

Smart-Aleck Kill

by Raymond Chandler, 1888-1959

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Chapter 1

The doorman of the Kilmarnock was six foot two. He wore a pale blue uniform, and white gloves made his hands look enormous. He opened the door of the Yellow taxi as gently as an old maid stroking a cat.

Johnny Dalmas got out and turned to the red-haired driver. He said: "Better wait for me around the corner, Joey."

The driver nodded, tucked a toothpick a little farther back in the corner of his mouth, and swung his cab expertly away from the white-marked loading zone. Dalmas crossed the sunny sidewalk and went into the enormous cool lobby of the Kilmarnock. The carpets were thick, soundless. Bellboys stood with folded arms and the two clerks behind the marble desk looked austere.

Dalmas went across to the elevator lobby. He got into a paneled car and said: "End of the line, please."

The penthouse floor had a small quiet lobby with three doors opening off it, one to each wall. Dalmas crossed to one of them and rang the bell.

Derek Walden opened the door. He was about forty-five, possibly a little more, and had a lot of powdery gray hair and a handsome, dissipated face that was beginning to go pouchy. He had on a monogrammed lounging robe and a glass full of whiskey in his hand. He was a little drunk.

He said thickly, morosely: "Oh, it's you. C'mon in, Dalmas."

He went back into the apartment, leaving the door open. Dalmas shut it and followed him into a long, high-ceilinged room with a balcony at one end and a line of french windows along the left side. There was a terrace outside.

Derek Walden sat down in a brown and gold chair against the wall and stretched his legs across a foot stool. He swirled the whiskey around in his glass, looking down at it.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

Dalmas stared at him a little grimly. After a moment he said: "I dropped in to tell you I'm giving you back your job."

Walden drank the whiskey out of his glass and put it down on the corner of a table. He fumbled around for a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth and forgot to light it.

"Tha' so?" His voice was blurred but indifferent.

Dalmas turned away from him and walked over to one of the windows. It was open and an awning flapped outside. The traffic noise from the boulevard was faint.

He spoke over his shoulder:

"The investigation isn't getting anywhere—because you don't want it to get anywhere. You know why you're being blackmailed. I don't. Eclipse Films is interested because they have a lot of sugar tied up in film you have made."

"To hell with Eclipse Films," Walden said, almost quietly.

Dalmas shook his head and turned around. "Not from my angle. They stand to lose if you get in a jam the publicity hounds can't handle. You took me on because you were asked to. It was a waste of time. You haven't cooperated worth a cent."

Walden said in an unpleasant tone: "I'm handling this my own way and I'm not gettin' into any jam. I'll make my own deal—when I can buy something that'll stay bought... And all you have to do is make the Eclipse people think the situation's bein' taken care of. That clear?"

Dalmas came partway back across the room. He stood with one hand on top of a table, beside an ash tray littered with cigarette stubs that had very dark lip rouge on them. He looked down at these absently.

"That wasn't explained to me, Walden," he said coldly.

"I thought you were smart enough to figure it out," Walden sneered. He leaned sideways and slopped some more whiskey into his glass. "Have a drink?"

Dalmas said: "No, thanks."

Walden found the cigarette in his mouth and threw it on the floor. He drank. "What the hell!" he snorted. "You're a private detective and you're being paid to make a few motions that don't mean anything. It's a clean job—as your racket goes."

Dalmas said: "That's another crack I could do without hearing."

Walden made an abrupt, angry motion. His eyes glittered. The corners of his mouth drew down and his face got sulky. He avoided Dalmas' stare.

Dalmas said: "I'm not against you, but I never was for you. You're not the kind of guy I could go for, ever. If you had played with me, I'd have done what I could. I still will—but not for your sake. I don't want your money—and you can pull your shadows off my tail any time you like."

Walden put his feet on the floor. He laid his glass down very carefully on the table at his elbow. The whole expression of his face changed.

"Shadows...? I don't get you." He swallowed. "I'm not having you shadowed."

Dalmas stared at him. After a moment he nodded. "Okey, then. I'll backtrack on the next one and see if I can make him tell who he's working for... I'll find out."

Walden said very quietly: "I wouldn't do that, if I were you. You're—you're monkeying with people that might get nasty... I know what I'm talking about."

"That's something I'm not going to let worry me," Dalmas said evenly. "If it's the people that want your money, they were nasty a long time ago."

He held his hat out in front of him and looked at it. Walden's face glistened with sweat. His eyes looked sick. He opened his mouth to say something.

The door buzzer sounded.

Walden scowled quickly, swore. He stared down the room but did not move.

"Too damn many people come here without bein' announced," he growled. "My Jap boy is off for the day."

The buzzer sounded again, and Walden started to get up. Dalmas said: "I'll see what it is. I'm on my way anyhow."

He nodded to Walden, went down the room and opened the door.

Two men came in with guns in their hands. One of the guns dug sharply into Dalmas' ribs, and the man who was holding it said urgently: "Back up, and make it snappy. This is one of those stick-ups you read about."

He was dark and good-looking and cheerful. His face was as clear as a cameo, almost without hardness. He smiled.

The one behind him was short and sandy-haired. He scowled. The dark one said: "This is Walden's dick, Noddy. Take him over and go through him for a gun."

The sandy-haired man, Noddy, put a short-barreled revolver against Dalmas' stomach and his partner kicked the door shut, then strolled carelessly down the room toward Walden.

Noddy took a .38 Colt from under Dalmas' arm, walked around him and tapped his pockets. He put his own gun away and transferred Dalmas' Colt to his business hand.

"Okey, Ricchio. This one's clean," he said in a grumbling voice. Dalmas let his arms fall, turned and went back into the room. He looked thoughtfully at Walden. Walden was leaning forward with his mouth open and an expression of intense concentration on his face. Dalmas looked at the dark stick-up and said softly: "Ricchio?"

The dark boy glanced at him. "Over there by the table, sweetheart. I'll do all the talkin'."

Walden made a hoarse sound in his throat. Ricchio stood in front of him, looking down at him pleasantly, his gun dangling from one finger by the trigger guard.

"You're too slow on the pay-off, Walden, too damn slow! So we came to tell you about it. Tailed your dick here too. Wasn't that cute?"

Dalmas said gravely, quietly: "This punk used to be your bodyguard, Walden—if his name is Ricchio."

Walden nodded silently and licked his lips. Ricchio snarled at Dalmas: "Don't crack wise, dick. I'm tellin' you again." He stared with hot eyes, then looked back at Walden, looked at a watch on his wrist.

"It's eight minutes past three, Walden. I figure a guy with your drag can still get dough out of the bank. We're giving you an hour to raise ten grand. Just an hour. And we're takin' your shamus along to arrange about delivery."

Walden nodded again, still silent. He put his hands down on his knees and clutched them until his knuckles whitened.

Ricchio went on: "We'll play clean. Our racket wouldn't be worth a squashed bug if we didn't. You'll play clean too. If you don't your shamus will wake up on a pile of dirt. Only he won't wake up. Get it?"

Dalmas said contemptuously: "And if he pays up—I suppose you turn me loose to put the finger on you."

Smoothly, without looking at him, Ricchio said: "There's an answer to that one, too... Ten grand today, Walden. The other ten the first of the week. Unless we have trouble... If we do, we'll get paid for our trouble."

Walden made an aimless, defeated gesture with both hands outspread. "I guess I can arrange it," he said hurriedly.

"Swell. We'll be on our way then."

Ricchio nodded shortly and put his gun away. He took a brown kid glove out of his pocket, put it on his right hand, moved across then took Dalmas' Colt away from the sandy-haired man. He looked it over, slipped it into his side pocket and held it there with the gloved hand.

"Let's drift," he said with a jerk of his head.

They went out. Derek Walden stared after them bleakly.

The elevator car was empty except for the operator. They got off at the mezzanine and went across a silent writing room past a stained-glass window with

lights behind it to give the effect of sunshine. Ricchio walked half a step behind on Dalmas' left. The sandy-haired man was on his right, crowding him.

They went down carpeted steps to an arcade of luxury shops, along that, out of the hotel through the side entrance. A small brown sedan was parked across the street. The sandy-haired man slid behind the wheel, stuck his gun under his leg and stepped on the starter. Ricchio and Dalmas got in the back. Ricchio drawled: "East on the boulevard, Noddy. I've got to figure."

Noddy grunted. "That's a kick," he growled over his shoulder. "Ridin' a guy down Wilshire in daylight."

"Drive the heap, bozo."

The sandy-haired man grunted again and drove the small sedan away from the curb, slowed a moment later for the boulevard stop. An empty Yellow pulled away from the west curb, swung around in the middle of the block and fell in behind. Noddy made his stop, turned right and went on. The taxi did the same. Ricchio glanced back at it without interest. There was a lot of traffic on Wilshire.

Dalmas leaned back against the upholstery and said thoughtfully: "Why wouldn't Walden use his telephone while we were coming down?"

Ricchio smiled at him. He took his hat off and dropped it in his lap, then took his right hand out of his pocket and held it under the hat with the gun in it.

"He wouldn't want us to get mad at him, dick."

"So he lets a couple of punks take me for the ride."

Ricchio said coldly: "It's not that kind of a ride. We need you in our business... And we ain't punks, see?"

Dalmas rubbed his jaw with a couple of fingers. He smiled quickly and snapped: "Straight ahead at Robertson?"

"Yeah. I'm still figuring," Ricchio said.

"What a brain!" the sandy-haired man sneered.

Ricchio grinned tightly and showed even white teeth. The light changed to red half a block ahead. Noddy slid the sedan forward and was first in the line at the intersection. The empty Yellow drifted up on his left. Not quite level. The driver of it had red hair. His cap was balanced on one side of his head and he whistled cheerfully past a toothpick.

Dalmas drew his feet back against the seat and put his weight on them. He pressed his back hard against the upholstery. The tall traffic light went green and the sedan started forward, then hung a moment for a car that crowded into a fast left turn. The Yellow slipped forward on the left and the red-haired driver leaned over his wheel, yanked it suddenly to the right. There was a grinding, tearing noise. The riveted fender of the taxi plowed over the low-swung fender of the brown sedan, locked over its left front wheel. The two cars jolted to a stop.

Horn blasts behind the two cars sounded angrily, impatiently.

Dalmas' right fist crashed against Ricchio's jaw. His left hand closed over the gun in Ricchio's lap. He jerked it loose as Ricchio sagged in the corner. Ricchio's head wobbled. His eyes opened and shut flickeringly. Dalmas slid away from him along the seat and slipped the Colt under his arm.

Noddy was sitting quite still in the front seat. His right hand moved slowly towards the gun under his thigh. Dalmas opened the door of the sedan and got

out, shut the door, took two steps and opened the door of the taxi. He stood beside the taxi and watched the sandy-haired man.

Horns of the stalled cars blared furiously. The driver of the Yellow was out in front tugging at the two cars with a great show of energy and with no result at all. His toothpick waggled up and down in his mouth. A motorcycle officer in amber glasses threaded the traffic, looked the situation over wearily, jerked his head at the driver.

“Get in and back up,” he advised. “Argue it out somewhere else—we use this intersection.”

The driver grinned and scuttled around the front end of his Yellow. He climbed into it, threw it in gear and worried it backwards with a lot of tooting and arm-waving. It came clear. The sandy-haired man peered woodenly from the sedan. Dalmas got into the taxi and pulled the door shut.

The motorcycle officer drew a whistle out and blew two sharp blasts on it, spread his arms from east to west. The brown sedan went through the intersection like a cat chased by a police dog.

The Yellow went after it. Half a block on, Dalmas leaned forward and tapped on the glass.

“Let ’em go, Joey. You can’t catch them and I don’t want them... That was a swell routine back there.”

The redhead leaned his chin towards the opening in the panel. “Cinch, chief,” he said, grinning. “Try me on a hard one some time.”

Chapter 2

The telephone rang at twenty minutes to five. Dalmas was lying on his back on the bed. He was in his room at the Merrivale. He reached for the phone without looking at it, said: “Hello.”

The girl’s voice was pleasant and a little strained. “This is Mianne Crayle. Remember?”

Dalmas took a cigarette from between his lips. “Yes, Miss Crayle.”

“Listen. You must please go over and see Derek Walden. He’s worried stiff about something and he’s drinking himself blind. Something’s got to be done.”

Dalmas stared past the phone at the ceiling. The hand holding his cigarette beat a tattoo on the side of the bed. He said slowly: “He doesn’t answer his phone, Miss Crayle. I’ve tried to call him a time or two.”

There was a short silence at the other end of the line. Then the voice said: “I left my key under the door. You’d better just go on in.”

Dalmas’ eyes narrowed. The fingers of his right hand became still. He said slowly: “I’ll get over there right away, Miss Crayle. Where can I reach you?”

“I’m not sure... At John Sutro’s, perhaps. We were supposed to go there.”

Dalmas said: “That’s fine.” He waited for the click, then hung up and put the phone away on the night table. He sat up on the side of the bed and stared at a patch of sunlight on the wall for a minute or two. Then he shrugged, stood up. He

finished a drink that stood beside the telephone, put on his hat, went down in the elevator and got into the second taxi in the line outside the hotel.

“Kilmarnock again, Joey. Step on it.”

It took fifteen minutes to get to Kilmarnock.

The tea dance had let out and the streets around the big hotel were a mess of cars bucking their way out from the three entrances. Dalmas got out of the taxi half a block away and walked past groups of flushed débutantes and their escorts to the arcade entrance. He went in, walked up the stairs to the mezzanine, crossed the writing room and got into an elevator full of people. They all got out before the penthouse floor.

Dalmas rang Walden's bell twice. Then he bent over and looked under the door. There was a fine thread of light broken by an obstruction. He looked back at the elevator indicators, then stooped and teased something out from under the door with the blade of a penknife. It was a flat key. He went in with it... stopped... stared...

There was death in the big room. Dalmas went towards it slowly, walking softly, listening. There was a hard light in his gray eyes and the bone of his jaw made a sharp line that was pale against the tan of his cheek.

Derek Walden was slumped almost casually in the brown and gold chair. His mouth was slightly open. There was a blackened hole in his right temple, and a lacy pattern of blood spread down the side of his face and across the hollow of his neck as far as the soft collar of his shirt. His right hand trailed in the thick nap of the rug. The fingers held a small, black automatic.

The daylight was beginning to fade in the room. Dalmas stood perfectly still and stared at Derek Walden for a long time. There was no sound anywhere. The breeze had gone down and the awnings outside the french windows were still.

Dalmas took a pair of thin suede gloves from his left hip pocket and drew them on. He kneeled on the rug beside Walden and gently eased the gun from the clasp of his stiffening fingers. It was a .32, with a walnut grip, a black finish. He turned it over and looked at the stock. His mouth tightened. The number had been filed off and the patch of file marks glistened faintly against the dull black of the finish. He put the gun down on the rug and stood up, walked slowly towards the telephone that was on the end of a library table, beside a flat bowl of cut flowers.

He put his hand towards the phone but didn't touch it. He let the hand fall to his side. He stood there a moment, then turned and went quickly back and picked up the gun again. He slipped the magazine out and ejected the shell that was in the breech, picked that up and pressed it into the magazine. He forked two fingers of his left hand over the barrel, held the cocking piece back, twisted the breech block and broke the gun apart. He took the butt piece over to the window.

The number that was duplicated on the inside of the stock had not been filed off.

He reassembled the gun quickly, put the empty shell into the chamber, pushed the magazine home, cocked the gun and fitted it back into Derek Walden's dead hand. He pulled the suede gloves off his hands and wrote the number down in a small notebook.

He left the apartment, went down in the elevator, left the hotel. It was half-past five and some of the cars on the boulevard had switched on their lights.

Chapter 3

The blond man who opened the door at Sutro's did it very thoroughly. The door crashed back against the wall and the blond man sat down on the floor—still holding on to the knob. He said indignantly: "Earthquake, by gad!"

Dalmas looked down at him without amusement.

"Is Miss Mianne Crayle here—or wouldn't you know?" he asked.

The blond man got off the floor and hurled the door away from him. It went shut with another crash. He said in a loud voice: "Everybody's here but the Pope's tomcat—and he's expected."

Dalmas nodded. "You ought to have a swell party."

He went past the blond man down the hall and turned under an arch into a big old-fashioned room with built-in china closets and a lot of shabby furniture. There were seven or eight people in the room and they were all flushed with liquor.

A girl in shorts and a green polo shirt was shooting craps on the floor with a man in dinner clothes. A fat man with nose-glasses was talking sternly into a toy telephone. He was saying: "Long Distance—Sioux City—and put some snap into it, sister!"

The radio blared "Sweet Madness."

Two couples were dancing around carelessly bumping into each other and the furniture. A man who looked like Al Smith was dancing all alone, with a drink in his hand and an absent expression on his face. A tall, white-faced blonde weaved towards Dalmas, slopping liquor out of her glass. She shrieked: "Darling! Fancy meeting you here!"

Dalmas went around her, went towards a saffron-colored woman who had just come into the room with a bottle of gin in each hand. She put the bottles on the piano and leaned against it, looking bored. Dalmas went up to her and asked for Miss Crayle.

The saffron-colored woman reached a cigarette out of an open box on the piano. "Outside—in the yard," she said tonelessly.

Dalmas said: "Thank you, Mrs. Sutro."

She stared at him blankly. He went under another arch, into a darkened room with wicker furniture in it. A door led to a glassed-in porch and a door out of that led down steps to a path that wound off through dim trees. Dalmas followed the path to the edge of a bluff that looked out over the lighted part of Hollywood. There was a stone seat at the edge of the bluff. A girl sat on it with her back to the house. A cigarette tip glowed in the darkness. She turned her head slowly and stood up.

She was small and dark and delicately made. Her mouth showed dark with rouge, but there was not enough light to see her face clearly. Her eyes were shadowed.

Dalmas said: "I have a cab outside, Miss Crayle. Or did you bring a car?"

"No car. Let's go. It's rotten here, and I don't drink gin."

They went back along the path and passed around the side of the house. A trellis-topped gate let them out on the sidewalk, and they went along by the fence to where the taxi was waiting. The driver was leaning against it with one heel hooked on the edge of the running board. He opened the cab door. They got in.

Dalmas said: "Stop at a drugstore for some butts, Joey."

"Okey."

Joey slid behind his wheel and started up. The cab went down a steep, winding hill. There was a little moisture on the surface of the asphalt pavement and the store fronts echoed back the swishing sound of the tires.

After a while Dalmas said: "What time did you leave Walden?"

The girl spoke without turning her head towards him. "About three o'clock."

"Put it a little later, Miss Crayle. He was alive at three o'clock—and there was somebody else with him."

The girl made a small, miserable sound like a strangled sob. Then, she said very softly: "I know...he's dead." She lifted her gloved hands and pressed them against her temples.

Dalmas said: "Sure. Let's not get any more tricky than we have to... Maybe we'll have to—enough."

She said very slowly, in a low voice: "I was there after he was dead."

Dalmas nodded. He did not look at her. The cab went on and after a while it stopped in front of a corner drugstore. The driver turned in his seat and looked back. Dalmas stared at him, but spoke to the girl.

"You ought to have told me more over the phone. I might have got in a hell of a jam. I may be in a hell of a jam now."

The girl swayed forward and started to fall. Dalmas put his arm out quickly and caught her, pushed her back against the cushions. Her head wobbled on her shoulders and her mouth was a dark gash in her stone-white face. Dalmas held her shoulder and felt her pulse with his free hand. He said sharply, grimly: "Let's go on to Carli's, Joey. Never mind the butts... This party has to have a drink—in a hurry."

Joey slammed the cab in gear and stepped on the accelerator.

Chapter 4

Carli's was a small club at the end of a passage between a sporting-goods store and a circulating library. There was a grilled door and a man behind it who had given up trying to look as if it mattered who came in.

Dalmas and the girl sat in a small booth with hard seats and looped-back green curtains. There were high partitions between the booths. There was a long bar down the other side of the room and a big juke box at the end of it. Now and then, when there wasn't enough noise, the bartender put a nickel in the juke box.

The waiter put two small glasses of brandy on the table and Mianne Crayle downed hers at a gulp. A little light came into her shadowed eyes. She peeled a black and white gauntlet off her right hand and sat playing with the empty fingers

of it, staring down at the table. After a little while the waiter came back with a couple of brandy highballs.

When he had gone away again Mianne Crayle began to speak in a low, clear voice, without raising her head: "I wasn't the first of his women by several dozen. I wouldn't have been the last—by that many more. But he had his decent side. And believe it or not he didn't pay my room rent."

Dalmas nodded, didn't say anything. The girl went on without looking at him: "He was a heel in a lot of ways. When he was sober he had the dark blue sulks. When he was lit up he was vile. When he was nicely edged he was a pretty good sort of guy besides being the best smut director in Hollywood. He could get more smooth sexy tripe past the Hays office than any other three men."

Dalmas said without expression: "He was on his way out. Smut is on its way out, and that was all he knew."

The girl looked at him briefly, lowered her eyes again and drank a little of her highball. She took a tiny handkerchief out of the pocket of her sports jacket and patted her lips.

The people on the other side of the partition were making a great deal of noise.

Mianne Crayle said: "We had lunch on the balcony. Derek was drunk and on the way to get drunker. He had something on his mind. Something that worried him a lot."

Dalmas smiled faintly. "Maybe it was the twenty grand somebody was trying to pry loose from him—or didn't you know about that?"

"It might have been that. Derek was a bit tight about money."

"His liquor cost him a lot," Dalmas said dryly. "And that motor cruiser he liked to play about in—down below the border."

The girl lifted her head with a quick jerk. There were sharp lights of pain in her dark eyes. She said very slowly: "He bought all his liquor at Ensenada. Brought it in himself. He had to be careful—with the quantity he put away."

Dalmas nodded. A cold smile played about the corners of his mouth. He finished his drink and put a cigarette in his mouth, felt in his pocket for a match. The holder on the table was empty.

"Finish your story, Miss Crayle," he said.

"We went up to the apartment. He got two fresh bottles out and said he was going to get good and drunk... Then we quarreled... I couldn't stand any more of it. I went away. When I got home I began to worry about him. I called up but he wouldn't answer the phone. I went back finally...and let myself in with the key I had... and he was dead in the chair."

After a moment Dalmas said: "Why didn't you tell me some of that over the phone?"

She pressed the heels of her hands together, said very softly: "I was terribly afraid... And there was something...wrong."

Dalmas put his head back against the partition, stared at her with his eyes half closed.

"It's an old gag," she said. "I'm almost ashamed to spring it. But Derek Walden was left-handed... I'd know about that, wouldn't I?"

Dalmas said very softly: "A lot of people must have known that—but one of them might have got careless."

Dalmas stared at Mianne Crayle's empty glove. She was twisting it between her fingers.

"Walden was left-handed," he said slowly. "That means he didn't suicide. The gun was in his other hand. There was no sign of a struggle and the hole in his temple was powder-burned, looked as if the shot came from about the right angle. That means whoever shot him was someone who could get in there and get close to him. Or else he was paralyzed drunk, and in that case whoever did it had to have a key."

Mianne Crayle pushed the glove away from her. She clenched her hands. "Don't make it any plainer," she said sharply. "I know the police will think I did it. Well—I didn't. I loved the poor damn fool. What do you think of that?"

Dalmas said without emotion: "You could have done it, Miss Crayle. They'll think of that, won't they? And you might be smart enough to act the way you have afterwards. They'll think of that, too."

"That wouldn't be smart," she said bitterly. "Just smart-aleck."

"Smart-aleck kill!" Dalmas laughed grimly. "Not bad." He ran his fingers through his crisp hair. "No, I don't think we can pin it on you—and maybe the cops won't know he was left-handed...until somebody else gets a chance to find things out."

He leaned over the table a little, put his hands on the edge as if to get up. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully on her face.

"There's one man downtown that might give me a break. He's all cop, but he's an old guy and don't give a damn about his publicity. Maybe if you went down with me, let him size you up and hear the story, he'd stall the case a few hours and hold out on the papers."

He looked at her questioningly. She drew her glove on and said quietly: "Let's go."

Chapter 5

When the elevator doors at the Merrivale closed, the big man put his newspaper down from in front of his face and yawned. He got up slowly from the settee in the corner and loafed across the small but sedate lobby. He squeezed himself into a booth at the end of a row of house phones. He dropped a coin in the slot and dialed with a thick forefinger, forming the number with his lips.

After a pause he leaned close to the mouthpiece and said: "This is Denny. I'm at the Merrivale. Our man just came in. I lost him outside and came here to wait for him to get back."

He had a heavy voice with a burr in it. He listened to the voice at the other end, nodded and hung up without saying anything more. He went out of the booth, crossed to the elevators. On the way he dropped a cigar butt into a glazed jar full of white sand.

In the elevator he said: "Ten," and took his hat off. He had straight black hair that was damp with perspiration, a wide, flat face and small eyes. His clothes were unpressed, but not shabby. He was a studio dick and he worked for Eclipse Films.

He got out at the tenth floor and went along a dim corridor, turned a corner and knocked at a door. There was a sound of steps inside. The door opened. Dalmas opened it.

The big man went in, dropped his hat casually on the bed, sat down in an easy chair by the window without being asked.

He said: "Hi, boy. I hear you need some help."

Dalmas looked at him for a moment without answering. Then he said slowly, frowningly: "Maybe—for a tail. I asked for Collins. I thought you'd be too easy to spot."

He turned away and went into the bathroom, came out with two glasses. He mixed the drinks on the bureau, handed one. The big man drank, smacked his lips and put his glass down on the sill of the open window. He took a short, chubby cigar out of his vest pocket.

"Collins wasn't around," he said. "And I was just countin' my thumbs. So the big cheese give me the job. Is it footwork?"

"I don't know. Probably not," Dalmas said indifferently.

"If it's a tail in a car, I'm okey. I brought my little coupe."

Dalmas took his glass and sat down on the side of the bed. He stared at the big man with a faint smile. The big man bit the end off his cigar and spit it out.

Then he bent over and picked up the piece, looked at it, tossed it out of the window.

"It's a swell night. A bit warm for so late in the year," he said.

Dalmas said slowly: "How well do you know Derek Walden, Denny?"

Denny looked out of the window. There was a sort of haze in the sky and the reflection of a red neon sign behind a nearby building looked like a fire.

He said: "I don't what you call know him. I've seen him around. I know he's one of the big money guys on the lot."

"Then you won't fall over if I tell you he's dead," Dalmas said evenly.

Denny turned around slowly. The cigar, still unlighted, moved up and down in his wide mouth. He looked mildly interested.

Dalmas went on: "It's a funny one. A blackmail gang has been working on him, Denny. Looks like it got his goat. He's dead—with a hole in his head and a gun in his hand. It happened this afternoon."

Denny opened his small eyes a little wider. Dalmas sipped his drink and rested the glass on his thigh.

"His girl friend found him. She had a key to the apartment in the Kilmarnock. The Jap boy was away and that's all the help he kept. The gal didn't tell anyone. She beat it and called me up. I went over... I didn't tell anybody either."

The big man said very slowly: "For Pete's sake! The cops'll stick it into you and break it off, brother. You can't get away with that stuff."

Dalmas stared at him, then turned his head away and stared at a picture on the wall. He said coldly: "I'm doing it—and you're helping me. We've got a job, and a damn powerful organization behind us. There's a lot of sugar at stake."

"How do you figure?" Denny asked grimly. He didn't look pleased.

"The girl friend doesn't think Walden suicided, Denny. I don't either, and I've got a sort of lead. But it has to be worked fast, because it's as good a lead for the law as us. I didn't expect to be able to check it right away, but I got a break."

Denny said: "Uh-huh. Don't make it too clever. I'm a slow thinker."

He struck a match and lit his cigar. His hand shook just a little.

Dalmas said: "It's not clever. It's kind of dumb. The gun that killed Walden is a filed gun. But I broke it and the inside number wasn't filed. And Headquarters has the number, in the special permits."

"And you just went in and asked for it and they gave it to you," Denny said grimly. "And when they pick Walden up and trace the gun themselves, they'll just think it was swell of you to beat them to it." He made a harsh noise in his throat.

Dalmas said: "Take it easy, boy. The guy that did the checking rates. I don't have to worry about that."

"Like hell you don't! And what would a guy like Walden be doin' with a filed gun? That's a felony rap."

Dalmas finished his drink and carried his empty glass over to the bureau. He held the whiskey bottle out. Denny shook his head. He looked very disgusted.

"If he had the gun, he might not have known about that, Denny. And it could be that it wasn't his gun at all. If it was a killer's gun, then the killer was an amateur. A professional wouldn't have that kind of artillery."

The big man said slowly: "Okey, what you get on the rod?"

Dalmas sat down on the bed again. He dug a package of cigarettes out of his pocket, lit one, and leaned forward to toss the match through the open window. He said: "The permit was issued about a year ago to a newshawk on the *Press-Chronicle*, name of Dart Burwand. This Burwand was bumped off last April on the ramp of the Arcade Depot. He was all set to leave town, but he didn't make it. They never cracked the case, but the hunch is that this Burwand was tied to some racket—like the Lingle killing in Chi—and that he tried to shake one of the big boys. The big boy backfired on the idea. Exit Burwand."

The big man was breathing deeply. He had let his cigar go out. Dalmas watched him gravely while he talked.

"I got that from Westfalls, on the *Press-Chronicle*," Dalmas said. "He's a friend of mine. There's more of it. This gun was given back to Burwand's wife—probably. She still lives here—out on North Kenmore. She might tell me what she did with the gun... and she might be tied to some racket herself, Denny. In that case she wouldn't tell me, but after I talk to her she might make some contacts we ought to know about. Get the idea?"

Denny struck another match and held it on the end of his cigar. His voice said thickly: "What do I do—tail the broad after you put the idea to her, about the gun?"

"Right."

The big man stood up, pretended to yawn. "Can do," he grunted. "But why all the hush-hush about Walden? Why not let the cops work it out? We're just goin' to get ourselves a lot of bad marks at Headquarters."

Dalmas said slowly: "It's got to be risked. We don't know what the blackmail crowd had on Walden, and the studio stands to lose too much money if it comes out in the investigation and gets a front-page spread all over the country."

Denny said: "You talk like Walden was spelled Valentino. Hell, the guy's only a director. All they got to do is take his name off a couple of unreleased pictures."

“They figure different,” Dalmas said. “But maybe that’s because they haven’t talked to you.”

Denny said roughly: “Okey. But me, I’d let the girl friend take the damn rap! All the law ever wants is a fall guy.”

He went around the bed to get his hat, crammed it on his head.

“Swell,” he said sourly. “We gotta find out all about it before the cops even know Walden is dead.” He gestured with one hand and laughed mirthlessly. “Like they do in the movies.”

Dalmas put the whiskey bottle away in the bureau drawer and put his hat on. He opened the door and stood aside for Denny to go out. He switched off the lights. It was ten minutes to nine.

Chapter 6

The tall blonde looked at Dalmas out of greenish eyes with very small pupils. He went in past her quickly, without seeming to move quickly. He pushed the door shut with his elbow.

He said: “I’m a dick—private—Mrs. Burwand. Trying to dig up a little dope you might know about.”

The blonde said: “The name is Dalton, Helen Dalton. Forget the Burwand stuff.”

Dalmas smiled and said: “I’m sorry. I should have known.”

The blonde shrugged her shoulders and drifted away from the door. She sat down on the edge of a chair that had a cigarette burn on the arm. The room was a furnished-apartment living room with a lot of department store bric-à-brac spread around. Two floor lamps burned. There were flounced pillows on the floor, a French doll sprawled against the base of one lamp, and a row of gaudy novels went across the mantel, above the gas fire.

Dalmas said politely, swinging his hat: “It’s about a gun Dart Burwand used to own. It’s showed up on a case I’m working. I’m trying to trace it—from the time you had it.”

Helen Dalton scratched the upper part of her arm. She had half-inch-long fingernails. She said curtly: “I don’t have an idea what you’re talking about.”

Dalmas stared at her and leaned against the wall. His voice got on edge.

“Maybe you remember that you used to be married to Dart Burwand and that he got bumped off last April... Or is that too far back?”

The blonde bit one of her knuckles and said: “Smart guy, huh?”

“Not unless I have to be. But don’t fall asleep from that last shot in the arm.”

Helen Dalton sat up very straight, suddenly. All the vagueness went out of her expression. She spoke between tight lips.

“What’s the howl about the gun?”

“It killed a guy, that’s all,” Dalmas said carelessly.

She stared at him. After a moment she said: “I was broke. I hocked it. I never got it out. I had a husband that made sixty bucks a week but didn’t spend any of it on me. I never had a dime.”

Dalmas nodded. "Remember the pawnshop where you left it?" he asked. "Or maybe you still have the ticket."

"No. It was on Main. The street's lined with them. And I don't have the ticket."

Dalmas said: "I was afraid of that."

He walked slowly across the room, looked at the titles of some of the books on the mantel. He went on and stood in front of a small, folding desk. There was a photo in a silver frame on the desk. Dalmas stared at it for some time. He turned slowly.

"It's too bad about the gun, Helen. A pretty important name was rubbed out with it this afternoon. The number was filed off the outside. If you hocked it, I'd figure some hood bought it from the hockshop guy, except that a hood wouldn't file a gun that way. He'd know there was another number inside. So it wasn't a hood—and the man it was found with wouldn't be likely to get a gun in a hock shop."

The blonde stood up slowly. Red spots burned in her cheeks. Her arms were rigid at her sides and her breath whispered. She said slowly, strainedly: "You can't maul me around, dick. I don't want any part of any police business—and I've got some good friends to take care of me. Better scram."

Dalmas looked back towards the frame on the desk. He said: "Johnny Sutro oughtn't to leave his mug around in a broad's apartment that way. Somebody might think he was cheating."

The blonde walked stiff-legged across the room and slammed the photo into the drawer of the desk. She slammed the drawer shut, and leaned her hips against the desk.

"You're all wet, shamus. That's not anybody called Sutro. Get on out, will you, for gawd's sake?"

Dalmas laughed unpleasantly. "I saw you at Sutro's house this afternoon. You were so drunk you don't remember."

The blonde made a movement as though she were going to jump at him. Then she stopped, rigid. A key turned in the room door. It opened and a man came in. He stood just inside the door and pushed it shut very slowly. His right hand was in the pocket of a light tweed overcoat. He was dark-skinned, high-shouldered, angular, with a sharp nose and chin.

Dalmas looked at him quietly and said: "Good evening, Councilman Sutro."

The man looked past Dalmas at the girl. He took no notice of Dalmas. The girl said shakily: "This guy says he's a dick. He's giving me a third about some gun he says I had. Throw him out, will you?"

Sutro said: "A dick, eh?"

He walked past Dalmas without looking at him. The blonde backed away from him and fell into a chair. Her face got a pasty look and her eyes were scared. Sutro looked down at her for a moment, then turned around and took a small automatic out of his pocket. He held it loosely, pointed down at the floor.

He said: "I haven't a lot of time."

Dalmas said: "I was just going." He moved near the door. Sutro said sharply: "Let's have the story first."

Dalmas said: "Sure."

He moved lithely, without haste, and threw the door wide open. The gun jerked up in Sutro's hand. Dalmas said: "Don't be a sap. You're not starting anything here and you know it."

The two men stared at each other. After a moment or two Sutro put the gun back into his pocket and licked his thin lips. Dalmas said: "Miss Dalton had a gun once that killed a man—recently. But she hasn't had it for a long time. That's all I wanted to know."

Sutro nodded slowly. There was a peculiar expression in his eyes.

"Miss Dalton is a friend of my wife's. I wouldn't want her to be bothered," he said coldly.

"That's right. You wouldn't," Dalmas said "But a legitimate dick has a right to ask legitimate questions. I didn't break in here."

Sutro eyed him slowly: "Okey, but take it easy on my friends. I draw water in this town and I could hang a sign on you."

Dalmas nodded. He went quietly out of the door and shut it. He listened a moment. There was no sound inside that he could hear. He shrugged and went on down the hall, down three steps and across a small lobby that had no switchboard. Outside the apartment house he looked along the street. It was an apartment-house district and there were cars parked up and down the street. He went towards the lights of the taxi that was waiting for him.

Joey, the red-haired driver, was standing on the edge of the curb in front of his hack. He was smoking a cigarette, staring across the street, apparently at a big, dark coupe that was parked with its left side to the curb. As Dalmas came up to him he threw his cigarette away and came to meet him.

He spoke quickly: "Listen, boss. I got a look at the guy in that Cad—"

Pale flame broke in bitter streaks from above the door of the coupe. A gun racketed between the buildings that faced each other across the street. Joey fell against Dalmas. The coupe jerked into sudden motion. Dalmas went down sidewise, on to one knee, with the driver clinging to him. He tried to reach his gun, couldn't make it. The coupe went around the corner with a squeal of rubber, and Joey fell down Dalmas' side and rolled over on his back on the sidewalk. He beat his hands up and down on the cement and a hoarse, anguished sound came from deep inside him.

Tires screeched again and Dalmas flung up to his feet, swept his hand to his left armpit. He relaxed as a small car skidded to a stop and Denny fell out of it, charged across the intervening space towards him.

Dalmas bent over the driver. Light from the lanterns beside the entrance to the apartment house showed blood on the front of Joey's whipcord jacket, blood that was seeping out through the material. Joey's eyes opened and shut like the eyes of a dying bird.

Denny said: "No use to follow that bus. Too fast."

"Get on a phone and call an ambulance," Dalmas said quickly. "The kid's got a bellyful... Then take a plant on the blonde."

The big man hurried back to his car, jumped into it and tore off around the corner. A window went open somewhere and a man yelled down. Some cars stopped.

Dalmas bent down over Joey and muttered: "Take it easy, oldtimer... Easy, boy... easy."

Chapter 7

The homicide lieutenant's name was Weinkassel. He had thin, blond hair, icy blue eyes and a lot of pockmarks. He sat in a swivel chair with his feet on the edge of a pulled-out drawer and a telephone scooped close to his elbow. The room smelled of dust and cigar butts.

A man named Lonergan, a bulky dick with gray hair and a gray mustache, stood near an open window, looking out of it morosely.

Weinkassel chewed on a match, stared at Dalmas, who was across the desk from him. He said: "Better talk a bit. The hack driver can't. You've had luck in this town and you wouldn't want to run it into the ground."

Lonergan said: "He's hard. He won't talk." He didn't turn around when he said it.

"A little less of your crap would go farther, Lonnie," Weinkassel said in a dead voice.

Dalmas smiled faintly and rubbed the palm of his hand against the side of the desk. It made a squeaking sound.

"What would I talk about?" he asked. "It was dark and I didn't get a flash of the man behind the gun. The car was a Cadillac coupe, without lights. I've told you this already, Lieutenant."

"It don't listen," Weinkassel grumbled. "There's something screwy about it. You gotta have some kind of a hunch who it could be. It's a cinch the gun was for you."

Dalmas said: "Why? The hack driver was hit and I wasn't. Those lads get around a lot. One of them might be in wrong with some tough boys."

"Like you," Lonergan said. He went on staring out of the window.

Weinkassel frowned at Lonergan's back and said patiently: "The car was outside while you was still inside. The hack driver was outside. If the guy with the gun had wanted him, he didn't have to wait for you to come out."

Dalmas spread his hands and shrugged. "You boys think I know who it was?"

"Not exactly. We think you could give us some names to check on, though. Who'd you go to see in them apartments?"

Dalmas didn't say anything for a moment. Lonergan turned away from the window, sat on the end of the desk and swung his legs. There was a cynical grin on his flat face.

"Come through, baby," he said cheerfully.

Dalmas tilted his chair back and put his hands into his pockets. He stared at Weinkassel speculatively, ignored the gray-haired dick as though he didn't exist.

He said slowly: "I was there on business for a client. You can't make me talk about that."

Weinkassel shrugged and stared at him coldly. Then he took the chewed match out of his mouth, looked at the flattened end of it, tossed it away.

"I might have a hunch your business had something to do with the shootin'," he said grimly. "That way the hush-hush would be out. Wouldn't it?"

"Maybe," Dalmas said. "If that's the way it's going to work out. But I ought to have a chance to talk to my client."

Weinkassel said: "Okey. You can have till the morning. Then you put your papers on the desk, see."

Dalmas nodded and stood up. "Fair enough, Lieutenant."

"Hush-hush is all a shamus knows," Lonergan said roughly.

Dalmas nodded to Weinkassel and went out of the office. He walked down a bleak corridor and up steps to the lobby floor. Outside the City Hall he went down a long flight of concrete steps and across Spring Street to where a blue Packard roadster, not very new, was parked. He got into it and drove around the corner, then through the Second Street tunnel, dropped over a block and drove out west. He watched in the mirror as he drove.

At Alvarado he went into a drugstore and called his hotel. The clerk gave him a number to call. He called it and heard Denny's heavy voice at the other end of the line. Denny said urgently: "Where you been? I've got that broad out here at my place. She's drunk. Come on out and we'll get her to tell us what you want to know."

Dalmas stared out through the glass of the phone booth without seeing anything. After a pause he said slowly: "The blonde? How come?"

"It's a story, boy. Come on out and I'll give it to you. Fourteen-fifty-four South Livesay. Know where that is?"

"I've got a map. I'll find it," Dalmas said in the same tone.

Denny told him just how to find it, at some length. At the end of the explanation he said: "Make it fast. She's asleep now, but she might wake up and start yellin' murder."

Dalmas said: "Where you live it probably wouldn't matter much... I'll be right out, Denny."

He hung up and went out to his car. He got a pint bottle of bourbon out of the car pocket and took a long drink. Then he started up and drove towards Fox Hills. Twice on the way he stopped and sat still in the car, thinking. But each time he went on again.

Chapter 8

The road turned off Pico into a scattered subdivision that spread itself out over rolling hills between two golf courses. It followed the edge of one of the golf courses, separated from it by a high wire fence. There were bungalows here and there dotted about the slopes. After a while the road dipped into a hollow and there was a single bungalow in the hollow, right across the street from the golf course.

Dalmas drove past it and parked under a giant eucalyptus that etched deep shadow on the moonlit surface of the road. He got out and walked back, turned up a cement path to the bungalow. It was wide and low and had cottage windows

across the front. Bushes grew halfway up the screens. There was faint light inside and the sound of a radio, turned low, came through the open windows.

A shadow moved across the screens and the front door came open. Dalmas went into a living room built across the front of the house. One small bulb burned in a lamp and the luminous dial of the radio glowed. A little moonlight came into the room.

Denny had his coat off and his sleeves rolled up on his big arms.

He said: "The broad's still asleep. I'll wake her up when I've told you how I got her here."

Dalmas said: "Sure you weren't tailed?"

"Not a chance." Denny spread a big hand.

Dalmas sat down in a wicker chair in the corner, between the radio and the end of the line of windows. He put his hat on the floor, pulled out the bottle of bourbon and regarded it with a dissatisfied air.

"Buy us a real drink, Denny. I'm tired as hell. Didn't get any dinner."

Denny said: "I've got some Three-Star Martel. Be right up."

He went out of the room and light went on in the back part of the house. Dalmas put the bottle on the floor beside his hat and rubbed two fingers across his forehead. His head ached. After a little while the light went out in the back and Denny came back with two tall glasses.

The brandy tasted clean and hard. Denny sat down in another wicker chair. He looked very big and dark in the half-lit room. He began to talk slowly, in his gruff voice.

"It sounds goofy, but it worked. After the cops stopped milling around I parked in the alley and went in the back way. I knew which apartment the broad had but I hadn't seen her. I thought I'd make some kind of a stall and see how she was makin' out. I knocked on her door, but she wouldn't answer. I could hear her movin' around inside, and in a minute I could hear a telephone bein' dialed. I went back along the hall and tried the service door. It opened and I went in. It fastened with one of them screw bolts that get out of line and don't fasten when you think they do."

Dalmas nodded, said: "I get the idea, Denny."

The big man drank out of his glass and rubbed the edge of it up and down on his lower lip. He went on.

"She was phoning a guy named Gayn Donner. Know him?"

"I've heard of him," Dalmas said. "So she has that kind of connections."

"She was callin' him by name and she sounded mad," Denny said. "That's how I knew. Donner has that place on Mariposa Canyon Drive—the Mariposa Club. You hear his band over the air—Hank Munn and his boys."

Dalmas said: "I've heard it, Denny."

"Okey. When she hung up I went in on her. She looked snowed, weaved around funny, didn't seem to know much what was going on. I looked around and there was a photo of John Sutro, the Councilman, in a desk there. I used that for a stall. I said that Sutro wanted her to duck out for a while and that I was one of his boys and she was to come along. She fell for it. Screwy. She wanted some liquor. I said I had some in the car. She got her little hat and coat."

Dalmas said softly: "It was that easy, huh?"

"Yeah," Denny said. He finished his drink and put the glass somewhere. "I bottle-fed her in the car to keep her quiet and we came out here. She went to sleep and that's that. What do you figure? Tough downtown?"

"Tough enough," Dalmas said. "I didn't fool the boys much."

"Anything on the Walden kill?"

Dalmas shook his head slowly.

"I guess the Jap didn't get home yet, Denny."

"Want to talk to the broad?"

The radio was playing a waltz. Dalmas listened to it for a moment before he answered. Then he said in a tired voice: "I guess that's what I came out here for."

Denny got up and went out of the room. There was the sound of a door opening and muffled voices.

Dalmas took his gun out from under his arm and put it down in the chair beside his leg.

The blonde staggered a little too much as she came in. She stared around, giggled, made vague motions with her long hands. She blinked at Dalmas, stood swaying a moment, then slid down into the chair Denny had been sitting in. The big man kept near her and leaned against a library table that stood by the inside wall.

She said drunkenly: "My old pal the dick. Hey, hey, stranger! How about buyin' a lady a drink?"

Dalmas stared at her without expression. He said slowly: "Got any new ideas about that gun? You know, the one we were talking about when Johnny Sutro crashed in... The filed gun... The gun that killed Derek Walden."

Denny stiffened, then made a sudden motion towards his hip. Dalmas brought his Colt up and came to his feet with it. Denny looked at it and became still, relaxed. The girl had not moved at all, but the drunkenness dropped away from her like a dead leaf. Her face was suddenly tense and bitter.

Dalmas said evenly: "Keep the hands in sight, Denny, and everything'll be jake... Now suppose you two cheap crossers tell me what I'm here for."

The big man said thickly: "For gawd's sake! What's eatin' you? You scared me when you said *Walden* to the girl."

Dalmas grinned. "That's all right, Denny. Maybe she never heard of him. Let's get this ironed out in a hurry. I have an idea I'm here for trouble."

"You're crazy as hell!" the big man snarled.

Dalmas moved the gun slightly. He put his back against the end wall of the room, leaned over and turned the radio off with his left hand. Then he spoke bitterly: "You sold out, Denny. That's easy. You're too big for a tail and I've spotted you following me around half a dozen times lately. When you horned in on the deal tonight I was pretty sure... And when you told me that funny story about how you got baby out here I was damn sure... Hell's sake, do you think a guy that's stayed alive as long as I have would believe that one? Come on, Denny, be a sport and tell me who you're working for... I might let you take a powder... Who you working for? Donner? Sutro? Or somebody I don't know? And why the plant out here in the woods?"

The girl shot to her feet suddenly and sprang at him. He threw her off with his free hand and she sprawled on the floor. She yelled: "Get him, you big punk? Get him!"

Denny didn't move. "Shut up, snow-bird!" Dalmas snapped. "Nobody's getting anybody. This is just a talk between friends. Get up on your feet and stop throwing curves!"

The blonde stood up slowly.

Denny's face had a stony, immovable look in the dimness. His voice came with a dull rasp. He said: "I sold out. It was lousy. Okey, that's that. I got fed up with watchin' a bunch of extra girls trying to pinch each other's lipstick... You can take a plug at me, if you feel like it."

He still didn't move. Dalmas nodded slowly and said again: "Who is it, Denny? Who you working for?"

Denny said: "I don't know. I call a number, get orders, and report that way. I get dough in the mail. I tried to break the twist here, but no luck... I don't think you're on the spot and I don't know a damn thing about that shootin' in the street."

Dalmas stared at him. He said slowly: "You wouldn't be stalling—to keep me here—would you, Denny?"

The big man raised his head slowly. The room suddenly seemed to get very still. A car had stopped outside. The faint throbbing of its motor died.

A red spotlight hit the top of the screens.

It was blinding. Dalmas slid down on one knee, shifted his position sidewise very quickly, silently. Denny's harsh voice in the silence said: "Cops, for gawd's sake!"

The red light dissolved the wire mesh of the screens into a rosy glow, threw a great splash of vivid color on the oiled finish of the inside wall. The girl made a choked sound and her face was a red mask for an instant before she sank down out of the fan of light. Dalmas looked into the light, his head low behind the sill of the end window. The leaves of the bushes were black spearpoints in the red glare.

Steps sounded on the walk.

A harsh voice rasped: "Everybody out! Mitts in the air!"

There was a sound of movement inside the house. Dalmas swung his gun—uselessly. A switch clicked and a porch light went on. For a moment, before they dodged back, two men in blue police uniforms showed up in the cone of the porch light. One of them held a sub-machine gun and the other had a long Luger with a special magazine fitted to it.

There was a grating sound. Denny was at the door, opening the peep panel. A gun came up in his hand and crashed.

Something heavy clattered on the cement and a man swayed forward into the light, swayed back again. His hands were against his middle. A stiff-vizored cap fell down and rolled on the walk.

Dalmas hit the floor low down against the baseboard as the machine gun cut loose. He ground his face into the wood of the floor. The girl screamed behind him.

The chopper raked the room swiftly from end to end and the air filled with plaster and splinters. A wall mirror crashed down. A sharp stench of powder fought with the sour smell of the plaster dust. This seemed to go on for a very long

time. Something fell across Dalmas' legs. He kept his eyes shut and his face pressed against the floor.

The stuttering and crashing stopped. The rain of plaster inside the walls kept on. A voice yelled: "How d'you like it, pals?"

Another voice far back snapped angrily: "Come on—let's go!"

Steps sounded again, and a dragging sound. More steps. The motor of the car roared into life. A door slammed heavily. Tires screeched on the gravel of the road and the song of the motor swelled and died swiftly.

Dalmas got up on his feet. His ears boomed and his nostrils were dry. He got his gun off the floor, unclipped a thin flash from an inside pocket, snapped it on. It probed weakly through the dusty air. The blonde lay on her back with her eyes wide open and her mouth twisted into a sort of grin. She was sobbing. Dalmas bent over her. There didn't seem to be a mark on her.

He went on down the room. He found his hat untouched beside the chair that had half the top shot off. The bottle of bourbon lay beside the hat. He picked them both up. The man with the chopper had raked the room waist-high, back and forth, without lowering it far enough. Dalmas went on farther, came to the door.

Denny was on his knees in front of the door. He was swaying backwards and forwards and holding one of his hands in the other. Blood dribbled between his thick fingers.

Dalmas got the door open and went out. There was a smear of blood and a litter of shells on the walk. There was nobody in sight. He stood there with the blood beating in his face, like little hammers. The skin around his nose prickled.

He drank some whiskey out of the bottle and turned and went back into the house. Denny was up on his feet now. He had a handkerchief out and was tying it around his bloody hand. He looked dazed, drunk. He swayed on his feet. Dalmas put the beam of the flash on his face.

He said: "Hurt much?"

"No. Clipped on the hand," the big man said thickly. His fingers were clumsy on the handkerchief.

"The blonde's scared blind," Dalmas said. "It's your party, boy. Nice pals you have. They meant to get all three of us. You rattled them when you took a pot out of the peephole. I guess I owe you something for that, Denny... The gunner wasn't so good."

Denny said: "Where you goin'?"

"Where d'you think?"

Denny looked at him. "Sutro's your man," he said slowly. "I'm through—washed up. They can all go to hell."

Dalmas went through the door again, down the path to the street. He got into his car and drove away without lights. When he had turned corners and gone some distance he switched the lights on and got out and dusted himself off.

Chapter 9

Black and silver curtains opened in an inverted V against a haze of cigarette and cigar smoke. The brasses of the dance band shot brief flashes of color through the haze. There was a smell of food and liquor and perfume and face powder. The dance floor was an empty splash of amber light and looked slightly larger than a screen star's bath mat.

Then the band started up and the lights went down, and a headwaiter came up the carpeted steps tapping a gold pencil against the satin stripe of his trousers. He had narrow, lifeless eyes and blond-white hair sleeked back off a bony forehead.

Dalmas said: "I'd like to see Mister Donner."

The headwaiter tapped his teeth with his gold pencil. "I'm afraid he's busy. What name?"

"Dalmas. Tell him I'm a special friend of Johnny Sutro's."

The headwaiter said: "I'll try."

He went across to a panel that had a row of buttons on it and a small one-piece phone. He took it off the hook and put it to his ear, staring at Dalmas across the cup with the impersonal stare of a stuffed animal.

Dalmas said: "I'll be in the lobby."

He went back through the curtains and prowled over to the Men's Room. Inside he got out the bottle of bourbon and drank what was left of it, tilting his head back and standing splay-legged in the middle of the tiled floor. A wizened Negro in a white jacket fluttered at him, said anxiously: "No drinkin' in here, boss."

Dalmas threw the empty bottle into a receptacle for towels. He took a clean towel off the glass shelf, wiped his lips with it, put a dime down on the edge of the basin and went out.

There was a space between an inner and outer door. He leaned against the outer door and took a small automatic about four inches long out of his vest pocket. He held it with three fingers against the inside of his hat and went on out, swinging the hat gently beside his body.

After a while a tall Filipino with silky black hair came into the lobby and looked around. Dalmas went towards him. The headwaiter looked out through the curtains and nodded at the Filipino.

The Filipino spoke to Dalmas: "This way, boss."

They went down a long, quiet corridor. The sound of the dance band died away behind them. Some deserted green-topped tables showed through an open door. The corridor turned into another that was at right angles, and at the end of this one some light came out through a doorway.

The Filipino paused in midstride and made a graceful, complicated movement, at the end of which he had a big, black automatic in his hand. He prodded it politely into Dalmas' ribs.

"Got to frisk you, boss. House rules."

Dalmas stood still and held his arms out from his sides. The Filipino took Dalmas' Colt away from him and dropped it into his pocket. He patted the rest of Dalmas' pockets, stepped back and holstered his own cannon.

Dalmas lowered his arms and let his hat fall on the floor and the little automatic that had been inside the hat peered neatly at the Filipino's belly. The Filipino looked down at it with a shocked grin.

Dalmas said: "That was fun, spig. Let me do it."

He put his Colt back where it belonged, took the big automatic from under the Filipino's arm, slipped the magazine out of it and ejected the shell that was in the chamber. He gave the empty gun back to the Filipino.

"You can still use it for a sap. If you stay in front of me, your boss don't have to know that's all it's good for."

The Filipino licked his lips. Dalmas felt him for another gun, and they went on along the corridor, went in at the door that was partly open. The Filipino went first.

It was a big room with walls paneled in diagonal strips of wood. A yellow Chinese rug on the floor, plenty of good furniture, countersunk doors that told of soundproofing, and no windows. There were several gilt gratings high up and a built-in ventilator fan made a faint, soothing murmur. Four men were in the room. Nobody said anything.

Dalmas sat down on a leather divan and stared at Ricchio, the smooth boy who had walked him out of Walden's apartment. Ricchio was tied to a high-backed chair. His arms were pulled around behind it and fastened together at the wrists. His eyes were mad and his face was a welter of blood and bruises. He had been pistol whipped. The sandy-haired man, Noddy, who had been with him at the Kilmarnock sat on a sort of stool in the corner, smoking.

John Sutro was rocking slowly in a red leather rocker, staring down at the floor. He did not look up when Dalmas came into the room.

The fourth man sat behind a desk that looked as if it had cost a lot of money. He had soft brown hair parted in the middle and brushed back and down; thin lips and reddish-brown eyes that had hot lights in them. He watched Mallory while he sat down and looked around. Then he spoke, glancing at Ricchio.

"The punk got a little out of hand. We've been telling him about it. I guess you're not sorry."

Dalmas laughed shortly, without mirth. "All right as far as it goes, Donner. How about the other one? I don't see any marks on him."

"Noddy's all right. He worked under orders," Donner said evenly. He picked up a long-handled file and began to file one of his nails. "You and I have things to talk about. That's why you got in here. You look all right to me—if you don't try to cover too much ground with your private-dick racket."

Dalmas' eyes widened a little. He said: "I'm listening, Donner."

Sutro lifted his eyes and stared at the back of Donner's head. Donner went on talking in a smooth indifferent voice.

"I know all about the play at Derek Walden's place and I know about the shooting on Kenmore. If I'd thought Ricchio would go that crazy, I'd have stopped him before. As it is, I figure it's up to me to straighten things out... And when we get through here Mister Ricchio will go downtown and speak his piece.

"Here's how it happened. Ricchio used to work for Walden when the Hollywood crowd went in for bodyguards. Walden bought his liquor in Ensenada—still does, for all I know—and brought it in himself. Nobody bothered him. Ricchio saw a chance to bring in some white goods under good cover. Walden caught him at it. He didn't want a scandal, so he just showed Ricchio the gate. Ricchio took advantage of that by trying to shake Walden down, on the theory that he wasn't clean enough to stand the working-over the Feds would give him. Walden didn't

shake fast enough to suit Ricchio, so he went hog-wild and decided on a strong-arm play. You and your driver messed it up and Ricchio went gunning for you.”

Donner put down his file and smiled. Dalmas shrugged and glanced at the Filipino, who was standing by the wall, at the end of the divan.

Dalmas said: “I don’t have your organization, Donner, but I get around. I think that’s a smooth story and it would have got by—with a little co-operation downtown. But it won’t fit the facts as they are now.”

Donner raised his eyebrows. Sutro began to swing the tip of his polished shoe up and down in front of his knee.

Dalmas said: “How does Mister Sutro fit into all this?”

Sutro stared at him and stopped rocking. He made a swift, impatient movement. Donner smiled. “He’s a friend of Walden’s. Walden talked to him a little and Sutro knows Ricchio worked for me. But being a councilman he didn’t want to tell Walden everything he knew.”

Dalmas said grimly: “I’ll tell you what’s wrong with your story, Donner. There’s not enough fear in it. Walden was too scared to help me even when I was working for him... And this afternoon somebody was so scared of him that he got shot.”

Donner leaned forward and his eyes got small and tight. His hands balled into fists on the desk before him.

“Walden is—dead?” he almost whispered.

Dalmas nodded. “Shot in the right temple... with a thirty-two. It looks like suicide. It isn’t.”

Sutro put his hand up quickly and covered his face. The sandy-haired man got rigid on his stool in the corner.

Dalmas said: “Want to hear a good honest guess, Donner...? We’ll call it a guess... Walden was in the dope-smuggling racket himself—and not all by his lonesome. But after Repeal he wanted to quit. The coast guards wouldn’t have to spend so much time watching liquor ships, and dope-smuggling up the coast wasn’t going to be gravy any more. And Walden got sweet on a gal that had good eyes and could add up to ten. So he wanted to walk out on the dope racket.”

Donner moistened his lips and said: “What dope racket?”

Dalmas eyed him. “You wouldn’t know about anything like that, would you, Donner? Hell, no, that’s something for the bad boys to play with. And the bad boys didn’t like the idea of Walden quitting that way. He was drinking too much—and he might start to broadcast to his girl friend. They wanted him to quit the way he did—on the receiving end of a gun.”

Donner turned his head slowly and stared at the bound man on the high-backed chair. He said very softly: “Ricchio.”

Then he got up and walked around his desk. Sutro took his hand down from his face and watched with his lips shaking.

Donner stood in front of Ricchio. He put his hand out against Ricchio’s head and jarred it back against the chair. Ricchio moaned. Donner smiled down at him.

“I must be slowing up. You killed Walden, you bastard! You went back and croaked him. You forgot to tell us about that part, baby.”

Ricchio opened his mouth and spit a stream of blood against Donner’s hand and wrist. Donner’s face twitched and he stepped back and away, holding the

hand straight out in front of him. He took out a handkerchief and wiped it off carefully, dropped the handkerchief on the floor.

“Lend me your gun, Noddy,” he said quietly, going towards the sandy-haired man.

Sutro jerked and his mouth fell open. His eyes looked sick. The tall Filipino flicked his empty automatic into his hand as if he had forgotten it was empty. Noddy took a blunt revolver from under his right arm, held it out to Donner.

Donner took it from him and went back to Ricchio. He raised the gun.

Dalmas said: “Ricchio didn’t kill Walden.”

The Filipino took a quick step forward and slashed at him with his big automatic. The gun hit Dalmas on the point of the shoulder, and a wave of pain billowed down his arm. He rolled away and snapped his Colt into his hand. The Filipino swung at him again, missed.

Dalmas slid to his feet, side-stepped and laid the barrel of the Colt along the side of the Filipino’s head, with all his strength. The Filipino grunted, sat down on the floor, and the whites showed all around his eyes. He fell over slowly, clawing at the divan.

There was no expression on Donner’s face and he held his blunt revolver perfectly still. His long upper lip was beaded with sweat.

Dalmas said: “Ricchio didn’t kill Walden. Walden was killed with a filed gun and the gun was planted in his hand. Ricchio wouldn’t go within a block of a filed gun.”

Sutro’s face was ghastly. The sandy-haired man had got down off his stool and stood with his right hand swinging at his side.

“Tell me more,” Donner said evenly.

“The filed gun traces to a broad named Helen Dalton or Burwand,” Dalmas said. “It was her gun. She told me that she hocked it long ago. I didn’t believe her. She’s a good friend of Sutro’s and Sutro was so bothered by my going to see her that he pulled a gat on me himself. Why do you suppose Sutro was bothered, Donner, and how do you suppose he knew I was likely to go see the broad?”

Donner said: “Go ahead and tell me.” He looked at Sutro very quietly.

Dalmas took a step closer to Donner and held his Colt down at his side, not threateningly.

“I’ll tell you how and why. I’ve been tailed ever since I started to work for Walden—tailed by a clumsy ox of a studio dick I could spot a mile off. He was bought, Donner. The guy that killed Walden bought him. He figured the studio dick had a chance to get next to me, and I let him do just that—to give him rope and spot his game. His boss was Sutro. Sutro killed Walden—with his own hand. It was that kind of a job. An amateur job—a smart-aleck kill. The thing that made it smart was the thing that gave it away—the suicide plant, with a filed gun that the killer thought couldn’t be traced because he didn’t know most guns have numbers inside.”

Donner swung the blunt revolver until it pointed midway between the sandy-haired man and Sutro. He didn’t say anything. His eyes were thoughtful and interested.

Dalmas shifted his weight a little, on to the balls of his feet. The Filipino on the floor put a hand along the divan and his nails scratched on the leather.

“There’s more of it, Donner, but what the hell! Sutro was Walden’s pal, and he could get close to him, close enough to stick a gun to his head and let go. A shot wouldn’t be heard on the penthouse floor of the Kilmarnock, one little shot from a thirty-two. So Sutro put the gun in Walden’s hand and went on his way. But he forgot that Walden was left-handed and he didn’t know the gun could be traced. When it was—and his bought man wised him up—and I tapped the girl—he hired himself a chopper squad and angled all three of us out to a house in Palms to button our mouths for good... Only the chopper squad, like everything else in this play, didn’t do its stuff so good.”

Donner nodded slowly. He looked at a spot in the middle of Sutro’s stomach and lined his gun on it.

“Tell us about it, Johnny,” he said softly. “Tell us how you got clever in your old age—”

The sandy-haired man moved suddenly. He dodged down behind the desk and as he went down his right hand swept for his other gun. It roared from behind the desk. The bullet came through the kneehole and pinged into the wall with a sound of striking metal behind the paneling.

Dalmas jerked his Colt and fired twice into the desk. A few splinters flew. The sandy-haired man yelled behind the desk and came up fast with his gun flaming in his hand. Donner staggered. His gun spoke twice, very quickly. The sandy-haired man yelled again, and blood jumped straight out from one of his cheeks. He went down behind the desk and stayed quiet.

Donner backed until he touched the wall. Sutro stood up and put his hands in front of his stomach and tried to scream.

Donner said: “Okey, Johnny. Your turn.”

Then Donner coughed suddenly and slid down the wall with a dry rustle of cloth. He bent forward and dropped his gun and put his hands on the floor and went on coughing. His face got gray.

Sutro stood rigid, his hands in front of his stomach, and bent back at the wrists, the fingers curved clawlike. There was no light behind his eyes. They were dead eyes. After a moment his knees buckled and he fell down on the floor on his back.

Donner went on coughing quietly.

Dalmas crossed swiftly to the door of the room, listened at it, opened it and looked out. He shut it again quickly.

“Soundproof—and how!” he muttered.

He went back to the desk and lifted the telephone off its prongs. He put his Colt down and dialed, waited, said into the phone: “Captain Cathcart... Got to talk to him... Sure, it’s important... very important.”

He waited, drumming on the desk, staring hard-eyed around the room. He jerked a little as a sleepy voice came over the wire.

“Dalmas, Chief. I’m at the Casa Mariposa, in Gayn Donner’s private office. There’s been a little trouble, but nobody hurt bad... I’ve got Derek Walden’s killer for you... Johnny Sutro did it... Yeah, the councilman... Make it fast, Chief... I wouldn’t want to get in a fight with the help, you know....”

He hung up and picked his Colt off the top of the desk, held it on the flat of his hand and stared across at Sutro.

“Get off the floor, Johnny,” he said wearily. “Get up and tell a poor dumb dick how to cover this one up—smart guy!”

Chapter 10

The light above the big oak table at Headquarters was too bright. Dalmas ran a finger along the wood, looked at it, wiped it off on his sleeve. He cupped his chin in his lean hands and stared at the wall above the roll-top desk that was beyond the table. He was alone in the room.

The loudspeaker on the wall droned: “Calling Car 71W in 72’s district... at Third and Berendo... at the drugstore... meet a man...”

The door opened and Captain Cathcart came in, shut the door carefully behind him. He was a big, battered man with a wide, moist face, a strained mustache, gnarled hands.

He sat down between the oak table and the roll-top desk and fingered a cold pipe that lay in the ashtray.

Dalmas raised his head from between his hands. Cathcart said: “Sutro’s dead.”

Dalmas stared, said nothing.

“His wife did it. He wanted to stop by his house a minute. The boys watched him good but they didn’t watch her. She slipped him the dose before they could move.”

Cathcart opened and shut his mouth twice. He had strong, dirty teeth.

“She never said a damn word. Brought a little gun around from behind her and fed him three slugs. One, two, three. Win, place, show. Just like that. Then she turned the gun around in her hand as nice as you could think of and handed it to the boys... What in hell she do that for?”

Dalmas said: “Get a confession?”

Cathcart stared at him and put the cold pipe in his mouth. He sucked on it noisily. “From him? Yeah—not on paper, though... What you suppose she done that for?”

“She knew about the blonde,” Dalmas said. “She thought it was her last chance. Maybe she knew about his rackets.”

The captain nodded slowly. “Sure,” he said. “That’s it. She figured it was her last chance. And why shouldn’t she bop the bastard? If the D.A.’s smart, he’ll let her take a manslaughter plea. That’d be about fifteen months at Tehachapi. A rest cure.”

Dalmas moved in his chair. He frowned.

Cathcart went on: “It’s a break for all of us. No dirt your way, no dirt on the administration. If she hadn’t done it, it would have been a kick in the pants all around. She ought to get a pension.”

“She ought to get a contract from Eclipse Films,” Dalmas said. “When I got to Sutro I figured I was licked on the publicity angle. I might have gunned Sutro myself—if he hadn’t been so yellow—and if he hadn’t been a councilman.”

“Nix on that, baby. Leave that stuff to the law,” Cathcart growled. “Here’s how it looks. I don’t figure we can get Walden on the book as a suicide. The filed gun is

against it and we got to wait for the autopsy and the gun-shark's report. And a paraffin test of the hand ought to show he didn't fire the gun at all. On the other hand, the case is closed on Sutro and what has to come out ought not to hurt too bad. Am I right?"

Dalmas took out a cigarette and rolled it between his fingers. He lit it slowly and waved the match until it went out.

"Walden was no lily," he said. "It's the dope angle that would raise hell—but that's cold. I guess we're jake, except for a few loose ends."

"Hell with the loose ends," Cathcart grinned. "Nobody's getting away with any fix that I can see. That sidekick of yours, Denny, will fade in a hurry and if I ever get my paws on the Dalton frail, I'll send her to Mendocino for the cure. We might get something on Donner—after the hospital gets through with him. We've got to put the rap on those hoods, for the stick-up and the taxi driver, whichever of 'em did that, but they won't talk. They still got a future to think about, and the taxi driver ain't so bad hurt. That leaves the chopper squad." Cathcart yawned. "Those boys must be from 'Frisco. We don't run to choppers around here much."

Dalmas sagged in his chair. "You wouldn't have a drink, would you, Chief?" he said dully.

Cathcart stared at him. "There's just one thing," he said grimly. "I want you to stay told about that. It was okey for you to break that gun—if you didn't spoil the prints. And I guess it was okey for you not to tell me, seein' the jam you were in. But I'll be damned if it's okey for you to beat our time by chiselin' on our own records."

Dalmas smiled thoughtfully at him. "You're right all the way, Chief," he said humbly. "It was the job—and that's all a guy can say."

Cathcart rubbed his cheeks vigorously. His frown went away and he grinned. Then he bent over and pulled out a drawer and brought up a quart bottle of rye. He put it on the desk and pressed a buzzer. A very large uniformed torso came part way into the room.

"Hey, Tiny!" Cathcart boomed. "Loan me that corkscrew you swiped out of my desk." The torso disappeared and came back.

"What'll we drink to?" the captain asked a couple of minutes later.

Dalmas said: "Let's just drink."

