady in the distance.

He couldn't seem to get any closer to it, but it grew clearer as the other things faded away. It was a woman's face, framed in soft black hair, and it had eyes as golden as wine. He dragged himself on, and suddenly it was cold, very cold, and he was creeping along the floor of a room that was high and beautiful like a cathedral nave. White curtains fluttered from long windows. Ahead there was a bed, narrow and hard and without pillows. A man lay naked upon it as on a catafalque, his eyes closed, his arms crossed over his breast. The face was still there, beyond the bed, high against the wall, and it was only a painted picture.

The broken, shivering thing that crawled on the floor cried out to the

man on the bed. Take me back. I am lost. I'm afraid.

And the man on the bed answered slowly, moving only his mouth: I am dead.

Michael Vickers cried out. He could hear it as he woke, a cry of sheer, simple terror. He sat up, snapping on the bedside lamp. He was dripping with cold sweat and his head was aching again. Coolin put his chin on Vickers' thigh. Vickers took hold of the dog and sat perfectly still until he had stopped shivering. Then he got up, slowly and stiffly because of the pain in his head, which was much worse when he moved. He lighted a cigarette, and stood looking around the room. The curtains moved lightly in the breeze. He picked up his dressing gown and went out into the hall, where he put it on. He had forgotten his slippers. He did not go back for them.

He went down the hall and rapped on Angie's door.

She answered, and he went in. The lamp was burning on the bedside table. There was a book, open and face down on the blanket, but he knew that she had not been reading. She sat quietly against the piled-up pillows and watched him. When the light struck his face she leaned forward and said: "What's wrong?"

"I've got a blinding head."

He said it almost angrily. She pushed the book off onto the floor and moved her legs under the fluffy white blanket. For a moment he stood still. Then he went and sat down on the bed, where she had made a place for him. She touched his hand, gently, and frowned.

"Why, Vick--you're trembling."

"The damn thing hurts, that's all." He shrugged it off.

She looked at his eyes and the line of sweat on his forehead, but she didn't say anything. She slid the top pillow off and moved over. Presently he stretched out on top of the blanket, and she saw his bare feet.

"You shouldn't be running around without your slippers. You could catch cold, or step on a pin, or something." She reached down and pulled the spare blanket up over his legs. Vickers laughed.

"What are you laughing at?"

"It's funny, that's all."

"What's funny?"

"After living the way I have for four years, it's amusing to have someone fuss over my bare feet."

"It's nice, though, isn't it?"

The crawling thing on the floor cried Take me back, I am lost, and the man on the bed answered slowly, I am dead.... The world turned over.

From a great distance a voice spoke his name. "Vick." And then, softly, "Pappy."

He was deathly cold, and the saliva ran in his mouth. He said, "What?"

"My wrist, darling."

"What about your wrist?"

"Nothing, only it's going to break in a minute."

A hand appeared before him. It was his own, and it was gripping Angie's forearm in the way the hand of a drowning man grips the proverbial straw. He opened his fingers, and left the marks of them livid on her flesh.

He started to sit up. There was a crack in his skull as big as the Grand Canyon. "I have a grim feeling I'm going to cat."

"Don't be silly. You didn't eat any dinner." She pressed him back. He realized that she was out beside him now, with just the spare blanket over both of them. Her arms went around him. He could remember his mother holding him in just that way. Her body was wonderfully warm, wonderfully safe and comforting. The nausea passed. She reached up and touched his hair in the light remembered way, and then her lips brushed the ugly scar.

"Your poor little noggin," she whispered. "You must see a doctor about it."

"I suppose so."

"Is it very strange coming back?" She laughed, not very humorously, and amended, "Well, considering what's happened, I guess it would be for anybody. But you know what I mean. The house, the people, the city, all of it. Being Michael Vickers again."

Involuntarily his arms tightened around her. "Yes. Very strange."

"You must have suffered terribly."

"No more than the rest of them."

"Fiddlesticks. They were used to it. You weren't."

"They got just as hungry as I did. And I had the edge on them for size. I found that out on the coffee docks. I could sack and load rings around them."

"Don't try to be noble, Pappy. You'd never missed a meal--and good meals, too--nor done a day's physical work in your life. Don't tell me it was easy." She paused, then added softly, "And don't tell me you weren't having nightmares about it just before you came in here."

He did not answer. She looked down at his face and saw the change come over it. His eyes were closed, but she didn't need to see into them.

"Was it Harry Bryce?" she asked sadly. "Did you recognize his voice and..." She did not finish.

Vickers said, "No. I didn't even see Harry."

"But if you had..."

"I couldn't have recognized his voice. I told you it didn't sound human. I was crazy with dope. And anyway--not murder. It's too dangerous, too stupid, and --- too quick."

He felt her shiver. There was a long silence.

"Vick."

"Yes?"

"I told you the truth about Harry."

"He had a lock of your hair."

"Why not, if he wanted it? He got it from my hairdresser."

Again there was a long pause. Vickers' head was beginning to ease off. He was warm again. The dream was retreating into the mental cave where it lived. He knew it was there. But when it was decently veiled, the sharp destroying edges of it hidden, he could study it objectively. He could say to himself quite reasonably, I feel like that because, and go on with the nice neat rationalization. It was only when the bloody thing attacked him in his primitive emotions that it got the better of him.

He put his hand sleepily on Angie's head, drawing it closer into his neck.

"You said you'd been trying to find out what really happened to me. Any results?"

"Nothing. Except in a negative way. I'm sure Harry Bryce didn't do it."

"Any particular reason?"

"Yes. Harry's pretty well gone to pieces in the last year or so. You can't live at Harry's rate of speed forever. I've made him tell me about the cruise, and your disappearance, over and over when he was far too drunk to have any control over what he said. And he always told the same story. Not in the same words, or the same sequence--sometimes just fragments of it--but he never varied the facts."

Vickers thought that over and said, "Mm-hmm. And the others?"

"I don't know. Surely not Job... He's really a very sweet person, worships his youngsters, puts up with Harriet on account of them. He drinks too much, but with Harriet around, who wouldn't? And Bill..."

She shook her head. "Oh, it's crazy to think either one of them would do such a thing! People we've known so long."

Vickers said, "That's naive, darling. You will never know how naive." He was drowsy now, delightfully relaxed. He turned slightly, toward Angie, drawing closer to her warmth. "You know, I could see you long before I could remember anything else. I knew your name. Angie. Later on, when my memory was beginning to function by fits and starts, I'd try to think, How did she feel about this thing, or what would she have done about that? And d'you know, Angie, I..."

"I know," she finished for him. "You couldn't remember, because you never bothered to find out."

"I found out a couple of things, though. I spent a lot of time thinking down there. I'm an egotistical son of a bee. Some of my thoughts didn't please me at all, but I couldn't seem to duck them. And I tried, believe me!" He paused. "I notice the rug is gone. The one before the fireplace."

"Yes."

"One of the things I learned down there was what it feels like to be mastered, physically."

She whispered, "You weren't very nice to me, Vick." She drew her breath in, started to shape words with it, then changed her mind.

"What were you going to say?"

"Nothing."

"What was it?"

"Never mind, Vick. I learned a long time ago, it's the moment that counts with you, not the days. I'm happy right now. Why spoil it?"

"Good God, but we're philosophical!" He sighed and went to sleep.

He woke very early. Angie was still close to him. Worn out, she had fallen into a heavy slumber, and hardly stirred when he moved away from her and got up.

He stood looking down at her, his face strangely remote and sad. Then he went out, very quietly, and closed the door behind him.

Chapter Eight

DOWNSTAIRS IN THE breakfast room Joan Merrill was having her early cup of coffee and her newspaper. Her ritual never varied. Promptly on the stroke of six she arose, splashed cold water on her face, combed her hair, put on her dressing gown and went down to the kitchen, where she brewed her own particularly black and muscular fluid with no help from Cook, who was still abed like a decent body.

While the pot was dripping, Joan went out and collected the morning paper. Both family and servants had learned to avoid Joan until she had finished with it. By that time the duties of the day had usually put an end to her fulminations against the administration, local politics, national politics, the actions of labor unions, foreign policy, and the sinister behavior of Soviet Russia. Joan thoroughly disapproved of humanity and held little or no hope for it.

This morning, however, she had no interest in anything except the headlines that concerned Michael Vickers and the violent death of Harry Bryce. She poured herself a second cup and lighted a cigarette, and stared with a deep and bitter loathing at the gallery of pictures confronting her.

Coolin padded in and said good morning. She patted him and rose to let him out, then stopped as Vickers said from the doorway, "Never mind. I'll do it."

Joan sat down again. She said coldly, "Good morning, Michael." Vickers, still in dressing gown and slippers, opened the side door into the garden. Coolin trotted out, and his mate appeared like magic from somewhere in the shrubbery. Vickers watched them go off

together, leaping and wrangling in devoted mock combat.

"What happened to Dee?"

"She died. The vet said it was grieving over you. We nearly lost Coolin, too, but Angie pulled him through. She used to sit up all night sometimes, coaxing him to eat broth out of a spoon."

Her tone said quite plainly, You weren't worth the life of a good dog.

After a moment Vickers said, "I'm glad you got him a new mate. What's her name?"

"Molly."

"That's good enough." He returned to the table and sat down. "Is there some coffee left?"

She reached another cup off the sideboard and poured him some. Vickers sipped it, hoping it would dissolve the vestiges of pain still creeping about the corners of his skull. It seemed strong enough to dissolve anything.

"Joan," he said, "how would you like to go down to the beach house for a while?"

Joan sat perfectly still for a long moment. Then she said with careful distinctness, "I don't quite understand."

Vickers looked down at the table, very quiet, very serious.

"Angie and I have a lot to get straight between us. You can understand--we want to be quite by ourselves for a while."

He waited. Joan said nothing. She had not moved. Vickers glanced

up at her. "If you don't fancy the beach place, choose a hotel. I'd say a trip somewhere, if it weren't for the police."

"No," said Joan. "I shouldn't care for the beach place."

She got up. "This is rather sudden and surprising. If you don't mind, Michael..." She started toward the door.

"But I do mind." Vickers turned slightly in his chair, and she stopped. "Angie's very tired, she's sleeping, and I don't want her disturbed. After all, Joan, she's my wife, not yours. I'd like her to myself for a while."

Joan was facing him now. She was quite calm. "You want to get rid of me."

"That's a crude way of putting it. But, for a while, yes."

"What does Angie say about it?"

"She agrees with me."

"Then why should you mind my seeing her?" Vickers rose. "Look here, Joan. I know you don't like me. I know that you wish I had never come back. Yesterday you accused me of killing a man. You are, to say the least, a disturbing factor. Matter of fact, I'm being rather decent not to fire you." He laughed abruptly, becoming friendly again. "Really, Joan! Is it too much to ask, after four years—a few weeks alone with my wife?"

Joan said, "If your wife wants it like that, I'll go. But I must see her first." She turned, and his hand fell on her shoulder. Lightly, gently, like a falling leaf. His eyes were expressionless, and his mouth held a faint, vague smile.

"You are a servant in my employ," he said. "You will do as you are told."

They stood there for a time in the doorway, she looking up at him and not moving, except that she began to tremble slightly.

"I will not go," she whispered. "I will not leave her."

"Do you think I'm going to harm her, Joan, on our second honeymoon? Have I any reason to harm her?"

"Michael. Michael--let me go."

He took his hand away and said impatiently, "Really, you're being very stupid! You've been without a man too long, Joan. Getting neurotic. I might almost begin to wonder just what your extreme interest in Angie means. For heaven's 'sake, take a vacation and find yourself a playmate. A male playmate!" A bell rang in the rear. "There's the cab I ordered. Come along."

He propelled her toward the front hall. Her overnight bag, a coat and hat, and a pair of sandals were waiting for her. Vickers picked up the coat and held it for her.

"This will do you for a while. We'll send the rest of your things along later." He waited. Joan stood staring at him. He moved the coat. "Well, come on!" He waited again. Finally he asked patiently, "Are you going to scream?"

She studied his hands, curled over the soft tweed lapels. "No," she said. "No, I'm not going to scream."

She permitted him to help her on with her coat. Vickers picked up the rest of her things and took her to the door. The cabby was waiting

impatiently. Vickers thrust a bill into his hand.

"Wherever she wants to go." He guided Joan down the steps and helped her into the cab. "You'll find your handbag in the overnight case. There's a check in it. Let me know when you need more." He backed off and waved as the cab started. "Have a good time, Joan, and don't worry."

He watched the vehicle until it disappeared down the hill. Coolin and Molly came up to him. Molly was still uncertain about him, but he talked to her and presently she made advances, and when he went indoors she was as close on his heels as Coolin. Vickers smiled. He took three envelopes from the pocket of his dressing gown and headed for the servants' quarters.

Angie came down shortly after nine. She found Vickers in the kitchen, serenading himself with the original and bawdy version of Bell Bottom Trousers while he whipped up batter for French toast. He was wearing slacks and a very gay sport shirt and one of Cook's big flowered aprons, and he seemed completely happy. Molly and Coolin sat moist-eyed, lost in admiration of the magnificent breakfast taking shape on the big white table.

Vickers became lost in admiration of Angie. She was wearing white shorts and a flowered silk shirt with the tails tied up native-fashion in front, and a bright matching ribbon in her hair. She had lovely legs. She burst out laughing at Vickers.

"Don't we look nice in our pinafore!" Vickers held the skirt out in his free hand and studied it. "I thought so. All I need is some lipstick. Suppose you come and put it on for me." She did. "Better?"

"Much. Now you go sit down till this is ready."

"How did Cook like being run out of her kitchen?"

"She seemed a little bewildered."

"I don't wonder." She sat down, drew a long breath, and closed her eyes. "It smells as though you could still cook!"

Vickers looked from Coolin to Molly to Angie, and laughed. "The three of you are making me drool."

He dipped slices of bread in the batter and laid them in the skillet. Angie picked up the paper and put it down again hurriedly. "The house is awfully quiet this morning," she said. "I haven't even seen Joan."

"Joan isn't here."

Angie stared at him, in blank amazement. "What?"

"I sent her away for a vacation. She's earned it. I sent the servants, too."

"But--Vick..." She had stiffened, grown tense, her body drawing in upon itself. "I--I don't understand. Why would you do such a thing?"

He said gently, "It's been a long time, Angie. We have a lot to say to each other. I've changed--you've probably changed, too. Things have to be worked out between us. We had to be alone."

She got up and stood with her back to him, looking out into the garden. "But why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you ask me? Joan is my friend!"

"That's just why I didn't mention it, darling. You'd have got all involved with emotions and ethics and things. It was so much easier for

everybody." He turned the toast with a quick expert flip of the wrist.

"This," he said, "beats tortillas."

Angie said, "Vick, why did you send Joan away?"

"I'm not trying to break up your friendship with her. I just don't want her around for a while. I want you to see me through your own eyes, not through hers. She detests me, Angie--perhaps with good cause, but..." He left the stove and went to put his arm around Angie. "Do you still love me?"

She turned her head away. "I'm just where I always was with you."

"Are you afraid to stay with me long enough to find out?"

"I don't know, Vick," she whispered. "Before God, I don't know!"

He stood in silence for a moment. Then he released her and returned to the stove. "It's all ready. Want to hold the plates for me?" There was no answer. He glanced over his shoulder. Angie had gone. He got the plates himself from the warming oven and filled them with golden fried toast and crisp bacon. He was bringing coffee to the table when she came back.

"Vick, the phones don't work."

"I know it." He poured steaming coffee into bright spode cups. "I cut off the extensions. Use the one in my den."

"Your den is locked."

"Is it?" He set the coffee pot down carefully on a mat. "That's funny. Must have done it without thinking."

Were you calling Joan?" He walked over and opened a cupboard door.

"Yes."

"But you don't know where she is." Vickers was investigating the jelly situation, and finding it inadequate.

"No bramble. But then, no one liked it but me."

"Joan will go to the Wilshire Regent. The manager's wife is a good friend of hers." She watched Vickers take a spoon and transfer currant jelly from the jar to a cut glass dish. She had come no farther than the doorway. "Vick." He paused and looked around. "Vick, why did you cut off the phones?" He shrugged and picked up the jelly. "I didn't want to be bothered with the ruddy things ringing all over the house." He smiled at her. "We're going to have other things to do beside answering telephones." He added, wryly, "Even if we fight."

Angie said, "I want to call Joan."

"Of course, darling. But don't you want to eat these things while they're still young and beautiful?"

"I think I'd better call Joan."

Vickers sighed. "No wonder cooks get temperamental. Oh, well. It won't take long." He pulled off the apron and went to Angie, and she slipped away from him, unobtrusively, and went ahead of him down the hall.

He tried the door of the den and shook his head humorously. "Must be balmier than I thought." He pulled out his keyring and opened it, then followed Angie in. The room was small enough to have a

pleasant personality. There was oak paneling and cretonne draperies of a soft but cheerful brightness and a few good prints. There was a gun case and a place for fishing rods of varying sizes built in between the book shelves. It was, like Vickers' bedroom, extremely masculine and self-sufficient.

Angie went directly to the desk and picked up the telephone. Vickers put his hand on her arm. There was something oddly pleading about the gesture. "Give me a chance," he said.

She looked up at him and let the phone rest. "If I could only understand you, Vick! You shouldn't have sent Joan away like that."

"You can surely see my reason."

"But it was rude and unkind, and you should have asked me!" He could see the little anger sparks in her eyes. "And the servants. There was certainly no reason to send them away."

He said quietly, "I thought there was."

"Why?" said Angie. She had begun to tremble visibly, and her eyes were flashing. "Why do you want me alone in this house, with the only telephone in a locked room?"

He turned away from her, slowly, and walked across the room and back again, his head bent in an attitude of deep thought. He reached into his hip pocket, as though for a handkerchief, but what he brought forth was small and flat and cleanly shaped from blued steel. A .32 Colt automatic.

A stillness came over Angie. Her knuckles, curled around the shank of the telephone, showed white.

Vickers was looking at the gun. It was not pointed at anything in particular.

"Four years ago," he said, "somebody tried to kill me. I know it was one of three men. I know that it wasn't Harry Bryce, because yesterday somebody tried again. Right here on the hill. They fired into the cab." He touched the scar with his free hand. "Only the man who did this would have any reason to try again so soon, with one murder already on hand. You see, he doesn't know how much I remember.

Perhaps I saw his face that night, in spite of the dope he fed me. Perhaps I knew his voice. Perhaps at any minute a 'latent memory will come clear, and I'll know him." He looked somberly at Angie.

"Remember that. When you kill a man, make sure he's really dead."

Angie's voice was only a whisper, and it came from a long way off. "Do you really think I..."

He dropped the gun in his pocket and began to pace again. "I didn't want the servants here. I don't know them, and servants can be bribed. I didn't want Joan. I'm going to stay here, in this house, and I want no visitors that I don't let in myself, and stay with every minute. I'm afraid of being killed. Now do you understand!"

Angie let the phone come to rest on its stand. She sat down, rather slowly, in the big leather chair behind the desk. A shaft of sunlight from the window touched her silk blouse to tropical brilliance. Above it, her face was waxen and stiff like the face of a doll.

She said, "The police..."

"There's no such thing as protection. Besides, my friend would only have to wait until the boys got bored and went home." He paused.

Then he said, very softly, "One doesn't call the police to settle a family quarrel."

"Vick." She did not move in the big chair. Even her lips hardly moved. "Vick, you can't believe..."

He put one hand on the desk and leaned on it, and stood looking down at her. After a while he said, "In your own words, I don't know. Before God, I don't know!"

In the silence, suddenly, the telephone rang. Vickers reached across the desk and picked it up.

"Vickers speaking. Oh, hello. Yes. Yes, any time. We'll be home all day."

He put the phone down. "That was Trehearne," he said. "He'll be up later. The autopsy report was -- murder."

Chapter Nine

THE BUILDING THAT housed the Bay Cities Division of the Los Angeles forces of law and order was less than a year old and consequently still fresh and clean and reasonably un-marred by the laborious grindings of the wheels of Justice. The Homicide Bureau was on the second floor. Joan Merrill found it with little or no trouble.

She was shown immediately into Joe Trehearne's private office, a small and plainly furnished cubicle of a depressing utilitarianism, neat and very efficient. There was, on the desk, a framed portrait of a young woman with fair hair and intelligent eyes. She held a very bored infant in a white dress, and had her free arm around the shoulders of a little girl. She seemed completely happy and at peace.

Trehearne himself rose and shook hands, motioning Joan to a chair. "You sounded upset over the phone," he said. "What's happened?"

"You know my position in the Vickers' household?"

"Well, perhaps not too well." He thought Joan Merrill was looking remarkably handsome in her soft blue suit, in spite of the strain evident in the lines around her mouth and eyes. He thought it was quite an accomplishment. He knew nerves when he saw them. This woman had them, in big quivering bunches, and few women can mix nerves and beauty with any success.

"I work there. I'm with the family, but not of it. Housekeeper, secretary, companion, whipping-boy, anything you like. Every wealthy home has one." She stopped and drew breath. Her next words came much more slowly. "I've been there nearly nine years. In that time I have..." She stopped again, then leaned forward. "Angie--Mrs. Vickers has become almost like my own--sister."

Trehearne nodded. "I guessed that. Go on."

"This morning Michael put me out of the house."

Trehearne's angular face became intent. "Put you out?"

"Yes. He even had my bag packed." She told him what had been said and done over the early coffee.

"He frightened me," she said. "I think if I had screamed, or tried to force my way upstairs, he'd have—I don't know. But he terrified me."

"Well," said Trehearne soothingly, "maybe he was just tactless. It's logical that a man would want to be alone with his wife..."

"Then why wouldn't he let me see her? Why did he have everything ready to get me out of there without a moment's delay? And there's more to it than that." Joan had let go now. Words were pouring out of her. "I tried to call the house to let them know where I was, and to reassure myself that Angie was all right. The phone rang and rang and no one answered. That means the servants are gone too, and that Michael isn't letting Angie..."

"Hold on, now." Trehearne put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I talked to Vickers myself about an hour ago. I'm sure everything's all right."

"Then why doesn't Angie call me? I waited..."

"Perhaps she got up late. Perhaps no one was near a phone when you called her..."

"That's impossible. There are phones all over the house, and there's always someone there. Besides, I called repeatedly. I even tried the

beach place." Joan got up and stood in front of Trehearne and looked into his eyes. "I'm afraid for her. I know he's turned the servants out. I know he's got her there alone, and I'm afraid."

Trehearne studied her silently for a time. Then he said softly, "I think you'd better sit down, and tell me why."

She did. He gave her a cigarette and lighted one for himself and then let her alone while she pushed things around in her mind and got them ready to be spoken. She glanced at him once or twice. Trehearne knew the look.

"Don't be afraid to say anything you want," he said. "I'm here to listen."

Her eyes rested a moment, sharply, on his face. It was a strange blend of elements. His odd mouth was as compassionate as that of a church image, yet he was somehow completely impersonal. He seemed less like an individual than a symbol of justice, impartial, without malice or human frailty. It was one of his most valuable accomplishments. He smoked quietly and let her look. Presently she relaxed and dropped her head reflectively.

"There was always a cruel streak in Michael. I don't mean that he abused animals, that sort of thing—it was far more subtle than that. A mental thing, a coldness. He was sufficient unto himself, and he was proud, and he was dominant. Always dominant. He could do everything better than anybody else, and more easily, and more quickly. Make money, play games—take the most attractive woman for his wife.

"I've watched the marriage from the first day they moved in on the hill, right after the honeymoon."

She paused and turned to stare out the window at the distant glitter of the sea.

"I think," she said, "that I hated Michael from the start."

Trehearne said nothing. His very silence was comforting, an invitation. Inside, his brain was coldly dissecting Joan and examining each part separately, weighing, estimating, judging the exact substance of Joan's love for Angie.

Joan went on talking.

"There was no kindness in him. He could be charming when he wanted to, very gracious, even tender and sweet where Angie was concerned. But it was all on the surface. He was nice when it pleased him to be nice. He had no heart. He never gave a thought to how other people felt. He's said things to me that were so coldly rude..."

She caught herself. "You'll think I'm just resentful of his position. And I am, because he's made me resentful. There are some people who can, just by a look, destroy your-inner pride--your dignity as a human being. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. Go on."

Joan spread her tanned, slim fingers on the arm of the chair and studied the polished nails as though they were deeply important. Trehearne had not noticed before how strong her hands were. They had a sure, competent way of moving. Tennis, thought Trehearne, from her legs, and certainly swimming. She's got a swimmer's neck.

"Angie used to come to me, late at night. At first she'd just sit and talk, about nothing in particular -- never about Michael. I knew that she was desperately unhappy, and often she was furious, in the way that

only a man can make a woman angry, if he's that sort of man. I was married once, to a man who was not kind to me." Her face hardened. "I understood."

Ah, thought Trehearne, there it is. Psychic trauma involving sex. Doesn't like men. Doesn't like what some idiotic females term "subjection." Six, two, and even, she's a Les and won't admit it even to herself. "One night," Joan said, "Angie broke down and cried. After that she'd talk a little, and as we became better friends, I got the whole story. I'd been sure of it all along, of course. Angie was Michael's wife, and to him a wife was merely a possession, to be displayed or used or set aside, according to his whim.

His bedroom was his own. Private. But not Angie's. Oh, no. Michael came and went as he pleased.

Michael was God. He had a huge rug in front of Angie's fireplace..." Joan's voice choked off. Two red spots burned over her cheekbones.

"He used her shamefully. Angie had her pride. There were frightful scenes. He never struck her, I'll give him that. But I remember one time when he came and found that Angie had locked her door. When she refused to open it, he merely shrugged and said, 'Very well, I shall get myself a whore,' and went away, and did.

"I told Angie to leave him. Once or twice she nearly agreed, but then Michael would put on his best face, and she'd weaken. The worst of it was that Angie really loved him--or thought she did. She said he wasn't really selfish and cruel. She said he'd only been spoiled by being born too clever and never having had to sweat or worry or lose out. She said some day he'd change." Joan's mouth twisted bitterly. "She waited nearly five years, and then he disappeared. I prayed he wouldn't come back."

Trehearne said, "But he did." He rose and walked over to the window. There was a patch of well-kept green lawn below, and a bed of mixed cannas. He glanced at the sea and thought about Catalina and tarpon and cold beer. "Is he changed now?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"I can't tell you that. Superficially he's the same, what I've seen of him. But underneath, he's..." She stopped. The sound of her voice died away and left a silence in the room. It was growing hot. Trehearne said, "Do you think he killed Harry Bryce?"

She didn't hesitate. She lifted her handsome chin and set it, hard, and said clearly, "I do."

"Why?"

"Because Harry was in love with Michael's wife. And Harry was drunk that night, and Harry always talked too much."

Trehearne thought that over and nodded. "And was Michael's wife in love with Harry?"

"No. I almost wish she had been, even with him. With almost anybody, just to get Michael off her mind.

No. Angie has waited for him. They've tried hard, all three of them. Job Crandall, Bill Saul, and poor Harry. None of them got beyond the conventions."

"But," said Trehearne slowly, "you're not sure Vickers believes that."

"I'm only sure of one thing. He's got her alone in that house. Really

alone, without even a servant. And God only knows what may have happened to him mentally in these four years. A blow on the head that took his memory... it could have done more."

"Yes." Trehearne walked back to the desk and shoved the phone over toward Joan. "Would you like to try again, from here?"

She flashed him a grateful look and dialed the operator. Trehearne went into the outer office and picked up the extension. The call was put through, but the number rang and rang, and was not answered.

Trehearne hung up and went back inside.

"Call your hotel. She may have left a message."

Joan got the desk clerk. "Oh, yes," he said. "A Mrs. Vickers called shortly after you had left. She said -- shall I read you the message?"

"Of course!"

"She said, 'Tell Mrs. Merrill that I am all right and she is not to worry. I will call again.' That's all."

"Thank you," said Joan, and hung up. She told Trehearne. "Now I don't know what to think. Oh, God, I wish I hadn't missed her."

"She'll call again. Look, I'm going up there myself this afternoon. Official business. I'll call you when I get back, let you know how things are."

Joan got up. "Thank you," she said. "I'm really dreadfully worried."

He said sympathetically, "I know." Then, casually, he asked, "By the way, did Mrs. Vickers ever mention that perhaps Mr. Vickers' disappearance was not accidental?"

Joan started, stared at him, then frowned. "Come to think of it, she said once that she wondered whether it could have been murder."

"And what did you say?"

"I said if it was, I hoped they'd done a good job of it."

Trehearne laughed. "What did you think of the idea?"

"Well, it had never occurred to me. So many things can and do happen in those horrible little ports. But when I did think about it, I simply couldn't imagine any one of those three actually killing someone. I mean..." She spread her hands in a vague gesture. "Well, they're just not the kind of people who commit murders!"

Trehearne sighed. "I wish I had a week's vacation with pay for every time I've heard that. I wouldn't have to work again until 1994." He shook his head at Joan. "People are never the kind who commit murders--until they commit them." He held the door for her. "Now don't sit around and brood, Mrs.

Merrill. I'll take care of everything."

She said again, "Thank you," and went away. Trehearne began to hum the old ballad that starts, "Stay your hand, hangman, Oh, stay it for a while." The case was beginning to look better and better. His phone rang, and he answered it.

"Trehearne here."

"This is Tuschinsky. We found the murder weapon. I think."

"Yeah? Where and what is it?"

"Well, we've had guys dragging the bay, and then some kids came along and started diving in shallow water. One of 'em came up with a two-foot length of three-quarter steel bar. Been snapped off of something and still has a busted coupling welded on one end. Water's washed it clean, of course, but the laboratory boys may find something. The surface is no good for prints. Too corroded. The bar's pretty old."

Trehearne said a bad word. "This sure looks like a spur-of-the-moment job. Everything's too damn perfect for the killer. It's the premeditated deals that go sour, because they try too hard. Give me a careful, painstaking murderer every time. Could a woman have used this particular blunt instrument?"

Tuschinsky considered. "Pretty heavy for a dame, but I guess she could of."

"Okay. I guess that's all you can do down there, now." He hung up, then put through a call for Job Crandall. He had left home, but could be reached at his agency office. Trehearne promptly called Job Crandall, Inc., Agency, and was told by a supercilious feminine voice that Mr. Crandall was in a meeting and could not be disturbed, and would he care to leave a message? Trehearne said, "Yes, as follows: Lieutenant Trehearne, of the Homicide Bureau, would have speech with him concerning the murder of one Harry Bryce, and Lieutenant Trehearne doesn't give a damn whether Mr. Crandall is in a meeting, or in the little boy's room reading Superman. Tell him I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

He hung up, put his hat on, and went off whistling. Oh mother, have you brought me gold, or have you paid my fee, or have you come to see me die upon the gallows tree? Fifteen minutes later Trehearne parked his car on the Sunset Strip, stepped out, and paused to examine the white two-story office building. Traffic whizzed and

tooted behind him, punctuated by the scream of brakes applied in the very teeth of the red light at the corner.

The building resembled a small Grecian mortuary. Across the chaste facade was the legend LOUIS FISHER BUILDING in bright red letters a foot high. On either side of the pillared doorway were polished brass plates bearing the names of the tenants. One of these said Job Crandall, Inc. Agency.

Trehearne entered Mr. Fisher's property and trotted up the narrow stairway to the second floor. The carpeting, he could have told Mr. Fisher, was somewhat worn, so that the vermilion-and-black lozenges appeared to have a touch of leprosy.

Crandall's offices were on the front, cozy but swank. The receptionist matched her voice. She was an ill-tempered and rather well-worn glamour-puss, tightly draped and with a fantastic superstructure.

Trehearne was tempted to try hanging his hat on one of the points. He introduced himself. She regarded him without love and shoved in a plug on the switchboard.

"Mr. Crandall, Mr. Trehearne is here.... All right." She disconnected and gestured toward a door. "Will you go right please?"

Crandall had the door open before Trehearne was across the reception room. He looked terrible. His face was drawn and grayish under the healthy burn and his eyes were those of a sick animal. As he greeted the detective, some of his normal easy charm returned. Trehearne could almost see him hauling it back by main force.

He shook hands with Crandall, noticing the tremor in the agent's hand. The office was beautifully paneled and hung with framed photographs of Crandall's more prominent clients. On his desk was a

double frame holding portraits of a girl about fifteen and a boy perhaps two years younger. They were handsome kids, Trehearne thought. He indicated them. "Yours?"

Crandall nodded. His eyes changed. "Away at school," he said. "I miss them."

Trehearne noticed that there was no picture of Harriet visible in the office. He sat down on a comfortable leather couch and accepted a cigarette and a light. Crandall's face was twitching slightly. He sat down behind the big shining desk and said, "So it was murder. Poor old Harry." Trehearne nodded. "Everyone has been notified, and the guest list is being checked. You'll probably be called for the coroner's inquest, but it's only a formality." He grinned apologetically. "Meanwhile, I'm afraid I start asking questions."

"Anything at all."

Trehearne tapped ashes into a crystal tray as big as a soup bowl. "Please tell me everything you can remember about the night of Bryce's death."

Crandall answered without hesitation. He seemed to have thought the whole thing out carefully.

"My wife and I arrived at the beach house around nine. We'd both had two or three drinks at home. The party was getting under way. Bill Saul was already there, and so was Harry. He'd come down with Angie, and he was pretty stiff. He seemed to be sulky and put out about something, but maybe he just wasn't feeling well. I went over and spoke to Angie, and then--my wife..."

He paused awkwardly. Trehearne's face now wore its father-confessor look. "I'm afraid," Crandall said quietly, "that Harriet is

jealous of Angie. She has no reason to be. No reason, I mean, in the accepted sense. You must believe that, in fairness to Mrs. Vickers." He leaned forward, like a pleading and rather pathetic small boy. "Angie has always been a good friend to me. One doesn't have many good friends."

Trehearne nodded. He said nothing.

"Well, after that I don't remember anything clearly. There was just one of those long unpleasant wrangles, and I got very drunk, and I know Harriet did too. I passed out finally, and next morning Vick was there, and..." He shrugged. "That's it. That's absolutely it."

"What sort of man was Harry Bryce?"

Crandall frowned. "Like the rest of us, I guess. No better and no worse. Likable guy, a lot of fun, no viciousness in him. He was an ass, of course, where women were concerned, but he always paid them off well. He had taken to drinking heavily in the last year, but he never made any trouble." He paused. He seemed to be far off, withdrawn. After a while he said somberly, "Harry was in love with Angie. Angie was kind to him because she's kind to everyone, but he couldn't get to first base with her. I think that's why he took to drinking. I think that when Vick disappeared, he thought maybe there was a chance for him."

"That," said Trehearne gently, "doesn't seem to have been an uncommon hope, does it?"

Crandall's face became angry. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean you're in love with her, too." No one could possibly have taken offense at his tone. His manner was that of a man discussing the weather. Crandall's cheek muscles began to twitch violently. He

put his left hand up to stop them, then rose and stood with his back to Trehearne, watching the cars race along the Strip below.

"I'm a married man," he said. "I've been married for sixteen years."

Trehearne let the silence lie there for some time. Crandall didn't move. Trehearne crushed out his cigarette and yawned. "Did Bryce have any enemies?"

Without turning, Crandall said, "No. Everybody liked Harry. He was all right."

"What happened to Vickers in Mexico?" The question came so quietly that there was a perceptible lapse of time before Crandall reacted to it. He turned around and stared at the impersonal little man sitting comfortably on the leather cushions. Trehearne let him stare. Finally Crandall said, "I don't know. I always supposed that he'd been killed for his money by some local thief, or had met with some accident. He was awfully drunk that night. But since he came back, Vick has all but accused us openly of trying to murder him." He shrugged. "That doesn't mean it's so. Poor Vick got a terrible crack on the head, and he must have been through hell since then, to look at him. He may just be imagining things. It wouldn't be so strange."

With a sudden burst of violence, Crandall banged his fist down on the desk. "That's what scares me! God damn it, Trehearne, he's got Angie up there all alone. Joan Merrill called me, and I've been trying to get the house ever since, with no luck." He sat down again and reached for the phone. "Did you know that?"

"Yes, I knew."

Crandall was dialing. He sat tensely, listening to the ringing on the other end. Abruptly he started and said, "Hello? Vick? Well, where

the hell have you been? This is Job. Yes. I've been trying all morning...

Oh, I see. Well, how's Angie? That's good. Look, may I run up for a while this evening? I... Oh. Yes.

Sure, I see, Vick. All right. Good-by."

He set the phone down and looked at Trehearne. He did not seem to see him.

"He says he and Angie took a notion to be all alone, for a second honeymoon. They've been out in the garden a lot--that's why they didn't hear the phone. You heard me ask if I could see them. Vick said Angie was awfully tired and upset over the murder, and that he had a vicious headache, and would I mind not coming."

Trehearne said, "It sounds logical enough."

"Yes. That's the worst of it. It sounds logical enough." He got up again, for no particular reason.

Trehearne said, "Did you like Vickers, four years ago?"

"I..." Crandall hesitated. "I was his friend."

"I asked whether you liked him."

Crandall said irritably, "It's the same thing, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"Well, God damn it--all right, then! Yes, I liked him."

"Why?"

"Because..." Again Crandall hesitated. Trehearne's dark eyes glinted with a fleeting amusement.

"Because," Crandall said almost defiantly, "he was a good host, a good conversationalist, a--well, a stimulating personality..."

"And he had a wife named Angie. That's good enough. What sort of man was Vickers then?"

Crandall's voice was choked suddenly with some emotion that he wanted to keep hidden from Trehearne. "That's hardly a fair question."

Trehearne said, very gently, "Mr. Crandall, this is a homicide investigation. I have to ask a lot of questions, fair and unfair. Many of them will be just so much time wasted, but they must be asked, because you never know beforehand which ones are important. What was Vickers like four years ago?"

After a long pause Crandall answered sullenly, "He had a Jehovah complex, but you get used to that around Hollywood. You'll hear this anyway, so I suppose I might as well tell you. He was insolent and overbearing and too goddamned successful, and he made Angie unhappy. But you couldn't help admiring him--he was the man you had always wanted to be, good at everything, and he could be perfectly swell when he felt like it."

"Has he changed?"

"Yes," said Crandall. "Yes, he has. Inside. He has a way of looking at you...." He turned abruptly and faced Trehearne. "What are you going to do about Angie? We can't leave her up there alone..."

"With her own husband?" Trehearne rose. "Just now, there's nothing I

can do. But I'm seeing them later today. I'll let you know how things are."

The buzzer sounded. Crandall picked up the phone. "Yes? For Trehearne? Sure. Put it through." He flipped a switch and handed the instrument to the detective.

It was Tuschinsky again. "Finally caught up with you," he said. "One of the kids came up with something else right after I called you. A man's handkerchief. It was caught on a rock not far from where we found the murder weapon. An expensive one, too, with the initial V in the corner. It's got streaks of what looks like rust in it, and more that looks like blood."

A very slow, very sweet, very happy smile broke across Trehearne's face. "How nice," he said. "How truly delightful. Rush it to the lab and tell 'em I want a report, right away quick. But quick!"

He hung up. Crandall said, "Something new?"

"Maybe," Trehearne told him. "You never know. Well, thanks. I'll call if I need you again."

"Sure," said Crandall. "Any time."

As Trehearne went out, Crandall reached into his desk drawer for a flask. He held it in his left hand to drink. Down the right side he shook. Like an old man with the palsy.

Chapter Ten



BILL SAUL lived in a rambling, rustic old house perched on a wooded hill off of Laurel Canyon.

Trehearne urged his unhappy car up the steep drive, parked it securely, and went up the steps. Saul was already at the door, propped lazily against the frame and watching Trehearne with some private amusement.

"Just like old times," he said. "Hi, flatfoot!"

He stood aside for Trehearne. He was wearing slacks and a thin white T-shirt. His lean body showed a surprising muscular development. He reminded Trehearne of a big black tomcat padding across the floor.

"Don't tell me," Trehearne grinned, "that you've had contact with the police before. In an official capacity, I mean."

Bill Saul laughed. "Christ," he said, "there was a time when I had to throw cops out of my bed before I could get in myself."

"Liquor?"

"Yeah. That, and gambling." Saul flexed his long slim sinewy hands, and sighed. "Those babies used to be awfully good to me."

Trehearne said shrewdly, "Of course you're out of practice now."

"Oh, sure." Saul's voice was innocence itself. "I found I could keep myself in bread and cheese painting lampshades and doing a little fine sewing. It's dull, but it's honest."

Trehearne nodded. "I'm glad to know that. A lot of people have wondered just what you did do for a living. I'd hate to think you were mixed up in any of these friendly little gin rummy tournaments around the studios, and such."

Saul said virtuously, "I never play for more than ten bucks a point."

Trehearne grunted sourly. "Jesus, I can lose all I want to at a quarter of a cent." The living room was like a small and very comfortable barn, with big windows and haphazard furniture. He noticed an ashtray overflowing with crumpled butts. It stood on a coffee table in front of the big couch. There was a game of patience laid out. It was only half played, and it was never going to be finished, because somebody had shoved the telephone violently into the middle of it. The Queen of Hearts had fallen to the floor and had not been picked up.

Trehearne said quietly, "Having trouble getting hold of the Vickers'?"

Saul shot him a quick, hard look. "Yeah. Are you?"

"I'm the police."

Saul studied him with his odd, pale eyes. He said finally, "So you are. Mind coming out back for the third degree? He jerked his head toward a closed door. "Peggy's still asleep, and I'd just as soon we didn't wake her. She's the sleepest dame I ever saw, and also the dumbest--outside of Jennie Bryce. She'll be right here when you want her, but leave us get this done while we can make sense." Trehearne nodded, and he led the way out. "I've got some beer in the icebox."

"Fine."

Saul got two frosted quart bottles and a pack of cigarettes. The garden at the rear of the house was small and green and well-kept. There was a little covered patio with big canvas chairs. Trehearne decided that detecting was not always such a bad business.

"How's the case going?"

"Too early to tell yet."

"And you wouldn't say anything anyhow." Saul poured beer carefully down the side of a tall glass, took a long drink, and settled back. "Okay. I suppose you want my story of what took place on the fatal evening."

"If you have one."

"It's short, and fairly snappy. I came. I got drunk and made my usual pass at my hostess and took my usual No for an answer. I got even drunker, made my usual pass at Peggy, and was about to get my usual Yes for an answer when Vick arrived and interrupted me forcibly. There was some horseplay in between, of course, but it's all pretty hazy. There was a howling mob there, and I know someone put nitroglycerine in the old fashioned. I don't remember one single goddamned thing about Harry or what he or anyone else did, up to the time Vick came. After that I was reasonably sober, but nothing of interest happened, except Peggy got hysterical and I had to put her to bed, and she looked so doggone cute I didn't bother to go back to the party. That was about--oh, between one-thirty and two."

Trehearne said, "The autopsy report sets the time of death at not later than midnight."

"Before midnight I can't help you."

"Vickers was sober when you saw him?"

"But stony. He never drank anyway. Not what you could call drinking."

"But he was drunk that night in Mexico."

Saul's eyebrows went up. "You do get around. Yes, he was. Good and drunk. What the hell, everybody slips sometime."

"Harry Bryce have any enemies?"

"Harry? Christ, no! He was a good egg. Stupid, like Job Crandall, but you couldn't dislike him, any more than you can dislike Job."

"How about Vickers?"

"Him," said Bill Saul slowly, "you can dislike."

"Why?"

"Because he thinks his middle name is God. I used to get a kick out of him. He and I got along pretty well, because we understood each other. I've got enough of that in me, and he could never get me down, and it was just one of those funny things. I think we were closer to being friends than either Harry or Job." Saul laughed softly. "I was kind of glad the old son-of-a-bitch got back. I never thought he was dead anyway."

"Why not?"

"We never found a body. Of course, he could have fallen in the bay, but. .." Saul shrugged. "Call it a gambler's hunch, if you like."

"Who hit him over the head?"

Saul turned and looked very intently into Trehearne's eyes. "I kind of thought somebody would get around to that. Vick hasn't been very subtle." He leaned back and held up his glass and watched the sunbeams filter through the amber beer. "I don't know. If I did, I wouldn't tell you, of course. It might have been Harry. I wouldn't pick him for a killer type, but when a man is nuts enough about a woman, he may do anything, and I've seen guys a lot weaker and meeker than Harry cut other guys' guts out with long, sharp knives. On the other hand, maybe Vick just got clipped in the ordinary way by Jose Doakes, who wanted his watch. And maybe some funny ideas blew in through the hole in his head. I don't know."

He set the glass down and sprang up, without warning, in the quick smooth way an animal moves.

"I do know I wish he didn't have her up there alone!"

"Worried?"

"God damn right I am. People talk too much. They run off at the mouth like fire hydrants. Christ knows what Vick may have heard about Angie. In this neck of the woods the Virgin Mary wouldn't have a reputation, and Vick may be just dumb enough..."

There was an extension phone beside his chair. He sat down and reached for it, and it rang, startlingly, under his hand. He grabbed it.

"Hello!" His face changed, in a queer mingling of relief and anger. "Vick, you bastard, what's going on up there? Christ, I've worn the dial off the bloody phone... Oh. Well, I hope you drown in it. How about this, anyhow? You've got half the town imagining... Yeah, I suppose so. How is the lucky little girl? Still able to lift her head, I

hope. Could I speak to her?... Oh. Okay. Well, I may drop by later to compare notes. I've got the law leering at me now... What?... Oh. Yeah, sure, Vick, I understand. Maybe tomorrow, then. So long."

He hung up. He sat for a moment, as Crandall had, staring at Trehearne and not seeing him.

Trehearne said, "Angie is tired and upset over the murder, and Vick has a splitting head, and will some other time do?"

Saul's pale eyes nickered. "He didn't feed you that?"

"Not me. I'm the police. I'm quoting Job Crandall."

Saul shrugged and lay back in his chair. "Sounds logical enough. A guy would want to be alone with his wife after four years. He says they've been down by the pool most of the morning, and the hell with phones. He'd just come back to the house for some cold drinks. Angie was still down there, by the pool." He picked up his beer. "Yeah," he said. "It sounds logical enough." He took a long drink. Then he said reflectively, "I never tried it in a pool. Wonder if it's fun."

"I wouldn't know," said Trehearne. "My wife doesn't swim. Has Vickers changed, do you think?"

"Yes and no." Bill Saul's eyes were clear again, his mouth harboring a faintly derisive smile. "Physically, he's turned from a show-piece into a man. Mentally--well, I was watching him yesterday morning. God is still there, all right, but he's tougher than he used to be. I wouldn't be surprised if he packed a few thunderbolts in his jeans."

He glanced sideways at Trehearne, who was getting up. "No rubber hose? No phone book? No bar soap in the sock?"

"We'll catch that on the next time round. I'll give you a ring later, if you like."

"What about?"

"Angie. I'm going up there now."

"That's right," said Saul. "You're the police." He rose to show Trehearne out. "Sure, give me a ring."

The inner door was still closed. Apparently Peggy was still asleep. Saul made a "what-can-you-do?"

gesture. "It doesn't really matter," he said. "She sleeps on her back anyway."

Trehearne said, "Doesn't that get monotonous for both of you?" and went away.

He stopped at Schwab's to telephone the lab. The profane and plaintive voice on the other end urged him to refrain from losing his trousers. Trehearne gave them the number of Vickers' phone and told them to call there as soon as they finished. It was very hot in the phone booth. Trehearne came out dripping wet and yawning. Bill Saul's beer was making him drowsy. He climbed back into his car and drove out along the Strip and then up the long steep hill to the house where Vickers and his golden-eyed Angeline were all alone with what Vickers said was love.

Just out of sight of the gates he stopped, and a small nondescript man detached himself from the shrubby and came up to the car. He nodded at Trehearne, who said, "What's cooking?"

"Nothing. Some reporters came and went away mad. That fat little

guy, Sessions, was up here. He had the Merrill dame in his car, and they went away mad. Nobody's been inside the house, or come out of it since the Merrill dame and the servants left this morning."

"You'd be surprised," Trehearne told him, "what a hornets' nest that has stirred up. Okay, Brownie. I'm on my way in. If I'm not back when you think I should be, call out the Marines and come looking. The sheriffs office has been alerted--they'll cooperate." Trehearne's beautiful mouth was positively seraphic.

"This case may crack any minute, and I may need help on the arrest."

"Right," said Brownie. "You'll get it." He stepped back. It was remarkable how closely he blended with the trees. Trehearne drove on. He left his car in the drive, climbed the steps, and rang the doorbell. The house looked cheerful, calm, and perfectly normal. There were bright flower beds, and the lawns were green and smooth, and the sunshine was all it was expected to be.

He rang the bell again.

It was very quiet on top of the hill. There were a lot of birds, and they did a lot of singing, but it was a natural kind of noise that didn't disturb the quiet. There was a fine old pepper tree out on the lawn. The light-green lacy foliage was pricked out with the soft bright red of the berries. The whole tree swayed a little in the breeze, with the slow grace peculiar to pepper trees. Trehearne remembered the one in the school yard that he used to climb when he was a kid.

He rang the bell again.

Presently he forgot about the birds and the pepper tree and the restful quiet. He bent his head forward, and listened, and heard nothing, and his eyes got a hard, puckered look. He pushed the bell,

and listened to the faint chiming echoes die away, and then he turned and went swiftly down the steps. He did not head toward his car, but around the house to the rear.

He was already on the lawn when he heard the door open behind him. He stopped and turned.

The door was wide open. The inner hall was dark after the outer brightness, full of shadows. Michael Vickers stood there with his hounds. In the dimness, all three looked abnormally huge and something more, or less, than human.

Vickers smiled. "Trehearne," he said cordially. "Have you been waiting long? I was outside, and I only just heard the bell."

Trehearne went back up the steps. "I'd begun to think you were avoiding me, too."

Vickers laughed. "Everybody seems to be frightfully upset over an extremely simple thing. Apparently all my friends suspect me of homicidal mania--or something!" He closed the door. "Angie's down by the pool. Can I offer you a drink?"

Trehearne said, "No, thank you." He was looking at Vickers' forearm, left bare by the short sleeve.

There were three parallel scratches on it. The kind of scratches fingernails make. They were fresh. So fresh that the blood was still welling, and had not begun to flow.

Chapter Eleven

THE POOL HAD TURQUOISE tiling, and it was long enough so that a man could take more than two strokes without cracking his head on the opposite end. There were dressing rooms and a big sheltered terrace, and several gay umbrellas set in round tables.

Angie was stretched out in a long padded chair, completely relaxed, her eyes shut against the hot sun.

Vickers called her, and she roused up, saw Trehearne, and smiled. It was a curiously lifeless smile. Her eyes had dark circles under them, and they were clouded and tired. She covered them with dark glasses before she had finished saying hello.

"What's new?" she asked.

Trehearne shrugged. "Oh, a couple of possibilities." He nodded toward Vickers. "You two have certainly got this town in a tizzy."

Vickers said good-naturedly, "That worries me a lot." He had pulled out his handkerchief and was unconcernedly wiping the blood from his forearm. Angie curled her feet under her and sat up, watching him.

"Vick..."

He cut in smoothly on whatever she was going to say. "It's nothing, darling." He bent over and roughed Coolin's head. "You old son of a bitch," he said affectionately. "You've got claws like a tiger."

Angie said, "He was playing with the dogs." Her voice sounded flat. She reached for a cigarette, and Trehearne gave her a light. He

looked at her intently. Her lids were lowered behind the dark lenses. Her hand, guiding his lightly, was cold but perfectly steady.

"Thank you," she said. "Are you happy here, or would you rather go into the house?"

Trehearne glanced at the bloodstained square of fine linen that Vickers held. He said slowly, "The house, if you don't mind. I'm expecting a call."

Vickers laughed. "You're awfully polite, for a policeman." He held out his hand for Angie. "I suspect that it's merely a sinister cloak, behind which you are busily knotting a size sixteen-and-a-half noose." He pulled Angie into the bend of his arm and led the way to the house, the hounds trailing at his heels.

Trehearne absorbed the contours of Angie's back, full length, and sighed.

It was cool in the den, and quiet. Angie curled up in a big chair. She removed the dark glasses, but her face was in heavy shadow. Trehearne sat on the edge of the desk. He seemed not to be going to stay long, as though his visit were of no special importance.

He said to Angie, "When was the last time you saw Harry Bryce?"

"I don't know. Around ten-thirty or eleven, I should think. I lost him in the mob. He was very drunk."

"And then around midnight you took the boat out."

"I suppose it was about that time. I didn't notice."

Trehearne looked at Vickers. "Did you know when she left?"

"Yes. It was shortly after twelve. I saw the launch go out, from the terrace."

"Did you know then that it was your wife aboard?"

"Yes. I had seen her boarding the launch from the dinghy."

"At that distance," said Trehearne, "and at night?" He was not derisive, not even doubting. He was merely asking a question.

Vickers was looking more bored by the second. He said patiently, "I saw a woman in a light frock. Even at that distance a woman's skirts look different from a man's trousers. It was my wife's boat, and my wife's custom to go aboard her."

Trehearne thought that Over, and shrugged. "All right. But didn't you think it was odd?"

"Not at all. I remembered that she used to take the boat out alone quite often."

"You knew she was alone."

The vein began to swell slightly on Vickers' forehead.

"There was only one person in the dinghy. I don't think anybody had swum out."

"It was a horrible party," Angie said. "I wanted to get away from it. Of course, I had no idea Vick was coming..."

"Did you go directly from the house to the landing?"

"Yes. I got into the dinghy and sculled out. I didn't see anything, or anybody, on the way."

"No signs of a struggle? No prints on the sand?"

"Not a thing. If they were there, I didn't notice them."

"Who was down in the cabana?"

"I don't know. I didn't look. I didn't care. Matter of fact, I don't even know whether anyone was there."

"The lights were on, weren't they?"

Her hands made a vague gesture. "I—don't really remember."

Vickers said impatiently, "Yes, they were on. They were still burning when you came, Trehearne, if I remember. We've never worried much about light bills."

"No," said Trehearne, with a faint trace of envy, "I don't suppose you do. Mr. Vickers, why didn't you look for your wife in the cabana?"

"I was on my way down when I noticed the dinghy, and saw Angie go aboard the cruiser. After that there was no need."

Trehearne nodded. He leaned far over and tapped ashes carefully into a tray of hand-wrought copper.

"What did you do then?"

"Went back inside. After all, those unpleasant people were in my house, as guests of my wife—God knows why." Vickers bent over her chair. "Angie dear, while we're on the subject, what in Christ's name was going on down there?"

"Oh," said Angie wearily, "I was trying to do Harry a favor." Her head

was back in the angle of the wing her face completely hidden from Trehearne. "Jennie had been complaining that he was with me too much -- if she had only known how I would have loved to get rid of him! So I thought if I invited her crowd and made a special effort..." Her voice trailed slowly off to nothing. She sat perfectly still for a long moment, and then, in a curiously amazed flat tone, she said, "My God. What did I say?"

Vickers straightened, still looking down at her. "You said, darling, quote, if she had only known how I would have loved to get rid of him. Unquote. 'Him,' of course, meaning Harry. Mr. Trehearne will now no doubt inquire just how much you would have liked to get" rid of him."

The telephone rang.

Trehearne answered it. He did not ask permission or make even a token apology. For some reason, there was a perceptible tightening of the atmosphere in the den. The sun shone brightly through the windows. Michael Vickers sat down in a deep soft chair and stretched his legs out, and somehow the very ease and quietness with which he did it was an underlining of the tension. Angie did not move.

Trehearne said, "Hello. Yes, speaking." He listened. His face did not change, except that he began to smile. Not a broad smile, not one that would even be noticed ordinarily. Just a faint readjustment of the mouth, a sleepy seraph smiling at sun rising over heaven. "It is," he said. "It does. Good. Yes, I am.

Right." He broke the connection, dialed "O," and gave the number of his office. While he was waiting he leaned over and crushed out his cigarette in the tray that was almost out of reach. He didn't say anything.

Nobody said anything. Nobody, least of all Trehearne, seemed excited.

Once again he said, "Hello. Anything new?" Again he waited, listening. Then he said, "Okay. I think that does it. Yeah. 'Bye." He hung up.

"Don't tell me," said Michael Vickers. "I can feel it coming. You are about to make an arrest."

Trehearne looked at Angie. "Mrs. Vickers," he said, "would you mind leaving us alone for a few moments?"

She got slowly to her feet. There was a grayish pallor on her skin, where the rosy color had run out of her cheeks. "What have you found out?" she asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Please stay within call," Trehearne said. "I'll want you again."

She looked at him out of the sides of her eyes, and walked past him toward Vickers.

"Vick..."

"It's all right, old girl." Vickers gave her a nod. "Do as the man says."

She stood still for a moment. Then she turned and went out and shut the door.

Trehearne let his right hand drop very casually into his coat pocket. He sat down again on the corner of the desk.

"This is a funny kind of case, Mr. Vickers," he said. "So many people were present at, or near, the scene of the crime, and yet nobody remembers anything. I've just got a report from the boys who have

been checking the guest list. All any of those people can say is, 'Hell, I don't know. I was drunk.' Nobody knows where anybody was, who anybody was with, or what time anything in particular happened.

Nobody even remembers when you came in. Nobody, that is, but Bill Saul.

"So everything that happened that night is hidden in a fine alcoholic haze. Only four things stand clear.

You came back. You remained sober. At one time, your wife was down on the beach. And Harry Bryce was killed."

He stopped, pulled a cigarette out of his pocket with his left hand, and then got his lighter the same way.

He did not light the cigarette for effect, or to give him the chance for a dramatic pause. He wanted a cigarette because he was nervous and keyed-up, and trying not to show it, and because Bill Saul's beer had left a sour taste in his mouth. Vickers watched him. He did not seem to be worried. He was just watching.

Trehearne said, "I'd like to tell you what happened that night--as I see it."

Vickers threw one long leg over the arm of the chair. "Why not have a comfortable seat while you're doing it? That desk corner is rather hard on the butt, I find."

Trehearne said, "Thanks," and got up, but he did not find himself a chair. He began to move around the room, slowly, aimlessly, but in such a way that he was always facing Vickers.

"Four years ago," Trehearne said, "a man went on a cruise with three

of his friends. One night one of the friends tried to murder him. Perhaps the friend did this merely because he coveted the man's wife.

Perhaps the man's wife had secretly talked with the friend, and made certain suggestions, and promises. I don't know. Anyhow, the job was done, and bungled, because the man lived. He didn't tell anybody that he was alive, even after his memory returned; not even his wife. He didn't even tell anybody that he was coming back. This could only mean one thing. He knew that one of his friends had tried to kill him--and he didn't trust his wife."

The sunlight lay in big sharp-angled squares on the rug, and it was quiet in the den when Trehearne stopped talking in order to think, and Michael Vickers lay back in the chair and said nothing.

Trehearne went on.

"He came back, late one night. Nobody knew he was coming. Nobody had a chance to set the stage for him, to cover up, to decide what he should see, and how much. The man wanted it that way. He walked in on a wild party. He couldn't find his wife. He must have asked about her, and the people who answered were drunk, and they didn't know who the man was, and they probably said things that were common gossip. And the man went on looking for his wife.

"He found her. She was down on the beach with one of his old friends, Harry Bryce. Perhaps they were in the cabana, perhaps not. Anyway, they were there, and he saw them.

"I think he didn't let them see him, for a while. Perhaps they were just on the verge of breaking up, and the wife was heading out for the open sea to cool off a bit. I think the man waited until she had gone, and then he walked up to his old friend and spoke to him, and then hit

him very hard over the head with a short iron bar which he found lying about, and consigned the body to the water. After that he took out his handkerchief and wiped the bar carefully lest there be fingerprints, and then threw the bar after the body.

There was blood and iron rust on his hands, and he cleaned them too, and then weighted the handkerchief with a stone or something, and threw that after the bar. Then he went back up to the house where everybody was so wonderfully drunk, and played host for the rest of the night.

"Perhaps he was rather pleased with himself, playing host. Perhaps he was thinking there was one down, a part of his vengeance taken care of. Two more to go, and a faithless wife to be punished. Or perhaps he had recognized Harry Bryce as the man who struck him down. Anyway, he felt pleased, and pretty safe."

Trehearne stopped and looked into Vickers' eyes, and waited.

After a moment Vickers said gently, "Have you ever done any fiction writing, Mr. Trehearne?" Trehearne shook his head.

"You'd do well at it. You've concocted a really excellent little plot. From the limited data at your disposal, you've built quite an impressive structure." Vickers smiled wryly. "I was clumsy about that log book, I admit. I'd hoped that Harry might inadvertently have said something important." He sighed.

"Good old Harry. I might have known."

"But," said Trehearne, "good old Harry is dead now, and you killed him."

"That bit about the iron bar is based on fact, I suppose?"

"Yes. The murder weapon was found this morning. The laboratory found particles of blood and hair in the rough welding around the nut. That's what the phone call was." Vickers nodded. "The handkerchief was a nice piece of follow through. You'd make a writer, my boy." He studied Trehearne with malicious amusement. "Your accusation has not a God damned leg to stand on, you know. It's good sound deduction, all very logical, and I'd be inclined to believe it myself. But you know what a good defense lawyer will do to you in court."

"I know," said Trehearne. "Except for one thing. The handkerchief."

There was the smallest hesitation before Vickers answered. "The what?"

Trehearne said patiently, as though it were something Vickers should have known all along, "They found a handkerchief, not far from the murder weapon. It was one of yours, initialed V. It had stains on it. Rust, the same rust that's on the bar. And blood. Harry Bryce's blood." He shrugged. "We're still working on the case, of course. More evidence will probably show up. Meantime, I think I can take a chance on an indictment."

Vickers sat up, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. He stared at Trehearne.

"I suppose," he said quietly, "it's no good telling you I didn't do it. That I didn't see Harry that night. That I wouldn't have killed him if I had." And that I never touched either the iron bar or the handkerchief."

Trehearne said, "It's no good." His right hand, in his pocket, tensed ever so slightly.

Vickers laughed. "Don't worry. I've nothing to get myself shot for--yet." He leaned back in the chair, and Trehearne went to the door and

opened it.

"Mrs. Vickers."

She came in, holding herself very erect. She looked from Trehearne to Vickers and back again, and Vickers said, "I've been arrested, darling. For the murder of Harry Bryce."

Trehearne said sharply, "I'll take care of this, Vickers. And I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. You too, Mrs. Vickers."

Over in the chair, Vickers shut his hands over the ends of the chair arms until the knuckles turned white.

Angie said, "Do you think I did it?"

"I don't think so. But there's always the chance that you and your husband did it together. That Harry Bryce had become so troublesome to you that you welcomed a chance to get rid of him, and in so doing reinstate yourself with your husband. I do not believe your story."

"And you're arresting Vick."

"That's right."

Her enunciation was very slow, very precise. "On what grounds?"

"Common sense, generally. Specifically, his handkerchief was recovered from the bay, stained with blood that checks with that of the murdered man, and rust from the bar that killed him. That's enough for a starter."

"What are you holding me for?"

"No charge as yet. Further questioning. Of course, neither one of you can be made to testify against the other."

Her golden eyes met Vickers. Trehearne watched like a hawk, but not the faintest trace of a signal passed between them. "That's nice," said Angie. "On the other hand--silence gives consent." She put her hands suddenly to her temples and began to walk up and down.

"Handkerchief," she said. "Wait a minute. What do I know about a handkerchief? So much has happened.... Oh God, let me think!" She stopped, her head bent in an attitude of intense concentration.

"Handkerchief. Mr. Trehearne, did you find one on the body?"

Trehearne's dark eyes narrowed. His voice had a curiously flat note when he answered. "Come to think of it, we didn't." Angie said, "Harry didn't have one when he came here that night. He'd forgotten it, or lost it. I gave him one of Vick's. A white one, of very fine linen, with a hand-embroidered V in the corner.

Joan Merrill was with us. She'll remember it. Is that the one you found?"

"Yes," said Trehearne. "I'm afraid it is." He sat down on the desk again. He was no longer smiling, and there was nothing in the least seraphic about the expression of his mouth. "That's fine. That helps a lot.

Because if the handkerchief came off the corpse, anybody could have used it." He thought a moment, and then went on softly, "Yes, anybody. Including someone who wanted Vickers accused of the crime, knowing he would be the logical suspect. Including a woman, who wouldn't have a handkerchief of her own right handy." Vickers

got up. "I take it you're not arresting me, then."

"I guess not," Trehearne said. And added, "Yet."

"Then," said Vickers, "may I ask you to get the hell out of my house?"

"You may." Trehearne rose. "After I have made this call." He picked up the phone, dialed the Wilshire Regent, and asked for Mrs. Merrill. When she came on he asked a couple of carefully phrased questions concerning Angie, Harry Bryce, and the handkerchief, sighed, and said, "Okay, thanks. Angie's right here. Want to talk to her?" He stepped back and gave Angie the phone. His face was quite innocent.

Vickers gave him a fleeting glance that was full of sardonic humor.

Angie said, "Hello, Joan. I tried to get you earlier on, but you... Yes, everything's all right. Of course.

Vick and I are just taking it easy, and talking. No, thanks. Please, dear, don't be angry with us. Only a day or two, to get things straightened out, and then we want you back. I knew you would. All right, Joan.

"I'll call you tomorrow. Good-by." She hung up. Vickers turned to Trehearne. "Satisfied?"

"Should I be?" Trehearne picked up his hat and went out. Vickers and the two hounds followed him to the door. Angie stood at the doorway and watched them, her flowered shirt a spot of burning color in the dimness of the hall. Trehearne said over his shoulder, "I'll be back."

"Any time, old boy. Any time at all." The friendly words were spoken

in a tone that was sheer cold insult.

Vickers shut the door. Trehearne went down the steps to his car. His dark eyes had a hot reddish light in them. He was beginning to understand what people meant about Michael Vickers. On the way down the hill he stopped to talk to Brownie. "Any luck?"

Trehearne shook his head. "No. Good lead, but it blew up in my face." He looked with dreamy wistfulness into space. "I wish," he said softly, "that you could throw people like that in the common tank and work 'em over for what they've got to give. Really work 'em."

"You sound like you don't care much for Vickers."

"I love him. I love to be called 'old boy' in a tone that says I'm a little less than human and not quite clean.

I love a man that's as good as hooked for a murder, and so Goddamned sure of himself that he doesn't flicker an eyelash. I love a man that's lucky the way he's lucky." Brownie winked. "How about Mrs.

Vickers?"

"Ah," said Trehearne. "There you pose me a problem. If I were not a sedate married man with two kids, I could go for that. I might wake up in hell the next morning with a love token shoved up to the hilt in my back, but I'm not sure it wouldn't be worth it."

He sighed, and pushed the gear lever into second. "Keep your eyes open, keed. Wide open. If you see so much as a window shade out of place in the joint, grab the nearest phone."

Brownie raised his eyebrows. "Like that, huh?"

"Like that." The car began to roll. "Mr. Vickers has been away four years. He and his wife have a lot to talk over."

Brownie withdrew into the shadows. Trehearne let the car coast downhill in second. He was thinking hard. Words of the old ballad wandered out of his mouth, with no conscious help from him.

Oh, true love, have you brought me gold, or have you paid my fee, or have you come to see me die upon the gallows tree?

Chapter Twelve

AFTER THE DOOR HAD closed on Trehearne's stiffly retreating back, Michael Vickers returned to Angie, who was still standing where the two men had left her. Or rather, she was leaning there, her head and shoulders back against the wall. Her features had the dry whiteness of chalk, and her eyes were closed. Vickers picked her up in his arms and carried her into the living room.

"I'm tired," she whispered. "I'm so tired." She began to cry, very quietly, not making any fuss about it.

She did not even sob. The tears made little bright patterns on her cheeks.

Vickers put her down on the big couch and sat beside her. Very tenderly he pushed her dark hair back from her forehead and then let his hand stay there.

"You didn't have to tell him that," he said, "about the handkerchief. I'd never have known, and Joan would never have given you away."

"It was the truth. I won't have you accused unfairly."

Vickers' mouth twitched, with a certain wry humor. "In other words, if I killed Harry I've got to be caught fair and square, with no deviation from the rules."

Her eyes met his, held them, and did not turn away. "That goes for both of us, doesn't it? There's a legal phrase, I think. Something about proving guilt beyond the shadow of a doubt."

Vickers said slowly, "It's innocence I want to prove, for both of us."

Her fingers closed tightly, on his wrist. "How can we do that, Vick? How can we ever do that?"

"We can't. We've got to make others do it for us." He got up and began to walk about the room.

Suddenly he turned. "Are you still afraid of me, Angie?"

She put her arm up to shield her eyes from the light, and said dully, "I don't know. I don't know anything any more."

"You were afraid this morning. Why did you stay with me, Angie? Why didn't you make Trehearne take you away?" She rolled her head on the cushion and looked up at him. He was very tall. She said quietly, "Because I love you. Because I can't go on this way any longer. Because I've either got to have you, or be free of you."

He came close to her, his shoulders bent as he studied her. "You thought I might kill you. You still don't know. You don't know, do you?" She said, "No."

"But you were willing to chance it. Why?"

"I'm not playing at this, Vick. I've been married to you for nine years. I've loved you longer than that.

Even when you've been cruel to me--even when you've broken my heart, and worst of all, my pride -- for some crazy reason, I've loved you. These four years you've been gone, and I didn't know where you were, or what had happened to you, or whether I'd ever see you again--you've never really been away from me for one minute. The sound of your voice, the way you smile..."

She stopped talking. Vickers stood looking down at her for a long still

moment. Then he turned away and sat down. She could not see his face, and he did not speak. Angie sighed and said, "I knew you'd wake up someday. I wish it hadn't had to come like this."

He leaned back in the chair. She could see only his profile, with the white scar on his forehead. His eyes were closed. He seemed very tired.

"I haven't talked much today," he said. "No."

"I haven't known what to say. The things that we have to talk about between us, there don't seem to be any words for. I don't know why that is. I always used to find words."

"You'll find them," said Angie, "if you want to."

"I hope so. Whatever happens to us afterward, I want us--the personal us that has nothing to do with law or ethics or even murder--to understand each other." He gestured impatiently. "That's very clumsily put, but do you understand?"

"Of course."

He sat without speaking for sometime. Angie lay still and watched the muscles tighten around his mouth.

He put his hands up suddenly and pressed his temples, and said in a flat off-hand voice, "Christ, my head aches," and that seemed to clear the way. He began to talk.

"I lost myself. Up here I was Michael Vickers and I had a house and a bank account and did certain things with certain people. Down there I wasn't anyone. I didn't even have a name. I was just a body, male, in pretty bad condition, possessing three articles of clothing and a pair

of shoes. The clothes I lost immediately. They were good, and worth having. The body didn't matter much. It was a strange feeling, not having a memory. A feeling I can't describe."

Once started, he did not stop, did not even pause. The words came out of him rapidly, ill at ease, half ashamed.

"I have starved. I have stolen. I've been sick, revoltingly, humiliatingly sick, and not in the privacy of a nice white room with special nurses. I've been beaten and kicked. I've sat whimpering with pain like a small child, absolutely gutless, and I've been afraid. So Goddamned abysmally afraid I didn't want to see the sun come up again. In short, I've lost my pride."

He was finished. He did not move, nor look at her. He seemed to be waiting. After a while Angie said slowly, "I wouldn't say that, Vick. I'd say you'd learned the difference between having pride in something, and just being proud." Again she studied his face. "You've grown up. I suppose that sounds silly, but it's the only way I can put it. You were still a child emotionally A spoiled child, cruel and selfish without even thinking about it. You're different now." She paused, and added, "I was never afraid of you before."

He smiled. "That's an odd recommendation. Have I changed much? Superficially, I mean."

"You can still insult people," she said. "Only now you know you're doing it." For the first time, she, too, smiled.

They were silent again.

Presently Vickers said, "I had a woman down there. I'll tell you about her one day. And I had a friend.

His name was Pepon. He had bad teeth and he was lousy, but he'd give me half of his last tortilla. He sold his only chicken once, so he could buy a holy medal to cure my headache. Didn't work worth a damn, but I couldn't tell him that. He was killed on the docks."

He laughed. It was a small, quiet sound, and oddly enough there was no tinge of bitterness in it.

"After I could remember things again, I used to picture Job Crandall or Bill Saul or Harry Bryce having only one chicken, and selling it for me."

He got up and crossed to the window and stood looking out at the broad smooth lawn, burning green under the low sun.

"What did we do to fill up the time, Angie? What did we think about? What did we live for?"

The shadows were growing heavy in the corners of the room. Angie sat up. Her head felt very heavy and very full, but the thoughts that weighed it down were all hidden behind thick dark curtains. She held it in her hands, and her black soft hair swung down and covered her wrists.

"Do you want anything to eat, Vick? I don't think we had any lunch."

"Are you hungry?"

"No,"

"Neither am I." Presently he turned and came back to her. He reached down and tilted her head back so that he could see her face. Her throat was brown and smooth where his fingers touched it. He could feel the pulse beating in the side of it. "You stayed," he said.

"You had a chance to go. I couldn't have stopped you. But you stayed."

She met his gaze without effort. There was no fear in her eyes, no question, nothing but a weary calm.

"Yes," she said. "So I know you were telling the truth."

"Do you?"

"If you'd hated me enough four years ago to... well, you wouldn't be with me now. If you had anything to hide, you wouldn't be here."

She studied him, searching deeply into his eyes. "Do you want to believe that, Vick?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

Suddenly he was on his knees in front of her. Not in supplication, but because in that way he was closer to her. His hands slipped down along her shoulders, found the firm tanned flesh left bare at her waist, and stayed there. He could feel the small sensuous shiver that was born under his touch.

"I never forgot you, Angie. I never stopped wanting you."

She said quietly, "Do you love me, Vick?"

"I love you. For the first time in my life I can say that, and know what I mean by it."

"Then I'll tell you something." Her voice was very calm, unhurried. "If I were a very brave and very clever woman, and if I were afraid of you and wanted you dead, I would do exactly as I have done. I'd play along with you. I'd make you believe me. I'd get you into bed, and then

after you were asleep I'd knife you, quite quietly, and call Mr. Trehearne and tell him it was self-defense, and that before you attacked me you had boasted of killing Harry Bryce, and of being about to kill Job Crandall and Bill Saul. I would say that you had gone quite mad--and Trehearne would never doubt me."

Vickers nodded. "I know that."

"And are you willing to take the chance?"

He stood up, and brought her with him to her feet. He cupped her face in his hands and looked down into it, deep into her eyes, into what lay behind them. Then he bent and kissed her. He felt her arms go tight around him. Her lips parted under his. Her breath was warm and sweet, her tongue eager in the little mating. His hands slipped down and locked, hard, in the small of her back.

They stayed that way for a long time. Then Vickers caught her up in his arms and carried her out and down the hall, and then upstairs.

It was very late the next morning when Angie went alone into the den. The telephone was ringing. She stood beside it until it stopped, tapping an unlighted cigarette in quick nervous rhythm on the desk top.

She wore a yellow house coat and a yellow ribbon in her hair, and fresh color on her mouth.

When the phone was silent again she picked it up and dialed the Wilshire Regent.

"Mrs. Merrill," she said. She waited a moment. "Joan, this is Angie. Look, darling--come up to the house right away, will you? No, I'll tell you all about it when you get here. And Joan--don't tell anyone you're

coming. That's most important. Yes--you'll understand."

She put the phone down. Outside, the lawns were drenched with sunshine, and it was very still.

Chapter Thirteen

HARRIET CRANDALL looked across the dinner table at Job. "What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "You've done nothing but drink ever since you came home, and you look like the wrath of God. It's a wonder you couldn't be a little pleasant in the evenings. After all, you're not bothered with me during the day."

"I'm tired," Crandall said sullenly. "I've had a hard day."

Harriet took a large forkful of chicken. It was garnished with mushrooms and little onions, and had a wine sauce. Harriet enjoyed it audibly.

"You're a liar," she said. "It's because of Angie." She watched Job's face, and smiled. "You've had it soft with her for four years, haven't you? Phone calls every day, dropping in for lunch, dropping in for cocktails, dragging me up there in the evening so you could play gin-rummy with her. It's a little rough now, having her husband back."

Crandall picked up his fork. His hand trembled violently, and he put it down again. "Let's change the subject," he said.

"I like the subject. You haven't even been able to get the house, have you? I know, because I've been curious too, and I've tried. The phone just isn't answered. I wonder what they're doing up there, all alone?"

Her voice held a wicked malice. The muscles in Crandall's cheek began to twitch. He avoided looking at his wife.

She said, "Two whole days, isn't it, Job? And she hasn't even called you up."

Crandall got up from the table. "God damn it, Harriet, I'm worried! Can't you understand that? It isn't natural, what they've done. Christ, he may have killed her!"

"There are women in this town," Harriet said, "who wouldn't weep over it."

Crandall turned and looked at her. Then he said quietly, "They should. They should weep for themselves." He walked out of the dining room onto the terrace.

Harriet stared after him. Then she slammed down her knife. and fork and followed. Her thin face was drawn hard, her eyes glinting.

"Just what did you mean by that crack?"

"Does it matter?" Crandall was looking off toward the dark hills, with the lights hung on them like diamonds. He was not thinking about Harriet.

"Pay attention to me!" she snapped. "What did you mean?" Crandall said patiently, "I don't feel like fighting," and walked away from her. The study windows were French, and they stood open onto the terrace. Crandall went inside. He picked up the telephone and dialed. He waited a long time, but there was no answer. Harriet came in and stood watching him.

"Why don't you call the police?" she said. "I have. I talked to Trehearne. He said there was nothing he could do. It's their house, and they have a right to be alone in it."

"Isn't that too bad!" Harriet lighted a cigarette. She blew an insolent plume of smoke and smiled.

Crandall started toward the door. "Where are you going?"

"Out."

She moved quickly and caught his arm. "Oh, no, you're not. I know where 'out' is. You're going to stay here and mind your business."

"I just want to know that everything's all right."

"Don't be a fool, Job. Don't you suppose Vick will know what you're up to?"

Crandall said slowly, "There's nothing for him to know." Harriet's eyes fairly burned. "Oh, no? Well, I can tell him then."

"I think," Crandall told her, "that you and everybody else have already said enough." He shook her hand off. "I've got to go, Harriet. I've got to know that she's all right."

"You leave her alone, Job. You hear me? It's Vick's business what he thinks, and what he does. And I hope he gives her what she's got coming!"

A strange look came into Crandall's eyes. It was not a nice look. "I think," he said, "that I could forgive you everything but your stupidity."

Her lips drew back slightly from her teeth, which were white and sharp and made her look curiously like a viper. "You can't talk to me like that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm your wife. You seem to forget that, Job, but it does give me some rights."

"Oh, no," he said. "I don't forget it, not for one minute. But did you ever think that being a wife means more than just being married?"

"Oh, stop feeling sorry for yourself! I didn't get so much...."

He cut her short, going on as though he had not heard her. "You've never been a wife to me. The priest, if I remember, said something about loving and cherishing." He laughed. "For sixteen years I've been married to a woman, and I've lived in a house. But I've had neither a wife nor a home."

He started away again, and again she caught his arm.

"I suppose you think you'd have been happier with Angie." "Shut up, Harriet."

"All right. You go to her. You get right out and go to her. But I'm going to call the police. I was pretty drunk that night, and I don't remember much about it, but I know you got away from me for a while. I know you were hunting for Angie. All right. I'll tell Trehearne I saw you, the two of you. I'll tell him I saw you both from the terrace, and that you had Harry Bryce between you and were pushing him in the water. I'll tell it in court. I'll..."

Job Crandall struck her. He struck her very hard on the side of the head with his fist, and she slipped down against him, clawing at him. Blood began to run from the corner of her mouth. She bared her teeth at him, snarling like a cat, and the blood ran in tiny red threads between her teeth. He struck her again, and again. His face was perfectly blank, his eyes glassy and blind. Harriet made a queer whimpering sound. She was at his feet now, trying to crawl away. He kneeled down and caught her by the hair and his hand rose and fell until the sweat stood out on his face like drops of oil and he was breathing harshly, and his arm was tired.

He stood up.

"Harriet."

She did not move.

"I'm sorry, Harriet."

She did not move.

Crandall bent over and touched her. "I didn't mean to hit you. I guess it's because it's been so long.

Sixteen years. I guess I'm tired."

She did not move.

Someone knocked on the door, and a man's voice said, "Excuse me, sir. Shall I serve the dessert?"

Crandall stood staring down at Harriet, He had begun to tremble now with real violence. His jaw lifted and began to draw around toward his shoulder. He took hold of the table edge, hard.

Outside, the man knocked again. "Mr. Crandall, sir!"

Crandall said, "No. No, we won't be wanting dessert. Thanks."

The man went away. Tears gathered in Crandall's eyes. A little red trickle crept out from under the veil of Harriet's hair. Crandall watched it. The tears ran down his cheeks. Presently he got up and went out on the terrace, and from there to the garage. He moved like someone who is very ill. When he drove away he went slowly, and the car moved in uncertain lunges, with a harsh grating of the gears.

After a time he came to the top of the hill, and the house where no one answered the telephone. The lamps were on in the living room, soft and peaceful behind drawn blinds. Crandall got out of his car. He went up the steps rather slowly, as though he were not quite sure of his footing, and rang the bell.

The small barred opening in the door let a soft beam of light into Crandall's eyes. The tears had dried in them leaving them dull and curiously unreal, like things poorly manufactured out of glass. He said, "Let me in."

The door swung inward. Vickers stood there, with the wolfhounds behind him like huge familiar demons.

He did not seem surprised. He smiled.

"Come in, Job," he said. "I've been expecting you."

Crandall went past him without speaking. He made straight toward the living room. Vickers closed the door, without turning his back on Crandall. He crossed the hall and stood in the archway watching him, one shoulder propped comfortably against the wall.

The living room was empty.

Crandall turned and looked up at Vickers. "Where's Angie?"

Vickers shrugged. "Somewhere about. Will you have a drink?"

"Is she all right, Vick?"

Vickers' eyes widened. "Why wouldn't she be?"

"I've got to see her." Crandall moved closer to Vickers. "I've got to

see Angie."

"Why the hell should I let you see her? You've been seeing her for four years. My turn now."

Crandall came still closer.

"I've got to see her. Alone. I've got to talk to her."

"What about, Job? Something her husband shouldn't hear?" Vickers' expression was almost benign, except for his eyes. "What have you to say that couldn't have been said in four years, when she was alone?"

Job Crandall went up and took hold of the lapel of Vickers' jacket. He said, "If you've done anything to harm her..."

Vickers did not move from his easy position against the wall. He bent his head and studied Job. He seemed mildly amused.

Crandall let go of his jacket and turned away. His whole body now looked broken, very old, very tired.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose I am funny. Poor old Job, his wife nags him and he drinks too much, but he's really a lamb. Oh Christ. I look back and I try to see where I went wrong, and I don't know. I get married, I have children. It's normal. People are supposed to do it. So what are you going to do? If you run out on your family you're a louse, and if you stay you're poor sweet Job, the bloody fool." He paused, and then said in a completely impersonal voice, as though he were talking about somebody else, "All I ever wanted, really, was a home."

He sat down. Presently he said, "I've killed Harriet."

Vickers' body tightened and a certain intentness came into his face.

Presently he asked, "Why?"

"I..." Crandall seemed to be having trouble with his breathing. His chin lifted and turned. "I just suddenly couldn't help it."

Vickers came softly into the room and across the floor to where Crandall was sitting.

"How did you kill her, Job? Did you hit her over the head, the way you hit me?"

The cords stood out like ropes in Crandall's neck. His eyeballs were suffused with blood. "I hit her," he said. "I didn't know I was going to. She said something, and I hit her. I didn't hit you, Vick. I've never hit anyone before." His chin lifted and turned. He was beginning to tremble uncontrollably. Vickers slapped him, not very hard, on both cheeks.

"Stop that," he said. "We haven't any time for fits. What did Harriet say?"

"She couldn't have seen it. I was all alone on the terrace..."

"She couldn't have seen what?"

"I didn't go down to the beach. She was lying."

"And so are you." Vickers' tone was gentle, almost friendly. "You've committed a murder, Job. You know what they do to murderers in this state. They take you into a little room with a heavy door, and they strap you into a big chair, and they go away and leave you. I suppose it's quite comfortable until the gas begins to get strong. There's a window in the wall. They stand outside and watch you, and there's a man with a stopwatch. The dial numbers it in seconds. But I wonder

how long it seems to you."

He leaned forward. He took Crandall's jaw between his thumb and fingers and held it steady and looked deep into Crandall's eyes.

"It doesn't matter now, Job. You might as well tell the truth."

Crandall didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. "That's what I mean, Vick. It doesn't matter now." He drew a long breath. "I didn't try to kill you, Vick. I don't know who did. And I haven't touched your wife. Not because I haven't wanted to. Because she wouldn't let me."

He reached up and put his hand on Vickers' chest. "Please," he said. "Let me see her."

Vickers turned away. "All right," he said. He took a cigarette from a box on the table. His face was hidden from Crandall. It was very intent, alert. "There's no need to see her alone." He flicked the lighter into flame and breathed out a long feather of smoke. "I know what you're going to say."

He heard the silence behind him. It was the sort of silence that can be heard. Presently Job said, "You couldn't know."

Vickers shrugged. He did not turn around. The shrug was the only casual thing about him. "It's quite obvious, isn't it?"

"But you weren't there. You couldn't have..."

"I hadn't come into the house yet. I saw you. You were alone on the terrace."

"Then you saw her?"

"Who--Harriet?"

"Don't play with me! You know who I mean."

"Of course I saw her."

Crandall's voice dropped. The tone changed and softened. "Then you've known all along."

Vickers nodded.

"I guess," Crandall said, "you really do love her, then."

Vickers stood for a moment without moving. The lines in his face were drawn suddenly very deep. At the end of the room the white louver doors that closed off the dining room were opened. Angie came in. She wore loose satin trousers that matched her black hair, and a gold lame top that matched her eyes. She looked from Vickers to Job Crandall and back again. She said, with hardly any voice at all, "What are you both talking about?"

Crandall got up. He went and stood in front of her, and over his shoulder Angie watched Vickers, who had not stirred. His eyes were on her face. They were unreadable. There was nothing in them to be read.

Crandall said, "Are you all right, Angie?"

"Of course." She did not look away from Vickers.

"Harriet's dead, Angie. I killed her."

"I heard." For the first time she looked at Crandall. She caught his hands. "Oh Job, what a horrible thing! If only you hadn't..."

"It wasn't because of what she said, or what she threatened to do."

Crandall talked rapidly, like a man who has not much time. "I mean, I don't think she could have hurt you, not really, and I couldn't have killed her anyway, if I'd stopped to think even that far. I didn't do it because of you, Angie. Remember that. It was just--herself. But it's done now and I can't do the kids any more harm, and they can only kill me once, and so I'm going to say I did for Harry, too."

Angie backed off a little. "Job..."

"I want to do it, Angie. Murder's wrong, but I know you didn't murder him, not the way they mean it.

You haven't it in you to do that. I know you killed him because you had to. He was drunk that night, and upset, and he was crazy for you. You didn't even mean to kill him, I know. You just hit him, and--" He stopped. "The way I hit Harriet."

Angie was staring at Vickers again, and Vickers had not moved. He seemed completely detached, just a man watching some other people talk. Angie said again, "Job..."

He rushed on. "All those things would be hard to prove. They'd take you into court and say horrible things about you." He caught her by the shoulders. "You will let me do this. You can see that it doesn't matter. I want to do it. It'll make me feel better about--the other. I wanted you to know, so you wouldn't say anything, so you wouldn't try to save me. You understand, now?"

She put her hands on his shoulders. "Job," she said. She spoke very slowly and distinctly. "Job, what makes you think I killed Harry?"

He looked at her blankly. "But I saw you. I was on the terrace, trying to find you, and I saw you down on the landing. I saw your black hair and the light dress you wore. Harry was with you. I didn't know it was Harry

then. I saw him sort of crumpling up, and I heard something heavy fall onto the wood, and then you tried to catch him and he went partly off into the water. You bent over him and then finally you straightened up and Harry wasn't there any more. I heard my wife yelling for me, and I went inside. I didn't want anyone out there. Especially Harriet."

He pulled her closer into his arms. "It's all right, now, darling. You don't have to worry. Vick said..."

"Yes," said Angie. "I heard what Vick said."

Crandall let her go. He walked across the room and up the steps to the hall. He paused in the archway.

"Well," he said. "Good night."

He turned and went away. The only person who watched him go was Joan Merrill. She had come, like Angie, from the darkened room beyond the louver doors. She stood quite still and watched Job Crandall go. Her pale-gold hair gleamed almost white in the lamplight. It was no whiter than her face.

Outside, Crandall got into his car and drove away down the hill. In the darkness, eyes watched him.

They were Brownie's eyes. Brownie lay on his side in the bushes. There was a gag in his mouth. His hands and feet were tied together skillfully behind his back. He was not comfortable, and there was an ant walking around the edge of his ear. He watched the taillight of Crandall's car vanish down the hill.

His chin had stopped bleeding, but his tongue, exploring the gap where two teeth were missing, tasted the fresh sweetish liquid. He had found that you cannot spit with a gag in your mouth. He

swallowed instead, and prayed that he would not be sick.

Chapter Fourteen

THE CLOSING OF THE door on Job Crandall's heels left a silence in the living room. The lamps burned pleasantly. The chairs were deep and inviting. Coolin and Molly sprawled on the hearthrug and there were books to be read and cigarettes to be smoked. A nice room. A homely room. But the silence was there. It was quite dead. It lay there, and nobody touched it.

Vickers moved. He sat on the edge of the table and caught Joan Merrill's eye, and lifted his chin at her.

The gesture said, "Out." Joan opened her mouth to speak. She got a clearer view of Vickers, and closed it again. She went back into the dining room. The white doors swung shut behind her.

Vickers sat on the edge of the table and looked at Angie. His brow made two cold arches. He said nothing.

Angie shrugged. "Well," she said, "that seems to settle the matter."

Her words sounded very loud. She went over to the fireplace and leaned on the mantel. There was no fire. The hounds gazed up at her adoringly. Vickers could see only half of her face, the warm brown curve of a cheek.

Angie said, "We'll have to stop Job, of course."

"Let's worry about Job later." He watched her a moment. "Well? Aren't you going to say anything?"

"That would be rather silly, wouldn't it?"

"I don't know." Vickers got up. He went to her and pulled her around facing him. He put one arm across the small of her back, bracing her to him. He slid the other hand up along her neck and knotted his fingers in her hair at the base of her skull. He drew her head back slowly. She did not whimper. She looked up at him, and her eyes were hot and there was a shadow of fear in them. Only a shadow.

He said softly, "I'm not the police, nor a court of law. I'm your husband. I'm more than that, because I love you. I don't give a damn whether you killed Harry Bryce or not. I only want to know that you're not lying to me."

He held her, and she did not move nor try to break away.

"I did not kill Harry Bryce," she said. "I was not the woman Job saw."

"All right," said Vickers.

He bent and kissed her throat. It was beautiful, the cords shaped in smooth strength against the backward pull of his hand. He released it, and as she straightened he met her mouth with his.

After a while he whispered, "I trust you, darling. If I ever find I've been wrong, God help you."

He felt her move against him as she laughed. "At least I know now that you didn't kill Harry."

"Bitch," he said, and kissed her again. "Poor old Job. I wonder who he did see."

"I don't know. I was in the cabana then, I guess. I wanted to give Harry plenty of time to clear out of the way. He wasn't behaving nicely at all. I didn't see any other woman on the beach at all that night. But then, I

wasn't watching."

"You didn't hear anything."

She shook her head. "I had the radio on. Sort of reflex action, I guess. I wasn't listening to it."

Vickers guided her over to the couch. They sat down. "A woman with black hair and a light dress," he said. "It was night, of course, and Job was drunk, but those are details you couldn't get confused on.

Might have been Jennie Bryce. Her hair is dark enough to look black."

"She was wearing a black dress. I particularly remember. It was cut clear down to her navel in front, and the skirt was so tight she could hardly walk."

Vickers laughed softly. "Do I detect a slight ring of jealousy behind that righteous virtue?"

She took a deep breath, threw her shoulders back, and grinned at him. "What do you think?"

Vickers got up. "Stop that," he said. "I've got to keep my mind on what we're doing." He went over and got cigarettes from the table. Angie, sobering very quickly, curled up in the corner and said quietly, "We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. We make cracks, and Job's on his way to..." She broke off, shaking her head. "Vick, I can't believe it. It just won't sink in."

"I know." He gave her a cigarette and held the light for her. "Poor devil. Can't say I blame him much."

"No," she said slowly, "but... Vick, you don't think they'll kill him, do

you? After all, it wasn't premeditated..." He sat down beside her and she leaned wearily into the angle of his shoulder. "Oh God, what a mess everything is in. How can so many things happen so quickly--and all of them bad!"

"Perhaps," said Vickers, "I should have stayed away. I don't seem to have brought anybody luck."

"Except me."

He looked down at her. "Do you really mean that?" She reached up and kissed him, the light sweet kiss of lovers who are also friends. Then she sighed and slipped back again, her head rolling in against him.

She was like an exhausted child.

"Will this ever be over, Vick? Can we ever just go back to being people again? I don't want to see another policeman as long as I live. I don't want to read another newspaper. And if anyone ever gives me a mystery story, I'll..." She shut her teeth on what she would do. Presently she made a small, rather peculiar sound. "I want to laugh, Vick," she said, "but it isn't really funny. It isn't funny at all. Don't let me laugh." He turned to her quickly. "Here, here, now," he said gently. "None of that. Darling, you can't fold up in the stretch."

"I won't," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Look, darling. We're going to get one thing cleared up very soon." He touched the scar on his forehead.

"It wasn't Harry Bryce who did this. And we know now it wasn't Job. He's willing to take on an extra murder--no reason to fight shy of one that didn't come off. So that leaves Bill Saul."

"I know," said Angie. "I've been afraid to think." She looked at Vickers with wide, shadowed eyes.

"There isn't going to be much left, is there?"

He shook his head somberly. "Harry, Job, and Bill. I can understand what's happened to Job, but I'm damned if I can see why anyone should want to kill Harry. Even his discarded loves never seemed to bear him any malice."

"It still looks," said Angie, "as though I'm the only logical choice." He didn't answer. After a minute she asked, "Do you think Bill will come?"

"He's in love with you," said Vickers. "He hasn't spoken to you, or had word of you for two or three days. He'd come for that alone. But he's got me, too, to think about. And if I won't come out where he can get at me, he'll have to come in."

"Let me call the police, Vick." She faced him earnestly. "Now that we know who it is, let me call the police."

"Not till he's actually in the house, Angie. I don't want him scared off. I want a confession from him, before witnesses—which is the precise and only reason why I had you get Joan Merrill up here.

Because your word alone might not be enough. I want this over with." He laughed, not very humorously, with a definite overtone of nerves. "Christ, I'm no man of iron! I don't like being shot at. I'm like you. I could use a little peace and quiet."

She said quietly, "He may kill you, Vick."

"I've learned a lot in four years," he said. His mouth was hard. He

turned suddenly to Angie. "You don't have to stay, you know. If you're frightened, if you just don't want to stay..."

She looked at him.

"All right," he said. "Only for God's sake keep out of sight. Don't fire that little popgun unless you have to, and Angie--darling--be careful where you shoot!"

She smiled shakily. "You don't sound very trustful."

"I'm not." He watched her for a moment. His eyes changed. He whispered, "We'll get this over with. All of it. Then we'll lock the doors on the whole world." He bent his head until his cheek touched her hair.

His hands found her breasts. "Darling," he whispered. "Darling."

"You're hurting me..."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No... Oh Vick, I've missed you so!"

"What about me?"

Coolin sprang to his feet with the beginning of a growl in his throat, and the doorbell chimed sweetly through the empty house.

Vickers got to his feet. Angie sat frozen for one brief moment. Then she rose and looked at Vickers, and he put his hand on her shoulder. He seemed, now, to be almost unaware of her presence.

"Go on," he said. "If that's Bill, wait until he's in here with me. Then go round the back way and call the police. Quick."

She nodded and went into the dining room and closed the doors tightly behind her. Joan Merrill was sitting in the dark. She put out her hand and Angie took it.

"Listen," she whispered. "Remember everything they say."

There was a little automatic lying on a side table, beside a bowl of flowers. Angie picked it up. Through the louvers she could watch Vickers crossing the living room. She could see him disappear into the hallway. She could hear, after a moment, the opening of the outer door, and Bill Saul's voice saying easily, "Hello, Vick. May I come in?"

Vickers said, "I suppose so. Though I can't recall having invited you." He closed the door. Saul walked ahead of him to the archway. He said, "That's all right. I know you didn't intend to be rude." He glanced into the living room. "Where's Angie?"

"She's not here."

Saul's pale eyes flickered. "Not here?"

"No."

"Where is she, then?"

Vickers shrugged. He went past Saul into the living room, without, however, quite turning his back. "We were getting ourselves pretty involved, emotionally. Angie wanted to go away for a day or two, and think. So Joan took her somewhere--over in the valley, I believe."

"When will she be back?"

"When she gets ready."

"And Trehearne didn't mind her vanishing?"

"He didn't seem to."

Saul smiled. He came into the living room. "So you've been all by yourself up here, sulking, and refusing to answer telephones. And you haven't even called your old pals up for some gin-rummy to lighten the solitude."

Vickers said, "No," with unmistakable rudeness. Saul's voice held an equally unmistakable amusement.

"You know something, Vick? I think you're lying."

Vickers gave him a lifted eyebrow. "It's of no particular interest to me what you think."

Saul said, "It's of interest to me what's happened to Angie."

Vickers sat down on the arm of the couch. He seemed bored rather than angry.

"Really, Bill! I don't mind your being in love with my wife. Half the men in town seem to be in love with her, and I can understand that. But I do resent everybody accusing me of having murdered her, or of being about to murder her, because of it. Do I seem to be that primitive?"

"That's just it, Vick. We're not quite sure."

Vickers got up. He went and stood in front of Bill Saul, quite close to him. Saul's hands hung relaxed at his sides. Vickers towered over him. He smiled. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to look around, if I may."

"You may not."

"Why?"

"Because this is my house and I will be goddamned if people can make free of it."

After a moment Saul shrugged. "All right, Vick. You're a big boy. You can take me anytime." He turned away. "Mind if I have a drink?"

"Help yourself."

Saul took a long time over pouring the drink. The cellar-ette was not too far from the dining room doors.

Vickers sat down on the arm of the couch again. He watched Saul, not with any particular intentness.

Saul's triangular, faun-like face was as blank as a dead-end wall. A gambler's face, unreadable. Presently he looked up at Vickers, and a faint cold light of anger began to gleam in his eyes. He held the glass in his hand, full and untouched.

"Still playing Jehovah, aren't you?" he said. "You've got a hell of a nerve." He walked toward Vickers.

His shoulders were dropped forward slightly, his weight light on the balls of his feet.

"You resent being accused of murder. But the other way round is all right. Since you came back, out of God knows where and cares less, you've accused me of it. You've accused Job. It was no good accusing Harry to his face, but you made that plain enough, too." He paused. He studied Vickers as though he were something not quite

human. "But you're resentful."

"Good old Bill," said Vickers. "You always were the only one with guts. Go on."

Saul nodded. "I'll go on. If you've done anything to Angie, I'll go on till I see you in hell." Vickers hit him.

Saul went down hard onto his back. The glass shot out of his hand and rolled across the carpet, leaving a long stain of liquor. The hounds, who had become increasingly nervous, came to their feet roaring.

Vickers spoke to them sharply. They subsided, growling. Bill Saul sat up. He shook his head and blinked, and ran the back of his hand across his mouth. He was not bleeding. He looked up at Vickers and said conversationally, "I'm beginning to resent you, Vick."

Vickers said, "I can believe that." He was standing beside Saul now. He didn't do anything, but something about his attitude, the way he was balanced, suggested that Saul had better remain seated. It was very quiet in the house, very quiet outside. There was no sound of sirens, even in the distance, nor any sound of cars on the hill. Vickers went on, "Apparently you all resented me."

"We had a right to. Let me ask you, Vick. Why did you keep us around?"

"Because you amused me."

"There's your answer."

"You didn't have to stay and take it. Only there was Angie, wasn't there? And Angie had all the virtues I lacked, in addition to just being

Angie. By the way, how did you do with her while I was gone?"

Saul said wryly, "I didn't." His eyes were narrow, malicious, very bright. "Given a little more time, or a certainty that you were dead..." He shrugged.

"Yes," said Vickers slowly. "That was stupid of you, Bill. You should have made sure."

"Oh. Now you've made a definite choice. It's me."

Vickers looked down at him. Bill Saul seemed to be comfortable on the floor. There was nothing even faintly indicative of worry about him. Vickers began suddenly to grow angry. He was more angry than he had ever been in his life. He wanted to beat Bill Saul to death and then tramp upon his face--not because of what Saul had done to him, but because Saul was making him look silly. He felt like a small boy in a tantrum. My God, he thought, I shall be throwing things and screaming, all because Bill isn't behaving like a killer.

He went away from Bill and sat down. "Get up," he said. "For heaven's sake, get up, get yourself a drink, and get me one, too." His head, abruptly, began to split. He took it in his hands and laughed. The laughter was rueful, but genuine.

"These things," he said, "should go smoothly. There's a certain pattern, a certain form. They start with the accusation, delivered in a concise and dramatic manner, and end with the confession, which is then followed by threats, or abject surrender, depending on the individual. This little scene has got awfully bitched up."

Saul handed him a healthy double shot. He got rid of it quickly and felt better. "Sit down." He leaned forward and looked steadily at Saul. "The hell of it is, Bill, I know you tried to kill me in Mexico. I have the

impulse to beat it out of you, but... The atmosphere is wrong, somehow." In Pepon's alley I could have done it, and laid your body with the rats. But not here. Not with Angie watching...

"Besides," he added, "I'm not sure beating would do any good, with you."

Saul shrugged. "It's been tried," he said. "By experts. Why do you think I tried to kill you?"

"I know it wasn't Harry, because somebody tried again, with a gun, after Harry was dead. I know now it wasn't Job. He was up here a little while ago, and he's in the clear, absolutely. That seems to put it right in your lap, Bill."

"That's the way you figure it."

Vickers said slowly, "I always thought it was you. You're the only one I could ever see having guts enough to hit a man with homicidal intent--even from the back."

There was not the briefest flicker of expression across Saul's face. He said, with a certain cold edge to his tone, "I may hit you, Vick, and it may be with homicidal intent, but it won't be from the back." He paused. "There's just one thing wrong with your logic. One factor you're leaving out."

"What's that?"

"You."

Vickers looked at Saul from between his hands. There was a bar of pain being pressed down between his temples. It weighed on his eyeballs and the bar was bright, and the shimmer spread out from it

so that he could not see very clearly. He said, "Explain that, will you?"

"You got knocked on the head. That much you know. The rest of it you've built up in your own mind. It wouldn't be hard to do. I've been hurt once or twice myself, and I know how your brain acts when it's full of fever. You had it rough for four years. That's stamped all over you. All right. It's natural to want revenge. And it's natural to hook onto something--or somebody--definite, so you can be sure of getting that revenge. We were the last people you remembered seeing. You knew us. You didn't know Jose Doakes, who saw a rich gringo wandering around with a king-size bun on and just couldn't resist the temptation. So we were it."

He got up, heading for the cellarette again. "Will you have another drink, Vick, while that's soaking in?"

Vickers was staring straight ahead of him, at the place where Bill Saul had been sitting. He did not seem to be aware that Saul had moved. There was a long pause before he said, "Yes. I'll have another drink."

Saul took the glass out of his hand and went to refill it. Vickers did not stir. He sat with his elbows on his knees and his hands holding his cracking skull together, and presently his eyes closed and a deep groove came between his brows. Bill Saul came back with Vickers' drink and put it down beside him.

Vickers opened his eyes. There was a queer expression in them. He got up and took the lapels of Saul's coat in his hands and held them in close, so that Saul's face was near his own. He examined it. Saul's mouth, for the first time, twitched nervously.

"I heard a voice," Vickers said. "I can still hear it. It said, 'Turn around, Vickers. I've waited a long time for this.' It said, 'I want to see your

face as you go down.' " "Imagination, Vick. Dreams."

"It spoke in English. It called me by name. It was no Mexican thief talking to me."

Small beads of sweat stood out along Saul's hairline. "Vick!" he said.

"It was your voice, Bill. It must have been."

His hands were large, with strong bones and a lacing of thick muscle. They were the hands of a stevedore, a laborer, a common seaman. They let go of the lapels of Bill Saul's coat and fastened around Bill Saul's neck. They tightened.

Saul's upper lip curled back. He seemed to be grinning, but there was no humor in it. He slid his right hand into his pocket.

The dining room doors opened. Angie's voice cried out. Vickers shivered. Saul's eyes moved until they could see Angie, coming toward Vickers. Saul's face relaxed. He took his hand out of his pocket. The veins in his forehead were swollen and his breath rasped painfully. Angie said, "Vick. Vick, what are you doing?"

She touched his wrist. She was quite calm, not in the least noisy or hysterical. Her face was dead white.

Vickers turned his head and looked at her. His grip loosened on Saul's throat. He frowned at Angie, and then he seemed to remember who she was. He let go of Bill Saul altogether. He stood for a moment looking from one to the other and then he turned away and leaned one hand on the back of the couch and stayed there. He was shaking.

Saul straightened his collar. He coughed a couple of times and finally

got his voice working.

"Angie," he said. "Where in the hell did you spring from?"

"In there." She nodded toward the dining room. "I'll explain about it later. Maybe you'd better go, Bill."

"Yeah. I think I get the set-up, though. Not so dumb, at that." He caught her by the shoulder, almost roughly. "What do you think about it? Did I...?" He jerked his head toward Vickers.

She said softly, "Bill, I don't know what to think!" For a moment it seemed she was going to cry.

Saul said, "Do you want to get out of here?"

"No." She looked at Vickers. "No, Bill. Thanks. I'll call you in the morning." She laughed. It was not a gay sound. "Quite a situation, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Isn't it." Saul went over to Vickers. "Vick."

Vickers raised his head slowly.

Saul said, "Will you do something? For your sake, for Angie's sake--for all of us. Will you go see a psychiatrist?"

Vickers did not answer. He turned away and sat down on the couch. Bill Saul went out. The front door closed behind him. The hounds paced and growled uneasily. There was still no sign of the police. Angie sat down beside Vickers.

"Baby..."

His eyes were strange and unseeing. He caught her wrist. "Am I

crazy? Have I just dreamed all this?"

"Darling. I..."

"If I dreamed it, then who shot at me? Who tried to kill me in the taxi? Or... did I dream that, too?"

He got up and went away from her. Presently he turned and said, "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Of course not, Vick. It could be like Bill says, and it wouldn't mean you were crazy. You've been through an awful lot. You could have made a mistake. Anybody could."

"I suppose so." He was still shaking. He put his hands in his pockets. They were cold.

Angie said, "In a way, wouldn't you be happier to know it was a mistake? That none of your friends was guilty of such an awful thing?"

He shook his head. "I have no friends, Angie. They're all yours." He drew a long unsteady breath. "I don't know." He came back to the couch and flung himself down beside her and put his head on her shoulder, his face pressed against her neck. She could feel his lips move. "I don't know...."

Joan Merrill came in from the dining room. She looked at Vickers with distaste, and spoke to Angie.

"I just thought I'd tell you. I didn't call the police."

Angie stared at her. "But, Joan! I sent you...."

"I know. But I didn't call them."

"Why not?"

She gestured impatiently. "Why cause any more trouble? We've had enough publicity as it is. I knew the whole thing was a lot of melodramatic tommyrot." Vickers had sat up. Joan looked him straight in the eye. "Just like you, Michael. An ordinary accident couldn't happen to you. To anybody else in the world, but not to Michael Vickers. With you it would have to be attempted murder, with a lot of fancy trimmings." She paused. "You don't need a psychiatrist, Michael. You just need a little sense."

She walked out. They sat watching her until she was out of sight, and they could hear her climbing the stairs. Vickers got up. He didn't go anywhere, or say anything. He just got up, and stayed there. Angie watched him. Her mouth moved uncertainly, but she did not speak. Her eyes were worried. They were a lot like Coolin's eyes, watching Vickers.

A little thread of sound crept in under the silence. At first nobody noticed it. Then Molly pricked up her ears and howled, tentatively, and Vickers said, "Quiet."

He bent his head, listening. "A siren," he said. "It's coming up the hill."

Chapter Fifteen



THE SIREN CONTINUED to come up the hill. It came into the drive and stopped. Vickers went into the hallway. He glanced up the stairs. Joan Merrill had come part way down again. Angie came after Vickers and put her hand on his arm. Nobody said anything. The hounds pushed their muzzles against the crack of the door and snuffled and growled. Vickers pushed them away and opened the door. There were three men outside. One was in uniform. He was from the Hollywood Sheriff's office. Two were in plain clothes. They were all policemen. One of the plainclothes men said politely, "We'll all wait inside. Trehearne will be along in a minute."

There was another man in uniform standing alongside the car in the drive. Joan Merrill came the rest of the way down the stairs. She took hold of Angie. Vickers said, "What do you want?"

The three men came inside. They were not belligerent. The man who had first spoken said again, "Trehearne is coming." He nodded toward the living room. Vickers looked from one to the other. He shrugged and put his arm around Angie. Joan shot him a quick, furious look and let go. She followed behind them as they went toward the living room. The three men followed her.

From somewhere outside, a faint hail reached them. It had a note of urgency in it. Everybody stopped. A look passed between the three men, and the uniformed policeman went quickly back to the door.

Outside, the man by the car began to run along the drive.

The plainclothes man again indicated the living room.

They went in. Vickers sat down, with Angie close beside him. Joan stood in the middle of the floor and looked at the strange men.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "What do you want?"

The man said monotonously, "Trehearne is coming. He'll tell you."

Vickers said, "Joan. Sit down."

Joan looked at Angie. Angie smiled. It was meant to be a reassuring smile. It was not. Joan sat down.

Coolin and Molly prowled about, sniffing at the strangers. They did not approve of the smell of them, and said so.

The second plainclothes man spoke for the first time. "Mister," he said, "will you for Chrissake call off those elephants. They make me nervous."

Vickers said, "I'm so sorry." He called the hounds. They came reluctantly and crouched down. The room became quiet. There was no further sound from outside. Nobody said anything. Vickers put his hand up to his forehead to stop the throbbing. Angie's hand was on his thigh. Her fingers bit into the flesh.

There came a distant murmur of voices from the drive.

Everybody leaned forward slightly, listening. The voices came closer. One of them was very loud, full of a large anger, and not articulated. There were footsteps. People scuffled heavily up to the door and through it into the hall. They came into the archway and stood looking down into the room.

One of the people was Joe Trehearne. His eyes were hot and angry. He was half supporting a man with a split chin and a raw pair of wrists and lips that were puffed out like slabs of liver. A man who was covered with dirt and dry leaves and a fair quantity of blood, which was not yet as dry as the leaves.

Trehearne said, "Vickers, did you do this?"

Vickers said, "Certainly not!" He got up. "Well, don't stand there like a fool, Trehearne. Bring the man in. Joan, will you get him a drink?"

Joan rose and went to the cellarette. Trehearne helped the man down the steps and into a chair. He was still glaring at Vickers.

"Brownie," he said, "is this the guy?"

Brownie shook his head. "Dunno." He took the glass Joan offered him, gulped down the whisky in it, yelped and went rigid as the stuff burned the cuts inside his mouth. Finally he shook his head again. He said to Trehearne plaintively, "Told you didn't see him." His words were barely formed.

Angie said, "Is there anything I can do?"

Trehearne glanced at her. "No. We're leaving right away." Brownie was fishing in his pockets for a handkerchief. Trehearne said to Vickers, "Who's been up here tonight?"

"Job Crandall. . ."

Brownie nodded. He could not seem to find his handkerchief.

"And Bill Saul."

Brownie said, "Saw him go. Musta come while I was out."

Vickers turned to Trehearne. "Who is he?"

"Don't you know?"

Vickers said patiently, "No. I don't know." He listened while Trehearne explained Brownie. "I hadn't noticed him. Maybe Bill slugged him, I wouldn't know. I certainly didn't. Now would you mind telling us what you're here for?"

Brownie shot suddenly to his feet. His eyes were amazed and wild, like one who has just had a firecracker exploded under him.

"Jesus Christ!" he howled. "I been robbed!"

There was a startled silence. Then one of the uniformed men burst into laughter, which was instantly hushed. Brownie turned red, then purple. He turned around, glaring from one to the other. Nobody laughed again, but they were obviously strangling on it. Trehearne pushed Brownie back into the chair again. He sighed wearily.

"Okay, Brownie," he said. "I know it isn't safe to be out after dark on these lonely roads. You weren't by any chance raped, were you?" He turned from Brownie, who was now between fury and tears, and spoke to Angie.

"You're under arrest, Mrs. Vickers," he said, "for the murder of Harold Bryce."

Angie stared at him. She did not, somehow, seem surprised, or even startled. Only her face seemed to have aged and grown thinner in the last few minutes. Vickers moved forward. There was an instant reaction on the part of the law. Vickers stopped. He glanced around

the room, then said to Trehearne, "You came well protected this time."

Trehearne shrugged. "These boys live too close to the studios. They like to do things in style. Besides, men sometimes object to having their wives arrested."

Joan said suddenly, "You can't take her."

"But I must."

Angie said, "Job. What...?"

"He turned himself in at the sheriff's office," Trehearne told her. "They got in touch with me at home, and I went over. We questioned Job a little on this Bryce confession. There were a few holes in his story, and he fell right through 'em. After that it was easy. Lushes don't make good liars. They can't think straight."

Vickers said, "I was afraid of that."

Trehearne's gaze held a black contempt. "Were you going to let him take the rap for her?"

Vickers moved a little closer. "You answer that yourself, Trehearne."

After a moment Trehearne said, "All right, I'll withdraw that."

"Thank you." Vickers' tone had ice on it, and in spite of himself, Trehearne flushed. Vickers went on. "I only hoped he could keep you away from Angie long enough to find out the truth."

"This looks like a pretty good substitute."

"It's still not true."

"Of course," Trehearne said, "the burden of proof rests with us. But this will do until something better comes along. Eye-witnesses do help."

"He was drunk."

"We'll have to let the jury worry about that." He turned, with that surprising hint of a bow. "Are you ready, Mrs. Vickers?"

"I --" She seemed a bit dazed. The words were slow in coming. "I guess so."

Trehearne said, "Will one of you get her coat, please?"

Joan said, "Wait." There was something curiously authoritative about her. She went up to Trehearne.

"You don't want Mrs. Vickers. You want me. I'm the woman he saw with Harry Bryce."

Angie began suddenly to blink back tears. Trehearne sighed.

"The woman had black hair, Mrs. Merrill." Joan put her hand up and ran it across the smooth light waves of her hair. "I had a black snood over it. A jersey one. It's shaped like a long bob. I can show it to you."

Angie said, "Darling, please, it's no use. You weren't even down there until the next morning."

"But I was. I..."

Vickers said, "You were in bed when I left here, Joan." His voice held a note of gentleness it had never had before in the nine years of Joan's employment.

Joan reached out to Trehearne. "I tell you I was there. You've got to believe me. I..."

He cut her short, with the utmost sympathy. "Look, Mrs. Merrill. I appreciate how you feel. But I've had one phony confession tonight. That's enough."

Vickers took Joan by the shoulders. "There's nothing you can do now, old girl." She was beginning to show symptoms of incipient hysteria. He attempted to guide her to a chair and she turned on him suddenly, clawing at his face. Her eyes blazed. They were quite empty of sense.

"Why don't you confess?" she said. Her voice was less a voice than a subhuman hissing. "Why don't you confess?"

Vickers caught her wrists. She had an amazing strength. She stood perfectly rigid, fighting his grip with her arms only.

"You killed him. Why don't you confess? Why don't you..."

Her legs gave out. She sank toward the floor, still looking up, her eyes burning, fixed on Vickers' face.

Her lips went on forming the words. No sound came. Vickers picked her up and laid her on the couch.

She did not seem to be breathing. Her jaws were clamped shut, and her skin had a dusky bluish tinge.

Angie took her hands. "Joan," she said. "Joan, baby..." Vickers had gone after brandy. Trehearne came to the couch and looked down at Joan. He smiled reassuringly into Angie's frightened eyes. Then he leaned over and dealt Joan a smart whack on the diaphragm. She

gasped, opened her mouth, and began to breathe.

Trehearne said, "My kids do that when they get mad. Used to scare hell out of my wife. She thought they were dying. Now she just swats 'em."

He smiled, but there was no humor in his eyes. He watched somberly while Vickers helped Joan to sip brandy. He said, for no apparent reason, "By the way, Harriet Crandall isn't dead. He gave her a hell of a beating, but she'll live."

Angie said, "That's good. Oh, that's good." She got up and stood uncertainly by Trehearne, watching Vickers. Joan rolled over with her back to the room and began to cry, quietly. Vickers straightened. He glanced at Trehearne, who nodded, and Vickers took Angie in his arms.

"It's all right, darling," he said softly. He smoothed her hair back and kissed her, tenderly, as though she were a small child frightened by some shadow. "Don't worry. Nothing is going to happen to you."

She whispered, "I didn't do it."

"Of course not." He gave her a last quick pressure, his hands strong and comforting on her shoulders.

"Now," he said. "Let's get your coat and go along."

Trehearne said quietly, "Not you, Vickers."

Vickers studied him, apparently deciding whether or not to make an issue of it, then went docilely to the hall closet and came back with a soft tweed coat, which he put around Angie's shoulders.

He said matter-of-factly, "I'll get hold of Sam right away. Now go

along, sweet, and don't worry."

She gave him a vague fleeting smile and went out with Trehearne and the other men. At the doorway Trehearne stopped and looked back. There was something slyly triumphant about him. Nothing overt, nothing you could put your finger on, but it was there. He nodded to Vickers.

"I'll be seeing you," he said, "old boy!"

He went out and closed the door. Vickers stood still in the hallway, listening to the low voices outside, and the starting of the car, and the going away of it down the drive. He put his hand out against the wall and closed his eyes. Coolin came and stood close against his thigh, and whimpered. Vickers shook his head, winced, and went again into the living room. Joan still had her back to the room. She seemed quiet.

Vickers got more brandy, and when he came back to her she was lying flat, looking up at him. Her face was tear-streaked and unfamiliar, crumpled with grief. "You let them take her," she said. He held out the brandy. "This will help." She made no move to take it. Her eyes were steady, dark and terribly accusing.

"You let them take her."

"Joan," he said. "Please."

"Why did you come back, Michael? Why couldn't you have been really dead?" Her voice had the flat monotony of exhaustion. "You've brought nothing but trouble."

He said quietly, "I haven't meant to." He thrust the glass toward her. "Here, drink this. We've got to get busy."

She reached out and took the glass, slowly. She was still looking at him, but something about her, subtly, had changed. She had retreated from him. She had drawn her thoughts back within herself and pulled a curtain across them so that he should not see what they were.

He said, "I want to thank you for what you did." She dropped her eyes. "I might have known that no one would believe me."

Vickers knew suddenly that she was afraid of him. He got up and went over to the table for a cigarette.

He managed to watch her, obliquely, while she thought his back was turned. She did not touch the brandy. Instead, she hid the glass behind a bowl of flowers on the end table. When he turned around again she had risen and was coming toward him.

She said, "We had better go and call Sam." Vickers nodded. They went together to the den to telephone the lawyer.

Later, in her room upstairs, Joan Merrill placed a small suitcase open on the bed. From the darkest corner of the closet she pulled out the oyster-white housecoat she had worn on the night of Vickers' return. There were irregular brown stains on the front of the long skirt. Joan carefully avoided touching them as she folded the garment and laid it in the bag.

She went to the bureau and found a snood of soft black jersey, which she put on, covering her hair. She threw on a light coat, closed the bag, and turned off the lamp. In the darkness she went to the window and peered out, being careful not to move the curtains sharply.

Her room overlooked the rear terrace and the swimming pool. Vickers was there. He was walking up and down, his head bent, his

shoulders slack and bowed. He paused once to light a cigarette from the glowing end of another, then went on, trailing a white plume of smoke over his shoulder. The hounds slipped like gray shadows across the lawn, passed him, and were gone.

Joan Merrill left the window. She picked up the bag and went very quietly out of her room and down the stairs and out of the house by the front door. She tiptoed across the drive and then, when she was on the grass, she began to run, soundlessly, toward the gate.

She was in an agony of fear lest the hounds see her and bring Michael around. They did not. She slipped through the gate and walked rapidly along the curving street. A man watched her from the concealment of the heavy shrubbery. After she was out of sight he stepped out and began to follow her.

A second man, also concealed, yawned and scratched himself. He sat in the angle of a brick retaining wall, so that no one could approach him except from the front. His coat was wide open and the gun under his armpit was loose in the holster.

Vickers continued to walk up and down the terrace. He knew vaguely that it was dark and quite cold and that he should go in and get a coat. He did not go in and get a coat. His cigarette, burned down to a bare half inch, scorched his lips. He threw it away, took three turns of the terrace, and stopped to light another one. The match made a bright yellow flare. From somewhere out in the night came a sharp bang.

It sounded like a rifle. The bullet that clipped past Vickers' left ear could have been a rifle bullet. Vickers blew out the match. He moved, just ahead of the second bang. The bullet this time went very wide.

Vickers began to run, out across the lawn. Outside the gate the

plainclothesmen jumped up. One of them signaled to the other and left his post. He entered Vickers' grounds, running toward the sound of the shots.

Vickers yelled for the hounds. For the first time he became acutely conscious of the fact that there was damned little cover on his rear slope. He passed the edge of the swimming pool. The water looked leaden, very still, very cold. The hounds came tearing up to him. He spoke to them, waved them on.

They shot ahead of him, toward the tangled line of shrubbery that linked the row of Lombardy poplars and marked the edge of his land. Beyond the shrubs and the poplars was a ravine. It dropped down about sixty feet on his side, and rose about half that distance on the other side to a hilltop that was still bare and wild.

Coolin and Molly vanished through the trees. Vickers wasn't far behind them. He plunged through the clawing bushes and paused a moment, squinting down into the pitch black ravine. He couldn't see anything. But he could hear--a confused soft flurry of movement, furtive yet intense; the panting of the hounds, eager and rather horrible; and an abrupt terrified squealing that might have been human and probably was. It stopped. Vickers smiled. He didn't say anything. The hounds knew their business. He began to scramble down the ravine wall with perilous speed. The plainclothesman had by this time reached the swimming pool and stopped.

Coolin was making little tender crooning sounds in his throat. Vickers followed them. He made out a shapeless blob of substance, went to it, and resolved out of it two shapes sitting upon and all but hiding a third. He struck a match and bent to examine the third shape. It looked back at him. It had a plump face.

It was breathing heavily and the fear of God was on it.

"Sessions," said Vickers.

The little man twitched. Coolin laid his nose gently against Sessions' cheek and struck an enquiring tenor note. The little man ceased to twitch. Vickers shook the match out carefully and sat down. His hand encountered the stock of a rifle where it had been dropped. He picked it up and laid it across his knees.

"I assume," he said, "that this is the second time you've had a shot at me."

Sessions did not answer.

"Coolin," said Vickers. "Let the man breathe." He tapped the animal's shoulder. Coolin withdrew from Sessions' chest and crouched instead beside him. He seemed to be very fond of Mr. Sessions. Molly lay across his legs, staring fixedly at his round plump middle, which was heaving up and down in an enticing fashion.

Sessions said, "All right. Yes."

"You hate me very much, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you, also, love Angie?"

"Don't be disgusting."

"I only wondered. I thought you might have killed Harry Bryce. Two birds with one stone."

"I was at home with my wife. The police have already checked that."

Vickers sighed. "What a good little man you are. Home with your wife. But next day you were trying to shoot me with a rifle from my own sporting goods section. Why? Has the virtuous little Mr. Sessions been doing tricks with account books, perhaps?"

Sessions didn't answer.

"How much have you got away with?"

Sessions didn't answer.

"Quite a lot, I imagine."

Sessions didn't answer.

"I hope so," said Vickers. "I've no patience with piddling crimes. If you're going to commit one, do it up right. Give it to charity, Sessions, and we'll forget about it--this time."

Sessions tried to answer, and couldn't.

Vickers said, "That isn't the reason you tried to kill me, though. Not really."

Sessions said uneasily, "Vick..."

"You've been top dog since I went away. You've been Michael Vickers, Incorporated. Not Mr.

Vickers' whipping boy, but the works. Rather a nice feeling. Made a man of you. Let the old ego sprout wings. I'll bet you haven't been insulted in four years. Power and freedom are pleasant things, aren't they, Sessions?"

"Yes, damn you," said Sessions. "Yes, they are."

"And you didn't want to lose them, and you didn't want me examining your books, because you knew I'd catch you." Up above, the plainclothesman began to thrash about in the bushes. .

Sessions said, "Go ahead, call him. Give me lip."

"Not this time."

"What?"

"Not this time. Because I know that in your place I would have done the same thing. Just thank God you're a rotten shot."

There was a silence. The plainclothesman began to shout. Vickers said, "I apologize, Sessions."

He leaned over and thrust the hounds aside. He lifted Sessions onto his feet. He indicated the hilltop across the way.

"Get out of here, the way you came. Good night, Sessions."

Sessions stood looking at him in the darkness. "Good night," he said finally. "Good night, Vick."

He turned and went away, quietly. Vickers stood where he was for a while. He was not paying any attention to Sessions. He had forgotten him completely.

He climbed back up the cliff and called the hounds wearily away from the plainclothesman, who was not in a good humor.

"What's going on here? Why the hell didn't you answer me?"

"I didn't think it was necessary. Your presence is quite gratuitous, you

know."

"What were you shooting at?"

Vickers glanced at the rifle he still carried., "I thought I saw a fox," he said. He went away, into the house.

He went into the study. The house was very quiet. He propped the rifle in a corner and poured himself a drink and sat down with it. He began to shiver, possibly because it was cold, and he could not stop. He was thinking of the bullet hole in the taxi window, and his statement to Angie: Only one man would have any reason...

But another man had a reason. Not the right reason, but good enough.

Will you see a psychiatrist, Vick? For Angie's sake, will you see a psychiatrist? Will you see a psychiatrist see a psychiatrist see a psychiatrist... Vickers rose and locked the door of the den. He poured himself another drink and sat down again. He did not drink. He put the glass down and put his head in his hands.

Outside, the plainclothesman took up his post again.

Chapter Sixteen

JOE TREHEARNE examined the housecoat. It was early morning. There was a heavy fog outside his office windows, and the warning call of the foghorn down by the yacht harbor came faint and mournful through the nearer sounds of traffic. The pale fabric looked cold and dead in the gray light.

Joan Merrill sat erect and composed in a straight chair, watching him. She did not speak. Trehearne touched the brown stains very lightly with his finger. Then he flipped the annunciator switch and said a few words into it. Presently a man came in and took the housecoat away.

Trehearne sat down behind his desk. He left the annunciator open. "All right," he said gently. "Let's have it."

Without so much as shifting in her chair, Joan Merrill began to talk. Her voice sounded mechanical, as though she were a child in school reciting something she had memorized.

"Michael's return was a great shock to me. I knew that it was going to be much more of a shock to Angie. If he had sent word, if we had had any sort of warning... He should have known how cruel it was not to let us know. And when he forbade me to call Angie, I knew what he had in mind. He was hoping to catch her in some disloyalty, some indiscretion. He had left her for four years, without word, but he was hoping to find her guilty."

She stopped and took a long uneven breath. Trehearne was aware that the apparent calmness of her manner was as forced as it was false. He hoped that she could hang onto it. He disliked emotional demonstrations, not because they embarrassed or affected him, but

because the application of soothing-syrup and restoratives was such a stupid waste of time. He liked people who could say what they had to say and then go away quietly and collapse somewhere else. She was talking again.

She said, "It made me angry."

You wouldn't think she had it in her, Trehearne said to himself. She looks the perfect social factotum, sleek, efficient, and nothing inside her but skimmed milk. How you can be fooled. "I love Angie, and I know what sort of person she is, and I knew that all the gossip was just that. I knew that no man had touched her since Michael went away. I knew that she had stayed close to Harry and Job and Bill partly because they had been Michael's friends, and partly because she thought one of them might know what had really happened. But Michael never loved anyone but himself. He wouldn't know about things like that, or care. He'd only think of his own vanity, his own pride, the picture of himself in other people's minds. He wouldn't like being laughed at, or talked about. I didn't want it to be any worse than it had to be--his coming back. I thought Angie had a right to know.

"He stopped me phoning, and told me to go to bed. But I didn't. While he was in his room I got out of the house and took my car. The drive slopes downward from the garage. You don't have to start the engine if you don't want to. I didn't. I somehow didn't want him to know I'd gone. I think I was afraid he could run out and stop me. I don't know. I was upset, and Michael--well, it was like having a ghost in the house.

"I don't know how long it took me to get to the beach. I went the long way, I know, because it's a light, well-traveled road, and the short cut is across the flats. It's dark and lonely, and I've never dared to drive it alone. And I'm not a fast driver. I was in rather a bad smash once, and I've never quite got over it."

Trehearne interrupted quietly. "What you mean is that if Vickers took the short road and drove fast, he could have got there well ahead of you."

"Yes. Yes, he could have done, I know. It seemed hours before I got there. When I did, I saw the lights in the cabana and decided to go down there before I went to the house. I knew that Angie went down there a lot to get away from people she didn't like, and from the look of the party, I didn't think she would be enjoying herself. I hoped she'd be there, alone. So I went on down and crossed the beach. I had on that housecoat--I hadn't even thought of a wrap, the night was warm--and this." She touched the soft jersey draped over her head. "I wear something like this driving, to keep my hair in place.

"I passed the landing. I heard a sound, a strange sort of grunting. I wasn't frightened. The people up in the house were shrieking like idiots. When there's a party like that going on, you're apt to find anything. I supposed some drunk was being sick. Then I saw the shape of a man, lying in heavy shadow beside the storage locker. He seemed to be hurt. I was still not frightened. One doesn't expect violence. I went to him. It was Harry."

She stopped again. Trehearne watched the increasingly nervous motions of her mouth and hands, and prayed. Delayed reaction, he thought. She probably didn't do anything when she found the guy--if she did find him--and has continued not to do anything since. Watch it hit her when she thinks about it again.

"I thought at first that he was merely drunk, that he had fallen and stunned himself. It would be the logical thing to think about Harry. Even when I saw that his face was bloody I only thought he had cut himself falling. I asked him if he was all right, and he took hold of me, and I knew he wanted to get up. My thought was to get him back to the house. I tried to help him up. I touched the back of his head."

Look out--here it comes. Trehearne leaned forward slightly. "I imagine," she said, "that I screamed. I don't remember precisely. If I did, it can't have been loud enough to penetrate the din they were making up at the house. At any rate, nobody heard me. But I knew then that Harry had been killed deliberately. I say 'had been,' because I knew he was dying, that he was dying right under my hand.

"He got to his feet. I don't know how. Maybe I lifted him. Something fell. It was heavy. It had been lying across some part of his body. A short iron bar. It fell between his feet. He was still half crouching, we both were, and I remember thinking that one of us was going to trip on the bar, and I moved it away.

Harry straightened up. I think he was trying to say something, but he couldn't. Suddenly he just fell and went over the edge into the water. I tried to hold him but he was too heavy. My hands were all bloody, there was blood on my skirt. The handkerchief in Harry's breast pocket was half pulled out when he slid over the rough edge of the landing. I took it. Harry's weight was pulling me in too. I had to let go--"

She was holding herself rigid now, breathing unevenly, speaking in short rapid jerks. But she was still, so to speak, all in one piece.

"I wiped my hands with the handkerchief. Then I remembered the bar. Fingerprints. I had touched it. I was beyond thinking clearly. I wiped off the bar and threw it as far as I could into the water. I weighted the handkerchief and threw that, too. Then I just turned and ran. I forgot about Angie. I forgot Michael. I only knew I wanted to get away and not be seen. I could feel Harry's blood still on me. My skirt was wet with it. It was still warm. The people in the house were shrieking and laughing. I wanted to go home. I was afraid. I was afraid they'd think I had killed him. And I was afraid of something else. Much more afraid."

It was a long pause this time. Her eyes were seeing things, remembering. They gave Trehearne the shivers.

"I was afraid of the murderer. If he had seen me with Harry... Perhaps he was close by, hiding.

Perhaps he thought Harry had told me his name. I wanted to get away. I ran back to my car and went straight home. I bathed and took sleeping tablets and went to bed. Even then, with the sleeping tablets, I dreamed."

She began to relax, to slump forward in the chair. Her voice was dull, and it came slowly now.

"I began to think no one had seen me. Then Job came, and I knew I would have to tell the truth sooner or later." She looked up at Trehearne. "You'll let Angie go now."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Merrill."

She straightened. "But..."

"In the first place, we have to check your story as far as possible. In the second place, even though your story is true--and I think it is--as far as it goes--it does not clear Mrs. Vickers. The actual killer is still unidentified."

Joan got up. "How can you be so stupid?" Trehearne didn't try to answer that one. Joan approached him.

"Angie didn't kill him. She couldn't kill anybody. I should think you'd know that just by looking at her.

Why don't you arrest Michael? You know he did it. Why don't you do

something about it? Why do you go on persecuting Angie?"

Trehearne got up. He moved away from her. "I can't arrest a man without evidence."

"You fool! What more evidence do you need? Of course Michael killed him. Who else would have had any reason to?"

"You, perhaps," Trehearne said. "To protect Angie, perhaps from a threat of blackmail, perhaps from what is politely known as intimacy with a man. You're very fond of Mrs. Vickers. Fond enough to do almost anything."

Joan's eyes narrowed. They blazed. "Just what are you trying to say?"

He shrugged. "Take it any way you want. From your attitude toward Vickers and your own ex-husband, you seem to have rather a low opinion of men. Not that there's necessarily anything wrong with that. I have a fairly low opinion of just people in general. Not because they commit crimes, but because they're either so damned stupid about it that catching them is no fun, or so damned clever that it gives me a headache figuring things out. Never just a happy medium." He bent over the annunciator. "You can send the matron in now."

Joan said, "Matron!"

"Yeah. We're holding you as a material witness, Mrs. Merrill. Also, there will be further questioning."

For a moment he didn't know whether she was going to faint or spring at him. Then she said, "All right. I don't care if you hold me. But you can't hold Angie. You only have her because of what Job said, and now you know he saw me instead of Angie. You can't hold her!"

"You would be surprised," Trehearne said, "what I can do.

I'll have to check your story very carefully before I release Mrs. Vickers. It may take me a long time. A very long time."

The matron came in. Nobody paid any attention to her.

Trehearne and Joan Merrill were still glaring at each other.

Trehearne said softly, "I can't solve this case on clues or evidence. I can't even check time. The only way I can solve it is by getting the truth out of all the people concerned--which I have not been getting from any one of them. I am going to get it, and I don't particularly care how I get it. And now if you'll excuse me, I have things to do."

The matron took Joan's arm. Joan didn't budge. She looked Trehearne up and down.

"You're like all men. None of you have any common sense or common decency. I can't think why you were ever created."

The matron, who was blonde, buxom, and still reasonably young, winked at Trehearne and said, "We could tell her!" She led Joan out and closed the door. Trehearne bent over the annunciator, listening.

Sounds of strife and general unease came over the speaker, followed by the matron's good-naturedly profane comment about dames that were always passing out. Trehearne nodded and grinned widely. He waited until the debris had been safely cleared away, then said into the transmitter, "Bob Doyle."

A voice said, "Yeah?"

"Send for Michael Vickers, for questioning. Then come in here and

start making noises like an assistant."

Trehearne closed the switch and sat down. Presently Bob Doyle came in. He was a good-looking, good-natured, very tough young man with the physique of a medium-heavy army tank. He was considerably lighter on his feet and much more maneuverable mentally. He made himself comfortable with his feet on the corner of Trehearne's desk.

He said, "Well?"

"What did you think of that?"

"It sounded good. How did it look?"

"Even better. She's telling the truth—as far as she's telling anything."

Doyle said, "Uh huh. Of course you know one thing."

"What?"

"You can't hold the Vickers dame. You can stall for a while, maybe, on the grounds that you're still questioning her, but it won't work very long. Sam Leiber went hightailing it up to the Vickers' place last night, and he's the best lawyer in town. He'll have her out of here before noon. And you haven't got a goddamn thing to go to the D.A. with. You ask for an indictment, and he'll throw you right out on your can."

Trehearne sighed. "How right you are." He got up and went over to the window, to look out at the drifting mist. He yawned. His eyes were bloodshot and he had not shaved.

"I've put that gorgeous black-haired babe over the jumps," he said. "I've questioned her up, down, and sideways. And I've found out two things. She didn't kill Harry Bryce, and she loves her husband. I'll bet

my next week's pay on it."

Doyle examined Trehearne with a certain quizzical amusement. "You mean because she talks so straight, or because she looks so curved?"

"If I weren't so sleepy," Trehearne said, "I'd come over there and beat your ears down. I'm not through with her yet. Lawyers or no lawyers, I'm not through. Likewise that Merrill character. She's got potentialities."

"You can have 'em," said Doyle. "I'll take the pigeon."

"You ought to take something for that," said Trehearne sourly. "All you think of is sex."

Doyle grinned. "Naturally. Can't you remember before you were old and married?" He listened while Trehearne made a few observations. He sighed and shook his head. "And you have such a sweet face,"

he said.

"Forget my face. Forget women, as such. Just concentrate quietly on murder, its causes and effects. It's quite possible that Merrill lowered the boom on Harry himself."

"Motive?"

"She's in love with the girl herself."

"Oh-oh!" said Doyle. "Not one of those!"

"Call it that. Call it mother-love, or just plain old unselfish devotion--if devotion is ever unselfish, which you'll have to prove to me. Call it any

damn thing you like. Fact remains, she doesn't want anybody messing about with her little Angie. Not even Angie's husband."

He leaned his back against the wall and lighted a cigarette. He winced.

"Christ, my lips are sore! Smoking too much. You remember Bryce's widow said he'd been hanging around Angie too much, and Angie admitted that herself. Said she wished he'd go away. All right. But he was there, and maybe somebody thought he was moving in too solid with the gal. Maybe that somebody was Joan. She had a husband who was just too much man for her to handle, and she doesn't approve of sex, in the usual sense. Also, she's jealous as hell. If Joan Merrill had happened to bump into Harry, and Harry was pretty drunk and bent on rape, little Joanie would have brained him and never turned a hair."

Doyle thought that over, and grinned. "You think she'd think she had to protect Angie? Mrs. V. looks to me like a gal who could handle herself in the clinches."

"There are times when no woman can handle herself, if the guy really means business." Trehearne yawned until his jaws cracked. "Besides, horrible thought, maybe Angie wasn't going to fight too hard for her virtue. Four years is a long time."

He sat down. "The trouble is," he said plaintively, "the same motive is just as good for a couple of guys named Vickers and Saul. Crandall's out, of course. He's tried hard enough, but he can't seem to rack up anything worse against himself than assault with intent to kill." He considered a moment, returning to an earlier train of thought. "The blackmail angle is only good, of course, if Angie had something to do with Vickers getting conked in Mexico and Bryce was the guy who did it. For my money she didn't, and she says he didn't either.

However, we will hold the thought." He put his feet up on the desk. He said disconsolately, "So, here we are, right back where we started from. Suspects fall in every time you open the door, but they slip like water through your fingers. It's all very sad."

"You're getting paid for it," said Doyle. "What happens now?"

"I do a little more questioning, and I let them go."

"Then what?"

"You really want to know?" said Joe Trehearne. "All right, I'll tell you. Somebody will get killed." His voice held a great bitterness. "This thing isn't finished yet. No matter who killed Harry Bryce, his death didn't solve anything. I'll lay you six, two, and even it was Vickers who conked him, but it was still just a curtain raiser. So I will let go all these nice people who are telling the truth, or maybe only part of the truth, or maybe none of it at all. I will sit back, regretting the polite, sweet laws that prevent me from getting the truth out of people, and the social set-up that makes it possible for rich important bastards like Vickers to prevent me from getting around the laws that prevent me. And I will watch while somebody else gets killed, and the public will call me a corrupt and blundering incompetent because I didn't prevent the crime, and the Department will take my pants down and cane me soundly, and after that, by Jesus, I will make an arrest and somebody will go to the gas chamber."

He smiled vaguely at Doyle. He did not really see him. "Yes," he said softly. "A guy can't be lucky like that again. There was a reason for Vickers driving everybody but his wife away--more reason than that crap about having to be alone to talk. The reason, whatever it is, is still here. Nothing's changed.

Something was scheduled to happen up there last night, when

Brownie was slugged. That's why he was slugged, so he wouldn't interfere. Maybe it was Vickers used the brass knucks. Maybe it was Saul. But stealing Brownie's wallet was just to make it look good."

Doyle said quietly, "From what I hear, you were kind of rough on Brownie."

"He shouldn't have let himself be caught. Besides, I wanted the guy to think he'd got away with it, so maybe he'd try again." Trehearne took his feet off the desk. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands as loose and relaxed as his face. He seemed tired, and bored, and deeply, very deeply, annoyed.

"That house," he said, "is going to be watched. All those people are going to be watched. I'm going to make it as tough for them as I can. They're not dumb. They'll know it. I'm going to make 'em work. By Jesus, I'm going to make 'em sweat, figuring out what they've got to do. But they'll go ahead and do it.

They can't wait. This isn't murder for profit, or convenience. It isn't cold-blooded. It's hot, and it's violent, and that kind of murder won't wait."

Chapter Seventeen

THE CAB PULLED TO a stop in front of the house on the hill. Michael Vickers got out. The cabby handed him a parcel, accepted a bill, said good night, and drove away. There were no bullet holes in the rear windows. It was dark, the soft incomplete darkness of early evening, and it was quiet on the hill, and very peaceful. Vickers mounted the steps.

The door opened. Angie came out and took his arm closely in hers. She said, "How are you, darling?"

"Fine. Trehearne behaved himself admirably. I think it pained him, but he did. When did they let you go?"

"Around two o'clock." They were in the hall now. Angie closed the door. Coolin and Molly came from the direction of the kitchen and descended upon Vickers with passionate delight. The tangled mass of hounds and people made its way toward the living room. In the archway, Vickers stopped.

After a moment he said, "Hello, Bill." There was neither welcome nor distaste in his voice. Joan Merrill sat in a corner, knitting. She looked up, but she did not speak.

Bill Saul, who was comfortably settled with a tall drink, studied Vickers and grinned.

"They're getting better and better with the rubber hose," he said. "It doesn't show on you at all."

Vickers laughed shortly. "It shows on Trehearne. He's-getting as tired of me as I am of him." He came into the room and dumped the parcel

on a chair. "He now knows everything about me except what he wants to know."

"Which is?"

"Whether or not I killed Harry. Or rather, how to prove I killed him. I know he's convinced I did."

Vickers swung around suddenly and took both of Angie's hands in his. He held her off and looked at her, then drew her in to him. "How are you, Angie?"

"Tired." She smiled. "And relieved." Her face was without color, pinched and drawn with weariness. But she was beautiful. Vickers 'thought he had never seen anything so beautiful as she was then. He kissed her.

"How did they treat you? Were they all right?"

She shrugged. "They were just trying to find out about Harry. It's their job. Yes, they were all right." She seemed not to want to think about it. She touched the parcel. "What on earth is this?"

"Oh." He pulled the wrapping open. "There's an inventory somewhere. One man's suit, gray. One shirt, white. One pair men's shoes, Oxfords, black. And so on. These things have been put through every test known to human science and have been found pure. No blood. I know Trehearne was horribly disappointed."

Over in her corner, Joan Merrill's knitting needles broke rhythm, slowed, and came to a stop. She did not look up. After a while she began to knit again.

Angie said to Vickers, "I know I shan't want to wear my things ever

again." She shuddered and turned away. "Will you have a drink?"

"Definitely. You ready for another, Bill?"

"Thanks." Saul handed his glass to Angie, then looked at Vickers. His eyes smiled, but the smile was barbed with malice. Vickers thought, He's always got a private joke. One with a sting in it. Is he laughing at me, or at himself, or just at a little thing called creation? I suppose he'll look like that when he dies.

Saul said, "Your little wife has your welfare at heart, and no fooling. I've had to hold both her hands to keep her quiet."

Vickers nodded pleasantly. "Thank you, Bill. It's always nice to know that some strong capable man has one's wife's welfare at heart. Have they been questioning you any further, Bill?"

"Oh, sure. A character named Doyle has been hanging around my place. I think he's on the make for Peggy. Thanks, Gorgeous." He accepted his refilled glass from Angie, and then watched her and Vickers sit down together on the couch. "Ah, me. A touching sight. Joan, I ask you. Don't they look like an ad for the benefits of marriage?"

Joan glanced up, briefly. Very briefly. "Yes," she said. "Yes, they do." She gathered up her knitting. "I'm very tired. Unless you want something--" she was looking at Angie and no one else--"I'll go on upstairs."

Angie said, "Of course, dear. I don't know what we're going to do about eating, everything's so upset. I can bring you a tray..."

"I'm not the least bit hungry." Joan crossed the room and picked up the bundle of Vickers' clothes. "I'll lay these in your room, Michael."

"Don't bother with them. I'll take 'em up later."

"It's no trouble," she said, a trifle stiffly. She mounted the low steps to the hall.

"Joan."

She stopped and turned around. "Yes, Michael?"

He had risen and was standing uncertainly on the verge of doing or saying something. Joan remained quite still, hugging the bundle of clothing in her arms. Finally Vickers said, half curtly, "Thanks for getting Angie out of that."

She said quietly, "There's nothing to thank me for."

Vickers waited until she had reached the foot of the stairs before he spoiled her exit by saying frankly, "I know it. I was merely trying to be civil." She shot him one furious glance over her shoulder, and he bowed. "Good night, Joan." He sat down again and shook his head. "That isn't a sweater she's knitting.

That's a noose. She and Trehearne are going to fasten it on me together and tie it with a true lover's knot." He put his hand on Angie's knee. "Really, sweet, I know she's your bosom friend and all that. But she has been down there since early morning trying to talk me right into Death Row. I mean, there is a limit!"

Bill Saul said, "You don't have to tell us. We've been hearing it ever since the gals got out of clink. Sam Leiber and I formed a welcoming committee, since you were in conference, so to speak, and Sam finally told Joan she could get herself into trouble talking that way. Libel, or something."

Angie sighed. "Poor Joan. And she's only trying to help me." She looked pleadingly up at Vickers.

"Darling, you've every right to throw her out, but for my sake, will you be patient just a little while? I'll talk to her, try to straighten her out...."

He studied her, half sardonically amused at himself for listening to her. "And if she won't straighten?"

"Then I suppose she'll have to go."

Joan Merrill, bent in an attitude of listening over the newel post at the top of the stairs, heard Angie say that clearly enough. Her voice was unhappy, extremely so, but it was also decided. Joan's already pale face became dead white, and a stab of pain went through her. It started in the pit of her stomach and went up into her heart, so that she heard the rest of the conversation in the living room as a disconnected blur of words. She heard Vickers say that he would leave it to Angie to work out. She heard Bill Saul laugh, and tell Vickers he was certainly a changed man, because four years ago Joan would have been thrown to the dogs, literally, without a by-your-leave. She heard Vickers say quietly that Joan had been a good friend to Angie. By that time she had her breath again. She went slowly down the hall to Vickers' room. The voices downstairs became detached, far away from her. She was quite alone.

She went into Vickers' room and stood there, just beyond the door, holding the clumsy bundle of clothing and her knitting bag. She was not looking at anything in particular. She did not move. She was thinking, I shall be lonely. I shall be very lonely, without her.

Presently she walked over to the bed and put down the things she carried and began to lay the clothes out neatly. The shoes she examined closely, then went to the wardrobe and inspected the

shoes that were in it. She found a pair almost identical with the ones she held in her hand. These she took and placed in her knitting bag, returning the original pair to the tidy pile of clothing. Then she went out and continued down the hall to her own room, carrying the heavy knitting bag with the toes of Vickers' black Oxfords sticking out of it. There was no need to make sure first that the coast was clear. She could hear them below in the hall. Bill Saul was leaving.

He was saying, "Mind if I drop around occasionally? With Job and Harry gone, I haven't anybody left to play gin-rummy with."

Angie said, "What's wrong with Peggy?"

"She doesn't know a run from a hole in her stocking, and besides she can't count above two."

"And besides," said Angie, "you're getting a little bored with her."

"A little," said Bill. "Kee-rist! And she sticks to me like a friendly drunk. She won't even fight with me."

She just puts her head in my lap and goes to sleep. What can you do?"

Angie laughed. "Poor Bill. You just can't seem to find the right combination. What are you going to do when you run out of girls?"

"Is that possible?" he asked. His pale, clear eyes were studying Angie. There was a look in them. His mouth smiled and his voice was casual, but there was a look in his eyes. "I guess maybe it is, at that. And if that happens, Vick will sure as hell have to go back to Mexico." He glanced at Vickers and said plaintively, "I'm still damned if I can see why you had to come back at all."

"It was inconsiderate of me."

"Damn right it was. Another eight or ten years and I'd have got somewhere with this gal."

"So sorry," said Vickers. "I should have thought of that." Saul stepped out through the open door and Vickers leaned on the door jamb, his free arm sliding around Angie's waist. "Drop around any time, Bill."

Glad to have you."

Saul smiled. Light fell obliquely across his face, breaking it into sharp angular planes, a chiaroscuro Satan.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll do that." He did not move to go. He stood looking at Vickers, still smiling, an odd sort of half-forgotten smile that had no kindness in it. He said softly, "Do you still think this is fun, Vick? Are you enjoying yourself?"

Vickers relaxed against the door jamb. He said, "It all does have its elements of humor, don't you think?"

He tightened his arm around Angie's waist, drew her in against him until her body was moulded to the lazy curve of his own. There did not seem to be anything false or studied about the movement. Angie fitted there as though she belonged. Her lashes were lowered, her eyes and the expression of her face veiled in shadow. Vickers, too, was indistinct, standing with his back to the light, but Bill Saul could see that he, too, was smiling, and that it was a peculiarly merciless thing to be called a smile.

Vickers moved his hand up over Angie's breast, a deliberate, bold caress.

"Good night, Bill," he said.

Saul nodded and turned abruptly on his heel and went away. Vickers moved to go back inside, and Angie pulled herself away from him. She walked quickly down the hall, not far, then spun around and came back. He had closed the door and stood somberly watching her. Her cheeks were crimson, her eyes blazing. She slapped him, hard, across the face. Tears, slow and widely spaced, ran down her cheeks. They looked as hot as her eyes.

He caught her shoulders and said, almost roughly, "Don't you understand?"

"What do you think I am, Vick--another Peggy, to be pawed over anytime you feel like it? I thought you..."

"Listen to me." All his lazy self-sufficient ease was gone now. "Bill was lying last night. He had to be, or -- or I'm off my head. He came up here to do something. That man Trehearne brought in--I'll swear Bill hit him to get him out of the way. Then he changed his mind, because he knew that something was wrong. He played the whole thing off against me, so now if anything ever happens he's in the clear and I'm suspected of lunacy, and he's got you and Joan for witnesses." Angie was still rigid and angry between his hands. Her shoulder bones were cracking in his grip, but she was not going to complain. She said steadily, "What has that got to do with pawing me in front of Bill?"

"He wants you. Christ, he was practically raping you on the doorstep, the way he was looking at you.

You're the only reason he has for any of this. He's tried twice to kill me. He'll try again. He's got to, because he can't stand the thought of your being with me. It was all right as long as you were alone. But not

now. I wanted to bring it to his mind. I wanted to slap him in the face with it."

He let her go, suddenly, almost pushing her. "We've got to finish this," he said. "I don't care how it's done or what happens, as long as it's finished."

She studied him. She had not realized how tired he was. Her expression softened, turned grave.

"Yes," she said. "We are right back at the beginning." Weariness overcame her suddenly. Her body felt drained and hollow, her head like a great dull weight. She sank down on a chair.

"I'm afraid, Vick. What's going to happen? The police, and you and me and Bill, and poor Joan -- what's going to happen?"

He did not answer for a moment. He could not. He had to wait, until the pain in his head eased off enough so that he could see around it. Until the fear let go of his insides enough so that he could breathe.

He was hearing Bill Saul's voice saying, For your sake, for Angie's sake--will you see a psychiatrist? He heard Angie say, from a great distance, "Vick, are you all right?" He felt her hand on his arm. He reached out blindly and caught her to him, and the fear went away and the pain didn't matter any more because there was something born in him that was much greater than either one of them. It was not love.

It was not passion. It was anger. Sheer, simple, primitive, murderous anger.

He whispered, "Someone has done this to me. And by Christ, I'm going to get him."

Upstairs in her room, with the door locked, Joan Merrill carefully pricked the fourth finger of her left hand with a needle she had sterilized by holding it in the flame of a match. She laid the needle down and kneaded the finger until the blood began to flow steadily. The black Oxfords she had taken from Vickers' room were laid on a newspaper on the floor. Standing erect, she held her hand over them and let the blood splash on the tips of them. It glistened darkly against the black polish. Just a little blood. Only a drop or two. She was careful not to get any inside the shoes.

Wrapping a bit of cotton tightly around her finger, she took a linen handkerchief and wiped the blood off of the shoes, after giving it a few minutes to sink in. Then she put the shoes in the back of her closet, with the newspaper wrapped around them. The handkerchief she hid where it would be safe until she could get rid of it for good. Then she went to bed.

The next morning she got out the shoes again and polished them carefully all over with black polish, and put them in the sun to dry.

Chapter Eighteen

THE MORNING PASSED quietly. It was one of those times when there seemed to be nothing to do and even less to say. Joan spent most of the time in her room. She gave no sign that she had overheard any of the conversation the night before. She merely said that she was tired and overwrought, and wished to rest. Angie and Vickers got a late, slow breakfast and then went down by the pool and stretched out in long chairs and lay in the sun.

Vickers had a peculiar feeling of relaxation and emptiness. It was almost a feeling of peace. He lay in the sun, half drowsing, and there was no sense of time, no urge to be and think and do. He puzzled over this condition. He tried to drive his mind to grapple with the things that were going to decide his life, and Angie's life, and very probably somebody's death, and his mind reached out with the hands of a child. It picked up the thoughts of hate and murder like beach pebbles and let them fall again. It was concerned only with the motion of the turquoise water against the tiles.

He glanced at Angie. She lay close to him, her chair facing his. He looked at her brown legs and the lift of her breasts, and the deep blackness of her hair. Her eyes were closed, her mouth remote and soft and a little sad. Vickers had a swift strange feeling of distance, as though she were far away and completely unfamiliar. Once or twice before he had felt like that, in the last four years. It seemed that when life and its involvements with emotions and the personalities of other people became too complex, one retreated into oneself. One grasped at the all-important I, and everyone else was a stranger. The emotional lines broke down, and there was no communication. One sat safely wrapped up in one's own personal flesh and rested. Perhaps it was sheer self-preservation.

He wished that this were not so. He was amazed to find that he did not want to be separated from Angie.

He was even more amazed at the violence with which a thought burst into his conscious mind. She must have told the truth, she must love me, because, otherwise there is no one on God's earth who has told me the truth, or who has loved me. Me, as Michael Vickers. To Pepon and Amelita I was -- somebody else, and that was different. I can never go back to them. The implications of this thought struck him so harshly that he sprang up as though to escape some physical threat. He moved so abruptly that Angie started awake, half rising. He saw her eyes widen, searching for him, and he saw the deep fear in them, and heard his name on her lips. His psychic isolation was knocked suddenly to the four winds.

No one, he thought, could look like that and not mean it.

He smiled at her. "It's all right, darling. Just a bee about to sting me." She accepted the lie, still looking at him, still afraid, but relaxing a little, and he watched the relief come into her face. Relief for him, that he was safe, that nothing had happened. He stooped and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry I startled you. Lie down again, and rest." Her arms went around him, tight. Her face lifted to his, like the face of a child begging for comfort.

"Nothing can happen to us, Vick? Nothing can hurt us? Nothing can take you away from me again?"

"No," he said. "Of course not."

Her mouth was warm, infinitely tender. She lay back again, still holding to his hand, and she smiled, but he knew that she was still afraid. And so was he, more afraid than he had ever been in his life before.

Faintly from the house he heard the door chimes, and then somewhere around in front the hounds began to bay a welcome. His hand tightened on Angie's. For a moment neither of them moved. The chimes sounded again. Vickers said quietly, "I guess that's Bill. We'd better go in." It was Bill. He was alone, and his usual easy, acidly amiable self.

As he came in, he jerked his head backward toward the world beyond the Vickers' gate, and said, "I suppose you know the joint is crawling with cops."

"It doesn't surprise me," Vickers said. The three of them went into the living room. Upstairs, Joan Merrill's door opened.

"Just like the old days," said Bill, and sighed nostalgically. "I'd forgotten what it was like to have a shadow."

Angie said, "You, too, Bill?"

"Sure. A character in a broken-down heap that I'll bet could do ninety uphill if it had to. He thinks he's invisible. Well, maybe he would be to a law-abiding citizen."

Angie smiled. "But not to you."

"Well, of course, I've reformed. But even so, one remembers the teachings of one's youth, does one not?"

"Oh," said Vickers, "definitely, one does. Drinks all round?"

"Right," said Bill Saul, "and how about some three-handed gin?"

They played three-handed gin.

The afternoon wore on. Joan Merrill came into the living room and sat in a corner knitting. They had drinks, but no one got even remotely drunk. Bill Saul won consistently, but by small margins except where Angie was concerned. It was the usual pattern. Everything was normal. Nobody said anything or even looked anything out of the way. They did not mention the murder. They talked trivialities or concentrated on the cards, and everything was just as it had been four years ago, three good friends playing a round of gin and Joan knitting quietly in the corner, and the shadows outside getting slowly longer across a smooth green lawn.

Bill Saul went out to the kitchen for more ice.

Joan Merrill put down her knitting and went out also. Nobody asked her why, or where she was going.

Nobody noticed her at all. Angie turned to Vickers and whispered, "I can't stand this much longer."

There was a sudden hint of hysteria in her eyes. "Can't we do something? Can't we make him do something?"

"No." He took hold of her, speaking rapidly. "Hold on, old girl. We've got to. He's got to make the first move, in his own time." He closed his eyes and turned a grimace of pain into a wry grin. "And I hope it's soon, because I don't want to spend the rest of my life playing three-handed gin. Christ, it's given me a head!"

"Vick--" She started to speak, and then changed her mind, but he knew what she had been going to say.

"I hope," he said somberly, "we're not mistaken, because if it isn't Bin..." He did not finish. He reached out and began shuffling the cards.

Out in the kitchen Joan Merrill faced Bill Saul over a tray of ice cubes laid on the white table. Her voice was low and hurried.

"I've put a package in your car," she said. "When you leave here, take it straight to Trehearne. There's a note inside, explaining the whole thing to him. I can't take it myself. I can't even phone him. Michael keeps the den locked. You've simply got to do this for me."

Bill Saul stared at her. "Wait a minute," he said. "Let's have that again, a little slower."

Joan shot a look toward the door. She bent closer to Saul. "Listen. I've found evidence, proving Michael killed Harry. It's in your car. I can't leave here. I can't leave Angie alone, with him. You've got to take the package to Trehearne. Do you understand?"

Bill Saul nodded. "Sure," he said. "Sure, I understand." He picked up the tray of ice cubes. His eyes studied her, cold and clear and full of a cruel amusement. "You don't play for pennies, do you?" he said softly.

"I don't know what you mean," she answered stiffly. "Will you do that, Bill?"

"Sure." Again he nodded. "Sure, I'll do it."

She turned away, toward the door. Very gently, Bill Saul put down the ice tray.

The shadows were long and cool on the green lawn. Bill Saul stood by the front door, called good-by to those inside, and closed the door. Coolin and Molly escorted him to his car and then chased it noisily down the drive. A man concealed near the gate checked his watch and made a notation in a small book.

Farther down the hill, a rattle-trap car pulled unostentatiously from a dead-end side road and followed Saul's car down the hill. It followed, at a discreet distance, all the way to the Bay Cities Headquarters, and the driver of it watched Bill Saul go into the building with a parcel under his arm. A parcel the size of a pair of shoes, wrapped neatly in brown paper.

Michael Vickers was very comfortable. It was dark inside his head, and completely relaxed, and he did not wish to do anything to disturb the darkness and the relaxation. Therefore he tried to ignore the sound.

It was a loud, shrill sound, like a jagged streak of lightning. It had sharp edges. It jabbed him, and in spite of itself his brain stirred sluggishly.

The sound was repeated and became identified as a scream.

A pale gray blur appeared and began to seep through the nice calm darkness. As though the scream had tripped some trigger that set off a series of involuntary nervous explosions, he felt muscles twitching and grinding, and suddenly the focus was clear. His eyes were open, and they were looking at a hand.

It was not far away from him. It was spread out on some carpeting, and it had the handle of a poker under it. The rest of the poker stretched out away from the hand, and it was quite messy, having on it a mixture of soot and blood. It had spotted the carpet badly.

The hand moved, and he knew that it was his.

Vickers' heart stopped beating. For the space of a breath everything ceased, hung motionless. Then it all started again with a thundering jerk. Blood swept to his head. He leapt up, or thought he was going

to, and succeeded in floundering to his knees, balancing himself against the end of the couch. Sweat as cold as ice-water drenched him. He was suddenly half blind, everything obscured behind a weaving veil shot through with vicious flecks of brightness, but he could see enough.

He could see Joan Merrill. She lay not far away from him, and the back of her head was crushed in, and she was obviously dead.

He looked up. Angie was standing there. She had hold of the back of a chair. Her face was whiter than Joan's. Her eyes were huge and staring. He could hear her breathing. It was ragged, harsh, the breathing of an animal which is afraid. He knew that it was Angie who had screamed.

Her mouth formed words, loosely. She did not say them with a clear voice, like a woman. They had a terrible unfinished sound, as though they came from a throat not meant for speech. She said them over and over, rapidly, more rapidly, until they overlapped and became an indistinguishable babbling.

"You killed her you killed her you killed her..."

She let go of the chair suddenly and began to run, stumbling, bumping into things. She half fell on the steps, and scrambled on. He heard her shoes clattering across the hall, and then the front door was wrenched open, and she was gone. He turned his head toward the window and saw her running down the drive. He pulled himself to his feet.

Coolin came in through the open door. He came to the archway and stopped suddenly. He growled and bared his teeth and began to shiver. Abruptly he flung back his head and howled. Outside, Molly began to answer him.

Vickers tried to walk. Waves of nausea and giddiness assailed him. The pain in his head was frightening.

He fell to his hands and knees again and began to crawl toward the cellarette. He dropped the brandy decanter. Some of it spilled. He managed to pick it up and gulp the liquor. More of it spilled, this time on him. He dropped the decanter again. He put his hands against the wall and made himself stand erect. This time he did not fall.

Joan's face was white and pure and unstained. It had not even a look of fear, or pain. It was calm, and full of a mystic dignity. Only the open eyes spoiled it. They were dull and empty, like the eyes of an idiot.

Vickers bent and closed them.

Outside, Angie had reached the gate. She ran through it, blindly, and men stepped out of the dusk that filled the street. They caught her. After a moment one of them took her away and two others began to run back toward the house. They had guns in their hands.

Vickers turned and stumbled out through the dining room. He was filled with a curious lassitude. It made his feet drag and he could not judge distances accurately. He found a side door and went through it. The air was cool and it smelled of evening. Angie's car stood in the cement space in front of the garages. The keys were in it. Vickers climbed under the wheel. It took him a long time, several years, to start the motor and get the car in gear. The two men heard him and came fast around the corner of the house.

He let in the clutch and shot lurching toward them along the drive.

They fell aside, out of his way. He heard shots. A round hole came in the windscreen and something whanged nastily against metal

somewhere, but he was going fast. Very fast. The drive rushed past under his wheels. Dim shadowy shapes of trees and shrubs swept backward like streaming water. There was a white gate. It was open. There were people beyond it, quite a lot of them, men and women. More of them were coming out of the houses along the street. They scattered like quail from in front of him.

Somewhere there was another shot. Then he was at the end of the street and the hill dropped away under his wheels, and he was going down it like a falling star.

A car darted up at him. It was going to block his way. He set the horn to screaming with a hoarse wildness. He saw that the car was black and white, and on it there was a big red light blazing. Vickers did not want to be stopped. He had the center of the road. He held it. The red light rushed up toward him, nearer, very near, and the wind slid whining along his side windows, and the wheel between his hands fought to be free, and under him the car yawed and swung, and he kept on. He was not afraid. He did not hate the men behind the red light. It did not even particularly bother him when they began to shoot at him and there were two more holes in the windscreen. It was only that he did not wish to be stopped.

He was not stopped.

The red light swerved and vanished. There was a glancing crash of fenders. Glancing automatically at the rear-view mirror he saw the police car go caroming into a cutbank and tip lazily over onto its side. It made quite a lot of noise. It did not occur to Vickers to wonder whether anyone was hurt. He was hardly aware that there were men in the car. It was simply an obstacle. Now it was gone. The dark road fell clear before him.

Some instinctive control took over when he reached Sunset. He

drove east to Laurel Canyon, and he drove like a Christian. He had no trouble. He climbed the winding road to the turn-off and then up that, and stopped the car in front of Bill Saul's house. There were lights on, and a radio was playing inside.

Vickers got out of the car.

He took the gun out of his pocket. The gun he had carried since the day after Harry's death. He walked across the gravel drive and climbed the steps. He did not hurry. He tried the door. It was locked, and he rapped on it with the knuckles of his left hand. High heels tapped across the floor inside. He waited. He was not impatient. Peggy opened the door, and yawned. "Yes?" she said. "Is Bill here?"

"Sure. He's in the shower right now, but..." A delayed light dawned slowly. She smiled. "You're Michael Vickers."

"I'm Michael Vickers," he said. "I'll come in."

She held the door wider for him, and then she saw the gun. Her face became a caricature of a face, the mouth and eyes stretched idiotically, the skin turning a bleached yellow under the light tan. She looked upward from the gun into Vickers' face, into his eyes, and her throat opened to let out the waiting shriek.

Vickers hit her across the temple with the flat of the gun. She made no sound at all. He eased her fall with his free hand, more because she fell against him than because he cared how hard she fell, and then he pulled the door shut. He did not glance again at Peggy. She was not a person. She was like the car with the red light. He went back through the house.

There were two bedrooms, but he remembered which one was Bill's. He could hear the shower running.

He went softly into the bedroom. It was empty. A man's clothes lay in casual disorder across the tumbled bed. Vickers could hear Bill Saul moving about in the shower. The door was pulled half shut, screening off most of the bath. Vickers could see only part of the porcelain basin and a strip of mirror above it. He moved lightly toward the bed, making no sound. He bent over the clothes. With his free hand he picked up the cuffs of the shirt, and studied them. They were white and clean. He dropped the shirt and began to search the pockets of the suit. The water ran in the shower. Out in the living room the radio played softly.

There was no warning. There was no change of sound, no slightest shift in tempo, no indication of any kind. There was only the shot, through the crack of the bathroom door.

Vickers' gun dropped out of his hand. It struck the side of the bed and fell from there to the floor. For one stunned instant Vickers remained motionless, bending over the bed. He watched the blood start to pour out from under the cuff of his right sleeve. It dripped off his fingers with amazing swiftness, making spots of brilliant red on the rumpled white sheet. It was only a second. A split second. It was too long.

Vickers knew then that it had been too long the moment he entered the room.

The door to the bath was wide open now. Bill Saul stood there. He had a gun, which he held almost carelessly. His eyes were not careless. He was still wet from the shower. He had a towel knotted around his waist, and the water ran in little trickles down his body and his bare legs and made a damp track on the floor.

Vickers straightened. He did not try to pick up his gun. He did not seem to be afraid, nor even, particularly, in pain. His eyes had an odd

expression in them, or rather, a lack of it. They looked steadily at Bill Saul and his wet naked body and his gun.

"You were expecting me."

Saul said, "I've been expecting you since the day you came back." The muzzle of the automatic described a small tight arc. "Will you walk ahead of me, Vick? Into the living room. I'm going to call the police."

Vickers walked as far as the foot of the bed, and sat down on it. "No need to bother, Bill," he said.

"They'll be here, soon enough." He smiled at Saul. "They want me, you know. For murder."

The water ran briskly in the shower. Out in the living room, the radio played Chopin's Polonaise. Peggy slept.

Chapter Nineteen

BILL SAUL said, "Murder?"

Vickers nodded. He seemed surprised that Bill questioned him. "Of course."

Saul stood still in the doorway, waiting. Vickers said nothing more. There was a subtle air of malicious pleasure about him. It was not quite sane. Finally Saul said harshly, "Tell me."

"It's all rather hazy. I woke up with a poker in my hand. Joan was dead."

Saul's eyes narrowed. "So you killed Joan."

Vickers shook his head. "No." He studied Saul with that strange, shocking amusement. Not a muscle of Saul's poker face moved, but it began to change color, slowly. "Not Joan," Vickers said. "Angie." He added, as though it were not important, "You killed Joan."

He watched Saul's body stiffen, muscle by muscle, and draw forward into a half crouch. He watched a light come into Saul's pale eyes. Saul said, "You're lying. Why would you kill Angie?"

"I had a splitting headache," said Vickers, as though that explained everything. "She screamed at me, very loudly, which hurt my head, and then she said you were right, Bill, and that I was obviously quite mad, and I..." He shrugged. "Well, I still had the poker in my hand. I suppose it was to stop her screaming, as much as anything. Though she really shouldn't have said I was mad."

Saul said again, very slowly, very distinctly, "You're lying."

"Really, Bill! Why should I lie about a thing like that? Go and telephone, if you like. Check up." He leaned over and took hold of the footboard with his left hand. He looked suddenly faint. "When you come back, old boy, bring me a drink, will you? I feel rotten." He slid off the end of the bed and lay on the floor.

Bill Saul did not move. He watched Vickers. His muscles began to twitch like an animal's. Presently he went very carefully around Vickers and stooped and picked up his gun. Vickers did not move. Saul went back around him. Something had happened to Saul's face. It was no longer composed and without emotion. There was something terrible in it now. He looked down at Vickers again, and then at the door that led to the telephone. Vickers was quite still. Saul began to move toward the door. After the first step he went faster and faster until he was almost running. The radio and the hissing water in the shower stall covered any other sound. They covered the slight sound of Vickers getting to his feet with incredible swiftness. Saul sensed danger one split second too late. He tried to turn and fire, and he was fast, but he was off balance and he didn't quite make it. The shot missed.

Vickers hit him, low, with the point of his shoulder. He gathered Bill into his arms and the two of them went down. The impact wedged them both into the doorway. One gun went flying out of Saul's hand, out of reach. The other one, his own, he hung onto, but Vickers was on top of him in the narrow space of the doorway, and Vickers' left hand took hold of his wrist and held it. They lay there like that. They did not seem to move. Sweat broke out on Saul's face and he breathed harshly through his teeth, and after a while his arm relaxed and the gun dropped out of his hand, and Vickers picked it up.

"You did that for me, Bill," he said. "Four years at hard labor. You get strong, doing that." He stood up.

He threw the gun away, into a far corner of the room. He looked down at Bill Saul and smiled. "Get up," he said.

Saul got up. "Did you kill her, Vick? Did you kill her!"

"Make a guess, Bill. You've got an even chance to win."

Saul moved toward him. "By Christ," he whispered, "if you've..." He stopped. "No," he said. "You can't needle me that way."

Vickers shrugged. "Go on and telephone. Find out." Saul stood looking at him. The towel had come off.

He was quite naked now, his body balanced like a cat's, for action. The radio had left Chopin for Handel, a Tibbett recording, very quaint and restful. Peggy stirred by the front door, but did not waken.

Vickers looked into Bill Saul's eyes and said softly: "I haven't anything to lose, Bill. The way you've worked it out, I haven't a hope. I don't know whether I can make you talk, and I don't know whether any of it could be proven if you did. But I've got beyond the point where that is all-important. Way beyond it." He paused, then went on, as though he might have been talking about the probability of rain. "No," he said, "I didn't kill Angie. She's safe. But she thinks I killed Joan. She'll think now that I killed Harry. I can't expect her to think anything else. The most charitable view she can possibly take is that I'm mentally unsound, but it means the end of our marriage."

He paused again, studying Bill Saul, weighing him, measuring.

"You've done all this, Bill. You've done it to get Angie. I'm going to try and clear myself. I'm going to do my damndest to keep what belongs to me. But no matter what happens, there's one thing I can do. I can stop you taking what you want after I'm out of the way." He saw what

came into Saul's mind, and he smiled and shook his head. His voice was almost caressing. "I don't mean to kill you, Bill. You're far too important to me for that."

Bill Saul measured the distance between himself and escape. He gave that up. He listened for approaching sirens, and heard none. He looked Vickers up and down, weighing the bleeding wrist against the size and weight. A bitter light of humor flickered briefly across his face.

"Four years ago I could have taken you, Vick. I could have given you height and weight and still taken you, because your guts were just stuffed feathers. Now, I don't know." His breathing was deep and steady, his belly pulled in, his shoulders loose. He said, "I hope I can take you."

His eyes began to burn, deeply, with an ugly heat. All the indecision left his face, and the gambler's mask of blankness, and what was left was hate. His own personal, particular kind of hate, born of logic as much as emotion, and spiked with his own kind of laughter.

"You went down easy in Mexico, Vick."

"I was drugged."

"You're drugged now."

"I know it. But I can still see."

He was hampered by the bad arm. Saul got in quite a bit of damage at the start.

The radio moved from Handel to Strauss.

Vickers knelt on Saul's chest. He looked down into Saul's face. It was

not pretty. Neither was his own.

Saul's eyes glittered. He cursed Vickers, very softly, not wasting breath.

Vickers said, "You killed Harry."

"Yes."

"You killed Joan."

"Yes."

"Will you tell the police?"

"Christ, no!"

Vickers hit him carefully under the right eye. The cut that was already there split wider.

Bill Saul laughed. He said two words.

The radio turned from Strauss to Harry James.

Not very many seconds had ticked by on the clock.

Vickers dragged Bill Saul to a sitting position against the wall. He crawled over into the corner and picked up the gun he had thrown away and crawled back again. Saul was trying to stand up. Vickers half rose and knocked him down. He propped him against the wall again. Saul looked at him through the slit of one eye.

Vickers said, "You wanted my wife."

"Yes."

"You tried to kill me."

"Yes."

"Twice."

"Yes."

"Will you tell the police?"

Saul said two words.

Vickers laid his forefinger along the barrel of the gun. He drew the sights experimentally across Saul's cheek. He said, "You aren't going to have much of a face."

Harry James started on the "Two O'Clock Jump."

Vickers pulled Bill Saul into the bath. He pulled him by the hair. The shower was still running. The water was cold. It splashed glistening on the tiles and swirled energetically down the drain. Vickers pulled Bill Saul up to the shower stall and lifted his head and shoulders up over the sill and shoved him in until his face was under the spray. The water swirling around the drain top turned red.

Presently Saul began to jerk convulsively. Vickers hauled him out, onto the floor. He bent and studied Saul, as an artist studies a finished work, critically, turning Saul's head from side to side. Saul breathed heavily through his mouth. Vickers rose and walked unsteadily to the shelf by the window and took the shaving mirror carefully in his hands. He went back to Saul.

"Bill," he said. "Bill."

He took his finger and pushed Saul's eyelids open. Saul looked up at him.

Vickers held the shaving mirror over his face.

"Do you think it needs a bit more off on the side, Bill?"

He held the mirror steady. Bill Saul made a strange sound. His body tightened, then relaxed.

Vickers put the mirror down with great care. "By Jesus," he said. "He's fainted."

Out in the living room, Peggy stirred. Somebody was making a lot of noise. It was the police, breaking in.

Harry James started on "Holiday For Strings."

Twenty-one minutes had gone by on the clock.

Bill Saul lay on the bed. There was a blanket over him. Vickers held his left arm. A uniformed policeman held his right. Two other men held his feet. He struggled, but not very hard.

Trehearne stood at the foot of the bed. Beside him there was a young man in plain clothes, who had a notebook and pencil. The shower had been turned off. The radio had been turned off. Peggy had been taken outside.

Bill Saul whispered, "I want a doctor."

"Not yet," said Vickers. "Not yet."

The blind red thing on the pillow moved. A hoarse sound came out of it.

"You ought to be dead, Vick. I hit you hard enough. I'd have hit you again, only those goddamn drunken fools came."

Vickers said, "You wanted my wife."

"Damn right. She needed a man, not a stuffed shirt. Yeah. I wanted her." He began to struggle again. "I want a doctor."

"Not yet," said Vickers. "You killed Harry."

"Yeah. I saw you when you came in, Vick. I didn't believe it was you. I kept out of sight. Went around onto the terrace and looked in at you--I still didn't believe it, but there you were. I didn't want you back."

"No," said Vickers. "You wouldn't,"

"I went away and thought about it. How to get rid of you so that Angie'd hate you. How to get rid of your memory. I wanted to get rid of Harry, too. He was around her too much. She felt sorry for him.

When a woman gets pitiful, she gets soft. I knew he was with her then. Alone. Didn't take long to figure out."

He coughed over some blood that ran down his throat.

"I went down to the beach. I was lucky. Harry came out alone. He was drunk. Very drunk. I hit him, with a rough iron bar. No fingerprints, Vick. No way you could prove it wasn't you killed Harry, before you'd even gone to the house. Then a car came up on the drive. I had to run."

"Joan Merrill's car," said Trehearne. Vickers nodded. He held Saul's arm and said, "Not yet. There's Joan."

"She died easy," whispered Saul. "Not even a twitch. Let me go."

Trehearne said, "Let him go. I can fill that in myself."

They let him go.

Trehearne looked at Vickers. He said, "Well, you didn't have to go to all this trouble, Vickers. But I guess you had it coming to you, at that."

"What do you mean?"

"Saul is a very smart boy. He painted a beautiful picture. There was only one detail that was wrong. Joan did die easy. Much easier than he thought. He knocked her out in the kitchen. She must have had some warning of it. She was under great tension anyway, and the shock stopped her heart. With medical attention she'd have come round, but she didn't have any. She'd been dead over an hour when you were supposed to have killed her with the poker. Did you notice that she hadn't bled the way Bryce did, from the same type of wound?"

"My God," said Vickers.

Trehearne said, "Catch him, there. Isn't that goddamn ambulance here yet?"

Chapter Twenty

THEY SAT, OR RATHER, lay comfortably at full length in the long padded chairs by the pool. The butler brought a tray of tall cool glasses and went away again. Trehearne sipped drowsily and then glanced with a certain sardonic annoyance at Vickers.

"I'm disappointed," he said.

"And also," said Vickers, "your pride is touched."

"To the quick." Trehearne sighed. "And I had such a beautiful case against you."

"Circumstantial evidence," said Angie.

"Not with that last performance. I had everything. Fingerprints on the poker. Fingerprints on the bottle of chloral hydrate we found behind the flower bowl. Your visual testimony, Mrs. Vickers, which you volunteered."

Angie flushed painfully, and Vickers said, "My God, do you blame her? She wakes out of a drugged sleep and sees me,..."

"I don't blame her at all. I merely said it was helpful. Very. Then your wild escape down the hill."

Trehearne shivered. "Christ, you terrified me! I was in that police car, you know. We thought we were dead ducks. We didn't have the license number of your car, our radio was busted in the crash, and Mrs.

Vickers had passed out cold, so we were a trifle delayed in finding

you. You got quite a lot done in that time."

"I had four years to make up for," Vickers said.

Angie said, "Just what did you do to Bill?"

"Darling," said Vickers gently, "we're interrupting Mr. Trehearne. This is his moment. Let him enjoy it."

Trehearne said, "Thank you. Well, this was supposed to be the set up. Bill Saul had to get Vickers out of the way. He fumbled the job in Mexico, through no fault of his own, and it was very embarrassing to have him turn up again, alive, and probably able to guess pretty shrewdly at what had happened. Saul figured it this way--Vickers hadn't told anyone he was alive, or coming back, therefore he suspected an attempt at murder. However, Vickers had not set the police onto Bill Saul, therefore he did not know who was responsible. Saul thought he had a little time, enough to try something smart.

"Saul knew that the only way to get rid of Vickers once and for all, as far as Angie was concerned, was to make it seem that Vickers was a killer, a louse, a murdering, half-cracked sonofabitch. In short, to destroy Angie's faith in him. So he killed Harry Bryce, knowing that Vickers would be blamed for it. But the thing got a bit confused, what with Angie and Joan, and a distressing lack of proof. Nothing for Bill to do but wait and try again. I'm using the third person here because it goes easier. Ungrammatical, but you don't mind, do you?" They did not.

"So he waited, and suddenly the break came. The psychological moment. Joan gave him his chance. She, too, wanted to get rid of Vickers. So she arranged a very clever frameup. She knew that she and Harry Bryce had the same type of blood. They found that out during the Blood Bank era. And she knew what nearly everybody has

read in the newspapers--that blood tests can only be proved negatively. That is, you can prove that a certain sample of blood did not come from a particular individual, if it's the wrong blood type, but never that it did, if it happens to be the right type. There are only four blood groups, and that makes a lot of people that match.

"So Joan doctored a pair of Vickers' shoes with her own blood, which was the same as Harry Bryce's, polished them carefully, and sent them to me, via Bill Saul. She sent a note with them, explaining that Vickers had switched shoes on me when his clothes were picked up for examination, and that these were in reality the ones that Vickers had worn at the beach the night Harry was killed. The only trouble with that hopeful effort was that laboratory tests showed that the shoes had not been worn for a long time, there was no beach sand or tar on them, and there were none of Vickers' fingerprints, which there would have had to be if he had worn and polished them himself, as she Claimed.

"Well, Bill didn't know any of that, and he didn't care. He knew the evidence was a phony, of course, because he himself had killed Bryce; but that didn't matter. What did matter was that Joan had put into his hands a perfect motive for murder. The lack of love between Joan and Vickers was pretty well known all round. So what would be more convincing than that Vickers should discover that Joan had sent incriminating evidence, phony or not, to the police--she was even the type who might have bragged about it to Vickers--and that Vickers flew into a rage and killed her? So Bill knocked her out, he thought, and went back into the living room to play some more gin rummy."

Angie said, "He told us Joan had gone out into the garden."

"Uh huh. She'd gone out, all right, for good. Well, somewhere along the line Bill managed to slip the chloral into your drinks. He brought it along, like a careful craftsman, in case it should come handy. He also

brought along the brass knuckles with which Brownie was clipped, impressed them with Vickers' fingerprints, and tucked them away in Vickers' bureau drawer. A very thorough boy.

"When everybody but Bill was sound asleep, he scurried about setting the stage. He carried Joan in from the kitchen. She hadn't had time to cool off, or stiffen up, so he didn't know she was dead. He banged her over the head with the poker a couple of times, made sure this time that it was final—he'd had bad luck with corpses before—then arranged Vickers, the poker, and the fingerprints to look right. He had wrapped the poker handle in his handkerchief when he used it. It didn't even get bloody. Then he went out by the front door, called good-by for the benefit of the boys staked out by the gate, and drove straight to me with the package. Then he went home. He probably felt pretty safe, but he was Still being careful. That's why he took the gun into the bath with him, and left the door so that he could watch the bedroom via the mirror over the washstand.

"The chloral gag was a little risky, but not too much, and he had to use it. He hoped that in the excitement nobody would think about drugging until it was too late for a conclusive test. But if anybody said anything about it, well, what the hell. Vickers was obviously a killer. He was obviously a little nuts. Maybe he had intended to murder Angie, too, painlessly, and commit suicide himself. There was the motive, the opportunity, the weapon, the fingerprints, and the corpse. What more would the cops need to convict a man for murder?"

"Not much," said Vickers.

Angie set her glass down. She had begun to shiver, though the sun was hot. She shut her eyes and put her hands over her face.

"In a way," she "whispered, "I suppose this is all my fault," Vickers went over and sat down beside her, drawing her close to him.

"You mean because Bill wanted you, and did all this because of it? Well, in the first place, darling, I don't blame him too much. I can understand feeling that way. In the second place, you didn't do anything to encourage him. I hope."

"Vick! For God's sake, don't joke about it!"

"All right." He said soberly, "There was a lot more to it than that. Bill's an odd guy. "He's always had a bit of a God complex, too. I say 'too,' because I know I had one. Bill made up his own laws and ethics.

He did exactly as he pleased, because that was all that mattered to him--doing what he wanted to do, in his own way. And he always got what he went after. Women, particularly. It puzzled him that he couldn't get you, and the more he couldn't get you, the more he wanted you, and I suppose you took the kick out of every other female in the world as far as he was concerned. So he began to hate me, because I was between you and him. But I'm beginning to think that you were the symbol, a very real one, but not the whole cause.

"Bill hated me. He hated me, I think, because I was a bigger and more successful louse than he was. I was more arrogant, more selfish, more cold blooded, and I had huge bank accounts and social standing, and the woman he wanted for a wife. I was a challenge to him. To his manhood, if you like. I kept him around because he was good company. He amused me. He could play up to me at cards, and even beat me with fair frequency. And that attitude on my part was like feeding him poison. Harry and Job were weaker stuff. They took it. But Bill didn't. And because he was the man he was, he reacted in the way he did. Violently, but subtly." Vickers shook her gently. "So you see, Cleopatra, it's more my fault than yours."

"Nuts," said Trehearne. "It's Saul's fault, and he'll find it out in the gas

chamber." He stood up. "Well, I guess that covers everything, for a while. You'll have to stick around while the usual legal machinery grinds this mess through the mill. After that, you're on your own. Oh, and by the way, this'll interest you.

Harriet Crandall isn't going to press charges against Job. She's decided on a separation, instead." He grinned. "You should go down and see her. From all I've seen and heard of her, she's a changed woman."

"Tomorrow," said Vickers. "I've got another woman to look at right now."

Trehearne nodded. He said good-by and walked away around the corner of the house. The pepper tree swayed gracefully on the green lawn. Coolin and Molly escorted him, only half in play, to his car.' Trehearne drove away. He began to hum, and then to sing.

Oh, yes, I have brought you gold, and I have paid your fee, and I have not come to see you die upon the gallows tree!