

MICKEY SPILLANE

**DAY
OF THE
GUNS**



A SIGNET BOOK

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To: The tigers of the world. There are still a few left. Some are dead and some will die, but the living ones be careful of. Those who know the inside story will get the message.

M.

Chapter 1

I looked past Wally Gibbons at the woman who had just come into the Cavalier Restaurant and felt the same as every other man in the place. Just to see her had a startling effect, but that low laugh and throaty voice was like the caress of fingertips across a naked stomach.

She was tall and auburn-haired with the edges of it curling around an upturned collar onto her shoulders and the wide-belted trench coat made you tingle because you knew she was all real beneath it. She had the lapels thrown back wide so that the flesh of her throat merged into the swell of her breasts before plunging into the black fabric of her dress.

Pedro, the maître d', bowed lower than was his usual habit, smiled more charmingly than he ever did to anyone else and led her past the tables of craning necks to the back of the room and into the alcove where the two stout men were sitting and hid her out of sight in the corner. Once she was there the table talk around us resumed, but the subject was the same, from the wishful thinking of the junior execs to the dirty cracks of the boys who liked to make like they'd been around.

Wally speared a piece of fish and grinned at me. "How about that," he said.

I grunted and picked up my drink.

"Come on, Tiger, don't play it down. Some broad, huh?"

"Swell," I said.

"Comes in here every once in a while. Never saw it yet when she didn't stop the action. I ran a piece about the mystery ... just a U.N. translator, a sort of foreign-type career girl too dedicated to her job to be seen around much. Not that she doesn't get the offers."

Somebody at the next table made a snide remark and the others laughed. "Not that they wouldn't like to hand them out," I said.

Wally shook his head. "Hell, Tiger, I've seen it tried. Those English broads can knock you off your pins with two words and a look." He grinned at me. "Being a big columnist and all, I even tried it myself."

"And ... ?"

"I got knocked off with two words and a look."

"Tough."

"Go give it a try, Tiger. You're not like in the old days, but from the word

I hear you're still pretty active. I'd like to see you get bounced. Just once."

"Why?"

"Oh, you know ... losers enjoy seeing winners get their lumps once in a while."

"I got enough to last me, buddy."

"So be a sport and give it a try. Hell, everybody else did. They're all waiting for a champ to come along. They'll hate your guts if you make out, but, man, they'll be looking up to you the rest of your life if you swing it."

"Forget it."

"Come on, Tiger ..." he grinned again and shoved his plate away. "Her name is Edith Caine. London background, old family and all that. I understand she has plenty of private loot, so you can't use that approach. I've seen some Hollywood types make their pitch, and public personalities don't seem to sway her any, so that's out. All you can do is turn on the charm and whisper whatever the hell it is you whisper in their ears."

"Quit being a clown. I've had it."

"I'll write that you're a fink."

"So who knows me?" I laughed.

Wally put his drink down and stared across the table. "That, Tiger, is something I've always wondered about. Once or twice a year we get together and each time there's something different about you. At the wrong seasons you come in with a tan, I catch you in the shower last time and you got a new bullet hole in you that wasn't from the Army days, you have money to sit in on a big game and some funny pull in queer quarters. Now I'm a newspaperman and have ways of finding out things, yet I can't run you down in anything. I can't get past that discharge in '46. You might not even be alive, for all I know."

"I'm a spook."

"Sure. So go spook the broad. You're Tiger Mann, she's Edith Caine, go introduce yourself."

I put my drink down, swirled the ice around in my glass a second and took my hand away. "I don't need any introduction," I told him. "Her name isn't Edith Caine ... it's Rondine Lund. She isn't English, she's Austrian and during the war she was a goddamn Nazi spy. She shot me twice in '45 and left me for dead, and if there's anybody in this world left that I'd like to kill, it's her. No, buddy, we don't need any introduction."

Wally couldn't answer. He sat there looking at me as though I was crazy, then his eyes squinched up to ask a question, but before he could he waved the thought away and said, "You're nuts." He pointed at my drink, then motioned to the waiter for another round. "Damn, what an actor you are. You almost get me believing you. After twenty years on the Broadway circuit in the newspaper business you'd think I could spot a line right off. Buddy, you should be in Hollywood, you and that crazy name of yours."

"The checker-outer," I said as the drinks came.

"Damn right. I have a reputation too, Tiger boy. She's been a news item since she got here six months ago. Everybody was flipping over the glamorpuss at the U.N., and right after she was on the cover of the Sunday-supplement section, I was assigned to do a piece on her. So did a few other columnists. So back we went through the British Embassy, the respectable Caine family in old London, a fashionable girl's school and a previous position in some obscure agency of the British government. She's twenty-eight, unmarried and untouchable. You're just finding out."

I leaned back in my chair and lit a smoke. "She's thirty-nine, an Austrian national and in '45 she tried to kill me."

"Okay, Tiger, tell me a story. I'll give you two minutes and have to blow. Maybe I can sell it to Paramount."

"Drop dead," I said.

Wally called for the check, signed it, and picked up his envelope off the spare chair. "When do I see you again?"

"Who knows? I'll call you."

"Anytime. You're always good for a laugh. If you ever run across any of the old gang, give 'em my regards. You going to be at the Group reunion this year?"

"Maybe."

"Try to make it. Terry Atkins and Bob Shiffer won't be there. Terry got killed down in Honduras during the flare-up and Ben got his from a cheap hood when they were cleaning up that narcotics ring in L.A."

"I heard about it."

"Brother, they can stuff the cop angle. One tour during the war with the O.S.S. was all I could take. I get scared."

"Who doesn't?"

"Yeah," he grinned. "Take it easy. I'll see you around"

He left then, and I sat back with the butt until it was down to the filter, then I squashed it out and got up from the chair.

The two fat guys had the look of importance about them, their clothes tailor-made for shape and the cigars the best. They were dignity and money with the subtle power of governments showing in their demeanor. They were speaking of the Common Market and exchange of trade when I walked up to the table and their eyes showed the intelligence of breeding and knowledge of affairs and they stood up when they realized I was about to join them.

But there was a hint of laughter there because they had evidently seen it happen before, knew why I was there and waited to see sudden death from a frosty glance and a few words.

I said, "Hello, Rondine."

Chapter 2

She was very good. Much better than I had expected. Her smile was lovely and forthright, and when the two men passed a quizzical look between them, I said, “Pet name,” and held out my hand.

There was strength in her fingers, her smile a magical thing, and when I looked at her sitting there I could see why all the others wanted that crazy body so badly. She was woman all the way, bloomed to perfection and proud of the valley between her breasts and the way the tight-fitting dress dipped into her hips and swelled out against her thighs.

“It’s been a long time, honey,” I told her. I let her hand go and looked at the two men. “Tiger Mann,” I said, shaking with them both. “Ridiculous name, but my father gave it to me.”

One was Burton Selwick, the other Vincent Harley Case. Both were connected with the British legation, active at the U.N., both models of propriety and they invited me to join them. Pedro found another chair, brought a fresh drink, and we raised a toast to the beautiful, gorgeous killer sitting in the corner.

Selwick put his drink down and offered me a cigar. I shook my head and dumped the last butt out of my pack. “Are you in politics, Mr. Mann?” His voice had the crisp, cultured tone of an Oxford graduate that didn’t quite conceal the subtle note of authority, a quality heard only behind closed doors at Downing Street.

I took the light he held out. “No ... not politics.” I looked across the flame at Rondine. She was sitting there with her chin propped on the back of her fingers, smiling. “You might call it ... international business. Of a sort, that is.”

“I see.” He didn’t really, but he said it.

“And how have you been, honey?”

“Fine, Mr. Mann.”

“It used to be Tiger.”

Her laugh was as deep as it ever was. “Fine, Tiger. And you?”

“Not bad at all. I’m surprised to see you again.”

She made a gesture with her hands. “The world changes. Things happen.”

I could still feel those two bullets going into my belly. “But we can still remember, can’t we?” I said.

Her eyes were a peculiar shade. I tried to remember what they were like when I saw them last in the little room in Hamburg. Outside, the Eighth Air Force was plastering the city with block-busters and in another two minutes Cal Haggerty would be coming up the stairs with a tommy gun that would blow that goddamn nest of agents right off the face of the earth ... only she had killed Cal too because she was quicker and had all the wiles of a woman going for her. You don't spray a naked broad with .45's without looking at her first and he had looked too pointedly and too long and had missed the Luger in her hand.

Vincent Case looked at his watch and snubbed his cigar out. "Well, you two, supposing we leave you to your reminiscing. We have to be back, but since everyone has adjourned for the weekend, you might as well stay, my dear. Mr. Mann, it was a pleasure." Unlike his partner, there was a slight Scottish burr to his words.

Burton Selwick said, "As for me, I'm afraid my day is ended. A few years after fifty can bring tiredness too easily, ulcers too abruptly, and strange pains that make one yearn for the heath and heather and the hearth."

Rondine shot him a sudden glance of compassion, but one so easily assumed. "Are you all right?"

"Just the usual complaint. Overwork, my dear. Too many late hours, too much work and the usual complaints. I'll be happy to be replaced when the time comes."

"The doctor ..."

He spread his palms out and smiled. "Exactly what I've just told you. Age, my dear. A few pills, a little administration, and I shall be quite well again to work another day."

I shook hands with them both. "Nice to see you," I said and watched them leave. Then I picked up a cigarette from her gold case, put it between her lips like I used to and lit it for her.

"Tiger," she said softly.

"Yes, dear," I said just as softly. "And now you're on your way down because I'm going to kill you just as dead as you thought you did me. Surprised? You shouldn't be."

She blew a thin stream of smoke at me, her eyes as steady as ever, not afraid. They had never been afraid. Determined, dedicated, but never afraid. "I was wondering when someone would come," she said.

“It’s now, honey.”

“I see. Can I explain?”

“No.”

“How are you going to kill me?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. “I think I’ll shoot you.”

“Why?”

I grinned at her, enjoying something I had thought about for almost twenty years. “It’s not so much the past, sugar, but the present. You’re back, you’re here. Nobody knows it except me, maybe, but you haven’t changed. Your damn setup is as good as it was then. You’re still what you were, one of those tying the world into knots and you’re in the right place to do it. U.N. translator? Hell kid you can speak seven languages and were trained in the greatest espionage school that ever existed. Right now you have a minor job but a key position to take what you want and wherever your information is going you got it made. With all the background and experiences you have it must be like making mud pies for you. Only now there’s a difference.”

“Oh?”

“Me. Now you can die. You left me with my belly torn out and figured me for dead. You suckered me into a beautiful love trap when I should have known better than to fall for a stinking Nazi agent and even when I let you off the hook .. when I gave you a chance to get out when I could have killed you, you didn’t take it ... hell no, you gave me a pair of quick ones and blew. Honey ... it wouldn’t have mattered ... the war was over ... you could have made it if the hate wasn’t inside you so deep nobody could get it out.”

I put out my butt and sat back smiling at her as if it were just another luncheon conversation. “So now you die, kid. Whatever you’re up to, tough ... you die.”

Her face pulled together and the tip of her tongue wet her lips. “When?”

“Soon. I could do it right now, but first I find out what game you’re playing and why. Then, pretty killer ... right in that smooth gut of yours.”

“Tiger ...”

“Come on, honey ... you’ve had it too. No way out. Maybe you’ve had the face lifted and the gray dyed out, but this is the old soldier who dropped into Germany and made the big one. I don’t go the mistake route twice. Kid ... you’re dead. From this minute on, you’re dead. I’d do it now only I want to enjoy it. I want to poke around some and blow your game before I put the big

one inside your stomach.”

I pushed my chair back, stood up and grinned down at her. A sudden, strange expression clouded her eyes. then passed.

“You were a great lover,” I said. “Remember the bomb shelter?”

Her eyes were like twin arrows reaching for me.

“Remember the rainy night I lied to keep the Frenchies from finding you?”

Both of her hands were tightened into knots.

“They would have killed me if they had found out, Rondine. But we were lovers, one Nazi spy, one American spy. You showed your appreciation well. Ten minutes after we went to bed together you shot me. Twice. Ten minutes after you were rolling on that bed crying and moaning because you never had anything like it before you gave me two in the gut. That’s real appreciation. Thanks a bunch. Now sweat.”

The wetness that came in her eyes didn’t bother me any. The quick motion of a sob that forced the cleft of her breasts apart had no effect at all.

I said, “Later, Rondine. I’ll see you later. Just sweat.”

They watched when I left. They knew I had been back there alone with her when nobody else was able to make it. They had seen the other two go, the essence of dignity and respectability, and now they saw a different type none of them could put their finger on and wouldn’t really want to because I had to shave every day and looked at too many mirrors not to know what the others had seen.

Only those wouldn’t talk any more. They couldn’t. They were dead.

They came for me that night like I knew they would. I set it up beautifully and it was like the New York Giants pulling the Statue of Liberty play on the Packers. It was so damn old, with the dummy in the bed and all the archaic bits and pieces that went with the play that it was almost pathetic. I wanted to find out how fast they could run me down when nobody knew I was here or where I was, and they did a great job. Just great.

Except they missed.

I was outside on the window sill, forty feet above the street, hanging on to a rig I had snapped into the window washer’s clamps, with a .45 in my fist for safety’s sake and they came in the door with a key, smiling and joking like it was their room and the two of them pumped a full clip of slugs into the mound on the bed, each one going off with an almost inaudible *plop*, and the

idiots were so sure of themselves and so anxious to be out of there they didn't check to see what they had hit. You don't catch a slug, even in your sleep, without a twitch or rearing up or some blood spilling out and the jerks didn't check it. They simply laughed some more, opened the door and walked out.

I gave them a full minute, opened the window, swung in and looked at the holes in the bedclothes. Tomorrow the house-keeper was going to be one teed-off broad. Maybe I'd even make a complaint. Fourteen shots had torn up three pillows under the blankets and left the room stinking of cordite.

I threw the chain on the door, double-locked it, fanned the fumes out of the room and climbed into my nice shot-up sack. Tomorrow was going to be full of surprises. For Rondine, anyway.

Chapter 3

Unless you've made a trip to the U.N. and sat in on a meeting of the General Assembly or the Security Council you don't know what you're missing. Outside on the door there's a quotation from Scripture ... about turning swords into plowshares. There's not even a credit line ... you'd think they had dreamed the possibility up. But considering the fact that ever since its inception the world has been at war, you'd think that this magnificent conglomeration of brains assembled from the world over were there for one purpose ... not to make peace, but to figure out how many ways there were to kill. Hell, it's an old story, look at the record. We get stuck with the bills and the trouble. They scream for the gravy. But there are still some of us left. They can't kill us all.

Something had come up about Ghana and week-end passes had been canceled. I made a phone call from the lobby and an innocuous-looking guy had come out to show me to a spectator's seat. He gave me that funny look I always got when my calls had been routed and didn't ask any damn questions, but there was a distaste in his face when he saw my eyes. Maybe he knew. Maybe he didn't. But he felt. I made sure of that.

The Russians were shouting that day. They didn't like what was coming up. It had to do with U.N. dues and some million-dollar trivialities and all I could think of was the slob who didn't let Patton go ahead into Berlin and we had to split the spoils with pigs who later built the wall. We break our asses fighting and the striped-pants gang loses the peace.

Nothing much came out of it, but I found Rondine.

I came up behind her and said, "How much longer, honey?"

She was better than when we met. She looked around slowly, never hesitating in her translation, but the sudden widening of her eyes was enough to spell it out. The only thing that was wrong was that the wetness came back again and all I could think of was how much a woman could hate that she'd cry because one man didn't die.

I looked at the clock. The session was almost over. "I'll wait outside," I said.

She only took fifteen minutes. She came through the door composed and smiling as if death and terror were a daily occurrence. And they were. "Hello, Tiger."

“Tell me something.”

“All right.”

“Who did the face job ... the plastic surgery? You look great. The lines don’t show at all.”

“They weren’t supposed to.”

“Your boys missed last night. I want you to tell them something. Will you?”

“Yes.” Her eyes dropped to the floor.

“I could have killed them, baby. It would have been fun. Tell them they don’t get a second chance. Neither do you.”

“Tiger ...” She was clear again. Beautiful as hell, woman all the way. She was almost as big as I was, soft luxurious woman I could fall into and kiss and love ... only I wouldn’t. “Are you hurt that badly?” she asked.

“It was a long time ago. The hurt is a long time gone.”

“Revenge?”

“Nope.”

“What then?”

“Satisfaction. I need it. I died too many times since you. All I want is you dead.”

“I’m here.”

“Uh-uh. I want your reason first. I want to see you scared again, then you die.”

She did it too fast for me to stop her. She raised on her toes with her hands behind her head and her mouth was a hot, wet fire that pierced into me with a wild spurt of passion that sucked her body behind it, pressing it flat against mine. Before I could push her away she did it herself, then stood back and smiled, her teeth showing their white edges.

“Don’t die again, Tiger,” she said.

And when I smiled her eyes went dark and tightened at the comers because she read me right. “Don’t worry, I won’t,” I reminded her.

The building on Fifth Avenue was a brand-new modern monstrosity that towered over Manhattan and on the sixteenth floor it housed one single office that bore the label, *THOMAS WATFORD, IMPORT-EXPORT*. I walked in, told the receptionist I’d like to speak to Mr. Watford, and no I didn’t have an

appointment, but he'd see me. She made the call, told me to go in and when I went through the door the gimlet-eyed guy in blue with the tight crew cut looked up, leaned back in his chair and said, "Ah, yes, Tiger Mann. Have a seat, Tiger."

I sat down.

"We heard you were in town," he said.

"Your agency has big ears."

"Not really. The trouble you leave behind you is easy to follow. It isn't appreciated."

"Tough, Mac."

The chair creaked forward and I wondered how many guys he had scared to death with that face of his. "We were aware that you knew of us. I don't like it."

"Then don't try to hide. We're pros too."

"Are you really?"

"You got a file on me."

"The rest of the group you represent, too. Very professional. You call yourselves patriots, don't you?"

I shrugged. "Not me. I used to, but no more. Now I just like the trouble. We get clobbered by all the pinkos and the liberals, but I gave up the patriot angle a long time ago. Too damn many patriots are going down the wide-open trail to Communism to suit me. They swallow the garbage, the promises, they lead the country down the garden path singing songs of peace and happiness behind the shoe-pounder and the do-gooders, but not me. I'm just one guy who likes trouble."

"Your bunch is going to get slammed by a Congressional investigation, Tiger."

"So go ahead. We're ready."

"Listen ..."

"Who stopped the bit in Nicaragua? Who killed off the uprising in the Honduras? Who went into Colombia and Panama and put the squash on that deal? You slobs tried working it with papers and a couple of money twists when there were guns out in the open. Okay, buddy ... get this, we're a power. We can push. We go right where it hurts those Commie bastards and we're not stopping. Like Hitler had commercial money behind him, we have top financing too. It's no Hitler job, but don't count us out. You're a secret

tunnel here and we know the secret, so play ball or I'll blow the lid off this outfit now. Pretty?"

Watford sat back again, picked up a pencil and tapped it against the desk. "We heard what you had in mind."

"You know the way out. You're too big to break up. You know we can smear you if we want to. I'll break up this whole goddamn operation unless you cooperate and you can't afford to lose your cover. Too much is involved."

"Mr. Mann ... you are a traitor."

"Not yet, friend. Not ever. Maybe in your eyes, but not ever. It's just that we're sick of some things and do them our own way."

"Illegally."

"The terminology is extralegal. We did it in 1776 too."

"This is 1964."

"So we'll do it again."

THOMAS WATFORD, IMPORT-EXPORT, was fed from Washington, D. C. It was a tight, secret agency that worked out of L.A.T.S, and what they had nobody was supposed to know.

But we knew.

The grand machinery of The Government vs. People Who Cared, I thought.

I said, "There's a girl in the U.N., a translator. Her name is Edith Caine. I want a check on her tomorrow."

"Personal, Tiger?"

"You might say that."

"Or else, I suppose."

I shrugged. "I got friends who think public agencies should be public information."

"No doubt. And where do I deliver this information?"

"I'll call you," I told him and left.

I took the bullets I had squeezed out of the pillows to Ernie Bentley and five minutes later had a report on them. They were perfectly bore-marked for a ballistics check and the next time they showed up I'd know where they came from. They were 7.65-caliber Luger ammo fired from another make of gun; they were marked and filed away. I told Ernie thanks, left his office, ducked out the back way and took a cab back to the hotel.

Chapter 4

Edith Caine had a British passport. From the outside it looked good, backed up by the usual birth certificate and a phone call to London put her in the clear. Somehow she had made her way pretty well, but it isn't too hard to pick up a b.g. when you start back far enough. Somebody had died or was missing in her past and she had taken on from there. All I needed now was definite proof of identity. Two days at the outside. She was here and it could look easy. There was nobody to doubt her. Until she arrived at the U.N., cleared all the way, nobody had known her personally. She came out of London, picked up her job and was well liked. The pattern had a familiar ring to it. I had seen it during the war.

Wally Gibbons took time out to meet me for coffee and brought along four head photos of Edith Caine that had been taken for the papers. When he handed them over he said, "She tugs at the heart, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, man."

His grin turned curious. "What are they for?"

I tucked them inside my coat. "Reproduction. I want to get copies off to every plastic surgeon here and in Europe."

"What for?"

"To see who did a face job on her. It would have been one of the big ones."

"Come off it, Tiger. She needs a lift job like you need a hole in the head."

"If she had one I'll find who did it unless it was done behind the Curtain."

"You're sick, friend. You got something on that mind of yours again. Now I'm getting that trouble feeling like before and it scares me a little bit. You want to tell me about it?"

"Not yet."

He picked up his coffee, sipped it and studied me a moment. "I called your hotel this morning."

"Oh?"

"You had already left, but I was asked some questions by a certain Detective Tibbet. When I identified myself, and since we knew each other he mentioned a maid's complaint about a hatful of bullet holes in the bedding but no spent slugs. Any comment?"

I shrugged. "Lousy hotel. Who knows what happened after I left?"

Anybody hear any shots?”

“That’s the funny part. No.”

“Then let them figure it out.”

“Will they?”

“I doubt it.” I called for a refill and turned back to Wally. “Do something for me. Find out who Edith Caine is familiar with.”

“How closely?”

“Personal relationships, business associations ... anybody whose company she’s in with any degree of regularity. Can do?”

“Why sure. Later you’ll give me a breakdown on this I imagine.”

“My pleasure”

“Okay, sucker.”

The Army retired Colonel Charlie Corbinet a brigadier in ‘54, found a place for him in government, couldn’t put up with his intelligence or his refusal to go along with certain proposals and eased him out in ‘56. The Russell-Perkins company took him on and now he rolled in millions.

But he still hadn’t changed from when he was head of the group that was dropped behind the lines during the war. He was older now, crustier than ever, but behind eyes that once were blue but now had the gray circle of age around their irises, he was the quietly determined probing person he ever was.

He held out his hand, said, “Well, Tiger, it’s nice to know you’re still alive.”

“I had good training, Colonel.”

We both laughed and you’d never realize that it had been ten years since we had seen each other. He told his secretary to cancel everything out for an hour and leave us alone, found a bottle, ice and mixer in a sideboard and poured us a drink. He held his glass up, looking into it. “To the old days, Tiger?”

“To now, Colonel.”

Without moving his head, his eyes jumped to my face, then he nodded and accepted the toast. “This isn’t a friendly visit, is it?”

“Not exactly. I want some information.”

Corbinet sat down and waved for me to do the same. “I see. You know,

Tiger, you aren't the first one to come back. Some of the others have done the same."

"I heard," I said.

"And I've heard about you. Not directly, of course, but I'm still in a position to pick up pieces of the action. Some of it had your stamp all over it. That business in Panama was very neat."

"We try."

"Your ... group ... can come to be well hated."

"That's already happened." I took a pull of the drink. As usual he had made it too damn strong.

"What can I do for you?"

"Rondine Lund. What happened to her?"

Corbinet didn't say anything for a moment. He watched me, thinking, then played with his glass. "Aren't you going pretty far back?"

"Maybe."

"Rondine, eh? You loved her, didn't you?"

I grimaced into my glass but the effect was bad. "So what?" I asked.

"So you almost spoiled the play at one time. Luckily the war was over."

"I paid pretty well for my indiscretions."

"Hell, you almost died for them."

"What about Rondine Lund?"

Corbinet leaned back and folded his fingers behind his head. "She dropped out of sight after the invasion. I heard the *maquis* caught her."

"Sure?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Too much was going on to check it out. She had lost her importance along with her war and we were being disbanded. You were still in the hospital when I got that much."

"From what source?"

"Price Richards in British Intelligence. He picked it up someplace and mentioned it over a drink as we were shipping out."

"If I contacted him..."

"No good," he interrupted. "Price died about three years ago."

"You think there's a way I can get past him to his source?"

"There's always a way," Corbinet said, "but it will take time. You don't cover twenty years in an hour, you know that. The *maquis* didn't keep records either." He took his hands down and leaned on his desk. "So it's

Rondine again,” he stated. “What would you do if you found her?”

“Kill her,” I said simply.

“Well, I think it’s going to take you a long time to find her.”

I stood up and put on my hat. “Colonel ... I think I *found* her.”

Little tight lines pulled at the corner of his eyes. He was going over the list mentally, the ones dead Rondine had made that way, the two towns she pinpointed for destruction, the lives lost on the beach because she found a way to get inside somebody’s mind and pry loose that critical bit of news.

All he said was, “Ah, yes, Rondine.”

“I have to be sure. Colonel. Do you still have the contacts?”

Now his mouth tightened too in an expression I had seen before when the chips were down. “In a certain way ... and I don’t want this repeated ... I’m in much the same position as you. Yes, I have the contacts.”

It was my turn to study him. I put things into place in my head, remembering things I had come across about a certain former intelligence officer, about some peculiar strokes of luck in my own operations that seemed a little too coincidental, and there were a few times I had seen the mark of a fine hand that seemed somehow familiar employed in the same engagement I was involved in.

I felt a grin touch my mouth. “So L.A.T.S, never really did let you go, did they?”

“You think too much, Tiger. It’s a new quality and an improvement over the old, but don’t make yourself dangerous.”

“It’s the only way I’m appreciated, Colonel,” I said. “I’ll call you in a few days.”

“Do that”

When I went out the door I covered the tiny lens set in the frame that photoed every visitor and laughed thinking of what the old boy would say when he saw the blank negative. Same old tricks.

At four o’clock I called Wally and asked what he had come up with. He gave me three names: Burton Selwick, with whom she apparently had a business connection; Gregory Hofta, another translator from Hungary with whom she was seen on numerous social occasions; and John Fredericks Talbot, a dashing-type Britisher who held a minor position with his embassy. There was a girl, Gretchen Lark, a U.N. secretary she frequently ate with and I took down their addresses, told him thanks and hung up.

My next dime got me Thomas Watford.

I said, "Tiger Mann. Anything on the Caine woman?"

"Possibly, but I think we had not better discuss it over the phone."

"Can you meet me?"

He said he would, named a bar on Sixth Avenue and told me he'd be there in an hour. That gave me time enough to get a line started on my three names.

With the last dime I called Barney Dodge and told him what I needed. He came right across with Burton Selwick's history and placed him as a man of more importance than his position indicated. It was assumed that he was one of those few people who could settle policy differences if they arose and could make decisions his government would back up without prior red tape. If he was a talker he'd be one fine source, but nothing ever pointed to him being loose-tongued. He said he'd give it a fast try and perhaps have some information that night.

It was about all I had time for. Office workers were beginning to hit the streets and were flagging down cabs from the corners. Rather than battle the crowd I started walking north toward the bar where I was to meet Thomas Watford, got there right on time, and that was where I made a mistake.

I should have been early.

Two of the boys he had with him were from a blue-card agency and I knew what they had in mind.

Nobody saw how they did it, but with nice, friendly gestures they lifted the .45 from the rig, let me have a beer while the pressure of two service revolvers were against my side, then they escorted me out of there.

The room they took me to was an unmarked office ten floors from the street in a building in the middle Forties. There was a deadly quiet about the place, every other office window blank. You could rent places like this in any name for any length of time and nobody cared at all.

Then they took turns interrogating me. For two hours I let them waste their time and told them nothing, then it was Watford himself who grabbed the lead.

I said, "How long does this keep up?"

"Until you talk or we say stop. Take your pick."

"Good enough, kid. Tell me about the Caine girl."

"That's what caused the trouble. Where do you fit in with her?"

“I knew her when. It’s personal.”

“Balls. We checked her out back to when she was born. She never had any contact with you.”

I shrugged.

“She’s a British subject, Tiger. She’s in a touchy and responsible position. The British get peeved when a check is run on their cleared personnel.”

“How peeved?”

“Enough to get heat in our direction.”

“Why? She’s only a translator.” I looked at him steadily.

“Your implication stinks,” he said. “We’re not letting anything happen that will foul up our relations with the British. We’re not letting you pull one single stunt, buddy. Now do we talk?”

I pointed to the phone. “That connected?”

“It is.”

“I assume you know your code calls.”

Watford said nothing.

“Call the *circle fry* number. Tell him I said ‘chow.’”

There was more surprise in his face than anything else, then the mask came on. He hesitated a few seconds, nodded and picked up the receiver. I heard him dial the right digits, mumble into the phone, make a few demands, listen carefully, then hang up.

When he turned around his face was tight and flushed. He said, “How do you do it, Tiger?”

I grinned at him. “Easy. A gentle form of blackmail. Now why this sudden heat on me?” I asked him.

The three of them passed a swift look around before focusing back on me again. “Because there’s one hell of a security leak in the U.N.,” he said.

I stretched, got up and walked to the door. Tomorrow they’d use a different place if they had to. I turned around and said, “It figures.”

Chapter 5

John Fredericks Talbot had an apartment in Gramercy Park, an exclusive little oasis in the jungle of the city. Enough money lives there to keep the prowling cars on a steady circuit and patrolmen on the beat, and the only way to forestall an identity check is to make like you belong there and take the direct route.

I had made sure Talbot wasn't home with a phone call, then rang the downstairs apartment, introduced myself to the woman who answered the lobby door as a friend of Talbot's and asked her if she would give him a letter for me. She was very happy to and held the door open long enough for me to touch the safety button that would keep it in the unlock position. When Talbot answered the message he would simply be calling his superiors to see if there were any additional instructions for him and in the red tape of the organization little tricks like that happen all the time.

I made one trip around the block, came back to the building, went inside, after putting the lock on right, and up to Talbot's apartment on the top floor. Getting inside was no trouble at all.

With a pencil flash I spotted all the furniture, made sure an exit was clear, then started the search systematically. John Fredericks Talbot had money, that was one thing. His clothes and accessories were the finest. He was regimented in his habits and everything indicated him to be as careful as a man in his position was supposed to be.

The garbage can in the kitchen held two empty beer cans and a fine pile of black, powdery ash. Talbot had burned some papers and made sure no one would ever know what they contained. Around the water level of the toilet bowl was another dark ring where he had flushed more of the same earlier. In all probability he had a maid, so it would have been done that day after she left.

It could be a necessary precaution in this job.

It could have been something else too.

Then I found the gun, a Colt Cobra in a belt holster, fully loaded and tucked inside one of his Chukka boots. Now there was something new to the pattern. Minor embassy employees don't go around New York armed.

I put the gun back, made sure everything was exactly in place and went back outside. Nobody saw me come in, nobody saw me go out. I was pretty

good that way.

On the corner I flagged a cab, went back midtown to an address of Stephen Midros, found his apartment number and touched the button. Midros was one of the Hungarian freedom fighters who had gotten out to fight again and right now he was leading the battle from his position in exile and doing a good job.

The man who answered the door looked ten years older than he was. The gray hair and the scar down the side of his face did that much, but the age was mainly in his eyes. They had seen too much.

I said, "Stephen Midros?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Tiger Mann. I am going to mention one name. I think that will be more of an introduction."

He was coldly casual. "Very well."

"*George the Third.*"

There was a sudden warmth in his eyes, a recognition that meant even though we had never met we were friends of the same side and had fought for the same things. *George the Third* was a final identity signal only top inside people could possibly know. He didn't question the validity of my knowing it as I didn't his.

He answered, "*In truth,*" and held out his hand. The identity change had been completed. But like all Europeans, there were pleasantries first and it was only over a glass of wine that he asked the question.

"What business may I help you in, Mr. Mann?"

"There is a Hungarian translator in the U.N. named Gregory Hofta."

"Yes, I know of him."

"Any opinion?"

His shoulders moved in a characteristic shrug. "There has never been any need for inquiry. Why?"

"He is often seen with a British subject, another translator ..."

"Ah," he smiled. "Edith Caine. Is that it?"

"That's it." I drank half the glass and waited.

"So, is this intrigue political or personal?" He grinned knowingly.

I didn't smile back at all. "It started from a personal angle, but it may have political repercussions. My interest is the Caine woman. There is a security leak in the U.N. somewhere and it could be there."

“But Hofta is not a Hungarian Communist,” he said. “He was born in Budapest, but long ago became an American citizen. He was graduated from one of your larger colleges and has been with the U.N. since it was founded.”

“Good cover if it is that way. I don’t think I have to remind you of how planning for the future worked for the Nazis ... or the Reds either for that matter.”

His head furrowed in a frown. “But this connection ...”

“What do you know of the two of them?”

He finished his wine, refilled our glasses and sat down again. “Generally I have seen them together at certain restaurants ... Hungarian restaurants. Twice they have been at one of our gatherings, at a rally and again at a party one of my associates gave.” “How intimate were they?”

Midros spread his hands, searching for a word. “They seemed to be ... well, more than ... friends, shall we say? Other intimacies I cannot vouch for.”

“Your organization is pretty tight, isn’t it?”

“We have ways of finding things out, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s what I mean. Can you run a check on Hofta?”

“Yes, how far?”

“See who he left behind in Europe. Let’s find out just how much of an American he really is.”

I didn’t have to explain any further. He got the connection immediately with all its implications. He had a mind like a computer, too, and was putting things in their places right then. He nodded, offered me another drink I refused and said, “It will be done, Mr. Mann. I expect that you will contact me?”

“Yes.”

Outside the rain was coming down harder, the reflected lights making a kaleidoscopic pattern in the asphalt streets. I ducked my head into it and walked to Broadway, then out over to my hotel. Out of habit I checked my box and saw the pink message slip there. When I slipped it open it read, “Edith called to get your number. Didn’t give it to her knowing how hoople you are on the subject, but she said she can be reached at EN 2-7254 between four and six.” It was signed, “Wally.”

I felt a grin twist at my mouth, found a phone booth and dialed Charlie Corbinet’s number. When he answered I said, “Tiger, Colonel. A quick

favor.”

“Shoot it.”

“Get me an address from a phone number. EN 2-7254. How long will it take?”

“Five minutes.” He didn’t quibble about it.

A little less than five he called back. “It’s a pay station in a bar and grill on Second Avenue called Lyon’s. Anything else?”

“That’s fine.”

“Need help?”

“Did I ever?”

“Once that I remember.”

“Those days are done with. Thanks.” I hung up.

She was there, all right. She sat at a table in the back with Burton Selwick, engrossed in whatever he was saying, nodding and laughing like any interested woman would. I watched them for a full twenty minutes then crossed the street to another bar, dialed the number she had given me, told her I was available.

There was nothing devious about her voice. It was quiet ... almost friendly with a peculiar touch of inquisitiveness in it. She would like to speak to me. Fine. I would like to speak to her too. Where? My hotel in an hour. Hell, she made the call, let her come to me. I hung up and went back outside.

He didn’t take long ... just enough time to pay the check and leave. I didn’t wait for her. An hour from now she’d be there. But when he managed a cab I got in the one I had standing by and followed Burton back across town, down into Greenwich Village and waited while he told his taxi to hold while he went inside, then watched when he came back out with a tall brunette who had a million-dollar body and a walk to match. They got in the cab, drove to a restaurant on Fourteenth Street and got out.

For a few seconds Selwick just stood there holding his stomach, then the woman said something earnestly, seemed angry for a moment, then took his arm gently and led him inside. There was no two ways about it ... the guy was hurting. Well hell, you don’t jump from a killer to another broad without getting stomach pains. Rondine could give any guy a pain in the gut. I suffered from mine for months, only then she did it with bullets.

I didn’t bother checking it out any further. I gave the driver my hotel and settled back to think about my date.

Things were looking up.

I sat there with my feet on the window sill looking out at the mist-shrouded roof of the city, thinking back twenty years, bringing her face back, the strange twist she could give to one eyebrow and the things we had said to each other in the dark.

Thinking of what kind of a fool I had been to expose an operation because one woman could do things to my insides and make my mind go against all the things it had been trained to do.

It had started back there, but it had ended back there too. The very thing I did made me try to prove something to myself and when Martin Grady had selected me along with several others to work in the same capacity through a civilian agency I had grabbed at the chance. There were forty when we started. Nineteen of the original group were left, but there were forty still, somebody always coming in as a replacement. The longer we lived, the better we got and the better our chances of staying alive.

Sure, the Washington agencies knew about our existence. I.A.T.S. kept a file on all of us as best it could, but none of it was explicit or important. They knew what we did only after we did it and nothing could be said because it was professionally done for the good of the country by experts in the field. It probably galled them though. It had, too. We moved in fast and hard when it was necessary and people had fallen and governments were toppled. Had we not been there it would have happened anyway, only millions of dollars and man-lives later.

By now Martin Grady would know I had hold of something and I'd get the word whether to process it or clear out, and, knowing how he hated any personal attitudes mixed in an operation, the word would be to get clear. He'd never take a chance on lousing up a job or losing a man to a pet hate. Only in this case he couldn't move me.

I wanted Rondine dead too badly.

There was a knock on the door.

I flicked off the light, swung around and sat there with the .45 facing the door and said, "Come in."

The knob turned, the door opened and there she stood, lovely, lovely Rondine. Beautiful as hell. With the same potential. Beauty and death inside the same shell. She still had that same hesitancy when she stepped inside a door and closed it, letting you have the full effect of the magnificence of her

face and body, still the same habit of flipping open the coat so the impact of seeing the pressure of her breasts against a dress and the nipped-in waist and swell of her hips into thighs and calves of startling proportions, so that you could lose one important second of life.

I knew she couldn't see me, but I let her hear where I was.

I thumbed back the hammer of the gun and it was the loudest sound in the room.

"Here I am, Rondine."

She knew what I was holding. "Do I get it here, Tiger?"

"Maybe. It depends on how much you've sweated."

Rondine walked toward me, her hand feeling for the furniture. She hadn't adjusted her eyes to the darkness yet and it took a minute before she found a chair. Even in the dark, she sat down, crossed her legs with a graceful sweep that would have shown the whiteness of her thigh had the light been on, and in the dark I grinned, remembering that Cal had fallen for that same skin and had died for it.

"I think an explanation is in order," she said.

"Forget it, kid. The past is the past."

"But ..."

"No buts. So you laid a couple in my belly. You knocked off a friend of mine and I tally it up to my own damn mistakes for letting you live when you were an enemy. No soap, kid, no explanations. I can understand the past. I hate, I pick up the pieces and wait my time out. Now it's here. You are as close to dying as you've ever been and you might make it."

"Tiger ..."

"Shut up, doll," I said gently. "It's no time to explain. You have something going for you and before I knock you off I want to expose the whole bit. Then you go. Don't even talk to me. The last time you did I wound up sleeping in a shot-up sack. Your boys really came at me." 35

"You asked for it. You endangered ..."

"Your situation? Why, sure, honey, that's what I'm here for."

"Tiger"

"I said shut up. It's my night to talk. Before, you always tried the great kiss and the roll in the hay to quiet me down, but no more, Rondine. How many times have I had you ... or was it me who was had? Twenty? We were great together. Lovers who could love in the middle of a war. Love conquers

all, we said. Great, just great.

“Everything went on the line for you, honey,” I said. “Integrity, life ... the works. I saved your ass and you tried to kill mine. For twenty years I’ve had it in the back of my head. All this time I thought you were dead, now it’s fine to see you alive. Now I can take you right. No bed, no kiss, no talk is going to take you out of this one. First I bust up your play, whatever it is, then I take you. I’m a pro, kid, all the way. I’ve been practicing for a long time and it’s my game right down the alley.”

“Please ...”

“Knock it off.”

She could see me now, the rod in my hand and the expression on my face. There was nothing she could do and knew it. Very slowly she uncrossed her legs and sat there with her hands folded in her lap.

I said, “Send the boys for me. I’d like that. The next time I won’t wait to have them prove a point. I’ll put them down one by one and you’ll be the last, the big one. Now get out of here.”

She knew there was no use talking. She stood up slowly, looked at me, walked to the door and turned as if she were going to say something and thought better of it, then opened it, went out and it closed behind her.

It was a hell of a date. I let the hammer down on the .45 and put it away.

Chapter 6

I had laid out the trot lines, baited the hooks and now I had to wait. Somewhere people would be meeting and policy set. Action plans would be formulated with me as the target and the second-guessing would be going on. In that great cluster of buildings there would be worried people because they had to step on a snake or get bitten and couldn't afford to lose.

So I waited for two days, knowing nothing would happen yet because whatever was done had to be done deliberately and carefully and things like that took time.

At nine in the morning on the second day a call came from the lobby that a Mr. Toomey was there to see me and I invited him up after he gave the recognition word that meant Martin Grady had heard about me.

You never knew what to expect in the way of his agents. This one was a good ten years older than me, a small man impeccably dressed like the Madison Avenue types, briefcase under his arm, rimless glasses and seemingly tired yet somehow good-natured. But in his past this one had knocked off his share and probably would again. He could handle a blade or a rod and would be adept at the peculiarities of the trade and follow orders right down the line.

I wondered what his orders were.

He sat in the chair I offered him with a sigh and looked at me with a single glance and I knew he was sizing me up all the way. He would have gone over the package Grady kept on me and knew every facet about my character and abilities, always allowing room for the little thing nobody knew about any of us.

"I presume you know why I'm here, Mr. Mann."

"Certainly. I've been waiting for you to show up."

"I see. Well, I'm here. We've had no report from you."

"You won't get one either."

"Mr. Grady understands that."

"Then what are his orders?"

Toomey smiled thinly and took the coffee I held out. "I think I'm going to surprise you."

"Nothing surprises me any more, buddy."

"This may." I caught the direct, humorous look in his eyes. "You can

proceed, Mr. Mann.”

“What!”

“Orders. Apparently by accident or coincidence you have disturbed something that needs disturbing. Your presence here has caused enough consternation in certain quarters that make an investigation profitable.”

“Did Martin Grady know about it before I arrived?”

“No. However since every effort is being made to sidetrack you it’s worth-while looking into.”

“Does he know it’s personal with me?”

“He realizes your motivation.”

“A fuse, huh?”

Toomey nodded and smiled. “Correct.”

“Then I can call on all the facilities of the command?”

“By all means.”

I sipped my coffee slowly, then put the cup down. “One thing, Toomey.”

“Yes?”

“What effort is being made to sidetrack me?”

His chuckle was quiet and low. “I’d hate to be on as many elimination lists as you are.”

“Finish it.”

“You’re on the new Commie ‘A’ form.”

“I was there a year ago.”

“This is understood, Mr. Mann. You are now a primary target. On top of that I.A.T.S. wouldn’t mind if you had an accident ... oh, not a deadly one, but enough to retire you for a while. Then there’s the British. Now you know how they don’t care for any interference in their projects. They even dislike tying in with our own government agencies and the British can be a tough outfit. Frankly, between the Reds and the British, I’d rather have the Commies on my neck. They are predictable and not nearly as determined. So, Mr. Mann, you are to have your head. Find out why you are so well disliked.”

“I can tell you now.”

Toomey made a negative motion with his head. “You may think so, but you don’t. Not yet.”

“So I will.”

“Mr. Grady seems to have great faith in your capabilities.”

I grunted and picked up the coffee.

“If you want me, I’ll be at the Chester Hotel,” Toomey said. “Wilson and Standish are ready at the office in Newark if they’re needed.”

“I don’t need anybody.”

He got up, opened his briefcase and flipped a sheaf of bills on the table. “Perhaps not. At least, you’ll need the usual. Call if you want anything at all.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Toomey shrugged. “Orders. Now you have them too.”

I met Charlie Corbinet for lunch at the Blue Ribbon on Forty-fourth Street and went upstairs where we could be alone, and after the beer came and while we waited for our meal, gave him a rundown on what happened. As long as he was still with I.A.T.S. I didn’t have to tell him much ... all I wanted to know was why our own people wanted me taken off a project.

He let me finish, then leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table. “This security leak at the U.N. is a big one. Right now we’re in an arms race with the Reds and we have to retain control of key bases on foreign soil. Any information the Russians get on policy we establish with the various governments gives them an edge. We don’t stand alone any longer. While we make policy with a government within a nation that same government can fall to the opposition, so we have to play it so that whatever we do is acceptable to ... well, let’s say both parties in British government. On top, we have to correlate our relationships with them and similar situations in other countries. This means there are a lot of angles to the game. Somebody in the U.N. has a hot pipeline in our basic policy structure and we’re finding it hard to move. The goddamn Commies are always a jump up on us and overseas they’re moving fast and hard and we’re almost on the defensive. Right now a lot of agencies are trying to break through and if something interferes with their operation they’re going to knock it out.”

“It’s Rondine, Colonel.”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll find out.”

“Expose her then.”

“That won’t be easy. She looks like a young kid. She’s had a face job and everything to boot. Her background is damn near perfect, but you know and I know that it can be done.”

“Go to England then, backtrack her.”

“Nuts, friend, then I lose the bit here. It can be over before I get through. It’ll be easier to work out where I can reach her.”

“Okay, but it won’t be her alone. If she’s the one, she’s getting her material from direct sources.”

“She’s in the position to do it.”

The waiter came and set our plates down in front of us. When he left Charlie said, “Supposing it isn’t Rondine?”

I started cutting into my lunch. “There’s a good way to find out,” I said.

“Oh?”

“But you wouldn’t know about that. You never had Rondine in bed,” I grinned at him.

I dropped him off at his office an hour later and went back to The Street. The Great White Way ... brother, how it had changed. Where there used to be men and broads, now queers and jerks; the Black Muslims giving out papers ... the guys who wanted to be kings. Okay, so be kings, only first take the crown away. Small bands like with Young Assassin on the back of their jackets trying to buck men who had guns in their hands and took the beaches, pimps peddling sixteen-year-old whores and finding the clientele that wanted them, cops who had to dress like babes in order to suppress the traffic, idiots who let the knotheads make passes at their wives because they were afraid to buck the trend. Now the slobs were on the loose and not too many wanted to do anything about it. Ha.

A mile away an international fiasco was in the making that would cover that lice who roamed and one of a few that wanted to stop it had the heat going high.

So try to stop that one.

I was glad it was raining.

Stephen Midros had left a simple note for me to meet him for supper at the Kubla Restaurant, a small side-street place that catered to those of Hungarian background. I got there a few minutes before seven, saw Midros facing me in a far booth and walked over.

There was another man with him I didn’t know until Midros said, “I’d like you to meet Gregory Hofta, Mr. Mann.”

He had a look of confidence about him, a polished cosmopolitan thing with a foreign air and his handshake was crisp and strong. *Hello, sucker*, I thought.

Midros said, "We are quite alone and unobserved here and very much among friends so we can be quite candid. First, sir, let me assure you that in what short time I had I did a thorough investigation of Mr. Hofta here." He smiled, watching me over his glasses, "And you too, Mr. Mann. You have quite ... a reputation."

My eyes ran over Hofta quickly. He caught the move and nodded. "I don't mind. These things are sometimes necessary."

I played it as cool as I could. "And what do we find out, Mr. Midros?"

"Perhaps you had better tell him."

Hofta agreed with a nod and folded his hands on the table. "There are times when we must take chances in revealing certain things."

"I know the game."

"Very well. I have been working with I.A.T.S. for nine months now."

"Identify," I said.

He did the trick with his thumb and forefinger, their first recognition code.

"Confirm," I told him.

The next motion proved his point. For fun I answered him and he frowned.

"You seem to know quite a lot about our ways."

"I have to. But that makes you know about me, too, doesn't it?"

"Yes. So we'll continue. How much do you know about the security loss in the U.N.?"

"This much," I said. "Although I don't know the details of what's been divulged at this point, I understand the import of what's happening. I can deduce future events if the trend continues."

"Ah."

"And I know where it comes from."

His eyes narrowed briefly a moment. He waited.

I shook my head. "But you're not doing me out of the pleasure of slapping the lid on it personally. How about that?"

Hofta spread his hands in an impatient gesture. "You leave yourself in a position of danger. You realize what could happen?"

"Sure, buddy, but let's you offer the information."

"The American and British agencies are cooperating in a joint effort to find the leak. It comes from somewhere inside the two structures."

“Could you pinpoint it?” I asked him.

“No. It could come from the Embassy, the policy-making sections or out of the capitals themselves. Somehow the Russians always seem to know in advance what our decisions are regarding world situations and beat us to the punch in laying groundwork for their operations. Right now you can say we are in the stage of losing the cold war.”

“That’s how far up they are on us?”

“Precisely. In a few days something very big will come before the Security Council and if the Russians know our decision we will surely lose face in the eyes of the world if they move to make us rearrange our policy. That is why, Mr. Mann, if you have anything to offer, then do it now.”

“Not now.”

“The fate of many should not have to hinge on one man.”

“Tough.”

He looked at me, accepted the statement and said, “You told Stephen you had an interest in Edith Caine.”

“Don’t you?” I suggested.

“Doesn’t everyone?” He smiled.

“Maybe more than you think.”

“It is she you suspect,” he stated flatly.

“Buddy,” I told him, “I don’t *suspect* anyone. I know.”

“Then you can be dangerous to everyone.”

“Midros ...” I started.

“Yes, Mr. Mann.”

“Am I to be doubted .. , or is my reputation no good?” I stood up and put on my hat.

“Sometimes ... things change, sir.”

“But not now,” I said.

He looked at my eyes and saw something there. “No ... not now,” Midros repeated.

Chapter 7

I knew I had a tail when I got out of the cab. Since he was waiting a block away it meant there was a team staked out to pick me up no matter where I got off and that kind of a bit meant business. It meant that they were going to be careful, too, so I went in the newsstand for a paper and made the crowd that shielded me from anybody outside and called Toomey at the Chester. It only took thirty seconds and I got the message across fast. I felt better after that.

One tail took me to the hotel, another one picked me up inside. He didn't go up, but let a third check me through on my floor and as I went in the room he was going past the door.

Any time now.

But damn, there's no sense playing with these types unless you can have fun at it. They had tried for one hit and missed, now it was my turn.

This time I didn't hang on any window-washer's hook. I had chosen my floor deliberately and outside my window, two feet down, was an eighteen-inch parapet that ran around the whole building. I climbed out, shut the window behind me and went around to the third room that I had taken out in another name and popped it open.

Forty feet below me, the streets of New York were filled with theater traffic, the cabs an unending yellow stream and the noise one gigantic celebration of horn-blowing. It would have been louder had not the rain been a blanket over the whole scene.

So I saw the guy at my other door and he never saw me. He was working the lock and when I said, "You!" ... he spun and fell on a dime and I missed with the .45 for the third time in twenty years and then I was in a tumble and roll because the bullet that creased my ear almost nailed me and I wasn't about to catch one.

From somewhere a slug blew out the light and in three short seconds of time there was nothing but the thunder of bullets blasting the semidarkness of the corridor apart and when it was over there was nobody there but me on the floor and Toomey on the other end.

Except for one thing.

A Tokarev 7.65-millimeter automatic was lying on the floor outside my door with little splatters of blood all round it with the hammer back in full

reload-and-fire position.

I said, "Damn, you took your time."

Toomey grinned and pulled me to my feet. "I like to see my associates work."

I picked up the gun, looked at it and handed it to Toomey. It was an old job, but in perfect condition, a Soviet-built rod made in 1944, not the Czech slave-labor model ... the one the officers wore during the war.

"Neat?" I asked.

"Neat," Toomey replied, "but it's a common piece. Ernie Bentley told me about your last bust. All 7.65's. Matter of fact, I know a lot of people who wear this rig."

"So do I," I said. "It won't help much. Chances are the blood types are all 'O' type."

"Chances are you better not try to find out. Come on, let's blow."

He stopped me by the exit staircase. "They went down here. No telling what floor they took out."

"I cased the place before I got here. Two floors down you can cut over to the other side of the building and take those exits down, too. They both open into the lobby and outside. If one of them's bleeding they won't stick around waiting for us to show."

"Want to go after them?" Toomey asked me.

I shook my head. "No. They'll be back. They have to come back. When they do I want it going all my way."

"You like this crap," he said, "don't you?"

"I love it," I answered.

Tomorrow I'd be asked to leave. One room at least. Tomorrow the whole goddamn city police force would descend on me for the job tonight and it was debatable whether or not it was to get me or get the heat on me that the whole play was pulled.

In a little while we'd find out.

Now here's the funny part. They were all watching me. They wanted to see what I was going to do ... and hell, if they were smart enough, all they had to do was ask. I could have told them. Kill Rondine. That was all. For the sake of my own cover I'd break hers, but the initial emotion was simply ... kill Rondine.

Everyone was sweating the security leak at the U.N. They even tried left-

fielding me in, even Grady. But screw him too. Screw I.A.T.S. and the British and security and all the crap that goes with protecting a billion people. Goddamn, I was the one who caught the slugs. I'm the target now.

How simple can it get? One broad ... that's all I asked. One lousy doll who needed a slug up her whoosis and who was going to get it from me and the whole world falls apart.

Hell, Grady even gave me orders.

Not really, though. I don't take those kind. He was just conforming. He had no choice either. I was going to nail Rondine beautifully and someplace I hit the tack and now everybody wanted to nail me.

That's the way I liked it.

When we hit the street we turned north and walked two blocks unhurriedly to a counter spot, then went in and ordered coffee. I said to Toomey, "You came on like gangbusters. How'd you know what the action was?"

"It figured. Besides, I was in contact with Grady a few minutes earlier. You're hot, Tiger."

"That's nothing new."

"Grady's contacts overseas got a message through. There's an all-out effort going on you. The Reds have you top-priority."

"*Thank you, Rondine,*" I half whispered.

"What?"

"Nothing. What's the scoop?"

"You have been ordered eliminated by any possible means immediately. From now on you'd better stay in the shadows."

"Think that accounts for the Tokarev?"

Toomey shrugged. "It's their pet weapon."

"Not in this country."

"Correction. This is not part of the American Commie setup. These are imports. You know they can get all the unregistered guns they want through diplomatic attaché cases."

"Then they weren't on their toes."

"Not necessarily. You were just up higher on yours. Martin says for you to go under cover."

"Nuts."

He drank his coffee and left a half a buck on the counter. "It's your neck."

“Damn right. Now do something for me. Run a check on John Fredericks Talbot and a U.N. secretary named Gretchen Lark.”

Toomey wrote the names down, slipped them away and said, “Shouldn’t take long.”

“Who will you work through?”

He grinned and shook his head. “I’ll do it my way. You want to get out of your hotel?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll get your stuff moved over to the Chester in the room next to mine. I think your Mr. Watford will get us clearance on this.”

“The local police aren’t going to enjoy the interference.”

“Friend, do I have to remind you that we’re working on an international level or have you only one thing on your mind?”

“Knock it off.”

“No, I can’t. You may want that girl, but the complications of this affair are a little too big to make her the primary target. You are still in the group, still on assignment and still what you are. The years of training and experience you’ve had left their mark on you whether you know it or not and regardless of any emotional involvement, this is still ... a case. Understand?”

“You took long enough to say it.”

“Grady’s instructions. I think he knows you better than you know yourself.”

“Okay, okay,” I laughed. “I’ll keep it down.”

But I wasn’t about to. I could play it that way for Grady and the rest, but it was Rondine whom I loved and Rondine who had pumped two bullets into my belly and Rondine who had killed my friend and Rondine who was going to die and to hell with international complications.

Wally Gibbons was finishing off his column at his apartment when I got there. When he ended it, checked it through and stuffed it in a manila envelope he swung around in his chair. “Hell of a time to come calling.”

I tossed a packet of photos on his desk. “Your shots of Edith Caine. I wanted to get them back to you.”

“Do any good?”

“It’ll be a couple of days before the reports come in,” I said.

“Well, I don’t wish you any luck. Frankly, I don’t think you’re going to have any either.”

I sprawled out in a chair across the room. “You told me you researched the family.”

“Thoroughly, buddy.”

“You got the material around?”

“On the shelf right beside your head. That brown folder.”

I reached up and pulled the piece out of the pile. It was a ten-page single-spaced summary with a couple dozen letters attesting to Edith Caine’s background, copies of her birth certificate, school diplomas, recommendations from important people in England and a few general observations.

I said, “Brief me.”

“Can’t you read?”

“Sure, I will, but you give it to me first.”

“Here we go again,” Wally grunted. “Okay ... fine English family. One of four girls and two boys. The oldest girl, Diana, was killed in the second air raid on London. The youngest son was in the R.A.F., shot down and killed in 1944. Ruth and Patricia Caine are both married to Army officers, Vernon, the oldest son, is still a bachelor and is in government service with the Admiralty. The father died in 1951, the mother is a dowager type who maintains the family residence, a sizable estate in the country with another place in London and is well recognized in English society. Not one smear on the family escutcheon; the stationery bears a coat of arms granted by old King John himself.”

“So?”

“So this ... if ever a more respectable bunch ever lived in merrie olde, it was the Caines. Prim and proper with never a breath of scandal. Always, the family has been connected with government service, putting in time with the military, emerging with officer rank in old regiments and what-not. Marriages have always been of their own class and they guard their reputation like we do Fort Knox.”

“Ha.”

“Laugh, but try to bust through the circle. You can’t do it. It just doesn’t have a loophole. Don’t think British Intelligence didn’t check every one of them out. They’re no slobs. You don’t get into government positions without

one big security check.”

“I can name a few who did.”

“So can I, but they were exceptions.”

“That’s what I mean. Can I keep this awhile?”

“Be my guest,” Wally said. He paused, looked at me seriously and frowned. “But ... just in case, let’s say ...”

I waved him off. “You’ll get the picture. You can be the hero.”

He nodded, still frowning. “Tiger...”

“What?”

“I finally got a lead on *you*.”

“How about that.”

“Seems like you’re a peculiarly important type of person.”

“Oh?”

“Want to give it to me?”

“No.”

“I’ll find out anyway.”

“Go ahead.” I looked at him, expressionless.

“You make me nervous, buddy. What I heard is kind of frightening. Now I know why I could never get a line on you in all these years. It explains a lot of things if it’s true.”

I felt a grin cut the corner of my mouth. “It might be better if you kept it to yourself.”

He nodded, not saying anything. I told him thanks for the package on Edith Caine and pulled myself out of the chair. At the door I turned and winked at him. He was still sitting there frowning and I knew what he was thinking. Maybe I would give him the story at that. He needed a little excitement in his life.

The invitation to visit the I.A.T.S. office downtown came from Thomas Watford through Toomey when he cleared the air about the affair in the hotel corridor. It was simply delivered, but the kind you didn’t ignore.

Watford didn’t bother introducing me when I came in. They were all seated at a conference table with an open chair on the end and he pointed to it and I sat down. Nothing else.

They weren’t the striped-pants types, these. Two were field men I had

seen before and the other pair matched them equally. The fifth was a big man, heavy in the shoulders with a tight set to his eyes and a hard mouth that had come out of years of war and intrigue. He had been a general once, during the war, now he showed up behind the scenes advising presidents and ambassadors on the fine hairline of action that can divide war from peace.

Hours before, the meeting had begun and decisions made. Although there were no papers showing on the table, the ash trays were full of butts and the room heavy with smoke. On a sideboard against the wall there was an empty water pitcher and another half full and all the glasses right side up with small pieces of ice still melting in their bottoms.

I nodded to them all in general and sat down. It was their play.

Watford said, "We'd like a statement from you about last night."

I waited a moment. "Simple. I was attacked."

"You were expecting it."

"In this business you have to expect anything."

"Come on, Mr. Mann. You had another room rented and we saw how you got into it. That's going pretty far."

"Maybe." I wasn't offering anything.

"Who were they?"

"Ballistics check the slugs?"

"Seven-six-five millimeter, a forty-five and thirty-eights." He tapped the table top with his fingertips. "We know where the last two came from."

"I take it Toomey gave you the gun we picked up?"

Watford nodded. "Unregistered. Russian make. There are a lot of war souvenir weapons like that in this country."

"And others brought in deliberately," I added.

He was noncommittal. "Perhaps." He glanced around, then said, "What about the first attack?"

"Can I make a phone call?"

"Need a lawyer?"

"Nope."

He pointed to a phone on the sideboard.

I got up, dialed Toomey at the Chester and asked, "You get the ballistics report on the test shot from the gun?"

Toomey was brief about it. "One of the ones used the first time. You're right in line."

“Thanks.” I hung up and went back to my seat. “It was the same bunch who tried for the first hit.”

For the first time the heavy guy spoke. He leaned forward to stare down the table at me, his mouth trying to hide the natural nasty curl of his lip. “It isn’t our habit to divulge information of any nature, Mann, but there is a top level over us again who can alter the code of procedure. How your group manages to exercise such influence I can only guess. I don’t have to like it and one day I’m going to be instrumental in breaking it, but at the moment we have instructions.”

“Fine.”

He ignored the sarcasm. “We ran a ballistics check on that gun too. It had been used before, once to kill one of our couriers and again to kill two supposedly minor British Embassy employees.”

“Minor?”

“They happened to be members of British Intelligence.”

“At least you know which side I’m on then.”

“We don’t need you, Mr. Mann.”

“But you got me, brother. Now get to the point.”

“Ah, yes, I will. We are very interested in uncovering the one who pulled the trigger. Since you seem to be a first-class target and insist upon offering yourself up for sacrifice, we’re going to take advantage of the fact that you might be able to draw this person out in the open. Whatever happens to you is of no importance to us. In this case you are quite expendable and if you go down several purposes will have been served. One, another lead to this killer; two, the opportunity to rid ourselves of unwanted interference. Am I being blunt?”

“Not a bit,” I said. “Only don’t forget one thing.”

“For instance?”

“This target doesn’t fall easily.”

“A matter we will help along if we can.”

“You still haven’t made your point,” I reminded him.

He got a little red in the face and had to suck in his breath. “One of those British Intelligence men lived long enough to give us a description of his killer. Not a big man, thin, high forehead with rather long dark hair combed in the European fashion. He had a peculiar trait ... he pulled the trigger of the gun with the second finger of his hand, not the forefinger.”

“A pretty acute observation from a guy getting shot.”

“He was a well-trained operator. There was another one with him, slightly taller, medium build. All he remembered was his mouth. He said he had a round mouth. That’s a peculiar description and our man died before he could explain, but it should be apparent if he’s spotted again.”

“You have more than just that,” I said.

The guy hesitated, then nodded slowly, the information coming out of him reluctantly. “A name. We think ... not know ... think, that the first one is a Red agent named Vidor Churis. Until now he has been assigned to and involved in the various situations in Central and South America.” He stopped then, and looked at me squarely. “I’m surprised you don’t know him, Mr. Mann.”

My eyes held his a long second. “I’ve heard of him,” I said.

Heard of him? Hell, I had shot him two years ago and that’s why he couldn’t use his forefinger on the trigger. My slug had knocked the rod out of his hands before the warehouse explosion had blown us right through the walls of the place and ruining that deal on him had set him so far down, in the party sights he had to accept piss-ant jobs in Chile doing leg work before they’d trust him with another big one. No wonder Churis was so anxious for a kill now.

“Have you anything to offer?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Or is it that you won’t?”

“I haven’t. If I had I wouldn’t.”

For a second it looked like he would pop. Then he said, “Will you?”

“When the right time comes, yes.” I tilted back in the chair. “It seems funny that you should be coming to me. Cooperation of this sort isn’t usual.”

Thomas Watford dragged in a hissing breath. “In our society and system of government people like Martin Grady can wield a sizable amount of influence.”

“No doubt.”

“Charles Corbinet’s voice is listened to carefully.”

“Good old Charlie,” I said.

“In the latter case he’s in a position of official authority, carefully covered, which you seem to know. I still can’t understand why he prefers to trust you ... or others in authority who seem to be swayed by Martin Grady.”

“Simple bribery,” I said.

One of the guys at the table said, “You bastard.”

I grinned at him and set the chair back right. “The Commies used the bribery of exposure as queers on certain ones in high places to extract what they wanted. Sometimes there’s good bribery, like the promise of results that can be gotten no other way. Keep it in mind. Now, is that all?”

“That’s all for now,” Watford said.

I looked down the table, fastening all the faces in my mind. They sat there hating the orders they had but not being able to do anything about it. I got up, poured a drink of water for myself, waved and left.

Chapter 8

It was Friday. The rain had stopped at last and the low scud hid the tops of the buildings above the twentieth floors. On the street people still carried their umbrellas and raincoats, not wanting to take a chance on the weather.

Outside the U.N. buildings the black limousines were pulling away from the curbs with taxis filling in the places they left. I waited ten minutes before Rondine came out, watched while she paused in the doorway until a tall brunette in a tan suede coat came out and they walked toward me together.

The brunette I had seen before. She was the one Burton Selwick had visited down in the Village and taken out to supper. When they reached the street I walked up and said, "Hello, Rondine."

It should have startled her, but didn't, that's how good she was. She turned her head almost casually, but her smile was a shade too tight to be real.

"Oh ... Tiger," she said.

"Like a bad penny." I looked at the brunette.

"Gretchen Lark ... Tiger Mann."

The brunette said, "How do you do, Mr. Mann. Or is Tiger a pet name?"

"My real one."

"Very picturesque. It has certain connotations," she smiled. Gretchen gave Edith a small puzzled glance then. "Rondine?"

"Now *that's* a pet name," I exclaimed. "We're real old friends."

Her eyebrows went up and her mouth pursed with a humorous, pseudo-knowing look and she laughed, "Well, then, I'll just say so long and leave you two old friends alone."

Edith said, "Oh, but ..."

I just winked and grinned at her as if she had said the right thing and took Edith's arm. I thought for a moment she'd pull away when I felt the muscles harden under my fingers, but when I squeezed just a little bit she shrugged resignedly and said, "I'll call you tomorrow, Gretch."

"Do that. Good-bye, Tiger."

"See you," I said.

Most of the crowd had found taxis by then and we didn't have to wait. I flagged down a cruiser, eased Edith in, told the driver to take us to the Blue Ribbon on Forty-fourth and leaned back into the cushions with my beautiful

killer beside me.

It was almost pleasant, that ride. It was almost like those times twenty years ago when we could sit and feel each other there in the dark and quiet and I could know the sensation of love long before the knowledge of hate. Neither of us spoke. We didn't have to. We knew what was in the other's mind and it was enough. I closed my eyes and thought about it and suddenly had to stop myself from reaching for her hand.

When the cab stopped at the intersection I could hear her breathing, forcing herself to keep control and I grinned because that's the way I wanted her to be. She knew she was going to die but didn't know when. My lovely Rondine was sweating inside.

At the restaurant I got out, paid off the cab and she stood there waiting dutifully, with perfect composure, knowing yet not being quite sure, that it wouldn't happen there. Rondine had always been like that. Even when she killed it had been with class. A lady, I thought. A lovely guise. It could cover almost anything.

We took a booth in the back, ordered a drink first, then steaks, and over the highball I grinned at her and she spoke for the first time. "You are making a big mistake, Tiger." There was ice in her voice.

"I'll take my chances on how I live or die, kid. No more mistakes for me."

Then for some reason the ice went out of her. There was a sudden heat in her eyes and the tip of her tongue moistened her lips before she sipped her drink. That was an old trick of Rondine's too. She could switch from hot to cold before you were aware of it and the new attitude almost made you forget the former one. She hadn't forgotten a thing.

When she tilted her head back I looked for the surgical scars, but the shadow of her chin obscured the region there. Later I'd find out.

"I don't understand your new technique, Tiger," she said. "You were going to kill me earlier."

"I still will, kitten, so keep sweating."

"Then why..." she made a motion of her hand around the booth.

"People have been telling me about you. I have feelers out. How'd you do it, Rondine?"

Her eyes creased in a frown. "Do what?"

"Get inside the Caine family."

Both her hands held the glass delicately and her eyes were steady on mine. "I was born into it. If you asked, then you would have found out."

"That's what I was told, but I have other ideas."

She flicked open her cigarette case, put one between her lips and waited for me to light it for her. Over the flame she said, "And they are?"

"A staid, respectable British family loaded with pride and tradition can have a lot to lose if somebody can jangle a skeleton in their closet. I wonder what they'd do or what they'd agree to do if they were suddenly confronted with something that could put them up to public ridicule and scorn to the point that they couldn't hold their heads up. Sometimes honor can tumble in the face of pride. It's an old dodge, sugar."

I knew I hit it right when her face went almost white. Tiny lines fixed themselves beside the corners of her mouth and eyes and her fingers nearly snapped the cigarette in two. For a few seconds her breath was caught in her throat and if ever she wanted to kill me it was then.

The laugh I made was the nastiest thing I ever heard. "What did you hold over their heads, Rondine?"

Through her teeth she said gently, "*I'd like to kill you.*"

"I know," I told her.

Only Rondine could have done it, that quick reversal of emotion, one second full of hate, the next totally calm and poised, thinking fast, ready with an answer. "Why don't you ask them?"

"I will. There are people working on it now. Before long I'll have all the facts and you'll fall. This minute pictures of you are all over the continent going to the offices of plastic surgeons and sooner or later I'll have the right one who did the face job. Or did you get it in Russia?"

Her smile was ambiguous. "Find out for yourself, Tiger."

"My pleasure."

The steaks came and we waited until the waiter left and then began eating to resume the pleasantries. It was like twenty questions now, the probing and parrying. It was fun being with her again, like the old days when we were on opposite sides, lovers, yet enemies, digging for information without wanting to hurt the other.

"Parents?" I asked casually.

"Richard and Agnes Caine: 1892 to 1951; 1896, still living." She smiled and went on, "Ruth, Patricia, Diana, sisters, Vernon, John my brothers. Both

Diana and John were killed during the war. The dates of ...”

“Never mind.”

“You have a family crest,” I started.

“Honorably won. Unicorns bearing a shield of red and blue with the bar dexter, beneath, an unfurled scroll with the insignia...”

“You’re doing great,” I cut her off. “You always were a quick study.

“Remember Cal Haggerty, Rondine?” I said abruptly.

She stopped eating, giving me a curious look. *Damn, she was better than ever!*

“Who?”

“You killed him, baby. You let him have it with a tommy gun. Right after you shot me.”

She almost dropped her fork and the expression in her eyes was unreadable.

“Hurt to bring those things back? Hell, kid, I don’t feel bad when I think about the people I knocked off. They all needed it. To your way Cal and I needed it too so don’t feel bad about it.” I stopped and picked up my drink and finished it. “Or does the thought scare you?”

Then she was back to normal again. “No,” she said, “it doesn’t scare me.”

“It should, doll.”

We finished eating then, not saying much more. I paid the bill and walked out with her and if anyone had looked we could have been nothing more than man and wife, not executioner and victim. On the corner of Broadway and Forty-fourth I whistled a cab over, gave her address and sat back, smiling to myself. She was on edge now and that’s the way I wanted her.

Unconsciously, she had set her handbag between the two of us and I gave it a squeeze. There was a gun in there, all right. It was easy to wait until she glanced out the window to flip it open, finger the clip out of the small automatic, close it and drop the clip in my pocket without being noticed. Colonel Corbinet had trained us well and we kept up the practice.

She made no objection when I got out and followed her into the apartment, but she did make a point of speaking to the doorman and the porter inside. Both had a good chance to look at me and very deliberately she asked the porter the time and she made a pretense of setting her watch. No matter what I did now there would be personal and time identification by two people and my neck would be in the trap.

What Rondine didn't know was why I was there.

It wasn't to kill her. Not just yet.

She pushed the number twelve button in the elevator and I said, "Very nice, Rondine. Good thinking."

Rondine knew what I meant. She looked at me, smiled and said, "Do you blame me?"

"Not at all. You've had the training for it, haven't you?"

Her smile and the set of her face were peculiar. "Yes, I have."

Sure, admit it, kid. You've had the best. I already know, so why deny it?

She held the bag with her thumb and forefinger on the snaps, the other hand ready to dip into it if she had to and unless you were aware of those things you'd never notice the stance. It just wasn't quite the way a woman holds her purse. It would have been funny to see what happened if she tried it.

At her door I took the key out of her fingers, unlocked it myself and handed the key back. She walked in, held the door open and said, "A nightcap, Tiger?"

"Sure."

One switch seemed to turn everything on in the room. Three lamps blossomed into a soft glow and the haunting strains of Dvorak's *New World Symphony* chanted from hidden speakers. She threw her coat on the back of a chair, went behind the bar and reached for glasses and bottles. When she made the drinks she handed me mine, said, "Luck," sipped from hers and put it on the bar. Then she walked out of the room. I didn't worry. Her bag was still on the chair with her coat.

But she was clever. The door to her bedroom was open enough so that if I walked to the chair she'd see me. As long as I stayed at the bar where I was she'd play the game my way, thinking I was playing it hers.

Come, darling, I have seen the act before. It's nothing new. Remember Hamburg? Remember that little town in occupied France where you did the bit in a ripped-open pillowcase? Man, but were you hot then. All white, soft skin and flowing, soft flesh and lovely hair and all mine. Mine. Remember the things we did that night? If they knew, the names they'd call us, eh? But fun. Great. Love. Real, true love.

She came out in a quilted, blue housecoat and I didn't have to be told that there was nothing beneath it. Her legs were the same lovely flash of pink,

beautifully molded like a dancer's, that melted into fabric before they revealed their true beauty; her waist pinched in and rising into the proud outthrusting of her breasts that were so deliberately Rondine's.

Oh, kid, I thought, what the hell do you think you're pulling? This old soldier's been through the routine. Backwards and forwards. Don't give me the negligee and thigh deal. Hell, I've seen more naked broads than you have hair on your head. I've put them to bed, waked them up, left them gasping and two dying and now you're doing this to me? Nuts.

"Nice," I said. "You'd make a great whore."

She stopped in mid-stride and smiled. "Thank you. Have you finished your drink?"

"I'm ready for another."

"So am I." She never saw the first one I poured down the drain, but I took the second one she handed to me, tasted it, then walked across the room to the windows. The apartment looked out on Central Park, the view taking in almost all of the giant rectangle that was so tightly laced together with the lights of taxis.

"Nice place, Rondine. Rent must go about a grand a month. Your U.N. job isn't about to keep you in a joint like this one."

"I have a private income," she answered simply. "I consider the position important enough to warrant the loss. My family feels the same way."

"Hell. I can think up an easier explanation."

"What would that be?"

I turned around and stared at her. She was standing in the middle of the room, the superb beauty of her turning my guts around. "You have a private income all right, but the source isn't the family. It's another government, a Red one."

She didn't challenge me. The small shake of her head was almost pitying.

Then I had another thought. "But maybe you are right, kid. Maybe it is the Caine family after all. Rattle that skeleton enough and they'll come across with anything." I paused a moment and grinned. "Perfect. Trace back your income and it fits the picture. What a wonderful setup."

The whiteness was there again, the fine lines back at her eyes, but only momentarily. The hate dissolved into the thinnest of smiles and she raised her glass to take a taste of her drink.

"In two days I'll have a pipeline into your family, kitten," I said. "If you

could do it, so can I. You should know I'm not working alone. Behind me are others trained to the hilt and they'll get everything I want."

"Tiger ..."

"How about your brother and sister who are dead? Maybe we'll have to go that far back if that's where the skeleton is. Want to tell me about them?"

"Damn you!" She threw the glass and it went past my head to smash against the wall. I never moved. "They're dead. You let my family alone." There was a harsh edge to her voice.

I let out a little laugh. "Honey," I said, "how you forget. You don't remember your old Tiger very well at all. I never let anything alone until I bury it personally. I want all the answers, sugar. I want you to fall hard and fast and I want to watch it happen. I loved you too damn much so I hate your guts the same way. So remember, girl."

I wouldn't let her talk. I said, "Remember all the things we were going to do after the war? The house on the ocean and the business together. How many kids did you say you wanted? Remember ... four ... and they'd look like both of us and we could teach them the things they should know and not the things they shouldn't? They'd never know how or where we met ... we were going to fake a story about that one, but they would know how much we loved each other.

"Honey, was I ever a sucker for that. I pulled you out of the fire and nearly wrecked an operation doing it and then you shot me. Love? Hell, you don't know the meaning of the word. You gifted me for information and called it love. You suckered me, beautiful, but never again."

Her eyes had widened somehow and there was a lost expression on her face, but she was a great actress.

Suddenly she said quietly, "Do you still love me, Tiger?"

And just as quickly I told her. "Sure I do, Rondine. I always have. It isn't something you can turn off. After I kill you I'll go right on loving you like I always have but it won't make a damn bit of difference to me. The game is over. It's all cold, hard fact now."

"You really mean to kill me, don't you?"

"For certain, baby. You can be sure of it."

The music was coming to a close. The timing was right for what I wanted to do. I put my drink down and sat on the arm of a big chair and looked at her. "Take off that robe, Rondine."

If she had a drink in her hand she would have dropped it. She gave me a startled look and one hand went to her throat inadvertently to close the neckline that had been so deliberately opened.

She just stood there a second, then when I got up, took a step back and there was no place else to go because the couch was behind her pressing into her hips.

I walked the ten feet that separated us and stood there in front of her. “What’s the matter, kitten? I’ve seen you naked before, dozens of times, from bedrooms to swimming in a river together. There’s not an inch of you I haven’t explored and you loved every minute of it. Don’t play prude, not with me.”

“Please ...” The quiver of her mouth even looked genuine. If I hadn’t seen her do it before I would have fallen for the act.

“Off,” I said, “or do I do it for you?”

Her hands grabbed at the back of the couch and bit into the fabric. Rondine was scared silly. She had a right to be.

“Please ...” she said again, “why ...”

I grinned at her. “You thinking I’ll jump you kid? Hell, I wouldn’t throw a rock at you any more. I wouldn’t give you another inch of myself. No, baby, I just want to see how far you went with the plastic surgery. Faces can be lifted, but women don’t usually go all the way down to their shoes. The faces they show in the day ... the rest they can hide in the night so why bother. But I’m curious about you, Rondine.”

Ten seconds ticked by slowly before she moved. Her teeth bit into her lip and she made her decision. Her fingers came away from the couch, fumbled at the belt of her robe, loosened it, then with one sweeping motion she flung the housecoat wide and stood there like some new Joan of Arc challenging the mob.

The clock turned back twenty years instantly and it was the day Rondine and I were hiding in the loft in France with the *maquis* somewhere outside searching for her. There was a driving summer rain we knew had wiped out our tracks and in the exuberance of knowing we would make it together had felt the heady flow of happiness that turned into the wild, emotional waterfall of love and ecstasy. She had danced there in the loft and stripped off her clothes piece by piece and, in one final gesture before she flung herself at me, had stood there motionless, arms outstretched, every muscle in her body taut

and vibrant, a luminescent, white, beautiful thing that was all mine.

And now she stood there again, breasts hard and proud, her belly trembling, the quiver seeming to run into her thighs, legs at a defiant angle, the auburn tint of her hair highlighted with gold, eyes flashing, daring.

“So you went all the way. The medics did a good job.” There was a cold flat tone to my voice. “Paraffin injections, invisible surgery, hard diet and steady exercise can knock a lot of years off a person’s appearance.” I grinned at her again. “But they can’t operate on memories, can they, kid?”

I stepped back, laughed and turned toward the door. I heard her curse me softly with something like a sob in her voice and she said, “Tiger ... turn around.”

She had the gun in her hand this time, the pocketbook open on the chair. “I could kill you right now if I wanted to.”

“No you couldn’t. Rondine. You forget too much.” I reached in my pocket and took out the clip, looked at it and threw it at her feet. “Better try using bullets. You should know how they work.”

Her mouth opened in surprise and she looked at the useless piece in her hand. I saw the tears start and like a kid she sort of crumpled to her knees on the floor and sat there crying with her head down.

She hated to be outguessed and that was the only way she could take it out on herself. But, Rondine had always been like that.

I got the hell out of there.

Downstairs, I walked to the corner, waited a couple of minutes for a cruising taxi and when none came by empty, turned west toward Broadway and started up the empty channel of the street. On either side the apartments rose flatly into the night sky, angular and drab, windows like dull yellow eyes sick of looking out at nothing. Cars were parked bumper to bumper along either curb, stacked there until morning, abrogating every law and violating every rule of common sense until the herd instinct took over at the de-witching hour of eight A.M. I never failed to wonder how the hell they got out of there. One big Caddie had pushed in the nose of a Volkswagen and tomorrow there would be one big bash on the sidewalk when the owners had it out. Halfway down the block somebody had swiped both tires off a Chewie and left it on chocks. New York at night. Great place.

Traffic went opposite me so I didn't bother looking for a cab. All I could think about was Rondine.

Naked, lovely Rondine.

How could a woman devote her life to destruction? How could anyone so beautiful as her throw away the only good thing she had ever had? Sure, war could demand things of anyone, but out of war can come peace and decency if you have the sense to let it. Goddamn it, we could have had the world for our own, everything we ever wanted, only she was too warped and twisted inside to take it.

And now? The big now?

Warped and twisted? Balls ... she was the essence of total depravity, a person who had gone from one scheme to another to recapture and keep the one thing a woman always wants ... control. She needed it. But she'd never get it. That's why she cried.

For a pro I had gotten too lost inside my own head. There was too much night and too many thoughts and too much Rondine to stop and think of what she would do and I damn near died because of it. I didn't notice the car slowing down at first until the first shot came and missed, but I knew there would be others and went into a crazy dive toward the curb with the slug from a tommy gun slamming into the parked cars and whistling over my head. I had the .45 in my hand when my back hit the doors of a Buick beside me and let one go through the back window of the Ford racing off down the street.

But it didn't go any further than that. I was ready for the rest, ready for the second car that pulled up and the guy who jumped out when he thought I was concentrating on watching the Ford and when I turned and killed him with one smashing blow from the butt end of the Army Colt his eyes were white with the murderous horror of the moment. I shot through the window of the car and saw the driver slam up against the window and watched the car swerve into the others across the street and stand churning a moment before it stalled and the yelling from the windows started.

You never run. You walk. Nobody pays any attention when you walk near the scene of a killing. They only get civic when you run and not always then, except that they give descriptions. I took my time about lifting the guy's wallet before easing off down the block and by the time I heard the first siren I was already in a cab headed back toward Times Square and when I reached

the Big Intersection I tapped the driver on the shoulder, handed him a buck and told him to let me out.

Down in the subway station I went into the men's room, went through the wallet and found thirty-two bucks in small bills stuffed in the money folder and not a card, scrap of paper or anything else. I was almost ready to toss it when I saw it was one of those secret-pocket types with a hidden compartment. I got my finger under the flap of leather, slipped it out and there was a brand-new thousand-dollar bill. I fingered it out, stuck it with the rest in my pocket, went out and tossed the wallet down between the tracks when nobody was watching and went up to the next level where the Coke machine was and had one.

Chapter 9

At nine P.M. I put a credit-card call through to London and, after a ten-minute wait, got Peter Johnson in our office there. He operated out of a fashionable haberdashery shop near Piccadilly Circus with a crew of four and after a four-month lay-off since the Berlin affair he was glad to get back on an assignment.

So far, he hadn't come up with anything on the Caine family outside of what Wally had given me, but was going to dig into the deceased Vernon and Diana Caine to see if there was any possibility of blackmail tactics being used against the Caines because of them. To date his research had been pretty thorough with no tangible results, so he wasn't especially hopeful about going back into the war years to find something new.

He did have one interesting piece of news though. In the general backtracking of Rondine Lund he had contacted a former *maqui* officer who said he had heard that the beautiful Rondine made two successful escapes from her captors at the war's end, and although he wasn't certain, he heard later she had been recaptured and shot. At that time she had been caught in a round up of Nazi collaborators when justice had been swift, burial quick and no reference made of identity after the act.

It wouldn't have been hard for Rondine to switch identities with some sucker. There were ways of working it. I had done it myself once. An unsuspecting woman gives the name of Rondine Lund and before she knows what's happening to her it's over. Exit Rondine, Enter Edith Caine.

I told Johnson to stay with it until I called and hung up.

The next call was through a relay and took five minutes before Martin Grady answered. As usual, he simply picked up the phone and held it without speaking, waiting for the caller to make the first move.

"Tiger here," I said.

"Is this necessary?" He had the cool, polished voice of a diplomat, but behind it was all the raw power of the man he was.

"Yes," I said. "I need to draw on all the resources. I.A.T.S. and the rest are looking for Vidor Churis. I want him first. He's in this area."

"Time element?"

"Now. This is a Class One."

"I'll have Newark call. Where can you be reached?"

“Tomorrow at exactly six P.M. I’ll be at this number.” I read it off to him. “It’s a pay station in the Eighth Avenue subway.”

I heard the click as the phone went dead, cradled the receiver and stepped out of the booth. In a few minutes from now the power of money would be doing what the power of great government organizations could not. Word would go out on a name and a description and whoever came out with the lead would find more money in his hand than he had ever dreamed of. Countless front men were used and nobody would be able to trace the inquiry back to its source or even want to, but there were those who knew about getting the word and what it meant, and even if they had to break down the payment to allocate some to others to bring the information to them it would be done. There would be one with a big bite, others with smaller bites, but everyone happy and all hoping to be the one on the fat end the next time.

But tomorrow at six there would be a line to Vidor Churis.

There was one strange note, however. Martin Grady didn’t take direct contact casually. There was usually an explicit instruction or request to explain the urgency of the matter, or more likely a tone of disapproval for not having gone through the regular channels.

Maybe Grady was softening up. No, that wasn’t it. Maybe he was smartening up. Could be age had given him insight into more than the big picture and he was considering personal feelings for once. In a way, he’d better. There were times when the big picture didn’t give a damn ... like twenty years ago with Rondine and me. There was even the possibility that he was going to teach me a lesson. If I hadn’t learned it twenty years ago I’d learn it now, *so let out the rope.*

Screw him if he figured that way, I thought. I was too old at the business now. I’d been behind a gun too long and seen too many men fall in front of it. I had them plow into me and felt the fire of metal inside my skin too many times. I’d mixed it with the wild ones and the shrewd ones too many years to worry about anything now.

So okay, Grady, thanks for the rope. I’ll use every inch of it you’ll give me.

There was one contact I hadn’t made yet, so before I left the phone I checked the number on my pad, dialed Gretchen Lark’s place and waited through a half-dozen rings before she answered. She was breathless and coughing and when she said, “Yes?” it was as if I had interrupted something.

I had. I said it was me and she tinkled a laugh back.

“Tiger ... the man with the funny name. I was just coming out of the shower. I’m all wet.”

“Dry yourself off.”

“I can’t. I have no towel.”

“You mean you’re standing there dripping and naked and talking to me?”

“Well, it isn’t exactly television, but you make me feel like it is.”

“I think I can describe every inch of you.”

“Don’t do it!”

I laughed back at her. “Skin talk gets you sexy?”

“You know too much. How did you get my number? It’s unlisted.”

Rather than tell her I said, “No trouble when a guy really wants to meet a girl.”

“Mr. Mann, please. You had a date tonight.”

“Just seeing an old friend. Edith and I have been buddies a long time. Only buddies make strange combos.”

“Tiger ... I feel a proposition coming on.”

“You’re right.”

“What about Edith?”

“I’m calling you, kid, not her.”

“Did you two have a fight?”

“Come on, I don’t fight with broads.”

“I know, you’re a tiger.”

“So I’ve been told,” I said. “Feel like getting dressed and going out?”

“Where?”

“Who knows? Maybe some slop chute. I feel like talking to a broad.”

“And you picked me ... just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“You excite me, Tiger. I think I’ll go.”

“Naked?”

“No, I’ll get dressed, but if you like you can come up and watch me.”

“I’m too far away. By the time I get there you’ll be ready.”

“I’m a slow dresser,” she said and hung up.

The cab dropped me off on her corner and I waited until it had pulled

away before I turned and started walking toward her building. The last time I had waited in a taxi while Burton Selwick made the call, but this time I punched the button under her name and when the door buzzed, shoved it open.

Gretchen Lark lived on the top floor, three long, creaking flights up. And like she said, she was a slow dresser. Women can take two hours to put their faces on, but two minutes to get into clothes. Gretchen Lark had her face on. The rest was being smothered in a crazy beatnik cotton blanket robe that was all efficiency and no charm ... but at least she had waited.

“Tiger man,” she said when she opened the door. It wasn’t my name. It was a deliberate dropping of the last letter and the capital and I let her see all the teeth in a smile and walked inside.

“Hello, baby. Should I say thanks?”

“It isn’t necessary.” She knew damn well what I meant.

There were framed oils on the walls, unframed canvases standing on the floor and two in easels with drape cloths hanging over them beside the skylights that faced the north side. Most of them were good, but a few were the expressionless scratchings of an artist that had no subject to paint.

I said, “Neat, but not gaudy.”

“They’ll never sell.”

“What do you care. You’re having fun.”

“I can afford it.”

She was laughing at me now, a tall, superlative doll with a shining brunette page-boy hair set that spilled around a nutty cotton robe that was no class at all. But she was laughing.

“Tiger ... what do you think?”

“Good color composition,” I said. “Brush strokes too hard and for Pete’s sake stay off the palette knife; you just don’t have the flair for it. The colored girl is lousy. No anatomy. No nothing there.”

“I realize that.”

“You can paint men, though,” I told her. The one in the corner was a beauty except that it would never sell either. Realism can come to an end at times. There wasn’t even a fig leaf and the exaggeration was too much to be believed. “You got a fetish,” I said.

“No ... only wishful thinking,” she smiled.

“Someday you’ll find out that technique can beat a ruler, kid.”

“You’re dirty.”

“Why sure.”

“I love it.”

“Don’t you all,” I said.

“Would you like to watch me get dressed?”

“No. The reverse process is far more interesting. Hurry up.”

Her smile was a teasing thing. “I knew you’d chicken out.” She pointed to an icebox half hidden behind a curtain. “Have a beer while you wait.”

“Thanks.” She walked off into a bedroom at the far end of the room without bothering to shut the door. I found a Pabst, jacked it open and poured it into a glass to get a head on it. At least she drank like a man with the beer barely above freezing.

While I waited for her I toured the room, deciphering her tastes. It wasn’t easy. Her book shelves were lined with everything from the classics to earthy mysteries, one entire shelf being given to treatises on international politics. About twenty books were in German, French and Spanish, all histories of each nation and their current role in politics. There were six volumes of a medical series and a stack of pamphlets from a New York school dealing with the aspects of being a legal secretary.

A real well-rounded broad intellectually as well as physically.

I flipped up the drape that covered a canvas and though it was only partially done it was recognizable and even in these early stages, beautifully executed. It was a study of Burton Selwick.

Behind me Gretchen said, “How do you like it?” She came out, turned so I could button up the back of her dress and looked at the picture over her shoulder.

“It should be your best.” Her flesh was warm under my fingers, firm and young. I tried not to touch her but couldn’t help it. “Why don’t you wear a brassiere?” I asked her.

She let me finish buttoning and spun around. “Because I don’t need it, Tiger.” She smiled impishly. “Do I?”

I had to admit that she didn’t.

With a sudden impulse she picked up a charcoal stick and swept in a line down the shoulder of the figure of Selwick. Just one line, but it added strength. Satisfied, she dropped the charcoal and wiped her fingertips on the drape cloth.

“This is for his wife,” she said. “They have an anniversary in two months.”

“How come he picked you?”

She took the beer from my hand and had a sip of it. “Sometime back I was exhibiting at the Conway Galleries and during lunch the office staff all went down with me. Mr. Selwick saw the studies I did of the President and a U.N. delegate and right then decided he wanted one of himself for his wife.”

“Make much money?”

“Surprisingly enough, I do. That is, if an extra five thousand a year is much.” She turned the drape down over the picture. “A few more sittings and I’ll have it. The only trouble with Mr. Selwick is time. He works too much. He’s not too well, either. Now finish your beer and let’s go somewhere. If I’m going to be late-dated I want it to be in style.”

There was a little place I knew buried on a side street that nobody could find unless they had been there before. The clientele is restricted to a chosen group because some of the things they sold there weren’t on the approved list of the Pure Food and Drug Act. You simply went in a door that adjoined a dirty, vacant store window, down a hall to where the cellar door should be and when you knocked on that one a slot opened in a panel and you got a glimpse of a pair of eyes.

Gretchen’s hand tightened on mine with a touch of fright.

Then the eyes crinkled in a smile as they recognized me and the door opened. The guy there was short, but broad in the shoulders with a face marked from years of dirty fighting. “Ah, Mr. Mann, it is good to see you again.”

“Hello, Dell. How’s everything?”

“Progressing, Mr. Mann. You would like your usual spot?”

“Please. The show on yet?”

“You are just in time.”

We followed him down the stairs into the basement, went through an alcove, through another door and there was a scene from the middle of the Casbah right down to tinkling bells on the toes of the dancing girls to the burnouses of the waiters.

It was a huge place, with a center dance floor surrounded by tables occupied by people dressed in everything from evening clothes to beatnik outfits. A half-level up was a balcony divided into compartments, each with a

heavily beaded curtain drawn across its front. But this Casbah joint had the benefit of modern air conditioning at least. Smoke was drawn off through ceiling ventilators and the only odor was that of some rich perfume. Whether it was deliberately introduced or was the conglomerate of that of all the women I couldn't tell, but was pleasant enough.

I pointed out the powder room to Gretchen and told her to hurry up. When she went through the louvered door I motioned Dell to one side where we were alone. "I'm after a man."

"Naturally. Otherwise you would not be here, no?"

"Only identification is a stiff right forefinger on the right hand. He may have an accent, but don't count on it. There's a possibility he'll be with another whose only distinguishing characteristic is a round mouth. I don't know what that means, but it should mean something."

"They have never been here."

"I don't expect they will. Pass the word."

"The usual fee?"

"We can throw in a bonus on this one."

Dell smiled gently and rocked on his heels. "I'll be happy to see what can be learned. We offer many accommodations here."

He nodded past me. "Here comes your lady. Very exquisite. You always did have good taste. What became of that stunning redhead?"

"She was killed in Mexico."

"So? Too bad. And the person who did such a thing?"

"I drowned him in a toilet bowl. It was a good ending."

"Very good," he said.

Dell turned us over to a bearded waiter who led us up the three steps to the balcony, went to the corner booth and held the curtains open for us.

After we sat down I gave him our order in rapid Arabic and flipped the curtain open so we could see what was going on downstairs..

The effect was showing on Gretchen's face. "In the middle of New York!" she said, awed. "And I thought I'd seen it all."

"Baby, there's a lot you haven't seen."

"But this place ..."

"It's called the *Hall of the Two Sisters*. The atmosphere is exciting, the food authentic and you can arrange anything from a killing to a main-line pop without batting an eye."

“Incredible.”

“Understand one thing. Nobody ... hear that? Nobody comes in here unless they’re cleared. Being with me clears you, but finger this place to anybody, talk about it and you can find yourself with a face full of acid or your fingers off down to the knuckles or tied to a table naked while a pack of goons work you into an idiot.”

Her eyes were perfect circles of horror as she watched my face. I knew what she was seeing there. Everything I told her was the truth and she knew it.

“How ... can it exist? The police ...”

“Baby, in police work they sometimes let things exist. There are sources of information that can come out of queer places and rather than destroy them they utilize them. Forget it. That’s not your line of work. Just keep in mind what I told you.”

“Then you’re a policeman?”

“Hell no,” I said. “I’m in a business that takes me around and I get to know some strange people.”

The drinks came then, tall and cool in oddly shaped glasses. Gretchen tasted hers, nodded with approval and took another sip. When she put it down she reached for a cigarette and let me light it. Through a gray stream of smoke she said, “And what is your business, Tiger?”

I shrugged. “Exploitation, to put it simply. The people I represent go into undeveloped areas and open them up. Five years ago it was rubber, then tin and tungsten, now we’ve located an untapped source of mahogany.”

“You enjoy your work?”

“As long as you don’t mind heat or cold, bugs, snakes, dry spells, cities or desert it isn’t bad. How about you?”

“Oh, I’m satisfied.”

“Why don’t you stay with your painting?”

She lifted her drink again. “It isn’t enough. I rather enjoy being with the U.N. Things are happening there that are important to the world.”

“Nuts.”

Before she could answer there was a clash of cymbals and immediately the flutes and drums started. Down on the floor the dancers came out, six of them, their only costume a head-dress and gauzy veil. They were all dark-skinned and beautiful with hair black as coal, their bodies going in a frenzied

motion that made you almost ignore their nakedness under the gauze.

Minute by minute the beat and rhythm of the music got more intense until it was one demanding tempo of seduction and the girls spun on bare feet so that the veils were wafted out in huge circles at their shoulders. Those at the tables below couldn't take their eyes from them and you could see the fine glisten of sweat on the foreheads of the men at the ringside. The women were the same way too and when I looked at Gretchen I could see the heat of it getting to her. There was a tight set to her body as if she were ready to go out there with them, ready to strip the clothes off her body and join the six. The tip of her tongue kept wetting her lips and the knuckles on the backs of her hands were white.

The man joined the dancers with a whip, an Arab in the loose white cotton of the desert tribes. He raised the lash, snapped it between the girls, twisted and spun in the rituals of the dance, every so often snaking the whip around the waist of a dancer to draw her to him and at the very moment of being ready to take her, changing his mind to go for another. One by one he tried them all, discarded them, then stood there, angry.

The drum beat was a signal. The girls stopped, then raced off the floor and in their place came the most exotic woman I had ever seen. She was evidently a Eurasian, combining the loveliness of the races. Each wrist and ankle was covered with bracelets that made music of their own as she came out in the classic motion of the dance.

And that was all she had on.

Her jet-black hair hung down to her waist and she could swirl it to cover or expose herself as she wished to. A look of greed and longing crossed the face of the Arab as he watched, then decided and went into motion with the whip. The lash snapped, ripped out and furred about her, to all appearances cutting her to ribbons, but it was as if she weren't there at all. No mark appeared on her bare skin at all, no welt showed and the girl's face simply smiled at the faces in the audience as she tinkled past the men and women who were plainly caught up in the act as if they were part of it. One woman was even half standing, her hands gripping the edges of the table and behind her a waiter hovered, waiting to restrain her if she moved. They had evidently seen it happen before.

The Arab was great with the whip, turning it into a living thing, then in a sudden climax he caught the girl up in the folds, this time refusing to let her

go and slowly brought her close to him. The music went higher and higher, the tempo getting more furious as he wrapped her inside his cloak and with a sudden smash of the cymbals again the pair folded to the floor as the lights went out completely.

When they came back on again the floor was empty.

Gretchen said breathlessly, "*Good gracious!*"

"Stuns you, doesn't it?"

She looked at me, frowning. "How can you just sit there."

"I've seen it all before, kid." Then I grinned. "You almost joined the act."

Her face flushed and she licked her lips again, nervously this time. "I know. I felt like it. There's something ... hypnotic about the whole thing."

"It's supposed to be."

"Inside, I feel like ... I feel ..."

"I know," I said.

"You know too damn much."

The bearded waiter came in, took the order I gave him and disappeared. Gretchen said, "How many languages do you speak?"

"Chow and girls I can order in almost any language. Conversationally I stick to English." It was a lie, but she didn't have to know it. Abruptly I said, "You know Edith Caine long?"

"Only since she came to the U.N."

"Close friends?"

"Pretty much. You know how girls are. How come you didn't take her out tonight? Have a fight?"

"We've known each other too many years. I rub her wrong. She ever tell you about her family?"

"A few times she's discussed them. They're quite important in England. Society, government and all that. She feels that she has to contribute something too and being part of the U.N. is the post she selected."

"Like the company?"

"The delegates?"

"More or less," I offered.

"Well ... if you live on an intellectual plane—"

"Do you?" I interrupted.

"Yes, very much so. When you do you can find the work and the company fascinating. Considering that the people involved are all carefully

selected and represent the highest order of culture and learning each country can bring here, working with them and sometimes adding to what they have is a satisfying thing.”

“We’ve had nothing but wars, kiddo.”

“True, but could we have had *bigger and more* wars if they hadn’t been there?”

“It’s a thought,” I said. “How’s Burton Selwick to work with?”

Gretchen made a face. “I’m not assigned to him often. Only twice have I had occasion to be with his staff. He’s funny.”

“How?”

“Oh, he has that staid British humor and isn’t afraid to mix a little fun in with his work. All the girls like him. He’s extremely intelligent. I had a professor like him once.”

“Where?”

“College here in New York.”

“Edith seems to think a lot of him.”

“They’re countrymen, that’s why. Whenever they go out to lunch all they talk about is England. He uses her a lot after hours like all the rest of the Embassy bunch. That woman will work night and day without pay just to be ‘doing her bit’ as they say.”

Sure, and doing her bit can get her a lot of inside information that can be diverted into other channels, I thought. Scratch another up for Rondine.

“She was always like that. Real close-mouthed, though.”

“You have to be. Everyone is cleared security-wise and you don’t last long if you talk out of turn. Look what happened last month and before that with that attaché.”

The waiter came then with a steaming tray of strange dishes that had the pungent aroma of the Orient. He set them down, waited for a smile of satisfaction and went back through the curtain.

Gretchen asked, “What is it?”

“Maybe I’d better not tell you,” I said. “Just eat it.”

She gave a mock shudder of excitement and dipped her fork into her plate. What she tasted pleased her and we ate with small talk about the place itself. I pointed out a couple of politicians, an actor and two big hoods on the level below and gave her some background on the *Hall of the Two Sisters*. Before we finished Dell came up, spoke in my ear and when I shook my

head, smiled and left.

“What did he say?”

I laughed and pushed my plate away. “He wanted to know if the lady and I were interested in sharing a room for the night. It seems that he has just the thing available.”

“And you said no?” she teased.

“Sure. The beds are hard, the mirrors two-way and for a seat behind them somebody who goes for the oddball kicks pays Dell five yards. Besides, your place is better.”

She leaned her elbows on the table, her chin cupped in her hands. “Tiger,” she said, “you are completely overbearing and the picture of supreme over-self-confidence.”

“So do we go to your place?”

“Certainly,” she said.

The fire was still inside her, the picture of the dancers there in her mind. She let me unbutton the dress then shrugged out of it and stood in the soft light from the dresser and shed the black lace that was left. Slowly, she undulated across the room toward me, not dancing, but with the innate classic movement of every female who had ever lived and wanted just one thing. She was tall and sleek and stalked with the subtle grace of an athlete; breasts high and thrusting, swelled with excitement. Her belly was a concave region tense with excitement, merging with hips and thighs that were taut with demand. The Eurasian girl was just that compared to her ... a girl.

“Now you,” she said and reached for the buttons on my shirt.

In the living room the phone rang, a sudden discordant note. I looked at her and she shook her head. It rang twice more and stopped. Then her fingers were inside my shirt brushing my skin and I pushed her away to do it quicker.

Outside the Village had gone quiet and beside me Gretchen slept curled on her side, one arm flung across my chest. I lifted her hand, felt the pulse in her wrist steady, her breathing regular, dropped her arm on the bed and rolled out. I got dressed, threw the cover over her and walked to the door.

I looked back, said, “Nice. Very nice,” then left.

Chapter 10

The story of the kill the night before was all over the morning papers. The pictures were there showing the guy on the ground and the one in the car. The accompanying story identified them as Tommy (Chum) Williams and the driver as Max Sweiber, both known hoods with police records whose regular base of operations was Chicago.

I put in a call to Thomas Watford and, when he wasn't in, told his secretary I'd be up there in an hour. Watford would know what I meant. He'd have everybody assembled, no doubt about that. I finished typing my report, dropped it in the mail chute beside the elevators and knocked on Toomey's door. He didn't answer so evidently he had already left on business of his own. He had a key to my room so I stuck a copy of the report under the empty bottom drawer of the dresser on the plywood dust panel where I told him I would and went downstairs for breakfast.

At nine-thirty, I finished, grabbed a cab to Watford's place and went in to the receptionist. She was smiling and busy, told me to go right in and nodded toward the door.

Just the two of them were there, Thomas Watford and the heavy gun from I.A.T.S., and the look on their faces meant trouble. Both were seated at the desk going over a stack of papers and looked up when I came in with dark, foreboding glances and sat back, forgetting what they had been doing until I slipped into a chair across from them.

"You saw the ballistics report, I guess," I said.

Watford nodded. "*Your* gun, Tiger. The bullet checked with the one we already had."

"Now what?"

The big guy leaned forward, his attitude challenging. "Both dead men were armed, so in a way you're off the hook. The papers and the police are attributing it to an attempted gang rub-out and luckily someone saw the action from a window, said it was a deliberate attack, but couldn't identify the intended victim except to say that it was a man."

"Buddy," I stated flatly, "you're the one who wanted me to be the sacrificial cow. If it happens, don't point any fingers toward me."

"At this point we won't," Watford told me, "not as long as you cooperate."

I shrugged. "Who's holding back?"

"All right. What were you doing at that particular place at that particular time?"

"Visiting Edith Caine," I said.

Both of them exchanged quick looks.

"Why don't you check with her?"

Watford flipped the key on the intercom and gave his receptionist instructions. While he waited he said, "Someone knew how to find you."

"Sure. She told them. I left her place and she had time to make a phone call. If she had somebody on hand for such an eventuality it could have been an easy hit. Hell, there were two carloads of them. The first missed and the second was insurance. You get anything on the guys?"

It was the big guy's turn and his tone was reluctant. "A contract setup. They flew here out of Chicago two days ago. Nothing more than that and I doubt if there will be anything more than that."

The call came in then. Watford spoke briefly into the hushaphone on his desk and though nobody could hear what he was saying I knew the answer. He put the phone down and looked at his friend solemnly. "He was there," Watford said. "A friendly visit and the time fits."

"The local police going to move?"

"In this case we have jurisdiction."

I grinned at him a long moment. "Or does Martin Grady?"

I thought the big guy would bust. His face was a tight, florid thing filled with loathing of the big pro for the little pro and his hand slammed down on the desk. Very quietly, in spite of his rage, he said, "Damn Grady and the rest of you. I'm making a point of breaking up that clique!"

"You said that before. I think it's been tried several times."

"Money can't always buy everything."

"Almost everything," I said. "It couldn't buy me."

Neither of them spoke.

I said, "I asked you for information on Edith Caine. What did you find out?"

After a few seconds Watford said, "Clear. Security marks her clean. You have nothing there. I'd like to know what you expect to find."

"A killer, Tommy boy," I said. I got up and put my hat on, watching the guarded expressions on their faces.

Finally the big one said, “Whose?”

“It’s a long story, friend, but mine among others,” I told him. “Do you want a formal statement from me or will you handle this the usual way?”

“Do we have a choice?”

“Not really,” I said.

“It isn’t over yet, Tiger. They’ll make another try.”

“Naturally. This time I’ll keep somebody alive long enough to talk about it.”

“You do that.”

“Why sure. Now I want a favor from your department.”

“This isn’t a joint effort on *our* part, Mann. You are to do the cooperating.”

“Stow it, friend. If it doesn’t work both ways count me out. It means you’re too stupid to work with at all.”

Watford ignored the insult, looked at the other one, then back to me.

“What is it you want?”

“A tail on Edith Caine. Twenty-four hours, rotating teams and all contacts tailed individually. Secondary contacts tailed too and stake-outs on everyone involved.”

“How long is this to last?”

“A week should do it.”

Watford said, “You know what this will entail in personnel and cost involved, I imagine.”

“If the government can finance Tito and underwrite wheat shipments to Russia I think it can stand a few grand and some men to protect its policies. If you want me to I’ll put our own group on this, but that would mean losing a day in the race and I don’t think any of us can afford it.”

Neither of them answered me directly. Finally Watford asked, “What do you expect to find?”

“When it happens you’ll know it. We’ll consolidate our reports and pick it apart from there.” I stopped and looked at them both. “Do we have a deal?”

“For a week,” the big guy said.

“That should do it,” I told him. “From now on I won’t make any direct contact with you unless it’s absolutely necessary, but if you get anything I’m at the Chester Hotel.”

“Wide open?”

“You don’t hide a target, friend, and that’s what you want me to be. A pro won’t find me too hard to locate, but for anybody else it won’t be easy.”

Watford had a satisfied look on his face. “I’m glad you’re asking for it,” he said.

“Don’t hold your breath waiting for me to be scratched,” I said.

“It’s bound to happen. We’ll all be better off when it does.”

“Drop dead,” I told him. But I was grinning.

I went downstairs and started walking back to the hotel. I stayed with the crowd, taking my time all the way, doing my thinking as I walked. A lot of things were beginning to tie in now, but the big apple hadn’t been plucked yet.

It was cute, the way they were working it, calling in outside men rather than involve their own. Rondine wanted no strings tying her into this bit at all. She was passing it down the line to other hands and letting them make the contacts.

Everything figured out nicely. The try for a hit right after I met her. It wouldn’t have been hard to find me where I was. Until I saw Rondine I wasn’t using a cover at all. I was between assignments from Grady and marking time. I had two weeks in New York with plenty of loot in my pocket and I was going to enjoy myself. Until I saw her again. She sure worked fast, but then again, she had to. I could jeopardize her entire operation whatever it was and she didn’t want to give me the chance. She knew damn well what I’d do.

She had had my hotel staked out when they made the second try that I spotted. When I made the tail I was thinking of it then because it’s what I would have done myself. If I had played it cool I would have switched hotels after the first attempt, but I wanted her right out in the open where she’d be left cold.

They missed then too because I *was* smart enough to get the other room on the floor with the ledge around it, and that was something I did no matter where I stayed or whether I was on an assignment or not. For three years I had been on the Commie “B” list which meant a hit at any given opportunity, but being promoted to the “A” sheet, like they told me I was, meant an organized effort to nail me. Orders had been cut to kill this old soldier and by request from Rondine Vidor Churis had been given the job.

It was going to be nice to see him again. He had killed a friend of mine

too.

There was a simple message waiting for me at the hotel and I had to laugh when I read it. I hadn't told Charlie Corbinet where I had moved to but he found me easily enough one way or another. It was coded in the old *Tike R* form we hadn't used since the war but couldn't forget because it was used more to set up interoffice dates than for business purposes. Charlie wanted to see me at two o'clock in front of the library building and I had twenty minutes to make it in.

Instead of going upstairs I called Toomey, got him in his room and told him my report was in and for him to be available right after six that night. Newark had already alerted him through Martin Grady and he said he'd stand by.

There was a cab in the slot outside, so I grabbed it and told the driver to drift by the library, spotted Charlie getting there right on schedule, waved him over and had him hop in.

I said, "Hi, Colonel. What's the good news?"

"You'll find out. Let's go to the British Embassy."

I gave the driver the message and sat back. When anyone was within listening distance Charlie Corbinet wasn't a talker. When we reached the embassy I paid off the driver and followed Charlie inside. He wasn't new to the place at all. He got the VIP treatment immediately and we were ushered upstairs to a private office furnished in dark-brown leather and mahogany and before we could get seated three men came in carrying briefcases and folders under their arms, shook hands quickly and were introduced to me.

One needed no introduction. He was Vincent Harley Case whom I had met with Rondine the first day I saw her again.

He said through a Glasgow accent, "Ah, Tiger Mann. Yes, we've already met through a mutual friend."

Charlie gave me a sideways look that could mean almost anything.

"Though I hardly expected to see you again under these—ah—circumstances."

"It's a small world."

"Not any longer, it seems. Please, sit down."

The chairs were pulled up around a low table, the folders laid out and it was the Colonel's time for explanation. Evidently they had expected him to come alone and weren't prepared for me.

Charlie said, “In view of the facts you’re going to have to leave some things to my judgment, gentlemen. Without going into extreme details I can only tell you that Mr. Mann is an associate of mine, has served under my command and is, at present, engaged in activities that make his presence vital. Security on him is clear. I will vouch for him completely. Has anyone any objections?”

For just a moment there was an exchange of looks, a silent acknowledgment to accept Corbinet’s opinion and Vincent Case nodded. “There is no reason not to go along with you, sir. After all, you are in an official capacity and our governments must work together. We can use all the help we can get.”

Charlie glanced my way and I followed his lead, letting him do the talking. It was for my benefit that he reviewed the details, knowing I would put the pieces together in a hurry. I had to do more than that. I had to figure out just how deep he was with I.A.T.S. and what power he held. Damn, the agencies were smarter than I thought, getting him back in the ranks again. I wondered if he was over the big guy who stayed so close to Watford.

“As you know, yesterday we submitted certain prepared papers to the British regarding our joint efforts in the *Climax Project*. They contained false information deliberately planted to see if it was picked up.” He paused and searched the faces of the others. “An hour ago our sources inside the Russian Embassy got word out that they had received news of our supposed intent and had called an emergency meeting of their delegates to counteract the proposal that was to be delivered today when the General Assembly convened.

“Since we did not follow it up with the true facts it was decided that the true proposal be discussed and agreed upon in secret, all members present not being allowed to confer with anyone until the time of the session this afternoon.” Corbinet looked at his watch. “You gentlemen will be at that meeting in exactly forty-five minutes at an assigned place you will be given before I leave.

“This new proposal is not a vital one at this stage. It is what will be coming up within the week that will be of major importance. What we must do is find the source of this security leak and block it. We can’t always be making last-minute decisions ... we need time for discussion and communication, so this arrangement is in the way of a trial balloon. Is that understood?”

Again, there were acknowledging nods. Then the tall, thin one called Beaver said, "And Mr. Mann's part ... ?" He let it hang there.

"Have you something to say, Tiger?"

"No offense intended," I said, "but I'd like you to run a security check on all your clerical help."

"Mr. Mann ..." Case started.

I held up my hand. "Our people will do the same. I know they've been cleared once, but go through it again. There might have been new developments."

"Am I to understand that you have someone in mind?"

"You might try Edith Caine."

His frown deepened into a scowl and his eyes bit into mine. "I happen to know the family well."

"How well do you know Edith?"

"Quite well, sir."

"For how long?"

He drew himself up and there was an edge to his voice. "Ever since she was a child."

I knew I had him then. I said, "You recommended her for government service, didn't you?"

"Among others, yes. She came to see me, renew an old friendship and I was instrumental in bringing her here."

"Uh-huh. How long had it been since you had seen her before." He frowned again. "Well ... I don't quite understand. ..."

"How long, Mr. Case?"

He saw what I was getting at and his mouth tightened. "Not since she was eight or nine. Of course, her family had sent her to schools both in England and abroad. Since she was the youngest I rarely had occasion to do more than inquire about her ... but this is sheer foolishness!"

I stood up. "Is it?"

"Indeed it is. However, to satisfy you we will check her through again. I hope it will satisfy you."

"It will," I told him.

Charlie took over then. He gave them an address, told them not to write it down and repeated the time of the meeting. There was nothing more. On the way out I managed to get in step with Case and take some of the sting out of

what he had to do by reminding him a double check could not hurt and only clear everyone not involved once and for all and helped the possibility of stemming the leak. He finally gave me a friendly grin and admitted I was right.

I said, "Where's your sidekick today?"

"Sidekick?"

"Burton Selwick."

"Oh." He gave a sympathetic squint and said, "He had another attack last night. Took him to the hospital. Chap works too hard. He's been warned and knows better, but it's a demanding job."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Ulcers. He's going under the knife shortly. Right now he's at home, but if I know him he'll be present today."

"Tell him hello for me."

"I'll do that, Mr. Mann ... and good hunting. I do hope you are mistaken in your premise, but if you aren't, well..."

"Sure," I said.

We separated at the elevator and Charlie Corbinet and I rode it down to the first floor. After picking up the hats and raincoats we went out to the street and without hesitation, he started north at a fast walk. I let him alone for a full block, knowing what he was doing ... looking for a group to fall in behind so that when he spoke there would be no chance of being picked up by any mobile parabolic microphone that might be tracking us.

Three women and a kid were up ahead so we fell in behind him and I said, "Thanks for the party, Charlie, but that wasn't the reason you wanted to see me. I'm short on time."

He turned his head and made a wry face. "You've opened up a dangerous avenue of thought."

"No kidding."

"After you left the other day," he said, "I made several calls to some old friends in British Intelligence. They aren't working at it now, of course, but I finally found one who tracked down an assistant of Price Richards. Luckily, he was a man with a remarkable memory and was engaged in liaison work with the French *maquis*. He did remember Rondine Lund and was able to fill me in on some of the details."

"A woman named Rondine Lund was shot," I said.

His eyes twinkled. "You're right there, boy. You still have your own ways, don't you?" Without waiting for an answer he went on, "Well, a year after the war she was caught up when the net went out for Nazi war criminals. Once again, by posing as the mistress of the one she was with, she managed to slip away because they considered her of no importance. However, sometime later she was recognized from a photo by one of our staff but by that time, naturally, she had made a successful escape.

"Now as a spy, with the war over, she never would have mattered, but there was a time, if you remember, she was in the company of several high officials of the Nazi Party who were never rounded up. These persons had access to documents we wanted and there was a possibility she could give us a lead to them, so an attempt was made to pick up her trail.

"It wasn't an easy job, several months were spent on it, she was identified and followed and the trail ended when she disappeared inside Soviet territory. A team of two was dispatched inside, one came back with the report that Rondine Lund was alive enough to kill his partner and there it ended because she had disappeared in the Soviet organization and there was no way of getting to her.

"By that time the documents we were after had been discovered by our men so there was no advantage in looking any further for Rondine. Naturally, there was no accusation of the murder of the agent because we couldn't let it out he was inside the Soviet line. So Rondine was dismissed and forgotten. The report was among many destroyed when we were burning the outdated paperwork and so ended Rondine."

"Until now," I added.

"It's hard to picture," he said. "I made a point to see Edith Caine."

"So did I. All over?"

Corbinet gave me a quizzical look.

I said, "Remember Carmen Bellogica? She was forty-two when they did the plastic on her so she could go back into Norway posing as her own sister who was fifteen years younger and pinpointed those Nazi installations for us. I saw her before she died and she looked like a kid. Surgery makes great strides during a war or in time of necessity."

"I remember her. And you think Edith Caine is Rondine Lund."

"I know it, Colonel."

"You'll need more than conjecture to swing it, Tiger."

“Don’t worry. When I pull it off it will be all the way. I won’t get myself messed up this time.” Before he could say what he was thinking I added, “And I realize the importance of the job. I won’t let personalities interfere. Digging out the security leak comes first, so don’t lecture me. I’m over my first mad and back at work. I’m under orders myself, so from now on it’s cut and dried ... but I’m taking a lot of real, personal pleasure in being on this one.”

“Very good.” He stopped, waited for the light to change and waved me across the street. “Incidentally, I heard about events on the street last night.”

“Your cross-intelligence section is pretty good.”

“No ... I made the inquiry myself. That rub-out attempt was too close to Edith Caine’s residence to be coincidental.” A smile flirted with his usually tight mouth. “You have Mr. Watford and Hal Randolph in a sweat.”

“That the big guy ... the one with Watford?”

“Correct.”

“Isn’t he second in command of the Washington section of I.A.T.S.?”

Again, Corbinet smiled. “Nobody ... nobody at all, is supposed to know that.”

“Balls,” I said. “You contact him?”

Charlie nodded. “This morning. He didn’t appreciate it.” “Anything new?”

“Possibly one thing you might be interested in.”

“Like what?”

“The staffs of all the agencies concerted their efforts on this one. When they have to they can dig hard and fast and getting to the contract killers who were hired wasn’t an easy thing. But as always, there’s an intimation at least, if not definite proof, of who was behind the attempted kill. One person in Chicago managed to come across with a small bit of information that has a peculiar tone to it in view of what we’ve just discussed.”

“So?”

“It is suspected that the arrangement for those hoods was made by a woman. No names ... no proof, but unsupported suspicion.”

“But not unfounded?”

“No, not unfounded.”

“We’re getting there, Colonel.”

“Your death is worth money to someone.”

I put my hand on his arm. "Wait a minute." I looked around, spotted a small delicatessen with tables along one side and motioned for him to follow me. We went inside, sat down and ordered coffee and Danish. When it came I took the money I had picked from the dead guy's wallet, thumbed out the brand-new thousand-dollar bill and handed it to Corbinet.

"What's this?"

"One of the hoods I killed had this on him with some small change. He wasn't the thousand-dollar type at all. Bills of this size generally have their serial numbers recorded and maybe you can trace it back."

He folded the bill slowly and put it in his inside pocket. "Nobody would make a mistake like that. Not in this business."

I shrugged. "Then get my grand back to me. I'll keep it as payment for getting shot at."

"Of course, if it's evidence, that's the end of it."

"The fortunes of the game, Colonel. I once found a million and a half in U.S. currency I had to turn in. I thought about it fifteen minutes before I figured it would only buy trouble. Remember?"

He smiled gently. "Quite well. You were younger then."

"I'll call you later then."

From across the table he gave me a direct stare, trying to read my face. "Vidor Churis?"

"Him."

"Every man available is on that pursuit."

"We have methods the agencies haven't."

"Yes, I know. Good hunting. I hope you're in shape."

"My kill record is pretty impressive. I'm still around."

"So I see. Shall we go?"

I found Wally Gibbons with a bunch of the guys from The News over in P. J. Moriarty's eating corned beef and cabbage. Brian gave me a nod from behind the bar, sent a beer over to the table for me and we shook hands all around. For a change the others were on assignments and couldn't stick around, so after fifteen minutes of small talk they paid up the tab, went back to work and left Wally and me alone.

Generally he was a laughing-boy type, always ready with a gag, but now

he had no smile ready. There was a funny cut to his eyes and he kept looking at me from behind a cup of Irish coffee, then he said, "The more I dig the more I think about you, Tiger."

"Now what."

"Last night?"

"Good action. You want the story?"

"Buddy, I have it, but I won't run it until you come across all the way. You have something big going."

"Your pipelines are pretty tight. That's a closed circuit."

"To some, maybe. Not to me. I'm the thinking type. You want to talk about it?"

"Not yet. I haven't got all the answers ready. It would be like a joke without a punch line."

"You're a bastard."

"So I've been told. Many times."

He finished his coffee and reached for a cigarette. "I can give you something, friend."

"Go, man."

"John Fredericks Talbot. You know who he is?"

I shrugged, saying nothing.

"You recall the ASO deal in Poland?"

"I was there."

Wally started to pull on the butt and stopped. "Am I telling you something new?"

"Maybe." I took the top off the beer. "When they blew the legation building I got Connors and White clear, but that was all I was assigned to. Why?"

"Because Talbot was the inside man who nailed the assassins. You ever know George Gifford?"

"INS man in Paris?"

"That's the one. He was there at the time chasing some broad he had a big one for and she was running with Chevesky at the time. She got herself in a mess and George smuggled her out. Later she told him Talbot was on top of the business for six months posing as a Polish National and she got the lowdown on him from another broad he was sleeping with. Damn, the history of the world is made in a bedroom."

“From Eve through Caesar to now,” I said.

“So while a member of British Intelligence, he was well planted and right there when the guns came out. He didn’t expect the play and tried to stop it but it was too late. He hit the two Reds who got to Seliga, but they wound up dead.”

“So why tell me?”

“Because one of the killers died slowly under Talbot’s hands. He talked. He partially identified somebody implicated in the plot and it was a broad. That’s where it ended. But now he’s here, the guy is one of their top men. You bring Edith Caine into the picture and from what I know, what little you tell me and what I find out, I’m beginning to get some cold shivers. I don’t like the action at all, Tiger.”

“You just don’t want to see a beautiful doll take a fall,” I said.

“No, it’s not that. The whole damn world is in a mess. One wrong move and somebody pushes the red button and you know what happens. One screwball with his finger on a switch triggers it and everything goes out of existence. The trouble is, you can be the catalyst and it scares me. I got that crazy feeling you can be the one.”

“Never me, Wally. I think too much of my hide.”

“Like hell you do. You got just one thing in your mind.”

“Maybe,” I said slowly. “I died a long time ago.”

“Well I didn’t.” He dragged on the cigarette and stuffed the butt out in the ash tray. “Incidentally, I got the b.g. on Gretchen Lark. It wasn’t too hard to do. I don’t know why the hell I do your leg work for you.”

“Because you want a story after the shooting’s over, that’s why.”

“Okay, you’re right. I’m chicken. You know her well?”

“We’ve met.”

Wally nodded and fiddled with his coffee cup. “She’s the intellectual type. Did you know she’s gaining recognition as a painter?”

“I heard.”

“Very scholastic. After high school she went into nurse’s training, spent three years at the Center, then went back for her master’s, then picked up two years’ legal training at Shute College. She’d written four recognized papers on U.N. affairs before she went into her job.”

“Good for her.”

“She has a Ph.D. too.”

“They’re better smart.”

“Better sexy too. I know two guys who laid her and they said it was great.”

“How about that,” I said.

“Oh, you slob. You bedded her down too, didn’t you?”

“We were on top of the sheets. It wasn’t exactly bedding.”

“Some guys have all the luck.”

“What else about her?”

Wally made a noncommittal gesture with his hands and said, “Nothing. Just general background you asked for. You want sex references?”

“The hell with that.”

“Otherwise she seems to be a popular type, all ends tied, good, respectable American family and all that jazz. I scrounged the original clearance on her if you want to see it.”

“No sweat.”

“Okay, now for another piece. Burton Selwick.”

“Oh?”

“The guy is sick. The office in London says he’s about to be replaced. He’s been hurting for the last year and they’re really concerned about his health. He’s had another ulcer attack but won’t leave the job and his wife is raising hell so they’re getting Smithwick to replace him. It’s fairly common knowledge so I’m not talking out of turn. The only trouble is ... he’s a thinker and they’ll face a heck of a loss when he goes. Selwick has been responsible for the tight relations between Britain and us for the last few years and whoever replaces him had better be good.”

“And you’re supposed to be a Broadway columnist,” I said.

“Come off it, Tiger. In my own way I’m a thinker too. I wasn’t in the code-and-cipher set like you were, but I had a personal interest in that goddamn war, too. I slogged behind tanks and got the crabs with the best of them. Maybe the only medal I got was the Victory Medal, but that was all I wanted. The ones you killed had names. The ones I knocked off were just uniforms. But I like it peaceful now.”

“You haven’t got it yet, buddy.”

“It’ll come. Now where do we go from here?”

I pushed the glass away and got up. It was starting to get late. “I’ll give you a buzz when it happens. Stay on the ball.”

“You got something working?”

“I got something working,” I repeated.

“My story, remember?”

“Natch.”

Chapter 11

The upheaval in the United Nations was already well under way when I got there. One of the nations from the Soviet bloc had entered its proposal on the subject under discussion and the United States delegate had countered with our own and was backed up by the entire Western group with such unanimous approval that the Soviets were thrown into a partial panic. It was totally unexpected and both proposals of such divergent nature, and the Western one so evidently the proper approach that the Soviets were passing notes and making hurried consultations and from some of the black scowls showing I knew they were wondering what went wrong with their inside track.

Burton Selwick was on his feet acknowledging Britain's acceptance of the United States' proposition, his voice thundering, yet persuasive. Two Russian delegates were trying to pull their usual stunts of attempting to disrupt the proceedings but were being ordered to quiet down. Some sort of signal passed between them simultaneously and, as one man, a dozen of them got up and began to file out of the room.

There was an immediate rush of reporters to the phones to get the latest news to the press and it was plain that with this latest move the discussions were going to end in the general snafu that always accompanied the Soviet action.

Burton Selwick was still talking, but there was a hesitancy in his voice now. From where I stood I could see him plainly and there was a whiteness to his face and he pressed his hand against his side and held it there. Abruptly, he excused himself, sat down and leaned back in his seat tiredly. Two of his associates spoke to him, helped him to his feet and led him from the hall.

In the corridor they sat him down again and by the time I got there both Edith Caine and Gretchen Lark were at his side along with a dozen others. John Fredericks Talbot took up a position a little behind the group with four others and from their stance and demeanor I knew they were more than spectators or part of the party.

Someone asked for a doctor, but it was Gretchen Lark who told them it wasn't necessary, she was a nurse and familiar with the situation. She sent someone into an office who returned with a glass of water and some tablets, had Selwick take them and when the color returned to his face, helped him

up.

There was too much hubbub to hear what they were saying, but Selwick and Edith spoke a few words, he said something reassuring to her, patted her shoulder with a smile and let himself be led away to a room. At the door Talbot and one other took up a post there, telling the reporters that it was a minor gastric attack and that everything was all right and well under control.

Toomey came out of nowhere, nodded and said, "What do you think?"

"He's been pretty sick."

"Yes, I know, but he was to be a key speaker today."

"What are you driving at?"

"He could have been out of action despite the Russian move. I'm wondering if that brought it on or not."

"Poison?"

"Not necessarily. There are other things ... stimulants, irritants ... that can incapacitate a man."

"I think I know a way of finding out."

Toomey glanced around him and said softly, "They fell for the gambit."

"I wonder if it can happen again?" I speculated.

"They aren't going to enjoy this development. Whoever steered them wrong is on the spot now."

"Unless he comes up with the new answer."

There was a half-smile on Toomey's face. "If it's worth mentioning, I caught a glimpse of Stovetsky's face a few minutes ago. He saw you standing there and he tightened up like a wrung towel."

"I saw him."

"Before K gave him this post he was assistant head of their secret police."

He wasn't telling me anything new.

"Talbot was watching you pretty closely, too."

"Good for him."

"You're playing this pretty close to your vest," Toomey said.

"Am I? You read the report. I.A.T.S. wants me to be a target so I'm trying to accommodate them. You have to push these slob. They think they have the whole world by the tail and it'll yell when they give it a twist. It scares hell out of them to know we're loose and whenever we dump one of them we get a bonus. They don't like knowing there are people more ruthless than they are and like poverty protects Communism, money can protect

capitalism. They push our bunch around knowing we go by the book because we like the public image of being good guys. Well damn it, the bad guys seem to have the edge these days and if you're going to be a bad one, be good and bad. That's the part they can't understand ... people like us stepping out of character to enforce a principle and not a law. Believe me, buddy, when you play guns, nobody wants to be on the receiving end, no matter how bad or tough they are."

"Nice speech."

"Screw you, too."

"I'm too old for that nonsense. What's your next move?"

I looked at my watch. It was nearly five o'clock. "We split," I told him. "Wait at the hotel until I call you."

Toomey said "Roger," and sauntered off, looking for all the world like he belonged there.

Downstairs there was a public phone and when the two girls waiting had made their calls I dialed Charlie Corbinet's office and gave my name to his secretary.

The Colonel's voice was tight and I knew he had something. He said, "I checked that grand note through you gave me."

"Go on."

"Somebody was in too much of a hurry. The mistake was made. It becomes evidence now."

"Yeah?"

"That bill was part of a hundred thousand dollars given to the Russian delegates in exchange for rubles when they first came over for the present session."

"The finger points," I said.

"Definitely."

"How will you use it?"

"As a lever, Tiger. It will get you a certain amount of latitude of action from our own agencies. Just don't go too far and if there are positive developments be sure to let them handle the final phase."

"Is this official?"

"Nothing is official because as far as anyone is concerned neither I.A.T.S. nor you nor Martin Grady even exist. I had to do a lot of talking to get this concession."

“Thanks, Colonel. Let me know if you ever need a favor.”

“Keep me informed,” he said and hung up.

I stepped outside the booth, turning it over to an elderly guy in a bowler who thanked me politely. There was another behind him with his back half turned, apparently thumbing through an address book. I caught the slight motion of his finger and followed him when he gave a look of annoyance and went to the directory rack to look up a number.

Gregory Hofta.

I played the same game, making sure we were unobserved. I stayed behind him, waiting my turn and he spoke face down into the book while I put on the impatient, but casual act.

“There is trouble, my friend.”

“What’s the pitch?”

“There will be no moves until they have control again. They’re calling a special meeting of the deputies at their Embassy tonight.”

“You on this?” I asked him.

“By special instructions from Mr. Randolph.”

“Target?”

“Edith Caine. I don’t enjoy the assignment at all.” He paused and thumbed through a few pages, found a number and began to write it down. “She was with Selwick before the session. He picked her up and they arrived together.”

“Then you’re thinking the same thing ... Selwick’s attack on the floor could have been arranged?”

“Let’s say we are overlooking no possibilities. His previous attacks have been real enough.”

“Where’s Edith now?”

“Still upstairs with Selwick and the others. They’ll be taking him out shortly. What happened isn’t serious, but it will incapacitate him long enough to slow down proceedings.”

“Why this contact?”

“One of the Hungarian nationals recognized an embassy clerk who works for Stovetsky. He was one of his chief agents and assassins when Stovetsky headed the secret-police section. His name is Alexis Minner and he was behind the scenes when the Russians tracked down the Freedom Fighters in Hungary. It was mentioned to Stephen Midros and I was told to pass it on to

you.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

Hofta closed the book, passed by me to go to the phone booth and I completed the act, giving him time to get clear. When I was sure I had it made I went back upstairs and over to the door where John Talbot still talked to a lone reporter.

When he was finished I walked over and said, “Tiger Mann, Mr. Talbot.”

There was an amused glint in his eyes. “Yes, I know you, sir. Can I ... help you with something?”

“I’d like to see Edith Caine.”

“At the moment she’s occupied.”

“It might benefit us both if you broke her loose a second. Just tell her I’m here.”

“I’m afraid ...”

“We missed each other on the ASO fiasco. I got Connors and White out. The chase was labeled ROCKPILE. Do I spell it out further for you?”

The amusement in his eyes disappeared and there was a hardness there and recognition, his mind going through the mechanics of whether or not to play it out. Then he made his decision. “I’ll see her. Wait here a moment.”

“Sure,” I said.

Edith Caine came out alone, her face drawn. The fingers of both hands fidgeted nervously and she had chewed away most of her lipstick. But she was still lovely, still desirable. Only now she was scared.

Why scared, Rondine? Of me because your time’s running out ... or scared because you fluffed and gave the boys a bum steer and you know what happens when you muff a critical play. Or maybe you’re scared because you got wind of what was going to come off and had to pull a cutie to slow down Burton, Selwick and left yourself wide open if they check it through far enough. Espionage laws still provide a death penalty, baby, and you damn well know it.

I said, “Hi, doll.”

Her nostrils made a tiny, flaring movement and when she saw my smile her eyes half shut. Was *she tired* ... or was her age showing now?

“Mr. Talbot said you wanted to see me.” Her head moved and she seemed satisfied that there were others passing by and she was safe for the moment.

“I just wanted to compliment you, Rondine. It came off pretty well. Good

timing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Let’s not kid each other.” I let my grin go bigger. “Tonight I’ll get a line on your boys.”

“Boys?”

“Come off it, doll. You’ve had it. If it’s worth anything to you I have a suggestion to make.”

She said nothing, just waited.

“Make sure nothing happens to Burton Selwick. If it has to be, a simple rub-out can solve a lot of things. I don’t have to go through the slow torture of making you sweat it out, kid. Either way will please me, but either way, your death will solve a lot of things. Clear?”

Before she could answer, the door behind her opened and Gretchen Lark stood there. “Oh ... oh, hello ... Mr. Mann.”

“Hello,” I said.

She looked at Edith and told her, “Mr. Selwick wants you a moment, Edith. Do you mind?”

Without a word she passed Gretchen and went through the door. I said, “How is he?”

Gretchen gave a sigh of relief. “Fine enough to throw dictation around. It was an ulcer attack, that’s all. The doctor’s orders were explicit, he was to stay in bed, but try to get him to do it. Right now he’s back on his feet, but they’ll try to keep him quiet if it’s at all possible. It won’t be easy.”

“That’s good.”

She looked at me quizzically, her eyebrows going up. “What are you doing here?”

“Interested spectator. Quite a show.”

“You must have some pull to make the audience.”

“I’m getting favors returned. Look ... they have a doctor with Selwick?”

“There’s one there now.”

“Then I guess everything’s under control.” I paused, grinned at her meaningfully and said, “When do I see you again?”

“You mean ... that’s why you’re *really* here?”

“A guy has to try anything.”

She let out a tinkly laugh. “Call me when I get squared away. I think it can be arranged.”

I winked at her and she went back inside. The door closed and locked with a soft click and I walked away. So I'd see her again, all right, but not just for a bed routine. I wanted to know what the doctor's verdict really was and since Gretchen Lark had been a nurse, she ought to know.

The evening had come early to the city. It had clouded over again and the rain smell was back. The air felt sticky and in the east a sudden yellow glow of heat lightning brightened the sky momentarily and there was the distant rumble of thunder.

I caught a cab in the middle of the street and had him take me across town to the Eighth Avenue station, got there five minutes before six and held down the booth faking a call. Just before the hour I elbowed the receiver down until the phone rang then let it up.

The deep bass on the other end of the line belonged to Evans of the Newark control and when I identified he said, "There was a single lead through the ticket seller of a movie house that puts on foreign films."

"How was it established?"

"She remembered the right hand with the straight forefinger when he laid down his money. There was a purple scar on the palm and the back of the hand. At first she thought he was pointing at her. The second time she saw him she realized that it was a deformity."

"Any description?"

"Only the hand. That's all she remembered, the money, the ticket, the hand. She doesn't look at faces."

"It's a starter."

"They start a three-day run of a new Russian film tonight. There won't be another for two and a half weeks since they intersperse their program with Polish, Greek and Hungarian pictures."

"Right," I said, "I'll cover it."

"One other thing."

"Let's have it."

"Peter Johnson called from London this afternoon. They completed the check on the Caine family and they're clean. Getting a past on the deceased members wasn't easy ... there's a natural reluctance to talk about the dead, but he found squadron mates of Vernon who were there when he was killed. Vernon Caine had nine victories flying Spitfires, was a squadron leader in his outfit, had several decorations and went in near Dover. He was positively

identified and buried in the family plot near the town where he was born.

“There wasn’t too much on Diana Caine. She had the usual schooling, all in England and was something of a wild one when she was young, which fact nobody seemed eager to discuss, but understandable. At the beginning of the war she joined a volunteer group in London. According to a former friend of hers it was to be where the excitement was and escape the pomp and protocol that was so much a part of her family. She was killed along with about seventy others during a raid on the docks.”

“He find out what volunteer group it was?”

“No. It was before the call went out for women in the services or the outfits really got organized. Her bunch were collecting money and using it to establish mobile canteens for the defense workers on the docks. Johnson managed to locate some of the men who were employed there at the time and he got one piece of news that sounds interesting. Those girls gave more than their time. Their patriotism extended to the bedroom and they had a reputation for being willing to go to any extent to keep the boys happy. Think it means anything?”

“Maybe not to us,” I said, “but to a family that puts virginity on a par with sainthood it might mean a lot. At least enough to be glad she’s dead and not part of their immediate history. Get a report into Central right away, will you?”

“Already done. Is there anything you need?”

“Not yet.”

“Very well. There’s been one alteration made yesterday. Ernie Bentley has moved into the loft where Caldwell’s was. You know the place?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve consolidated and all armament and analysis will be worked through him now. He’ll handle special equipment there too. His phone number remains the same.”

“Okay and thanks.” I hung up.

One lead now. The power of money had bought something, a natural. A man away from home who retained the tie by going to native-tongue movies. He was violating every rule in the book, but nostalgia had gotten the better of him.

Dillinger had made the same mistake and died because of it.

I called Toomey at the Chester and told him I was going on a stake-out at

the theater and to wait there until I needed him. He didn't like the idea of me playing it alone but that was the way I wanted it and it was my chase and I was calling the shots. I told him to stay in my room in case Watford or Randolph called and that I would check in at intervals until something broke.

The feature at the *Grenoble* Theater didn't start until seven-thirty and the ticket window didn't open until seven, so I had a forty-five-minute wait. I wasn't going to stake out on the sidewalk where I could be spotted, but through the doors I could see the benches in the lobby and figured it would be better to pay my way in and wait. If necessary I could take a seat in the last row, let my eyes get accustomed to the dark and sit it out. If Churis showed he certainly wouldn't take a chance of walking down the aisle but would do pretty much the same thing I did. It just depended on who saw whom first.

In case Churis had a spotter going ahead of him, I cut out of the area and grabbed a cab to the Village. At Gretchen's place I told him to wait and went up the three flights to her apartment and knocked on the door.

Nobody answered, but inside a radio was playing softly and I tried the knob, pushed open the door and gave her a call in case she was in the shower. I edged my luck a little bit and walked on in. There was one light on in the living room; it was the radio behind the bar that was playing and nobody was home.

She had probably gone to the store, but I didn't bother to wait. I flipped over the drape cloth that covered Selwick's picture, saw the progress she had made on it, even to catching some of the realism of the sickness he had and made a mental note to tell her to pretty it up for his wife. Then I went back to the cab.

This time the ticket booth was open at the *Grenoble* Theater and I passed in two dollars, took the ticket and the change, found a spot in the shadows where I could watch the door and sat down with the .45 loose in the holster.

In twenty minutes the place was filled but there was no sign of Vidor Churis. I found a seat in the last row, sat through a garbled propaganda picture and wished K could have seen the reaction. The only reason the public was there was to hear something in their own language, but they laughed at the wrong places and could have been against the wall for it in Moscow.

During the intermission I double-checked the faces in the lobby, waited for the second show crowd to file in, took ten minutes to be sure he wasn't

going to show and cut out.

One lousy lead and it wasn't paying off. I could feel that funny sensation crawling up my back and walked it off down to Forty-second Street because you can't afford impatience when you're playing the game of big guns.

From a drugstore I called Toomey and broke him loose from the TV set. He said there had been one incoming call that our subject had left the U.N. complex, walked to the automat with John Talbot, then taken a cab to her apartment. Talbot had returned to the Embassy building and was presumed there still. Before going in he had been joined by two members of the British staff and Vincent Case, all cleared personnel.

A stake-out was in progress outside Edith Caine's apartment with a team on the street and one deployed inside the building somewhere. The call had come a half-hour ago so it was a good bet she hadn't left the apartment.

I told him to stay there and he wasn't anxious to argue about it. The rain that had been threatening all night had finally found its way through the smog and was angling down against the window outside the phone booth. All I wanted was for him to put a signal call through to Martin Grady with my initial negative-contact report and request a new approach if possible and an expedite order.

Now it was time to stick the needle in deeper.

I spotted the two stake-outs early and felt like telling them to take a refresher course. Both should have known better, they were old enough to have gone through the mill from both ends. One was smoking in a car and all the windows were frosted over from the humidity and the other was standing out of the rain trying to be inconspicuous. They could have walked or doused the butts but the weather got the better of them and they played it down. One day they'd die for being stupid if they stayed around that long.

The other one was on the floor below Rondine's making a pretense of waiting for the elevator, but actually watching the cables to see if the car stopped at her floor or not. If it had, he would have checked. I had to ride up and walk down six times before I had him clocked, made like I rounded the bend in the corridor to some apartment, then took the fire exit up to her floor.

I put my finger on the buzzer and waited. I touched it again and her voice said, "Yes?" from somewhere inside.

"Tiger, honey."

There was no hesitancy. She didn't try the peephole or call out again. No

talking through the door. She swung it wide and stood there gorgeous and radiant in a sweeping white gown that accentuated every luscious curve in her body, showing the V glint of chestnut and dagger pink of womanhood, proud and obstreperous in their anger at being accosted so deliberately and I said, "Can I come in?"

"By all means," Rondine smiled, and the smile went back to years ago when she could hook me with wet lips and the sight of a body that belonged to a lewd calendar and a voice that was a snare and a challenge all at once.

This time she looked at me, a quick glance that ran up and down me, knowing how I had reacted before, watching to see a visual sign of a sexual attraction. Maybe somebody else would have made the grade, but I had had the full treatment and nearly died for it. It didn't happen now.

I said, "Thanks, kitten," and walked on in.

She closed the door and followed me into the living room. This time the music was from Wagner ... the Love-Death theme. Fitting, I thought. Nice. It went right with my mood. It had an undulating quality that seeped into your mind and set the scene so nearly perfectly that Hollywood couldn't have staged it better.

Rondine looked tired now. There were shadows under her eyes and lines down the sides of her mouth that seemed to pull the years together and inside I had that goddamn terrible feeling I had back in the loft when I had loved her so much.

She was as good as dead and I was going to do it. She knew it and I knew it and nothing would change it. If I missed again somebody else from Central would do it and without feeling, but if I did it the feeling would be there. So how do you want it, kid, from a stranger or someone who loved you so much he'd die for you?

I tossed my hat and coat on a chair, sat down against the arm of the sofa and stretched my legs out. There was a nervous quality in the way she moved and she tried to hide it by walking to the bar. "Drink?"

"Why not?"

"Scotch?"

"You made enough drinks for me before, kid. You know what I take. I haven't changed any. Just cheap bar whiskey and ginger ale and don't burn it." I was beginning to wish she'd quit the act in front of me. There wasn't any reason for it or sense to it. We were alone. It had all come to an end long

ago, except for the climax. What was going to be done was going to be done.

I said, "How was your Mr. Selwick?"

Rondine put the drink on the table at my feet. "Well taken care of. He'll be at work again Monday as usual."

"I understand you had lunch with him?"

Her eyes darted my way. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"Possibly." I picked the drink up and tasted it. Good. She had the balance down pat. I said, "That was nicely timed for him to have an attack."

She frowned, not getting the point. "He's had them before."

"And you've had lunch with him before."

Then she realized what I was intimating and the glass in her hand shook visibly. I could sense her searching for words, but they didn't come. They couldn't get through the dark rage that suffused her face.

Before she could think of anything I changed the subject. "We have some information on Diana Caine, honey. Interested or do you know it all already?"

She couldn't help it. The glass dropped right out of her fingers and spilled all over the floor. One piece of ice skidded across the room and I kicked it back casually with my toe. There was a stricken look on her face and tight, corded lines ran down her neck into her shoulders.

I grinned at her, a nasty thing that twisted my mouth out of shape. "So you got to the Caine family through her. That just leaves one thing left and that can blow you, doll. Where is the real Edith Caine?"

She didn't answer. She sat there, her face a cross between horror and rage, hating me with everything inside her.

I said, "I'll spell it out for you then. Somewhere the right Edith is supposed to be in hiding. My bet is that she's dead. You wouldn't leave any loose ends like that around. So far all your recommendations are from people who knew Edith Caine as a child, not an adult. Because the family has always been above reproach they never considered that one of the Caines would be a phony and a plant. I bet the family is turned inside out over this. When they see this thing laid out across the papers they'll do a mass Dutch act."

Her fingers trembled so hard they barely were able to hold the cigarette. I fished a packet of hotel matches out of my pocket, lit the butt for her and tossed them on the table. She choked once on the smoke, forced herself to a degree of composure. "You are so wrong, Tiger."

“Not me, sugar.”

“You really wouldn’t ...”

“Try me and see.”

She took a deep drag on the cigarette, snatched it away and snubbed it out in the ash tray until the butt came apart in fragments. Her eyes arched up, caught mine and she said, “I can’t let you drag down the Caine name,” in a cold, calculated tone that was the Rondine of old.

“How do you figure on stopping me? Vidor Churis?”

The pause before she spoke was a long one. There was a note of near-sympathy in her face and she said in a whisper, “You fool, you.”

“I like your dogs, Rondine. They’re the kind I know. I’ve been playing games with that type twenty years and left them lying stacked up behind me like cordwood. I’m surprised you aren’t more subtle. There was a time when you worked every device a woman could and parlayed a smile and a figure into some first-rate kills. This new act of yours stinks. It’s either too obvious or I’m getting jaded ... I’ve had it pulled on me down in Mexico and twice in France. Each time the broad took the big fall because it takes more than an act to put a gun on me.”

“Tiger ...”

“Come here, Rondine. I’ll let you take the act right to the end. Remember the kiss you gave me the last time? That was a real kiss, a real kiss of death. So come here, Rondine. I want to taste you again.”

She stiffened in her seat, her eyes never leaving mine, both hands gripping the edge of her seat.

“I want to see if you taste the same knowing what you’re doing to a fine family and with a young kid named Edith Caine lying dead in a hole somewhere. I want to know if having the smell of your own death in your nose can make you taste any different. Come here, Rondine.”

She rose like an automaton at first, stood there momentarily with mind and body as taut as a bowstring.

“Come, my darling,” I said. “I still have that same blaster on me. You might even have a chance to slip your hand inside my coat, grab the rod and spill my guts out again.” I knew I was smiling. I could feel my lips tight across my teeth and the kill feeling chasing itself across my shoulders.

Something happened to her then. It started in her eyes and flirted down across her mouth. The tension went out of her shoulders bit by bit until she

was the Rondine I had known so well, lovely, desirable, deadly ... suddenly finding the situation to her liking and under her control. Each step across the room deliberate, the golden flesh of her thighs breaking through the opening of her gown as she walked toward me. Her pose was provocative, her breasts undulating beneath the sheer fabric totally unrestrained in their movement. The light was soft and kind to her and when it was behind her the glow outlined the sleek flow of her body.

I sat there and looked up at her, reading her mind. It wasn't hard.

She said, "Tell me how much you loved me, Tiger."

I had read it wrong. It had to be something else again.

"More than anyone could ever know."

"Do you still?"

"I told you there are some things that never change."

"As much as ever?"

"As much." I wasn't smiling any more. My stomach was tight and the words came out harsh and a little too loud.

"Once you would have done anything for me."

"That was a long time ago. Now there's only one thing I'm going to do for you. Kill you, Rondine."

"If ... you must ... can you do one thing for me?"

"Nothing."

She knelt on the couch beside me, then eased into a sitting position and her knee was a gentle pressure against my leg. The top of her gown had parted with the movement and the deep cleft between her breasts was an open invitation she made no attempt to hide.

"Please hear me," she said with almost innocent simplicity.

"Why?"

"Because you love me."

I reached out and pushed her knee away. "And how about me, kid? Tell me how much you still love me."

"Still?"

"You used to make beautiful love talk, baby. I used to lie in bed with you and listen to the sound of your voice and it could turn me inside out. All the while we were having each other whether it was in the mud or in a bed you'd tell me over and over how much you loved me, so let's hear you say it now. I want to see if you can still get that feeling in your voice."

“I think I loved you from the first moment I saw you, Tiger.”

“Now you’re being trite, kid. That used to be one of your favorite statements. Try something new.”

Gently, she reached out and touched my face with her forefinger. “I love you, Tiger,” she said.

And she reached me with it. *She* knew she did *and I* hated myself for feeling that slow wave of warmth that started in my *brain* because it was twenty years *ago all over again*.

“Can I ask you now?”

When I didn’t answer she said, “Don’t do anything to the Caine family.”

“Killers don’t change,” I finally told her.

Her face remained impassive, but there was something new in her eyes. “I’m sure they don’t.”

I tried to stop what she did, but I couldn’t. She leaned forward, eyes partly closed, her hand along the side of my face and then her mouth was on mine and the tip of her tongue searching and feeling. My fingers tightened on her arms, pinioning them and the past came closer and closer. I forced her shoulders back and the gown opened under the pressure and she was tight against me, a perfumed, hilly delight, fire-hot and moaning softly.

The incredible desire was there and I knew I was going to take her. I was going to do something I swore I’d never do again and couldn’t help myself. But it was Rondine who made the move. Her breath jerked in her throat and she went rigid under my hands and tried to wrench herself away with a sudden sob. There was fright in her eyes and something else I couldn’t fathom and, as quickly as it had started, it was over. I let her go and she twisted, grabbing for the front of her gown, and scrambled to her feet. She stood there breathing heavily, watching me, her mouth working until she half-blurted, “I’m ... sorry. Truly ...”

I grinned at her. The act was still going strong. A new act, a damn good one, but an act just the same. The only thing that surprised me was that she didn’t make a try for my gun.

I eased out of the chair, got my hat and coat and turned to smile at her. “Soon, Rondine. I’ll spoil it for you first and kill you. Sleep on it.”

All the way out the door I knew her eyes were on my back and I was giving her one hell of a target, but somehow I knew she wasn’t about to try one damn thing.

The rain was driving down now, whipping up the streets in front of the intermittent gusts that whistled around the buildings. All the cabs that came by were filled so I turned west and started walking. The last time I made the trip I had company and wound up with dead men at my feet. Maybe this time I'd have better luck.

By the time I reached Broadway I was soaked through my raincoat and still hadn't seen an empty cab. But there was an empty bar that was warm and dry so I went in for a drink. An old movie was running on the "Late Show" that got me caught up in it and it was an hour and a half before I left. I got a cab on the corner this time, told him the Chester Hotel and rode back still damp.

I knocked, but Toomey didn't answer so I supposed he was asleep and stuck my key in the lock. I closed the door, flipped the light on and saw Toomey face down on the bed. But he wasn't asleep. There was a neat little hole at the base of his skull and a pool of red on the mattress that seeped up into the pillows. The body had barely lost any of its heat so the kill was only minutes old and I knew I had the answers.

Nicely timed, *Rondine*, I thought. A book of hotel matches carelessly left in your apartment, a phone call to a killer named Vidor Churis who gave me time to sack out, a passkey in the door, one nice shot with a silenced gun and out. The bad joke was on Toomey. The big joke was on the killer. He thought he had nailed me. He couldn't see Toomey's face while he napped and didn't think a positive make was necessary. It was my room and a guy asleep in my bed and it looked pat.

Chapter 12

The switchboard operator was a tired old guy who said a call had come in for me earlier, he gave the room number and was about to ring the room when the line went dead on the other end. Both he and the desk clerk said there had been traffic in and out of the lobby all night and neither had paid any special attention to people going either way.

I went back to the room, checked through it but found nothing. Later I'd get a report on the bullet, but it was still lodged in the body and I didn't want to probe for it.

There was one thing though. In Toomey's coat hanging on a hook in back of the door were two letters to me transshipped from the other hotel. One was a notice that my trunk had arrived by freight from Mexico. The other was from a German doctor specializing in plastic surgery who stated that although he never had her as a patient, she resembled a woman named Rondine Lund whom he had known when he was a medical officer in the Luftwaffe during the war. He understood that she was dead, but couldn't be certain.

Well, I could put him straight on that one.

My first call went through the relay to Martin Grady, the second to Thomas Watford. He said to stay there until a team arrived but I wasn't about to. I gave him the picture as quickly as possible, said I'd check back with him on the slug that killed Toomey and hung up. I didn't have time to waste sweating out all the details of a police investigation no matter what agency handled it and if Hal Randolph was brought in he wasn't going to let me off the hook.

I got my gear together, went downstairs and paid the bill, leaving no forwarding address. Three blocks away I checked into another small commercial hotel under the name of Frank Wilson of Memphis, Tennessee. Just three blocks but in the complex of the city, twenty thousand people away.

As late as it was, I called Stephen Midros and got him out of bed.

His voice was a querulous, "Yes, please?"

"Tiger Mann, Midros. Hate to roust you out but something important has come up."

"Yes, yes, it is all right."

"I don't want to make any direct contacts, so you do this for me."

“Certainly.”

“You know where to reach Gregory Hofta?”

“His home. He will be there. I spoke to him earlier tonight.”

“Good. Have him get the address of Alexis Minner. He’s a clerk at their Embassy ...”

“Mr. Mann ...” he stopped me. “This one is more than a clerk. He is dangerous.”

“Hofta gave me his history. If his present assignment is just a cover then he’ll be working with other people, too. He may be the lead I want.”

“I was there when this man was in Hungary,” Midros said carefully, keeping the emotion out of his voice that tried so hard to show itself. “He is a killer. Right now he enjoys diplomatic immunity and no matter what he does he can only be considered *persona non grata* and returned to Russia.”

“He can do one other thing.”

“What is that, Mr. Mann?”

“He can be buried.”

Midros said nothing a moment, then a slight chuckle came over the receiver. “I wish you the best of luck, sir. Anything I can do to assist will be done. I will pass on your message at once.”

“I’ll call you back,” I told him, said so long and hung up.

I needed sleep badly; too much had piled up and there was too much to come and I had to be right to finish it. I double-locked the door, checked the window and pulled the blinds shut, then flopped back on the bed.

How beautifully everything fit, I thought. They had to throw the package together in a hurry because I was something they had never planned on. Into the midst of their intricate planning that had taken years to set up, into their grand scheme to lock up the world through legalistic international maneuverings, comes one guy out of the past with one thing on his mind he never expected to find and that one guy could blow the basket for them.

Rondine knew what would happen. As soon as she left me that first day she had contacted her group and the order went out for an immediate hit.

Only I knew it would happen, too, and they shot up some pillows.

Ah, but she played it cute. She didn’t know where to reach me so she contacted Wally Gibbons, and like a sucker took up my invitation to meet me at my hotel. Then she knew. Then she could pass it along and this time they came back in force for the second try and muffed it again because Toomey

and I were ready for them.

She even knew the story would be quashed. The dirty ramifications of international politics aren't handled by local police and reporters are taboo. All you could do was play the game out as far as it would go until only one was left and that was the final answer, simple and complete.

Gretchen Lark put her finger on it when she inadvertently pointed up the way Rondine played Burton Selwick. He was the key, all right. He had the inside track and all the facts in his head. Rondine was a person to be trusted in his sights, a respected member of a fine old patriotic family, a countryman, a beautiful woman, one whom he had personally recommended for her position and one with whom he wouldn't be too guarded. She was on the inside, doing overtime work for him in addition to her regular duties and nobody knows more about the boss than his secretary. Or his work.

Rondine, it was a magnificent package!

You knew I'd visit you, kid. You knew I would want to be sure I knew how you did because I'm built that way. You knew I'd want to see how the plastic surgery worked and you were willing to take the chance because they had done such a good job you could afford it. You waited me out and had somebody standing by for the emergency. You had a gun and would have killed me yourself but I caught you on that one too and you had to pass the word down the line and it didn't take long. Two cars made the swing and tried for a hit on the street. That was a smart angle, calling in professional help. If they had made it nobody would have tied in the political bit. My reputation was enough to justify a kill like that and anybody could have done it, but it was still good thinking. Too bad it didn't work. Get your money back from the ones in the first car, sweetie, or are they still on the job? If they work it the usual way it's over for a while. You didn't tell them they were going after a big one and all contracts are canceled in their book. By now they'll realize what happened and you won't be getting them in again.

But it's the last one you're going to pay through the nose for, honey. You gave me plenty of time to get back to the hotel and fall asleep. You saw the book of matches and knew where I was. You didn't think I'd stop off for a few drinks and see a "Late Show" all the way through and your killer hit the wrong man. He's made too many mistakes to stay in business and now he's had it too.

And you know, stopping Burton Selwick's speech was a nice piece of

cake. A delaying action. You got wind of what was going to happen and made sure you had time to work up a change of plans. What did you feed him for lunch ... the same stuff we used on General Von Selter or the gook you dropped in the Greek's coffee that time in Athens? You didn't want to kill the old boy ... he was too vital a source of information. Just putting him out of action was enough and his natural illness would cover up the real thing.

I grinned up at the ceiling and fell asleep, the .45 in my hand, a shell jacked into the chamber and the hammer on half-cock.

At ten A.M. I showered, shaved and got dressed. I called Stephen Midros and without discussion he simply said, "One-one-four-nine, Sixteenth. Upstairs over an Italian grocery store. There are four exits in the building, front, roof and two through the cellar, one on either side. Hofta advises extreme caution, the man is known to be an expert in all fields of murder."

"So am I, buddy."

"Will you need assistance?"

"Not at this point. I'll call for it if I do."

"We have a large organization, Mr. Mann, nothing official, but our people can be trusted and themselves have had experience in this sort of thing."

"Thanks. I appreciate it, but don't expose them to this. You might need what you have for the big play coming up."

"I understand."

I hung up, made sure I had the address down in my mind, slapped the gun in the holster and grabbed my coat and hat. Pay-off day was shaping up.

The apartment was the middle one of five that had just been renovated into a higher rent bracket, the occupants having the dubious advantage of living in the area of Greenwich Village. I toured the block, separating the funny ones from the real ones, stopping in a few stores to buy things I didn't need just to pick up the flavor of the locale.

Most of the permanent residents seemed to have international backgrounds, the older ones still speaking with thick accents and having mementos of life in another country on display behind counters and in their windows. A general sampling put them in the Slavic-German category with a few Italians sprinkled about. Twice I heard Russian spoken on the street in conversation, but nobody seemed anxious to exhibit that particular nationality

with any artifacts.

Funny how patterns kept repeating themselves. Like Americans going across the ocean to Paris only to wind up in the American Bar or eating hot dogs that they wouldn't eat at home. There was always that unconscious search for your own kind, the innate desire to know you weren't alone. There was a sense of security, no matter how false, to hear a word spoken in a native tongue or taste back-yard spices on some familiar dish.

When I was ready I called Charlie Corbinet and told him to use the lever. Both Randolph and Watford wanted to talk to me but he would see that they were put off long enough for me to get this phase out of the way. What I wanted was a city fireman, in uniform, to accompany me on a simple inspection of the premises. All stops would have to come out because we were going to cross agencies and it had to be handled carefully. I said I would meet the one assigned on a corner two blocks away in an hour and got the "good-luck-and-go-ahead" signal from the Colonel on our old Tike R. code and hung up.

At ten after twelve a red city fire-chief sedan pulled to the curb and I got in. The driver was a young guy, the other a man in his fifties, with more the look of a cop than a fireman. There were burn scars on the backs of both his hands and another along the side of his face. He nodded, introduced himself as Captain Murray, the driver as Ron Kelly and wanted to know what the pitch was.

"Inspect all exits at One-one-four-nine, Sixteenth," I said.

"That's the Gorbatcher-Smith job. We went through there a week ago."

"Let's do it again."

He shrugged his shoulders. "No violations there. That's a good outfit and the super is on the ball. They complied with specs right down the line and the place is kept that way."

"Think of something."

"Can I ask any questions?"

"Sure."

"This came through some big channels. Police work?"

"Of a sort."

Murray grinned and nodded. "Okay, I get the picture. How do you want to handle it?"

"Regular routine," I said. "Nothing to draw any attention."

“No sweat. We pull spot checks all the time.”

Kelly took us up the street and stopped in front of the buildings. A police cruiser passed, the cops waved casually and we threw them a wave back. Nobody on the street bothered giving us more than a first look. Cops and firemen were too common and unless there was some action nobody gave a damn what went on that wasn't their own business.

The superintendent was a middle-aged Italian who occupied the basement floor of the first building and he took so much pride in his job he was almost happy about having an inspection run on him. He led the way through each building, smiling and talking, making us take note of the precision and cleanliness of the place and beamed every time Kelly made a check on the sheet on his clipboard that indicated an okay.

We wasted two hours on the farce, but I got to see what I wanted ... the way in and out of the place from all angles, cellar to roof. There was a self-operated elevator that serviced the four flights of each building, an interior fireproof staircase and steel fire escapes that went down the back to the concrete courtyard.

Each fire escape was tested and as we passed the window of Alexis Minner's apartment I had a quick glimpse of the interior. He wasn't home, the super had told us that earlier, but on the kitchen table were two empty bottles of vodka, a half-full one and four used glasses.

Murray made an entry on the inspection form, went through the routine of the play and we went back outside. In the car he said, “Satisfied?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“You want anything else?”

“Not now. Which way you headed?”

“Back to the station, I have some work to clean up. Can I drop you off somewhere?”

I told him where to go. It wasn't far and I had some questions to ask. Maybe Gretchen Lark could answer them for me.

She came to the door in a knee-length paint-smeared smock, holding a brush between her teeth and a palette in her left hand while she opened the door. I took one look at her and laughed and she almost dropped the brush. “Well, this is a surprise, Tiger.”

Only two buttons in the middle held the smock together and from the way it hung and the show of white at the closure I knew she didn't have anything under it. "You're going the Village route all the way. I like it."

Gretchen grimaced, glanced down at herself nervously and didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. She finally pushed her hair back with her forearm, gave me an impatient look and waved me in. "Look at me! I'm a mess. I wasn't expecting anybody."

"You look great."

"Oh sure." She glanced back at me over her shoulder. "*You men!*"

Gretchen dipped her brush in a peculiarly shaded apothecary jar half filled with solvent, picked up a few others and placed them beside it until they were soaked, swished them around and wiped them off, putting them on a table beside her easel.

I walked over and took another look at the study. Burton Selwick was a real British lion, proud, dignified, all his strength of character coming to life through his eyes and the set of his jaw.

"Like it?"

"He looks a shade strained. From here I'd say he was sick." She stepped back, frowned at the portrait, turned the easel to catch a different light and, after several moments studying it, nodded slowly. "My fault, I've always had a flair for realism. Do you think I should soften it?"

"Hell, I'm no painter. If it's for his wife I'd make him pretty, that's all."

"It might be a good idea."

"How is he anyway?"

"Much better."

"What hit him down there?"

"Nothing more than I told you. He keeps having these ulcer attacks. Last year it was gallstones and he had them out, but that job of his doesn't invite peace and tranquility. He's a walking medicine cabinet. I think he eats more pills than he does food. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to put something on. It's too early to be entertaining in the buff."

I let out a laugh. "Honey, it's never too early for that."

"*Men,*" she said again and walked away.

While she dressed I went back to the portrait of Selwick. From the time I first met him a few days ago until now he had changed. There was little of the jocular type he seemed to be; it was more like he was hiding in the shadow of

pain behind a mask of imperturbability. Chin up and all that sort of thing.

The chair that he was posed in was an ornate prop, but in the picture it appeared to be a throne. giving him a regal aspect. I sat in it myself and wondered if Gretchen painted him wearing nothing but a smock like she did when she was alone. I grinned at the thought because Selwick was just a little too dignified to sit through it. It would have shown on his face.

Beside the chair was an end table that didn't show in the picture and I flipped open the box on it. Selwick's medicine cabinet. There must've been a dozen bottles of assorted pills and capsules there, most from chain pharmacies in the city.

Gretchen came out in a sweater-and-skirt combination, her hair loose and flowing again and the paint smudges gone from her face. She smelled of a cross between turpentine and Chanel No. 5. She pointed to the box I had open on the table. "See what I mean? He sits there and eats them like candy."

"The doctors must know what they're doing," I said.

"Sometimes, although I don't always agree with their remedies."

"No?"

She finally got her belt adjusted and patted her hips down. "I used to be a nurse." She laughed, the tinkly one that sounded so nice. "Funny, but I wanted to try everything. I was good at it, but after a while the excitement seemed to pale. I guess I wasn't what you call dedicated."

"You should have tried getting married. You would have been good at that."

"Someday, Tiger, someday perhaps. There are still a lot of worlds to conquer and although I am only a woman I want to see what life is made up of before I settle down to diapers and dishes." She perched on an unpainted bar stool and swung her leg on either side. "Now, what do we do? It's Saturday afternoon and I'm hungry, if that's any kind of a hint at all."

"So let's eat," I said.

"Where?"

"Oh, there ought to be some local slop chute that serves up the rare and exotic."

"I'm thinking of that wonderful place you took me the last time, the *Hall of the Two Sisters*."

"No floor show at this hour but the chow is good."

"Can we go back?"

“Why not? Only don’t ask for an interpretation of the menu.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

Dell hadn’t arrived at the *Hall* of the Two Sisters when we got there but Joe Swan had and let us through with a big grin and a whistle-and-wink when he saw Gretchen. Swan handled most of the smuggling contacts, specialized in gems and blew the whistle on anybody he knew about handling narcotics. He had a special hate for horse because he lost a wife who was given an overdose by some wise punk at a party and wound up killing him. Down at headquarters he was treated with respect not given the ordinary informer or stoolie and although three rub-outs had been tried, Swan was still up at bat.

He got a waiter to get us our spot, suggested the specialty of the house and when we were halfway through came in to say he had something special to show me, the leer indicating it was of a sexy nature not intended for tender feminine eyes and Gretchen gave me the raised-brow look and sighed fatuously.

But it wasn’t that. Dell was back in his office and after he closed the door he said, “I have information for you, Tiger. Your man with the stiff finger.”

I waited.

“He has been seen.”

“Where, Dell?”

“Not too far from here. In the section between Fourteenth and Fourth Street.”

“Who got on to him?”

“Two people. One is a newsdealer who remembered the hand. He bought a copy of a foreign newspaper that is sold in the section. The other was a contact, Marty Lehman, a junkie. He’s a peddler. The man you’re looking for purchased three caps of H.”

“Somebody steered him to Marty,” I said.

“Not necessarily. Marty, unfortunately, is well known in that section. He took a chance with your man and charged him well above the going price for the goods. He passed it through a door and remembered the hand well. The man paid, Marty was clear and satisfied and so was the customer.” Dell moved behind his desk and sat down. “Have you learned something?”

“It’s coming together. The big thing is that he’s an addict.”

“That is important in a man.”

“He’d almost have to be to be a killer.”

Dell smiled and shook his head. "Tell me, Tiger, have you ever used this terrible thing?"

"I'm not about to, buddy."

"Yet you have killed."

"Just killers, Dell. They are animals who need killing badly. I don't have to get hyped up for that job."

"Please be careful. I like your business."

When I got back to the table Gretchen said, "How was she?"

"The great Oriental mystery is a secret no longer. They are all alike. The slant is only in their eyes."

"Dirty man."

"Just curious," I said. "Eat up. I have things to do."

"Can I go?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Business. Broads aren't an asset when you're setting a deal. They're too damn distracting."

"Will I see you again?"

"Maybe."

"When?"

I pushed away from the table and called the waiter in for the check. "You sure you want to?"

Her eyes had a mist over them and a rueful smile tugged at her mouth. "Yes, Tiger, I'm sure. You make me feel foolish saying it, but there hasn't been too much in my life, not really. I guess that's why I do so many things that seem strange to those who know me. Since you ... well, I feel funny inside."

"Don't kid. If anything happens it can hurt."

"What can happen?"

"It's a rough business."

"Please don't scare me."

I felt pleasant and relaxed and thoughts of the past and the present were very close in my mind. There was no future after Rondine, but there had never been any future anyway so it really didn't matter at all. Maybe with Gretchen Lark, but who could tell? You didn't parade any checkered flag past the grandstand until after you had won the race and it wasn't over yet.

“Can you tell me?” she asked.

“You wouldn’t believe it.”

“Try and see.”

I leaned back in the chair and felt for the words. “Suppose I have to kill somebody.”

“Is it necessary?”

“Essential.”

“Then there is no choice, is there?”

“No choice at all, baby.”

“Who is this person?”

“Not one ... several. Maybe just two. There have been others. I’ve killed before.”

She studied me intently, her eyes filled with quiet passion. “I know that, Tiger. It’s something I can feel in you. Whatever it is you have to do, you’ll do it. Just don’t leave me.”

“I won’t.”

“When do you have to do this?”

I moved my shoulders and frowned. “Tonight maybe.”

“You’ll be careful?”

“I’m always careful.”

“You will be back?”

“Later.”

“I’ll wait for you,” she said gently.

At five I let her out of the cab and had the driver take me back uptown to Ernie Bentley’s new workshop. It was a cross between a laboratory and a miniature machine shop and he was working at a microscope when I got there.

When I was at Minner’s apartment I got the name of the lock on his door and asked Ernie to fix me up with a master key for the make. He said he’d have to make six, one of which would fit and would take twenty minutes to complete.

While I waited I called Charlie Corbinet, got him as he was about to leave the office and asked him about the bullet that killed Toomey.

“Matches one gun that was used on you.”

“The guy must be nuts to hang onto the piece. If he’s picked up with it he’s had it.”

“Not with diplomatic immunity.”

“If he has it. We may not be talking about the same one. I’m thinking he might be smart enough to dump that rod.”

“Tiger ...”

“What?”

“In ’41 you were issued an Army Colt automatic. Do ’ you still have it?”

“Okay, I get the point.”

“Do you have anything for me?” Corbinet asked.

“Are you ready to work with probables?”

“Anything.”

“They seem to be located in the Village. If we push them hard they’ll have to move fast and won’t have the time to be careful. The improvisation is coming from their end, not ours. They’re the ones running scared.”

“Then move fast, boy. This coming week is a critical point in our history. If that leak is still there we can lose everything.”

“It won’t be,” I said. “If necessary I know one way of stopping it.”

“We may have to do it that way.”

“Did you see a report on Selwick?”

“I have it on the desk in front of me. They used a stomach pump and all known tests on him. Negative. His condition is a natural one.”

“Clever,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“There are ways to do anything if you have the right means. I can name you two poisons that can kill without leaving a trace and will be diagnosed as natural death.”

“Selwick didn’t die,” he reminded me. “He was in good health except for an organic disorder. Several top medical authorities attested to that.”

“You ought to remember what we did to Krouse and Gettler that time in ’45 to get them off the planning committee and put it directly in the hands of Hitler who we knew would louse up the situation.”

Before he could answer, I laughed and hung up.

Ernie finished the keys, dropped them in my palm and said, “Martin Grady called. We’ve been working on something you might find useful. He suggested you consider it.”

“Like what?”

He held out three black spheres half the size of golf balls. One had a line around its perimeter. “Remember the torpedoes you got as a kid on the Fourth of July? You could hit a sidewalk or a wall with them and they’d blow?”

“Yeah. Fun. The little pebbles inside could gouge an eye out.”

“They work the same way, only these have the intensity of a hand grenade.”

“Stable?”

Ernie shrugged eloquently. “They’re new. They worked fine under lab conditions. Keep them in your pocket and don’t jiggle them too much.”

“Thanks a bunch.”

“I’d suggest you keep them wrapped in a handkerchief or in different pockets. Somewhere where they won’t rattle around. And don’t hang your coat near a radiator. Anything over a hundred degrees will set them off.”

“What’s their primary purpose?”

“Same as a grenade. If you have something to pack them with the charge becomes directional and can take a steel fire door down. The one with the white line around it has an incendiary capacity.”

“Thermite?”

“We’ve progressed, Tiger. Something like it only better. Devlin used it in Yugoslavia to get through the safe he got the Morvitch papers out of.”

I dropped one in each side pocket of my raincoat and put the fireball job inside my jacket. “You hear about Toomey?”

“Grady told me,” he said. “I’m happy to stay inside and leave the field work up to you idiots.”

“You’ll never meet any broads in here,” I told him.

“Hell, I got more than I can handle at home. If you use those things let me know how they work. Anything can be improved.”

“Sure, buddy.”

There was a column in the evening papers about the dead man being found in the Chester Hotel. He was identified as a small businessman from a Midwestern city with a passion for gambling, a known Welsher and a person upon whom murder had been tried before. The story said he arrived late that

evening and occupied a room just vacated and was probably killed by person or persons unknown with whom he had gambled, lost and refused to pay off. Whoever wrote the story made it look like an old story and a warning to the sheep who came East to be fleeced. The big boys take a dim view of the type.

I.A.T.S. were on their toes and had the local police department following their line whether they liked it or not. If the story held, Vidor Churis might take an easy breath. He'd have time for another try at me without any heat on him. A bad kill wouldn't concern him. He'd know I was still around and he could move with some latitude, knowing the cops were on the wrong trail. He couldn't make a fast move and would have to wait for me, and this wasn't going to happen again. Not if I could help it.

But I could stir things up a little.

I called Rondine.

I said, "It's Tiger, doll."

Her breathing was audible in my ear.

"First the others, then you," was all I said. I heard her sob before I put the phone on the hook.

Rain again. I walked in it and watched it wash the streets down with the angular fury of the small storm that seemed to hover above the city. I walked past the row of newly renovated buildings and spotted the apartment that belonged to Alexis Minner. And company.

Funny, how birds always looked for a common nesting place. Dell's tip put Vidor Churis in the same neighborhood, a hodge-podge of nationalities where an accent or conversation in a foreign tongue wouldn't be out of place at all. The area was peopled by those of queer habits and odd customs and by nature wouldn't be looking for spots on someone else's back. It was an end of New York where privacy meant being lost in a crowd and you could be drinking buddies with your neighbor at a bar five blocks away and never find out he lived next door to you until you walked home with him one night.

There would have to be some liaison between the Embassy and the operatives and what better place than the apartment of a supposedly minor clerk who was, in actuality, a director and executor of kill operations taking orders from the big boss, Stovetsky.

It wasn't Moscow. It was New York. It wasn't a dictatorship, it was a

democracy and they could move without being harassed by secret police and tapped phones. They worked in an atmosphere of trust and respectability and stuck our noses in it, utilizing every advantage our country was sucker enough to give them.

Crime? Hell. Our diplomats walked on tippy toes for fear of making a single bad move. Oh, don't offend anybody ... let them get away with murder, park their cars by hydrants, make our government a joke all the way down into Mau-Mau territory, needle the nithead countries until they tear our flag down in student uprisings and shoot up our nationals, snipe at our military ... and then don't slap them down, don't even bitch about .. instead, try to remove the intelligence officers who gave the command to shoot if shot at and protect our interests. Make it appear that we were to blame because this country was rich and smart and powerful and everyone else downtrodden because of it.

Brother, what would the militiamen who fought at Concord or the pioneers who cleared the land of hostile Indians say to that! John Paul Jones had a damn good answer to that one ... so did the commander at the ridge of Bunker Hill.

We made it the hard way and now the clunkers wanted to take it away and the eggheads were willing to give it to them. But there were some of us who weren't going to let it go. There are ways of doing things and if there had to be a modern-day tea party we could do that too. If we had to stand in line abreast and challenge officialdom, red tape and radical thinking, it would be done.

They'd never expect it. They knew the usual pattern of things, the way the compromise would come or the total back-down when the propaganda pressure went on. But let them know there was more to us than what they thought and some revisions would be made. Fast. Nobody liked to die at all.

Who was it that had called it the day of the guns? It was back again. You can't win with scared diplomacy, but a bullet on the way to somebody's gut doesn't know any fear at all and moves too fast to be stopped. It has a power all its own of changing the shape of things instantly and instituting a propaganda factor that sticks in a person's mind all his life. They could stand up to words and would hold down a gun themselves, but what they did when the big hole in the end was pointed at them and they saw the hammer go back was a different story entirely and if ever there was a moment of truth it was

then, and not in a bull ring.

I called Wally Gibbons from a drugstore and finally got him at his office. He was excited, but kept his voice down. "Where the hell are you, Tiger?"

"Why?"

"Buddy, you have everybody on your neck. You know they've bugged me three times in the last two hours trying to make a contact?"

"Who are 'they'?"

"Come on, I can read between the lines. They don't show badges but I know who they are. I've seen them work before. You're hot, feller."

"Tell them anything you want to."

"Like what? I'm only a Broadway columnist, remember? Only there are other types on this paper and when Ted Huston who handles the political end saw those guys up here he leaned on me for my bit in it. Something big is rattling our guys and theirs and they're in a huddle like never before. The Russians have been at a top-level meeting all day and the British and Americans have decided to scrap their differences and hit this thing together. Now on top of all this scrambling going on they take time out to look for my old friend, Tiger Mann."

"Nice of them," I said.

"Give me the pitch, will you? If I have to do a cover-up, the least I can have is a track on the business."

"I told you you'd get it all, Wally. We're almost there so don't put anything out until I call it in."

"Sure ... thank's ... you're a great help. Not even a human-interest line except for Burton Selwick."

"Now what?"

"Oh, staunch British devotion to duty. He's up out of a sick bed calling the signals at the joint meeting. Vincent Harley Case is doing all his leg work for him, but Selwick's on the mound. Next week is going to be a turning point in international politics."

"Great. Maybe they'll cut taxes."

"Look, Tiger ... I'll be here all night. If you feel like talking, give me a call. I got a creepy feeling you're some kind of a time bomb ready to go off."

I laughed at him, said so long and hung up. Without knowing it Wally had tossed the dice for me and came up with a point. Now I had to make it the hard way.

And it was time.

The windows in Alexis Minner's apartment were dark and if they were in a tight huddle I'd have an opportunity to get inside. This time I didn't cruise past the building for a final look. I just turned in the doorway, used the stairs to get to his floor and went to the door. I rang twice, got no answer and took out the set of keys Ernie Bentley had made up. The second one fit, opened it and I walked inside.

As I did I felt the slightest wispy touch of something across my cheek and swore at myself for being so damn careless. Minner had put a check on his door someplace.

I found the thread with the pencil flash on the floor. It was about two inches long, black and as fine as a hair. He would have rigged it from the outside, a trick that could only be done as you closed the door from the hallway, and without it in place he'd know either someone was inside or the place had been broken into.

It wasted a full half-hour, but I managed to get the thread back where I imagined it would have been and hoped he wouldn't look too carefully if he got back unexpectedly. If there was any edge of surprise, I wanted it myself.

When I closed the blinds over the window I flicked on the light switch, saw that it turned on a single globe in the small alcove, then rigged the bulb with some tinfoil so that when it went on again it would burn out in a normal fashion after a second or so. That set, I opened the blinds and used the flash to get the furniture located and feel my way around.

The apartment was an expensive place and had been tastefully decorated. Apparently Alexis Minner wasn't concerned about bourgeois decor. There were cigarette burns on every piece of furniture, butts in flower pots, candy dishes and a few ground into the rug. Two vodka bottles and one of Scotch were on the table and some more dirty glasses along with the remains of a sausage.

At one side there were adjoining bedrooms with twin beds in each. Although they were made up, the cigarette burns on each side of the night table between them said all had been occupied and might well still be. Even though one guy rented the apartment, he could have visitors as he pleased and with just the single superintendent and neighbors who liked their privacy, it would be simple enough for them to come and go as they pleased without causing any comment.

Before going through the dresser drawers I looked for any thread checks like he had on the door and didn't find any. There wasn't much of anything else, either. The occupants might stay here a long while, but they were ready for a quick move out at any time. There weren't enough clothes to take up two suitcases.

The bathroom was the cleanest room in the place. Maybe they never used it. There was dust in the shower stall and tub. A glass on the sink held tiny pieces of soap and I could remember them doing that in Europe during the war years. Some things had a stubborn pattern that couldn't be wiped out, like trying to get too many shaves out of a blade.

Nobody had bothered to clean up the kitchen. The bottles and glasses were still there and a couple of flies had dropped into one and died there. The closets on the wall held a miscellaneous assortment of canned foods and spices, more like emergency stuff than a steady diet. The last one you could smell before you opened it because there were a half-dozen smoked sausages hung from the cup hooks on top.

I grimaced, started to close it and saw the corner of the box on the shelf. It was of heavy cardboard, about eight inches square and pieces of tissue packing were sticking out of the fold-in top. I flipped it open, separated the tissue and saw the bottles inside that reflected pale blue back into the light of the pencil flash.

Very gently I eased the cap off and smelled the contents, then tasted it to make sure. *Sodium pentothal*. Interesting. There were ways of using the stuff to get things out of a person the easy way. Two of the other bottles were clear glass and didn't take any tasting to determine the contents. One was prussic acid and the other strychnine.

This bunch was ready for anything and it wasn't subtlety.

I put everything back the way I had found it and closed the closet door. Legally, anyone could own the stuff so there wasn't any great necessity of hiding it. Especially if you had diplomatic immunity and never expected a search of the premises.

Which led to some curious speculation.

I began to poke around some more.

With what little clothes they had it was improbable that they'd use the washer-dryer combination that was set in the niche in the wall. I started on the washer and went through it first, but it was the dryer that paid off. I had

no definite idea of what I hoped to find, but thought it would be guns.

It wasn't.

It was a packet of brand-new thousand-dollar bills wrapped in wax paper and stuffed in the area just forward of the heating unit. If anyone had ever turned the machine on, forty-one grand would have gone up in smoke. I slipped out three of them, repacked the rest and put them back where I found them.

Let me be right in what I was thinking and there were going to be a few people declared *persona non grata* tomorrow.

But that day might be a long way off.

I heard a key go into the lock on the front door and the murmur of voices, a satisfied grunt and some low-key laughter. I said, "Damn!" to myself, ripped the .45 out and got behind the kitchen door. There were at least three of them there and they'd be pros, so what had to be done had to be done fast.

Someone flipped the light on and it glowed for no more than a second. It went out in a bluish flare with a soft popping noise and in that brief interval I saw one thing that brought back a minute from a few days ago. The one in front was wearing a funny velour hat with a feather in the band and the last time I saw him he had been directing the bit when the others shot up the pillows in my bed and I was on a ledge outside, forty floors above the street.

There was one other thing, too. The second guy had his right hand in a bandage and there was a trace of crimson seeping through the gauze. I had them locked in tight now and there was no doubt about it. These three were part of a kill team and the one with the bad mitt could be the guy I nailed in the corridor of the hotel.

One thing I was sure of. None of them was Vidor Churis and none had what could be described as having a round mouth. Two more were someplace else and I wanted them too.

With a thick-tongued accent one said, "Burned out. I'll get the lamp, Alexis."

I came around the door the same instant the light switched on and the one in the velour hat screamed out, "Nyet!" and I knew the odds had changed. The guy had been around too much and had probably pulled the same stunt before and he was in a dive going for a gun as I lined up on him.

The other two needed only that one hoarse shout to move and they were down and furniture was in the way and all I could do was pitch off to one side

and go for the floor. The first shots from Minner's gun blasted into the woodwork where I had been and smashed back into the kitchen.

Something flew through the air, hit the lamp and knocked it over in a shower of glass and a flash of yellow and the room was blacker than before because my eyes were not accommodated to the darkness.

The only advantage I had was that it had happened to them too and with three of them scattered around they couldn't risk random shots without risking their own necks. The blast of the gun still reverberated in everyone's ears and before it could fade and let the small noises back I skittered ten feet closer to the wall where the one was with the bandaged hand and I could hear him breathing only a little distance away from me.

I eased off my shoes, threw one across the room and it hit and bounced against a chair. Nobody fell for it. I couldn't wait. I couldn't give them time to let their eyes and ears get adjusted to the darkness. Any move I made had to be quick while they were on edge and not thinking. They couldn't be sure I was alone, but it wouldn't take long for them to realize how the situation stood.

The only thing that annoyed me was that I couldn't see their faces without exposing my position and I didn't want to take a chance of getting myself knocked off when the odds were in their favor. But one had a funny velour hat on with a feather in the band and if I saw that again I'd recognize it.

My hands felt the legs of the table and a heavy chair to the side. I tried to remember how the furniture was placed, recalled the details and began to edge around the chair. It couldn't have taken longer than a minute, but time seemed to drag on and on as I inched along.

The first thing I saw was a small luminous glow and knew it was the watch on the guy's left wrist. The job was going to take both hands, so I shoved the .45 in my waistband where I could get at it quickly and got ready. I took my time about how I was going to do it, located the approximate position of his head and neck, gathered myself and made the final jump of three feet. I landed on his back with my fingers tearing through the skin at his throat and felt his windpipe crack and burst as I forced his head back.

Even then, seconds before he died, he was able to drum his feet against the floor, just once, but it was enough. That reflex action of dying agony spelled it out for the others and I knew what was coming. I rolled fast, pulling the guy on top of me when the shots blazed out from across the room. Four of

the slugs thudded sickeningly into the guy and made him jerk against my stomach. One came right through him and slammed into my hip like a fist but I knew it was spent and never penetrated.

Then the noise was over and only the smell of cordite and blood was left. I felt for the .45. My hands never found it. Sometime during the struggle it had come out of my belt and was on the floor.

I used the body as a shield and pushed forward behind the sofa, feeling to see if there was a gun someplace. Either the guy hadn't felt up to carrying one because of his hand or he didn't have one on him. So the odds stayed down.

One shot winked out of the corner and there was the sound of hands and feet scrambling along the floor to duck a return bullet. I had maybe ten seconds before they knew what I was doing, so I rolled on my back, doubled up my knees with my feet against the body of the dead man and gave the body a shove that sent it rolling into the furniture.

I was running after the first roll of the guns. I could hear the bullets slapping into dead meat and the guy I hit never knew he was dying until he was dead. I snapped his neck, then his back while Alexis Minner was still throwing bullets into a corpse across the room and had his gun in my hand and the target in my sights.

The slob ran out of ammo with a laugh thinking he had nailed me and said, "Gorge ..."

I said, "Don't reload, pal. You're in the sights and I have you lined up."

For one horrible instant he stopped breathing and I knew how he was feeling. His guts were inside out and his brain going a mile a minute to fathom the situation. There was a lamp on the table beside me and I reached up and snapped it on.

Alexis Minner was face down on the floor, one hand in a pocket going after another clip for his gun and his head was turned toward me with eyes showing white all around the irises and nostrils flared to the fullest with the wildest kind of fear imaginable.

Before I could talk he said hoarsely, "I am a diplomat. I have immunity. This is my house."

"But I have the gun."

For some reason, he started to smile. His nerves were geared tight and the fear came out in a smile. "This will mean... trouble for you."

“Sure.”

“There will be police.”

Two dead men, one to either side of me. They weren't killed by my bullets. They died under my hands, one with his own bullets in him, but they were dead and we both were pros and now he was trying to snake out from under.

“I'll give the cops maybe five minutes, Alexis.”

This time he pulled his hand out of his pocket deliberately, wanting me to see that it was empty.

“It will be too late,” I said.

Now his eyes were half-closed, his tongue flicking in and out, trying to hide what he felt inside.

“Who's on the inside, buddy?”

“What is that?”

“Don't stall, you bastard. You haven't got that much time left. Who's on the inside?”

“I ... do not know what you mean.”

“Die silent then.”

He tried the old dodge, the indignant bit. He half raised himself to look at me squarely. “I come here as a diplomat attached to the Embassy. You have ... invaded my privacy.” He glanced toward the pair of bodies. “You have done this... you. The police will see that you...”

“Know who I am?” I asked him. I walked over and stood there with his friend's Tokarev in my fist.

“I am a diplomat and...”

“Know who I am?” I repeated. “I killed some of your friends. You have me on your 'A' list and if you keep a copy of your BTO-5's around you know my category.”

“Mr. Mann...”

Now he knew my name well enough. He was scared and could try to play it out. But all the while he was thinking and when old-time pros start thinking you start to watch out.

I said, “You paid out some of those new grand notes you have hidden in the machine in the kitchen to somebody else who hired a contract killer. Who, Alexis?”

His eyes made an appealing gesture and I knew he was playing it for

time. Somebody would have heard the shots and the report was in by now. In half a minute a squad car would come screaming around the corner. But Alexis was well brain-washed. Well trained. He could be scared, but he wasn't going to talk, and that type you don't waste time on.

I grinned at him, let him see all the choppers in a fat smile, leveled the gun and when he tried to make the one last move toward his pants leg, shot him squarely between the horns. The whole back of his head came off and splashed up against the wall.

There was one thing I had to be sure of. I took the two Tokarev 7.65's, ran to the bathroom and fired a shot from each into the five gallons of water in the toilet reservoir. Each bullet spun out dead before it reached the bottom... I got them out and dropped them in my pocket, then went back to the living room.

I found my .45 where it had fallen and for the first time felt lucky. I could make this deal stick all the way with a little fast talk and ballistics would prove me out if there were any cooperation at all.

I wiped the guns first, then got them back in the hands of the ones who had owned them, making sure prints were all over them, then took two minutes to go around the room and wipe out any prints I had left when I touched the furniture. Not everything will hold a print and I don't make stupid mistakes in handling things that did without gloves, so I wasn't worried about the rest of the place.

Somewhere outside a siren was whining and I knew it was time to go. Another joined it, so I ran to the kitchen, opened the window, closed it after I was on the fire escape and got down to the courtyard below. From there it was easy to hop the fence, go out through the areaway between the buildings and start walking toward the band of street lights and then north six blocks where I flagged a cab down and told him to drive me to Charlie Corbinet's house. After I settled back I checked my watch and the whole damn business couldn't have taken more than a few minutes. Three dead men in a few minutes.

Good score, Tiger. Your playing is up to par.

Chapter 13

If Ernie Bentley had more at home than he could take care of, he was showing it pretty well. He was still in the lab playing with miniature explosive charges when I walked in, and though the entry looked casual and easy, I knew I had been checked out on a closed-circuit TV downstairs and if I hadn't been right, I would have been dead.

I said, "Hi, lover."

Ernie never bothered to look up. "Now what."

"You have microphotos of the bullets from Toomey?"

"What's this, amateur night?"

"So?"

"Certainly. You want to see the slides?"

I tossed the two slugs down beside him. "Make a comparison test."

"Now?"

"Right now."

He snapped a light off, threw a couple of switches and picked up the slugs. While he was busy running the photos I walked to the window and looked down at New York in the shadows below.

It wasn't like being uptown. Here it was quiet and mean and dark, with all the latent streaks of hatred and animosity that go to build a city. Down there people were thinking and planning, and according to statistics, somebody would die violently within four blocks of this place tonight.

Hell, I could tell them where three of them were already if the police hadn't found them yet.

Ernie processed the slides as quickly as he could, set them in the machine and projected them on a screen. The left one killed Toomey. Its nose was blunted and there was a twist to the conical shape, but each land and lead had left an indelible groove on the metal.

The first one didn't measure up, but the second one did. It came from Alexis Minner's gun and now, even in death, he didn't have to worry about diplomatic immunity. He was on a meathook nobody could get off and there he had to hang. Those fat-faced Russian slobbs wouldn't even dare try a push after what we had and what I had set up. Before the Washington agencies or I.A.T.S. could get on it New York's Finest would have it photographed, fingerprinted and processed and no matter how hard the District pushed for

jurisdiction, the locals wouldn't let it out of their laps. It had better be good or it was no go no matter what.

This time it was pretty good.

So Minner killed Toomey... his other gun hands were on record, and in a fit of remorse, or a fight over the money they had to find, three guys had gone down. Maybe some bright boy would tie up the angles and figure me into it, but here, at least, I.A.T.S. kept quiet and Martin Grady's loot paid off excuses. Hell, maybe patriotism would even come into the picture.

But it wasn't the end yet. The noose wasn't tight enough.

Ernie said, "Use the goof balls yet?"

"Saving them for an emergency."

"Look, I found something out. They're good for about forty-eight hours. For some reason the instability becomes acute after that and you don't need heat or impact to set them off. The shells are too thin and there is an evaporation factor involved. Give yourself about twelve hours to be on the safe side and drop them down a toilet somewhere."

"What happens then?"

"They dissolve. No trouble."

"How long did you have them before you handed them over?"

"I'm getting old," Ernie said, "or maybe I just hate you field men. Limit it down. I just cut six hours off their expiration date. If I were you I'd make sure they were either used or destroyed before .. :)" he looked at his watch... "two A.M. Monday morning. Of course, if you want to be part of a grand experiment "

"Drop dead," I said.

He went back to his microscope and peered down the lenses. "I have a radio tuned to police frequencies," he mentioned.

"Good for you."

"They got to the house."

"How about that."

"Think you ought to write a report before you leave? You may not have another chance."

"Faith. Nothing like it."

Ernie shrugged his shoulders elaborately and looked up from his microscope. "Tiger... I'm an inside type. You field men scare hell out of me. I know what you do and help do it, but you wouldn't catch me dead with a

gun in my hand or any of the tools I dream up. Sometimes I sit here and wonder what goes on outside there and when I think about it long enough I get the cold shakes because I know I'm a part of it. I'm in this for money and nobody has enough to pay me for what I do or what I think except Martin Grady. But when those times come when my conscience starts working on my mind I try to figure out just where I stand. I look at you field men with your goddamn bullet scars and that wild, cold look in your eyes and know you can kill without a thought and man, I get scared. Am I a man or a bug?"

I took a long time before I spoke. "You're a man, buddy."

"Thanks. Sometimes I wonder."

"Play your part. You're important. Some things we can do alone. Some things we can't. At least you go home at night to a wife and lie in bed safe and sound and it isn't a bad thing to know you have. Try sweating out one day alone in a mud hut with a native whore so you can get one tiny piece of information or eat chicken heads and snakes to get inside a ritual and nail down a name that belongs to a guy you have to disembowel because he swallowed a piece of paper with an address or phone number written on it. Think of how it is to spray a compound full of people who have archaic weapons wanting to fill your hide with poison darts and watch them fall when even they know they're out of range, but to stay alive you pump all those bodies full of .45 slugs or Schamuser bullets or occasionally lob a grenade through an open window and watch chunks of arms and legs sail out of the wreckage. Buddy, you're lucky. You don't know how lucky. Stay with your chemicals, but when you start thinking, feel what we have to think when the possibilities are that you can be eaten alive by ants or tossed into a sinkhole with a weight tied to your feet and know you're dead, real dead in a few seconds and there's no way out."

Ernie's smile was pathetic. He'd like to try it, but he didn't dare. He had a wife at home. "Why don't you get married?" he asked me.

"Who the hell would have me?"

"A woman."

"There are only girls and broads left."

"I hear one time you loved a woman."

"If you're really hungry I'll make you eat that goddamn microscope," I said.

His eyes went up and down me and at last he got the answer. I could see

it go through his analytical mind and come up with the tape all neatly punched and classified. "I'll stay where I am," he said. Then he added, "Why don't you find a broad and get married?"

"Shut up, Ernie."

"No... no kidding. I heard about you and somebody a long time ago. What happened?"

"I said, shut up." My voice felt like a rasp in my throat.

"Psycho?" Ernie asked gently.

I turned around, looked at him and smiled. "I've killed friends too, Ernie, so lay off me."

"No, I won't. You got an itch for a broad. What happened?"

"Nothing happened yet."

"But it will? You're in love, sucker."

"She tried to kill me," I said.

"Kill her then. What do you have left?"

"I never had anything to start with. I died a long time ago. Now lay off me."

"I can't. We're in the same racket. I need you and you need me. You got a problem... oh hell, I know all about it, Tiger. You had one and you found her again. What now?"

I grinned, my mouth tight and my eyes pulled down into little slits. "Dead," I said. "She died."

"Happy landings," he told me and went back to his microscope.

I hopped a cab up to Charlie Corbinet's apartment, called him from the lobby to make sure he was alone, then went up. It was a small place, almost military in appearance. It functioned as a second office to him with filing cabinets, a large working desk and a rack full of handguns and rifles on the wall.

"Coffee, Tiger?"

"A quick one."

He poured out two, sat down casually and said, "I just had a call. There has been a triple killing downtown. One happened to be attached to the Russian delegation."

"How about that."

“Yes, Tiger, how about that? Care to offer an explanation?”

“No.”

He picked up the coffee cup and looked into it, thought a moment then sipped it. “At this moment the police are a little baffled. The bullets from one gun killed a man named Toomey. They found a good deal of money in the place so the shooting could have been over that.”

“It wasn’t.”

“I didn’t think so. Now, what’s the visit about?”

I pulled out the three thousand-dollar bills I had taken from Minner’s cache and laid them down in front of the Colonel. “Run a check on these serial numbers. See if they are from the same batch as the other one I gave you.”

He fingered the bills, frowned and reached for the phone. He had to go through two other numbers and a fifteen-minute wait before he had his party, then the conversation was brief. He read off the numbers, nodded, said something I didn’t get, then put the phone back.

“You hit it, Tiger.”

“Okay, so that dough was earmarked for the rough stuff. Alexis Minner arranged for that contract kill through somebody else and this is the money that was used in the pay-off. The Reds may start to sound off loud about this but when you slap it down in front of them they’ll cut and run like dogs. My suggestion is to let the papers have it ... spread it all over the front pages.”

“You know better than that. This is still an age of diplomacy,” he said.

“Balls. It’s about time the public was wised up to what these slobbs are pulling. They come over here acting like they own us, get privileged enough to commit murder without too much fear of reprisal and then bitch when they’re caught at it. Now I want you to understand something, Colonel... I’m not tied to any stupid rules of diplomatic protocol and convention. I don’t give one hoot in hell what the eggheads in Washington think. I’ve been there when they’ve loused up the situations so badly we had to slink off with our tails between our legs. Nobody’s going to stop me from doing what I want to do. Either I.A.T.S. or some other agency can make this thing public, or I will. I have a guy standing by who will go down the line on it and if it has to come out that way a lot of the college boys in striped pants will be reaching for their hats.”

“You’re asking for it, you know.”

“Screw it, Colonel. I’m the one who’s a target. They don’t put me up there without realizing the consequences. They got what they wanted... almost. There’s a little more left to do and it won’t take long. There’s still time enough to round the story out and polish it off to suit propaganda needs if they want to play it that way. I’ll give them one day to get ready, no more.”

“It’s incidents like this that can cause a war,” he reminded me.

I finished the coffee and put the cup on the table. “You got it wrong. They can’t afford a blowup. They aren’t that tough. We may seem like we can be pushed easily, but they know that when the chips are down we can wipe them out and nothing will stop us. If we can’t be pushed they’ll back down until they can control things again, but right now we have the ball and it’s about time we ran it a little.”

“Very well. I’ll submit the suggestion. If they don’t agree, I’ll remind them of the alternative. You know the possibilities, don’t you?”

“Sure, so let them try spotting me like they did Vance in L.A. When our own kind play it rough with us we let out all the stops. Martin Grady will have them screaming through their ears again.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I’ve been around, Colonel.”

“And where do you go from here?”

“To find Vidor Churis.”

“The same way you found the others?” A hard smile worked at the corners of his mouth.

“Maybe.”

I sat back and looked at him without really seeing him at all. There was a sharp turn in the picture somewhere and it had been pulling at my mind all night. It was one of those little things that is there without being seen you know can be the crux of the whole affair.

What?

Someplace I had picked up the key then laid it down again without realizing it.

Corbinet said, “Got it yet?” He knew what I was thinking.

I shook my head. “It’ll come. Maybe it doesn’t mean anything, maybe it does. If one thing doesn’t show up something else will.”

“Don’t go playing hunches. You can die that way.”

“You can die either way, Colonel.” I got up and put on my hat. “Thanks

for the coffee.”

“My pleasure. I’ll see what they want to do with this angle of attack.” He flapped the three bills against his fingers. “They may want a statement from you.”

“No doubt. It will make nice reading in the papers.”

“In view of the situation Hal Randolph may want to handle it differently. It can be done if it is warranted. In either case you are still on the spot, Tiger. Our Russian friends won’t take this lying down.”

“I’m on their ‘A’ list now,” I grinned, “but there’s a difference this time.”

“What’s that?”

“They’re on mine,” I told him.

The ticket window of the *Grenoble Theater* was just opening as I arrived. A half-dozen people were in line, a couple with kids, and I waited until they had gone inside before I shoved my money through the slit. The woman there passed back the ticket and the change without ever looking up, then went back to her evening paper as I walked away.

I took the same seat I had before and sat there with the .45 in my lap under my raincoat and waited. There was no sign of Vidor Churis or his round-mouthed friend. I did the same thing for the second show with the same result, then filed out with the rest.

If Churis was going to make the show he had one more day to do it in otherwise I’d lose a possible contact for three weeks. The previews of coming attractions all were of different language films for that period of time. The only other chance was that Newark Control could come up with another lead and to check it out I called them.

Negative.

I tried Dell on his private line and got the same thing, but he said he would put the word out to expedite matters if possible, then suggested that I take in the special show that night. Something new from Paris, France. If the lady was broad-minded she would enjoy it too.

Saturday night. The loneliest night in the week.

So I called the lady to see if she was broad-minded enough and Gretchen said, “Tiger Mann, I have never, repeat... never, seen anyone who was so offhanded about asking for a date.”

“It’s not that late.”

“Do you know it’s after eleven?”

“I’m a night people.”

“What have you been doing?”

“Causing trouble. Now I’m tired. I’d like to see you. Dell has a new act coming into the *Hall of the Two Sisters* we can catch if you shake it up. That is, if you can take it. His shows get pretty rough.”

She laughed, a pretty sound, full of life. “You talked me into it, Tiger. Will you come to get me?”

“Grab a cab and meet me there. It’ll be quicker.”

“Okay, lover boy. But there are times when I’d like to belt you one.”

It took me ten minutes to get to the *Hall* and Dell was there to meet me. I told him my broad-minded girl would be along shortly and to bring her to the booth. When he had relayed the word to his other doorman he led the way up the steps, down to the end and parted the curtains for me.

I told the Arab waiter to bring a pair of drinks and pointed to the table. “Join me for one, Dell.”

“Certainly, Tiger. We do not often get a chance to drink together, no?”

“Any news?”

“As I said, it is difficult. The man you want is ... elusive. I have dealt with these types before as have you. They don’t frequent public places, preferring to stay in their holes until they are needed.”

“You seem to have the guy pinned down pretty well,” I said.

Dell gave me his usual generous shrug. “It is that I know you better, Tiger. The ones you want are generally of the same sort. They have nearly identical habits. Something in their mind makes them do it.”

“They have to come out once in a while.”

“Yes,” he said, “it is so. There are necessities and peculiarities that make them reveal themselves eventually. I have posted my people and if the one with the stiff finger or the round mouth shows himself, you will know about it immediately.” He raised his drink in a silent toast and finished it.

The waiter came in then, swept the curtains aside and Gretchen Lark stood there, a fitted white trench coat hugging the beautiful curves of her body like a glove. We both stood up and Dell nodded approvingly.

“Ah,” he said, “now you can be alone. The show will start shortly.”

“Come on in, kitten.”

She smiled, unbuckled the coat and tossed it over the back of the chair. The black sheath she had on had an open throat that cut down in a generous V, exposing the cleft of her breasts in a daring sweep you couldn't take your eyes off.

"You look sexy," I said.

"I'm supposed to."

I signaled the waiter for two more drinks and lit her cigarette for her. Across the flame her eyes became serious. "I've been worried about you."

"Why?"

"Because the last time..." she didn't finish.

"I'm still here."

"Did you... do what you had to do?"

"Somewhat."

Gretchen exhaled a thin stream of smoke, watching me intently. "Tiger... I hope it can always be like this for us. I ... don't know what these things are you do ... I think I prefer not to know. But please be careful."

"Relax."

She reached over and took my hand. Her fingers were long and cool and there was a bluish pigment stain on the side of her palm she couldn't get off.

"How is the picture coming?"

"One more sitting will finish it, but who knows when Mr. Selwick will be back? This will be a busy week-end for him."

"He ought to be glad to take a break with you."

She smiled and her teeth showed even and startlingly white. "He is. He's a dear, you know. Whenever he isn't feeling well he'll tell me he's ready for another sitting." She giggled then. "It's a wonder the painting doesn't show him with a pill in his mouth."

"Take that crazy smock off and he'll get a better expression."

"I don't think his wife would appreciate it. She's pretty starchy from what he tells me. Anyway, he just likes to sit there and think. Nobody bothers him, no phones ring and he makes a fine subject. Sometimes he just sleeps." She squeezed my hand. "When am I going to paint you?"

"Nude?" I laughed.

"Naturally."

"That'll be the day," I said.

From the orchestra came a weird chord of sound. The lights dimmed

around the room and a tinted spot hit the floor. The dancers moved into it slowly, suggestively, preparing the audience for what was to come.

A Japanese team joined them, were followed by four Hawaiians who put more vibrancy in the hula than I had ever seen before. Then Dell's big act came in with a muted roll of drums.

There was no music, just the steady tempo of the drums. The pair that strutted in dressed in the ordinary stage attire of the Parisian *apache* dancers, peak cap, rough jacket and red pants on one, a black slitted satin skirt and loose scarlet blouse on the other, was the tallest couple I had ever seen. Both were well over six feet four, both wearing smiles of the oddest nature I had ever seen.

The beginning of the act was almost commonplace and Gretchen said, "I thought this was supposed to be something special."

"I don't know the gimmick," I told her, "but it will be. Watch."

Bit by bit the tempo increased and the pair went through the classical motions of the act. Then they began to improvise. As the woman struggled with the man in the mock dance-fight, things began happening to their clothes. It almost began to look as if it were real and had they not kept such close rapport with the music it would have been believable.

Again, it was those at the tables below who attested to what the act was designed for. I could see them, tense and drawn, unable to look away even to touch their drinks.

The two dancers came at each other, hands grabbing and clawing. The girl was nearly naked, fighting her partner off, and as he stripped away the last shred of cloth from her body she grabbed his shirt, tore it, took him to the floor and in the melee of the struggle, to the rising sound of the drums, he lost everything he had on.

And then the specialty of the act was plain for all to see.

They were both women.

They were both contortionists.

I picked up my drink and watched Gretchen. Her face was livid and a small pulse beat showed near her temple. When Dell came through the curtain, motioned to me with his finger to follow, she hardly noticed him.

At the corner of the balcony out of sight from any of the others he leaned toward my ear and said, "One of my people has seen your man."

"Which one?"

He held out a rigid forefinger. "He was first seen in a delicatessen store, then followed to a theater."

"The *Grenoble*?"

Dell nodded soberly. "You have a good system of your own too, no?"

"Everything helps."

"Indeed. He inquired of the attendant who was closing the theater if the picture would play tomorrow."

Good boy, Churis. Nostalgia will kill you yet.

"He get an address?"

"Unfortunately, no. My ... man... has a slight allergy for police and there was one standing on the corner. You see... he is wanted for something or other. He was forced to give up tailing him."

"That places him in two general areas, but both close enough to be related. He's not shopping in any one store apparently."

"It's still in the Village?"

"Looks that way."

"Tomorrow is your day, Tiger?"

"All the way."

I thanked him and went back to the booth. On the floor the dance had come to a torrid end that was unbelievable and the audience was sitting in shocked silence, but making no move to avoid the scene. They were enjoying every lascivious moment of it and when the lights darkened momentarily, to light up again and show the floor empty, you could hear the slow letting out of breaths long held in.

Gretchen had a look of guilt not quite concealed by the nervous smile she gave me. "That was terrible!" she said.

"I told you it would be rough."

"But did you see them?" She pointed to the tables on the floor. "The faces on those women..."

"You should have looked in the mirror yourself." I grinned.

"But ... but they knew what to expect."

"It takes all kinds to make a world, kid. I've seen far worse in the capitals of some of the most cultured countries in Europe."

"And you get up and walk away from it!" She laughed behind her hand and said, "Did your friend offer us a room again?"

"It was better than that." Before I had to lie to her I said, "Ready to go?"

“Whenever you like.”

“Let’s go then. I’ll drive you home.”

“For a nightcap?”

“It’s polite to wait till you’re asked. No, no nightcap. Tonight I want sack time and a chance to think.”

We told Dell good night and he called a cab for us. I gave Gretchen’s address, flicked a match for her cigarette and watched how her mouth formed around the tube, tinting it with her lipstick.

“Pretty,” I told her.

“Prettier than Edith Caine?” she teased.

“Different type.”

“She’s the jealous type. She doesn’t like to show it, but women can tell.”

“You mention I saw you?”

“Uh-huh. I call her every day anyway. I don’t think she was pleased at all when I told her.” She let out that silly laugh again. “Frankly, Tiger, I don’t care. Do you mind?”

“I’m here, sugar.”

She glanced at me sidewise. “Something always happens to your face when you speak about her.”

“Does it?”

“Were you... ever in love with her?”

I leaned my head back and stared at the ceiling. “A long time ago. Twenty years.”

“But .. I could feel the puzzled frown on her face and it wasn’t something I wanted to talk about.

“Maybe someday I’ll tell you about it.”

The cab pulled to the curb and I told him to wait. I got out, helped Gretchen out and walked to the building with her. She turned, her lips moist and her eyes soft. “Thanks for the date, Tiger.”

I kissed her easily, feeling her mouth tremble beneath mine, the restraint inside her. “I’ll call you earlier the next time,” I said.

She winked and went up the steps. When the inside door closed I started back to the cab and had one second to spot the car coming down the street. It was like a whistle going off in my head, a sudden premonition of what was going to happen and I threw myself to the side and hit the pavement behind a pair of ash cans as the first stacatto thunder from a tommy gun rolled out of

the window.

The slugs tore into metal, spraying a cloud of dust in the air, ricocheting off the walls of the building behind me. One tugged at my coat and another careened off the sidewalk sending a shower of stone into my face. I couldn't move, couldn't go for my gun without losing the protection of the cans. The cabbie didn't wait for anything more. He jammed the cab in gear, pulled away from the curb with rubber burning behind him, slipped around the black sedan and raced for the intersection.

This time they wanted to make sure. The car screeched to a stop, the door opened and a guy cradling the tommy under his arm ran to where I was. He had his back to the others when I went for the .45, shielding me from anything they could throw. He didn't think I could have been alive and didn't have the gun up. My first shot hit the butt of the gun, slammed him halfway around with a hoarse yell of terror, the tommy sailing out of his hands.

I didn't have to hit him again. The others did it for me. I dropped behind the cans when they started pumping shots at me and some of them caught the guy in the back and pitched him head first against the curb with a sickening thud. Somebody yelled in the car, the door slammed shut and it took off down the street with a foot jammed hard on the accelerator. The police car that suddenly nosed around the corner to block off the exit almost caught it. The driver wrenched on the wheel to get around him and couldn't hold it. There was one awful moment when the sedan was on its two right wheels, then it went rolling across the intersection with glass and metal fragments spewing from the body and, with a ghastly explosion, burst into a billowing sheet of bright yellow flame that turned the night into day.

Both cops were at the pyre and the people pouring out of the buildings in odd pieces of clothing hurriedly thrown on were hurrying toward the wreck with morbid curiosity. Nobody paid any attention to me at all. Later the cabbie would make a report, but at least I had time to get out of there.

Thanks again, Rondine. You talk to Gretchen and know I see her on occasion. You plant your men where you know you'll have a definite contact sooner or later and wait it out. But you've slipped badly, baby. Time was when you'd do the job yourself. I sure must be a sword over your head. Each minute I'm getting closer and closer, and now you're running with your tongue hanging out. How will you feel now, doll? What will happen to your guts when you get the word that they didn't make the hit? What will be your

next move?

Three blocks away, I flagged down a cab and went back to my hotel. I cleaned the .45, stowed it away, took a shower and laid down on the sack. Only then did I get a sudden, chilling thought. I had those damn pellets in my pockets all the time and in that fall I took behind the garbage cans I could have blown myself into little tiny pieces.

I picked up the phone, dialed Gretchen's number and, before it finished ringing the first time, she answered, her voice taut with fear. "Me, baby," I said.

"Oh, Tiger!" There was relief now and for a moment she couldn't talk. Then: "Right after I left you... I had just started upstairs..."

"I know. I was there."

"You... are all right, aren't you?"

"No trouble."

She seemed to be crying but not wanting me to know it. "They were after... you, weren't they?"

"It looks that way. Part of the business."

"Tiger ..."

"Come off it, girl ... it's the way I am and the way I'm going to stay. Quit worrying about me."

"I can't help it."

"So I'm okay. I just wanted to let you know. Now get some sleep."

I cut the connection so I wouldn't have to go into any explanations. The next number was Charlie Corbinet's. He answered with a sleepy hello, but came to fast when he knew it was me.

"They made another try, Colonel. You'd better check it out." I gave him the details and added, "My guess is they're all dead, but if you get make on them they'll be part of that contract bunch from Chicago. You'd better alert Randolph on this and have them keep it quiet. The usual story of a mob rub-out might do it. They killed one of their own men when he got in the line of fire so the slugs will match their guns."

"I'm afraid it will be more than that, Tiger. Randolph won't stand still for any more of this. He'll want to see you personally."

"Randolph can go jump, Charlie. He plays it my way. This thing is tied up with the international picture and if he doesn't want to blow the whole deal he'll go along. If you have to, go over his head. You'll get cooperation

there if you need it.”

“That’s just what I might have to do.”

“Good. Randolph swung a tail on Edith Caine. You hear anything about it yet?”

“Nothing there. She’s been very quiet. All other leads petered out.”

“When the stakes are high you have to play the cards close to your vest.”

“Tiger...”

“What?”

“Monday the new proposition comes up in the U.N. There’s no time left any more.”

“There’s enough,” I said and hung up. I lay back in bed, switched the light off and stared into the darkness.

All I could see was Rondine’s face.

And the rest of her.

We were back in the loft again and she was naked and beautiful and she loved me. I could feel the satin of her skin and the soft-hard curves of her body and smell the delicious warmth of her body and knew what the explosion of love was like.

Chapter 14

Rain tapping the window woke me up at seven. Outside it was another soggy, dull day, but it was Sunday and the streets were practically empty. It was like being in a ball park after the game was over, nothing left but the debris of cigarette and candy wrappers and a handful of lackadaisical keepers trying to clean up.

I shaved, went downstairs for breakfast, had the desk send up a typewriter then wrote out a report in triplicate, sealed it in an envelope and dropped it down the chute by the elevator. Martin Grady was going to have a lot of interesting reading. So was Wally Gibbons. So would the public. It was about time.

At noon I went down to the street to a pay phone and put in a call to Thomas Watford. There was a touch of anger in his voice and he told me that unless I turned myself into the office there would be trouble. Since the Minner affair they wanted me out of the way before there were any more complications.

I said, "How did the Soviets react?"

"It was they who hushed it up," he said laconically. "They chose to announce that it was a personal disagreement between three former friends that led to the killing."

"And the city police?"

"They accepted it, of course, under our instructions. However, with the bullets from the gun and the money they found certain facts are evident and will be useful, but we are not going to allow anyone else to pursue this case."

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning you, Mr. Mann. I think it will be better if you are placed in custody in view of the situation last night. There is no need for unnecessary deaths."

"You wanted a target, buddy."

"Not any longer."

"Tough."

He waited a few seconds then said, "It might be well if I gave you a certain piece of information. Friday afternoon a congressional committee started proceedings against Martin Grady and those in his employ. He will be subpoenaed this week and his entire organization investigated."

I laughed at him. “They’ll get their fingers burned, Watford. Martin Grady reaches into pretty high places. Sometimes he does it with money, other times with means that are slightly immoral but very necessary to get the edge he needs. Some of those congressmen can be leaving themselves wide open. I hope they have a private practice to retire to.”

“The Congress of the United States is not to be intimidated.”

“They’re only men, buddy. If some are afraid to do things the right way, private individuals will do it for them. All Grady has to do is give them the true picture of a few instances and the lid will come down hard. But thanks for the warning anyway.”

“You will be under indictment yourself, Mr. Mann.”

“That won’t be anything new either.”

“It will keep you out of our hair.”

“I’ll make a deal with you.”

“No deals.”

“You have no choice,” I told him. He didn’t answer, but he was still listening. “Call off the dogs until tomorrow. If the air isn’t cleared by then I’ll be around. Well?”

He took his time, finally saying, “All right. Nothing can happen on a Sunday, I’m sure.”

“I’m glad *you* are,” I said.

I ducked out of the booth, got across the street to the diagonal corner and looked at my watch. It took the police car forty-five seconds to get there. Thomas Watford’s methods of tracing a call could use some polishing up. Hell, I gave him enough time.

Wasting a rainy Sunday in the city wasn’t easy. It took two double features in Times Square movie houses to bring me up to supper and then I had another hour before the *Grenoble Theater* opened. To kill off the minutes I walked there, running the pieces of the puzzle through my mind trying to get it to make sense.

War was like that. You stopped the other guy without having to know his schemes or intentions. You just stopped him and it ended right there. If you didn’t, he took over and you’d find out what he wanted the hard way. So now we did it from back to front. Find a killer. Find Vidor Churis and you found who sent him. It wouldn’t be hard to make him talk. I knew enough ways myself. It might take a little time, but that would just make him talk louder

and faster. Find out how the Soviets arranged for the leak in our security. Kill Rondine and you stopped the leak. But you had to break up their organization to do it or they'd find another way.

At seven the ticket window opened and I bought the first pasteboard. One more time through the movie and I'd know all the dialog. I was even beginning to make sense out of it already.

I sat there in the semidarkness of the theater with my hand to my face trying to look bored. No more than twenty people came in before the lights dimmed and the picture started. None of them was him.

Had it not been for the slightly furtive manner of the guy I never would have spotted him, but the uneasy glance around he gave and the way he picked his seat was enough. He could have taken the one I had if I hadn't been there first. Instead, he took the back row on the opposite side, walked through the empty row to the side aisle and sat down. His hands were in his lap and I knew he wasn't taking any chances either.

There was one advantage going for me. If I had to take him in here he'd be engrossed in the picture. You could see the way he was settling down, nodding at the dialog, pleased with the action the way a kid would be at a cowboy show.

How's your hand, you pig? I thought.

My watch said almost eight. If I were going to move, it would have to be now. A fake trip to the men's room to see if he was covering himself with anyone else, take that one first, then get back to Churis. I wrapped my fingers around the butt of the .45 and thumbed the hammer back off half-cock.

Then the first move came from his side. Another man moved into the darkness of the corner, leaned over and spoke to Churis and I caught a glimpse of white as he passed something to him. He couldn't see it there, got up and went around the curtain to the lobby.

Damn!

I took the risk of being seen and lifted the heavy drapes behind my head. The two of them were standing there, Churis with his forefinger at a still, awkward angle as he held the note, the other guy facing him as though he was always saying

"Oh!" His mouth was round, all right. There was the puckered scar tissue from a burn all around it and when he wasn't speaking he held it in that peculiar way that made him look as if he had a hole in his face.

When Churis finished the note he took a quick look around, struck a match and let the paper flare up until it reached his fingers, then dropped the pieces in a standing ash tray filled with sand, stirring up the charred bits into powder. He nodded for the other one to follow him and went out the front door.

I gave them ten seconds, no more. When I spotted them they were on the corner looking for a cab. I saw one coming, going the other way, crossed the street and flagged it down.

When I got in I pointed to the pair still on the corner and told the driver, "Go up a block and swing around. When those guys grab a taxi, follow it."

The driver looked at my face and gave me a grin. "Police business?"

"Damn right," I said.

"Think it'll be a chase?"

"No."

"Look, if those are the punks who have been pulling a stick-up on the cabbies I can have them locked in tight in five seconds."

"Never mind, I'll take care of it."

"Sure, officer. You want help you can use my radio. We're the only outfit that's got 'em," he said proudly.

"Just follow them."

He went ahead, made the turn and headed back as Churis and the other one were climbing in a cab. They headed downtown toward the Village with us a half-block behind, well screened by the traffic. The street they turned in was one of the ones due for demolition, a remnant of the original section, now a flat-faced mass of crumbling brownstone and wood of odd shapes and sizes.

Some of the top floors facing north had skylights built into them for the benefit of the artist bunch that seemed to find this place so fascinating and the air was filled with the smells of cooking kept down by the mantle of misty air that lay like a blanket over the city. Each streetlight was a yellow glow encased in haze, throwing no light at all. A yellow-haired guy with a sweater over his shoulders like a cape strutted by walking a collie, but, outside him, the street was deserted.

I got out on the corner, paid off the cab after spotting the building they went into and stood across the street waiting to see if any lights flashed on in the building. None did, so the chances were their apartment faced the back.

There were three floors in the building, the cellar being closed with a padlock on the outside.

Two minutes went by.

I crossed over and went inside.

Kids were bawling on the first floor so that wouldn't be it. On the second floor the strong odor of garlic-charged spaghetti sauce seeped out under the door from the front apartment and the sounds of some kind of soiree from the back one.

That left one possible. The top rear apartment.

The lower stairs had creaked and groaned all the way up and I didn't want to announce myself to a funeral. I went back down, into the next building and ran up to the top floor. Somebody peered out the door on the second landing when they heard my feet, but went back inside after I passed him. When I reached the door that led to the roof I squeezed the handle, fought it until the latch gave and swung the door outward on rusty hinges.

At the rampart between the two buildings I swung my legs over, grabbed the tiles and let myself down as far as I could go and dropped the remaining two feet to the next level. I hit easily, but stood there anyway in case they heard the thump, the rod in my hand pointed at the kiosk door on the roof. They'd be dead if they came at me through there, not knowing where I stood.

Nothing happened so I started across the roof, trying to keep the gravel from crunching under my feet. I was almost at the door when I saw the pinpoint of light in the roof and made out a V-shaped skylight that had been painted black on the inside. I eased over, knelt down beside it and put my eye close to the one spot that a brush had missed.

They were there all right, talking rapidly in Russian, Vidor Churis pacing the floor like a caged animal. He reached in his pocket, pulled out a flat automatic, checked it absently and put it back, only to glance at his watch. I looked at my own. It was almost eight-thirty.

A quiet Sunday night.

Right on the half-hour he picked up the phone and when he did I plastered my ear to the window to see if I could catch the clicks of the dial and read off the number he was calling. I couldn't get it all, but I got part of the conversation. It was in English, this time, garbled, but one word came out loud and clear.

Selwick.

He said something else I didn't get then I heard him hang up and went back to peering through the peephole. Once again the conversation switched languages and Churis was giving the other one instructions. He was reaching for his coat and the other was nodding until Churis was done talking, then he walked over to a chair, switched on the TV and Churis left.

I didn't bother about noise now. I ran to the door, grabbed the knob and the damn thing came off in my hand! I had to check myself to take it easy and fit it back on the square shaft that protruded through the door. When I did I had to stick the .45 back in the holster to use both hands to turn it. Long ago the door had warped and only opened a foot, but it could have been wide open without doing me any good. From the sill to the landing the stairs were piled high with boxes and the remains of broken baby carriages and there was no way of getting through the mess at all.

Downstairs an outside door slammed shut and I knew Vidor Churis was gone on an assignment. But the other one would know whom he called. I got back to the skylight, saw the guy still in front of the TV with the sound up loud, felt for the metal edge of the glass and hoped it wasn't locked.

This time I was lucky. It lifted. I set it in place, got a length of broom handle from the junk in the doorway and held it ready. I lifted the skylight, propped it and was through it before the guy in the chair heard me. He came up with a startled yell, stood there immobile as I hit the floor and fell, then made a dash for a table across the room and I knew he was going for a gun. He had it in his hand as I got the .45 out and when he spun around I shot him right through the middle and he folded over backward knocking the table and lamp sidewise in a heap.

Even then he tried to lift the gun, but couldn't do it. He was dying with his intestines all churned to pieces and hanging out his back and he was still trying to kill me. I knelt down beside him and smelled the fetid odor of his breath mixing with the blood that was spilling onto the floor.

"Churis," I said. "Where did he go?"

All he did was hate me with his eyes, his mouth in that startled "O" shape, but white now and twisting with pain.

I put the .45 next to the other hole in his belly. "You won't die any quicker," I said, "But you'll hurt more."

He knew I would do it. He could read my eyes the way I could his and all the fear in his mind overflowed into one garbled, unfinished sentence.

“Selwick ... the girl...”

Then he died.

And I knew whom he had called.

Rondine. Edith Caine. If they couldn't play with Selwick any more they'd make sure he died before he figured out that he had been made a sucker.

I stood there in the middle of the room trying to sort out the possibles, my ears listening hard for the first sound of a siren. From downstairs came a burst of roaring laughter and everybody joining into a raucous party song. Here in the room the TV was going above normal. I let a couple of minutes pass and then I got it. The .45 made a big bang, but for once nobody heard it. Noise was the commonplace here and the other racket drowned it out.

The possibility then. On schedule, Churis called Rondine and was told Selwick could be induced to go to her place and Churis could take him there. How would they do it? Alexis had enough toxic goodies in his apartment to knock off a hundred people, but would have to be better than that.

No, Rondine knew the ropes. She'd be subtle about it. Some of the other things were lining up now. Like the sodium pentothal, truth serum. How easy it could be if Selwick did have to take an occasional needle for his illness. She could switch contents, put Selwick out and question him until she had the answers.

That was Rondine, all right.

Okay, cutie, here I come.

I went to the door, not the usual door, but a steel, fireproof affair double-locked with heavy Yales and a barrel bolt. Vidor Churis wasn't taking any chances on somebody busting in on him. He should have thought of doing more to the skylight than painting it black.

I eased out and let the door close behind me. The cops would have a fine time breaking in to see what the stench was that was coming from behind it.

I called Burton Selwick's apartment from a drugstore and got the clipped voice of a servant on the other end. He said no, he was sorry, but Mr. Selwick had left a short time before. I identified myself as Dr. Lane attached to the American Embassy, saying that I had treated Mr. Selwick when he had his last attack and idly wondered if my British colleague had called earlier. He had wanted to check Mr. Selwick before he attended Monday's session. Both

embassies were naturally concerned.

The servant said yes, Mr. Selwick left in response to a phone call from a woman without saying where he was going. Almost as a second thought I inquired if his employer had been taking the dosage by hypodermic as was prescribed. The man on the other end was quite certain since he had seen marks on his arms at various times.

When I put the phone back the picture was clear and bright. They had been getting Selwick under a needle and extracting the information from him. Now he'd be ready for another dosage and the next day's plans would be right out in the open.

Then exit Selwick in a convenient "accident."

I got a cab and reached Edith Caine's apartment at nine forty-five. The stake-outs had changed, but I spotted them and got inside and looked for the other. He hadn't changed. He was still watching the elevator cables from the floor below and I went past him on the stairway.

I leaned on the bell and waited, hearing her feet come across the floor. She opened the door, took a sudden sharp breath and bit her lower lip between her teeth. Her face was drawn with fear and something else, shadows underlining her eyes, her body tense. But even then she was beautiful, so damn beautiful that when I killed her I was going to be killing myself.

She had on a skirt and blouse, part of the suit combinations she had always liked so well, a wide leather belt at her waist. She always used to keep her rod there in a professional-type holster, but this time it was someplace else. *Too bad, honey.*

"It's here, Rondine. Time has run out," I said.

Rondine-Edith Caine held the door open so I could step inside. I did, but I pushed her ahead of me where I could see her. I'd never let her get behind me again. She looked at the gun in my hand, shook her head slowly and said nothing, simply walked straight into the living room and sat in the middle of the couch with her legs together and a sad expression on her face.

I checked each of the rooms quickly, never letting her out of my sight, then went back and sat across from her. "Tell me about it, Rondine."

"There's nothing to tell," she said simply.

"What happened to the real Edith Caine, honey? What did the dead Diana Caine do that you could hold it over the Caine family's heads? That's the

interesting part of the story. What's going to happen when it comes out?"

There were real tears in her eyes now and she was going to play the part right down to the end. I would have liked it better had she reverted to her true character, the one with the gun who could shoot a guy who loved her.

"Please stop it, Tiger."

"Why? I like to see you suffer. It's paying off for all those twenty years I had to."

"Tiger... what are you going to do?"

"Kill you."

She bit into her lip again. "Just... like that."

"No, I'll wait for the other to come. You aren't the only one."

The act again. The expression like she didn't understand and the quick lowering of her head so I wouldn't see what she was thinking. When she straightened up she wiped her eyes and said, "May I go to the bathroom? I look... terrible, I know."

Ah, vanity. Even in the face of death they had to look pretty. But if she was looking for razor blades she'd have to get them out of my pocket where I dropped them before. "Sure, go ahead," I said.

She got up, went to the bathroom, closed the door and I heard the sound of water running in the basin. I sat there thinking of how I was going to do it when I knew what was happening and raced to the door. She opened it before I could put my shoulder to it and I said, "Damn you, Rondine," because she had won again. I had forgotten that she had an extension telephone in there beside the tub.

"Nice. You got a call through. So now they won't be here. Churis will take him someplace else."

"Tiger ..." she said, a curious note in her voice.

"I could make you talk, Rondine, but there isn't any time. Your pain level is too high. You could hold out too long. I saw you do it when the *maquishad* you and I got you out. I could kill you here, but I might not make it out in time to get Selwick off the hook and that means our whole country would take a fall. So we'll go out of here together and when I shoot you I'll shoot Vidor Churis too, and tie it all up in a nice, neat package."

"Selwick?"

I gave her a shove toward the closet. "Don't play coy with me, baby. Your boys have him and I know where he'll be taken. We have the Embassy

and all their other buildings covered including most residences now. So he goes in one place where he'll be worked on ... Churis's apartment.

"You almost had it made, Rondine. You called Selwick to come here, had Churis ready to move in behind him and between the two of you it would have been done. But you managed to intercept Churis and I can see him going up to Selwick on the street downstairs with the story that you had to leave and would meet him someplace else and your killer friend, Vidor Churis, was instructed to lead him there. Like a sheep to the slaughter. Okay, kid, we'll meet him. I've already been at Vidor's apartment and left a dead man behind to watch the place. Get your damn coat on."

I called a cab and asked for one to stand by downstairs. Both the stake-outs had been walking and if it was timed right we could be in a cab and gone before they got to their car.

Once again I bypassed the guy on the floor below, took the elevator down the rest of the way and saw the cab pulling up outside. I pushed Rondine through the door, got us into the cab and told him to take off in a hurry and only gave him the address after we made the turn. Back down the block and too late, the stake-outs were trying to swing around in the street and were blocked by traffic.

There was no activity on Churis's block at all. Nobody had heard the shot and nobody investigated yet, otherwise a prowler car would still be on the scene and half the neighborhood trying for a look at the premises. I gave the cabbie ten bucks and told him to wait. He was glad to.

Keeping Rondine ahead of me, I nudged her up the stairs. Each time she tried to speak I shut her up curtly. She was terrified now. She saw death written all over my face and knew I was a part of it. She knew what I was going to do and she was tasting it already.

At the door I stopped. I had forgotten about the mammoth feature of the thing. Inside, the TV was going loud enough to make any sound I made impossible to hear, but if they were there already they'd keep it up. Churis would guess what had happened and would be ready for a break in the attempt.

But not the way I was going to do it.

I got out one of the pellets Ernie Bentley had given me, the one with the ring around it. I used wads of paper from the junk on the stairs, wedged the pellet between the knob and the door jamb, wetting it down with a half full

can of black paint, squeezing the mess until it had the consistency of mud and the capability of directing the charge where I wanted it to go.

Part of it I left exposed, took a cigarette from Rondine's bag while she stood there with amazement and terror a rigid mask on her face. I tore off a stub, lit it, set it on the exposed part of the pellet and moved her flat against the wall with me.

It was over in a minute, but when the thing went off, the concussion slammed against my eardrums like a sledge. The door flew inward, splinters flying everywhere, gray, choking smoke filling the hall. I grabbed her arm, spun her into the room first, shoved her aside and stood there with the .45 aimed at emptiness.

The dead guy was still saying "Oh," on the floor and downstairs doors were opening and voices yelling to ask what the hell was going on up there. I shouted back that it was all right... the oven blew but nobody was hurt and there was no damage. In a little while they'd be coming up to see for themselves.

And I was at the end of the road right then. The fox had been foxed. I lifted the gun and pointed it right at her head. She never moved. Too much had happened too fast and she seemed to be in a state of shock. Her eyes were on the body a long time and when they reached me they seemed lifeless.

You're getting old, Rondine, I thought. Plastic surgery can help the body, but the mind stays the same, getting older each day until you can't take it any more.

I couldn't do it alone now. I'd have to call in the others. I'd get wrung for it but it would be worth it. I went to the phone, the gun still on Rondine. I dialed Colonel Corbinet's number and held on until he answered. His voice said, "Hello ... hello?"

Very slowly I put the phone back without answering him. On a pad beside the phone was a sheet of doodle paper and on it was written an address, a familiar address.

Gretchen Lark's.

I grinned at the scratching Vidor Churis had made and knew what they had planned. Cute. Real cute. She was watching me now and some of the shock had left her eyes. I walked over, pointed out the door and when she left, stayed right behind her with the gun in her back. To a couple of nosy kids on the floor below I said my friend was upstairs taking care of the mess

and with the TV still on loud they nodded and went back to their party stinking of beer.

In the cab the driver said, “What was that racket back there?”

“Crazy Village party.”

“Always like that around here,” he said.

Yeah. On Sunday, too. What else can happen on a quiet Sunday?

She couldn't contain herself any longer. Her clenched fist went to her mouth and the tears came, coursing down her cheeks. Huge, gulping sobs wracked her body and with an impulsive move she slammed her hand against me and if I hadn't grabbed it in mid-air it would have been over there in a fat mushroom of flame.

I squeezed her wrist and said, “Don't be anxious to die ahead of time. I still have two more of those nice little charges and impact sets them off. They're right in my pocket, honey, and a small jar blows them.”

Instinctively, she pulled away, the fear back in her eyes. I told the cabbie to let us out on the next corner, paid him off while we were still two blocks away and held Rondine's arm while we walked. I wanted her in top shape when we got there.

And there would be time. They wouldn't kill Gretchen Lark or Selwick until she was there to give the order. It would have to be planned somehow, a love-nest suicide pact, and it would look logical as hell and only we would know the difference. There would be a ring of truth to it ... a lovely woman painter doing a portrait of a famous man for whom she worked, the two of them falling in love, realizing the futility of it all, him with a wife in England and an illness that could kill him at any time. So they take the big out together. Just a quick dosage of strychnine forced down their throats would do the trick. It was available and the thing suicides would use.

But first they'd wait for the master planner to show. Selwick would have to be forced to talk first. I explained it to her, letting Rondine see how much of it I had down pat, watched her go white as each sentence came out of me and saw her nearly get sick when I described how I had killed Alexis Minner and the two others. She stumbled and almost fell and I laughed and kept on with the story.

I said, “If I had killed you at first I could have stopped it cold right then, but I wanted to louse up your organization, Rondine. So far I did pretty well. You've gone all week trying to dump me because the critical time in the U.N.

comes this week and you couldn't have anybody standing in the way of all those grand Soviet sneak plans. Nobody. You could guard against the agency boys but not against me."

We were outside the building then. She looked at me and said one word, softly: "Fool."

I prodded her. "Inside. You know where she lives."

At the door I took the .45 out and whispered, "Knock."

With some hesitancy she tapped on the door. Inside there was a sudden movement, the sound of feet on the floor and Gretchen said in a voice that was tinged with fear, "Yes... who is it?"

Behind her Churis would be standing with a gun, making her speak. She had a right to be scared. I tapped Rondine with the nose of the gun and stepped out of the way.

Rondine said, "Edith... Edith Caine."

A chain rattled on the door and a lock clicked. The door opened and when Gretchen saw Edith her face changed, went from relief to fear again, then I shoved her into Gretchen so they both hit the floor in a jumble of arms and legs and there in a corner with a gun in his hand was Vidor Churis and the first shot he got off went across my side with a searing, white hot stab of pain.

He only got the first one. The .45 caught him right at the bridge of the nose and everything seemed to come apart from there on up. Skull, brains and blood sprayed the wall like a bright wet flower and he flung his hands out so violently with the death jerk the Tokarev flew halfway across the room.

I ran to the door, slammed it shut, jerked Rondine to her feet and threw her violently into a chair so she could look at the figure of Burton Selwick in the chair facing her, eyes closed in a peaceful sleep, one sleeve rolled up above the elbow and a tiny red dot in the vein showing where the needle had gone in. Behind me, still gasping from the fall, Gretchen was getting up, but I didn't take my eyes off Rondine.

"Want to question him, baby? Want to see what they laid out for tomorrow's session? Think it can do you any good now? Or aren't you curious any more? I'd think you'd want to know what he'd have to say just to satisfy yourself."

"Tiger..."

"Shut up, Rondine. It makes nice listening. You were the one putting the

squeeze on the old boy. We'll just back-check to be sure, but chances are you had him to your place many a time and needled him into a dream sleep supposedly to relax him and made him talk under the drug. Nice, baby, but not nice enough. You were the one who laid out the play to have me dumped. You were the one who knew where I'd be and how I'd move. You were trapped from the first second I saw you there in the restaurant and had to move from any angle at all to get rid of me without exposing yourself. The only thing I can't understand is why you moved so badly. You used to be a great operator. You could nearly outthink anybody. You could work in ways a person wouldn't dream of. You could scheme and plan and come up with a dilly in seconds... none of this crude stuff like contract killers. You would have known I could outthink you and be ready for something like sending a squad to nail me in bed. Why so stupid, Rondine?"

There was no fear at all in her eyes now. Instead, there was just the quiet acquiescence, resignation and deep, deep pity.

"I'm not Rondine," she said.

And I knew she was telling the truth!

There by the easel with the stems of her paintbrushes sticking out of the neck was a peculiarly colored pale blue bottle half filled with solvent and it was exactly the same as those filled with sodium pentothal that I had found in Alex Minner's cabinet !

From behind me Gretchen Lark said, "You really aren't very smart, Tiger. Throw your gun on the chair."

I didn't have to turn around to be sure. I knew she had me lined up. I eased the hammer down on the .45 and did what she told me to. The move made the bullet crease on my side blaze into life again and I clamped my teeth together. The belt on my raincoat was too tight and I began to feel sick.

Gretchen Lark walked around the side of me, pointed the gun at a chair near the wall and said, "Sit down."

Sweat was running into my eyes and dripping from my nose. I nodded, undid the belt of the coat, took it off and threw it next to Edith Caine. Then I sat down. I knew what she was waiting for. She had to make this look right and she was going to set it up. It wouldn't be too hard. I had enough kills behind me to make me look like a madman. The story would be easy. Selwick had come for a portrait sitting when Churis came in to drop him. I had charged in and during the resulting gunfight everybody but Gretchen got

knocked off. She could even inflict a minor wound on herself to make it look good and the story would be believed.

The thought was there in her mind because she picked up Vidor Churis's gun and weighed it in her hand. Smilingly, Gretchen said, "The house is empty at this moment. If you're hoping someone heard the shots you'll be wrong, Tiger."

I looked at Edith Caine sitting there so quietly. "I've been wrong about a lot of things."

"Yes, you have," Gretchen told me. "But you did spoil a wonderful situation."

"Great."

"Don't you know how I was able to move against you, Tiger?"

I did now, but I let her say it.

"Burton was a lonely man. He was sick and overworked as well. His only real pleasure and chance to relax was when he came here to sit for his portrait. There were many things he took for his illness, but being a nurse I was able to prescribe other things too. They relieved his pain, of course, but with the use of simple truth serums, sodium pentothal, I extracted every secret he had and he never realized it. That's how I knew about you. He told me of meeting you the first day he saw you. He was sick then and came here to relax. When he mentioned the name Rondine which you called Edith here we realized what might happen. You see, Rondine isn't exactly unknown to us either.

"Then, it was Edith who told Burton Selwick that she was to meet you at your hotel and later he told me under deep sleep and we tried to kill you there. You handled yourself well, Tiger.

"Unfortunately, your friend had to die for you. I visited Edith at her apartment and saw the matches you left behind. That was very clumsy of you... or was it deliberate?" She thought a moment and nodded. "Yes, that is it. You did it deliberately thinking what you did about her. Or was it unconsciously, Tiger?"

She was right the last time.

"It was I who arranged for those so-called 'contract killers.' They weren't very good at all and after all the money we spent! I knew you'd go to her apartment that one night and had those men ready. I thought I had them ready again when you took me home from the *Hall of the Two Sisters*."

Gretchen smiled again, and dramatically paced the room, the gun never leaving my stomach where it was aimed. In her pacing she stopped by the window, perched on the sill and changed guns in her hands so she had Churis's pointed at me with her right.

"Funny," she said, "all those elaborate plans that never seemed to work out and at the last moment you walk in all by yourself with an idiotic idea and turn your back on me. How strange fate is."

"Where is Rondine, Gretchen?" I said.

"Dead. A long time ago. She was shot by one of our agents when she tried to get some papers back to England that would possibly grant her some protection for her past crimes."

No, she wasn't dead. She was very much alive, sitting ten feet away facing me and I loved her with all my heart and knew she loved me. I said, "Who was Rondine, Edith?" because I had to know.

Her eyes were directly on mine, loving, forgiving, sorry that it had to come out this way. "Rondine was my oldest sister Diana. She didn't die in an air raid. She defected to the Nazis and worked for them against her own people. She was considered dead by the family and her name is never mentioned. She was the one shame they ever had."

She smiled, her eyes wet. "They tell me I look exactly like her, Tiger. I know what it must have meant to you to see me so suddenly. But I couldn't tell you, do you understand?" Her voice was soft, compassionate.

I still couldn't believe it. *That was Rondine sitting there!*

"Tiger... I couldn't expose what Rondine did to my family. I couldn't hurt them that much. I just had to put up with it."

"And I lost a good friend because you didn't have the nerve to talk." I couldn't keep the coldness out of my tone.

She dropped her eyes momentarily. "I—I'm sorry."

There was an amused smile on Gretchen's face as she listened to us, the gun never wavering in her hand. She had the back of Edith's head and my stomach in perfect target and she could afford the amusement. *But I couldn't look at Edith Caine in that chair and believe what she was telling me!*

There was one thing I saw. Edith was looking at Gretchen's reflection in the glass of a framed picture on the wall and one hand was already in the pocket of my coat. When it came out she had one of the pellets in her fingers and was getting it set on her knuckle and I felt a chill go over me that took all

the fire out of my side and made me want to turn inside out.

I tried to yell for her not to do it but by then it was already done. She flipped the pellet back over her head toward Gretchen Lark's feet and she never noticed it coming. The moment I let myself go to the floor, Edith did too and if Gretchen got off a shot it was drowned out in the wild blast from across the room. The violence of the explosion threw furniture all over and tumbled the chair over Edith into me and knocked the unconscious figure of Burton Selwick into a stack of paintings, completely oblivious to whatever happened.

I shoved the chair away, got up and reached for Edith. There were smudges on her face and a trickle of blood coming down her cheek, but no more. She touched my face once, ran to Selwick to make sure he was all right, then we both turned to look at the hole where the window had been.

Someplace down below Gretchen Lark would be lying in fragments.

She turned, looked at me, knowing I hadn't taken my eyes off her for a long while, frowned at what she saw there and tried to speak. I beat her to it. "It could have been a beautiful plant, kid. Gretchen wasn't going to knock you off because you two pulled it together. She sat there with a gun on us and could have killed us any time, the sooner the better. She was just letting you have your fun until you gave the signal. But you protected your own hide again, just like that last time. To come out clean with me you saw an angle and played it. You knew I had those damn things in my coat and took the big chance, just the way Rondine always did. If it went right you knew you could get me to fall for that phony story because I love you and would be sucker enough to let it lie."

I had the .45 back in my hand again and the hammer was back.

She saw it.

But she wasn't afraid.

She said, "Do you really love me, Tiger?"

"Yes, I really do, Rondine, and now you get it."

"I love you, Tiger. As I told you before, I loved you from the first time I saw you. Did Rondine love you that way too?"

"Yes, Rondine, that's the way you always did." I lifted the snout of the gun.

"You made love to her many times, didn't you?"

Her hands went to her jacket, took it off and threw it on the floor. Slowly,

she undid her blouse, pulled it out of her skirt and let it follow. In that strange way women have, she reached behind her back and unfastened the snaps on her bra and took it away deliberately, her breasts full and lovely, bursting with pride at having been relieved of their restraint.

I felt the gun in my hand shake and held it steady.

“No good, Rondine, the act won’t work. You tried the same one before.”

My words didn’t stop her. Her fingers felt for the zipper on the side of the skirt, found it and pulled it down. She moved her hips, swayed and the skirt fell in a heap at her feet and with her thumbs she pushed down the slip on top of it.

Damn, my hand was no good, no good at all! The palm was slippery with sweat and muscles jerked and pulled up my back. My eyes seemed to burn and something was churning inside my mind. I felt an involuntary message of habit from my brain trying to tell my fingers to move, to pull the trigger, to kill her, kill her, kill her before it was too late, but my finger wouldn’t move.

The last act of the tableau was complete because she had the wisp of pink nylon in her hand and she was naked before me, beautiful, lovely, desirable, legs as graceful and firm as a statue, belly flat and moving with the swell of her breathing, breasts hard and flamingly pink-tipped now, chestnut hair still soft and gleaming, skin satin-sweet and waiting.

The gun began to get too heavy to hold and I let it down. She was going to win after all. Two dead and one unconscious at our feet and she could still do this.

She said, “If you had Rondine then you’ll know now for sure, Tiger.”

I couldn’t stop her when she walked to the couch. As languidly as a cat she lay down on it, her body and her eyes inviting me, wanting me. No, it was more than that. She was demanding me.

I had to. I was beyond choice. I loved her too much and too long. This was a Rondine I loved and had to have and to hell with the consequences.

She reached her arms up to me and smiled, the love in her eyes bright and shining. “Now you will find out, Tiger, my love. Now you will know,” she said to me. “You see... I’m still a virgin.”

And she was.