

CHAPTER 2

But Roxy had missed her profession. Hollywood should have had her. Maybe she didn't remember Atlantic City or that New Year's Eve party in Charlie Drew's apartment. If she did she held a dandy deadpan and all I got in return for my stare was one of those go ahead, peek, but don't touch looks.

A peek was all I got, because Billy came around with a groan and made an effort to sit up. York put his hand against his chest and forced him down again. "You'll have to be quiet," he cautioned him in a professional tone.

"My face," his eyes rolled in his head, "jeez, what happened to my face?"

I knelt beside him and turned over the cold compress on his forehead. His eyes gleamed when he recognized me. "Hello, Mike. What happened?"

"Hi, Billy. They beat up on you. Feel any better?"

"I feel awful. Oh, that bastard. If only I was bigger, Mike . . . damn, why couldn't I be big like you? That dirty . . ."

"Forget about him, kid." I patted his shoulder. "I handed him a little of the same dish. His map'll never be the same."

"Cripes! I bet you did! I thought something funny happened down there. Thanks, Mike, thanks a lot."

"Sure."

Then his face froze in a frightened grimace. "Suppose . . . suppose they come back again? Mike . . . I—I can't stand that stuff. I'll talk, I'll say anything. I can't take it, Mike!"

"Ease off. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be around."

Billy tried to smile and he gripped my arm. "You will?"

"Yup. I'm working for your boss now."

"Mr. Hammer." York was making motions from the side of the room. I walked over to him. "It would be better if he didn't get too excited. I gave him a sedative and he should sleep. Do you think you can manage to carry him to his room? Miss Malcom will show you the way."

"Certainly," I nodded. "And if you don't mind, I'd like to do a little prowling afterward. Maybe question the servants."

"Of course. The house is at your disposal."

Billy's eyes had closed and his head had fallen on his chin when I picked him up. He'd had a rough time of it all right. Without a word Miss Malcom indicated that I was to follow her and led me through an arch at the end of the room. After passing through a library, a study and a trophy room that looked like something out of a museum, we wound up in a kitchen. Billy's room was off an alcove behind the pantry. As gently as I could I laid him under the covers. He was sound asleep.

Then I stood up. "Okay, Roxy, now we can say hello."

"Hello, Mike."

"Now why the disguise and the new handle? Hiding out?"

"Not at all. The handle as you call it is my real name. Roxy was something I used on the stage."

"Really? Don't tell me you gave up the stage to be a diaper changer. What are you doing here?"

"I don't like your tone, Mike. You change it or go to hell."

This was something. The Roxy I knew never had enough self-respect to throw her pride in my face. Might as well play it her way.

"Okay, baby, don't get teed off on me. I have a right to be just a little bit curious, haven't I? It isn't very often that you catch somebody jumping as far out of character as you have. Does the old man know about the old life?"

"Don't be silly. He'd can me if he did."

"I guessed as much. How did you tie up in this place?"

"Easy. When I finally got wise to the fact that I was getting my brains knocked out in the big city I went to an agency and signed up as a registered nurse. I was one before I got talked into tossing my torso around for two hundred a week. Three days later Mr. York accepted me to take care of his child. That was two years ago. Anything else you want to know?"

I grinned at her. "Nope. It was just funny meeting you, that's all."

"Then may I leave?"

I let my grin fade and eased her out through the door. "Look, Roxy, is there somewhere we can go talk?"

"I don't play those games anymore, Mike."

"Get off my back, will you? I mean talk."

She arched her eyebrows and watched me steadily a second, then seeing that I meant it, said, "My room. We can be alone there. But only talk, remember?"

"Roger, bunny, let's go."

This time we went into the outer foyer and up a stairway that seemed to have been carved out of a solid piece of mahogany. We turned left on the landing and Roxy opened the door for me.

"In here," she said.

While I picked out a comfortable chair she turned on a table lamp then offered me a smoke from a gold box. I took one and lit it. "Nice place you got here."

"Thank you. It's quite comfortable. Mr. York sees that I have every convenience. Now shall we talk?"

She was making sure I got the point in a hurry. "The kid. What is he like?"

Roxy smiled a little bit, and the last traces of hardness left her face. She looked almost maternal. "He's wonderful. A charming boy."

"You seem to like him."

"I do. You'd like him too." She paused, then, "Mike . . . do you really think he was kidnapped?"

"I don't know, that's why I want to talk about him. Downstairs I suggested that he might have become temporarily unbalanced and the old man nearly chewed my head off. Hell, it isn't unreasonable to figure that. He's supposed to be a genius and that automatically puts him out of the normal class. What do you think?"

She tossed her hair back and rubbed her forehead with one hand. "I can't understand it. His room is next door, and I heard nothing although I'm usually a light sleeper. Ruston was perfectly all right up to then. He wouldn't simply walk out."

"No? And why not?"

"Because he is an intelligent boy. He likes everyone, is satisfied with his environment and has been very happy all the time I've known him."

"Uh-huh. What about his training? How did he get to be a genius?"

"That you'll have to find out from Mr. York. Both he and Miss Grange take care of that department."

I squashed the butt into the ashtray. "Nuts, it doesn't seem likely that a genius can be made. They have to be born. You've been around him a lot. Tell me, just how much of a genius is he? I know only what the papers print."

"Then you know all I know. It isn't what he knows that makes him a genius, it's what he is capable of learning. In one week he mastered every phase of the violin. The next week it was the piano. Oh, I realize that it seems impossible, but it's quite true. Even the music critics accept him as a master of several instruments. It doesn't stop there, either. Once he showed an interest in astronomy. A few days later he exhausted every book on the subject. His father and I took him to the observatory where he proceeded to amaze the experts with his uncanny knowledge. He's a mathematical wizard besides. It doesn't take him a second to give you the cube root of a six-figure number to three decimal points. What more can I say? There is no field that he doesn't excel in. He grasps fundamentals at the snap of the fingers and learns in five minutes what would take you or me years of study. That, Mike, is the genius in a nutshell, but that's omitting the true boy part of him. In all respects he is exactly like other boys."

"The old man said that too."

"He's quite right. Ruston loves games, toys and books. He has a pony, a bicycle, skates and a sled. We go for long walks around the estate every once in a while and do nothing but talk. If he wanted to he could expound on nuclear physics in ten-syllable words, but that isn't his nature. He'd sooner talk football."

I picked another cigarette out of the box and flicked a match with my thumbnail. "That about covers it, I guess. Maybe he didn't go off his nut at that. Let's take a look at his room."

Roxy nodded and stood up. She walked to the end of the room and opened a door. "This is it." When she clicked on the light switch I walked in. I don't know what I expected, but this wasn't it. There were pennants on the walls and pictures tucked into the corners of the dresser mirror. Clothes were

scattered in typical boyish confusion over the backs of chairs and the desk.

In one corner was the bed. The covers had been thrown to the foot and the pillow still bore the head print of its occupant. If the kid had really been snatched I felt for him. It was no night to be out in your pajamas, especially when you left the top of them hanging on the bedpost.

I tried the window. It gave easily enough, though it was evident from the dust on the outside of the sill that it hadn't been opened recently.

"Keep the kid's door locked at night?" I asked Roxy.

She shook her head. "No. There's no reason to."

"Notice any tracks around here, outside the door or window?"

Another negative. "If there were any," she added, "they would have been wiped out in the excitement."

I dragged slowly on the cigarette, letting all the facts sink in. It seemed simple enough, but was it? "Who are all the twerps downstairs, bunny?"

"Relatives, mostly."

"Know 'em?"

Roxy nodded. "Mr. York's sister and her husband, their son and daughter, and a cousin are his only blood relations. The rest are his wife's folks. They've been hanging around here as long as I've been here, just waiting for something to happen to York."

"Does he know it?"

"I imagine so, but he doesn't seem bothered by them. They try to outdo each other to get in the old boy's favor. I suppose there's a will involved. There usually is."

"Yeah, but they're going to have a long wait. York told me his health was perfect."

Roxy looked at me curiously, then dropped her eyes. She fidgeted with her fingernails a moment and I let her stew a bit before I spoke.

"Say it, kid."

"Say what?"

"What you have on your mind and almost said."

She bit her lip, hesitating, then, "This is between you and me, Mike. If Mr. York knew I told you this I'd be out of a job. You won't mention it, will you?"

"I promise."

"About the second week I was here I happened to overhear Mr. York and his doctor after an examination. Apparently Mr. York knew what had happened, but called in another doctor to verify it. For some time he had been working with special apparatus in his laboratory and in some way became overexposed to radiation. It was enough to cause some internal complications and shorten his life span. Of course, he isn't in any immediate danger of dying, but you never can tell. He wasn't burned seriously, yet considering his age, and the fact that his injury has had a chance to work on him for two years, there's a possibility that any emotional or physical excitement could be fatal."

"Now isn't that nice," I said. "Do you get what that means, Roxy?" She shook her head. "It might mean that somebody else knows that too and tried to stir the old boy up by kidnapping the one closest to him in the hope that he kicks off during the fun. Great . . . that's a nice subtle sort of murder."

"But that's throwing it right on the doorstep of the beneficiary of his estate."

"Is it? I bet even a minor beneficiary would get enough of the long green to make murder worthwhile. York has plenty."

"There are other angles too, Mike."

"Been giving it some thought, haven't you?" I grinned at her. "For instance, one of the family might locate the kid and thus become number-one boy to the old man. Or perhaps the kid was the chief beneficiary and one of them wanted to eliminate him to push himself further up the list. Yeah, kid, there's a lot of angles, and I don't like any of 'em."

"It still might be a plain kidnapping."

"Roger. That it might. It's just that there're a lot more possibilities to it that could make it interesting. We'll know soon enough." I opened the door and hesitated, looking over my shoulder. "Night, Roxy."

"Good night."

York was back by the fireplace again, still brooding. I would have felt better if he had been pacing the floor. I walked over and threw myself in a big chair. "Where'll I spend the night?" I asked him.

He turned very slowly. "The guest room. I'll ring for Harvey."

"Never mind. I'll get him myself when I'm ready."

We sat in silence a few minutes then York began a nervous tapping of his fingers. Finally, "When do you think we'll have word?"

"Two, three days maybe. Never can tell."

"But he's been gone a day already."

"Tomorrow, then. I don't know."

"Perhaps I should call the police again."

"Go ahead, but you'll probably be burying the boy after they find him. Those punks aren't cops, they're political appointees. You ought to know these small towns. They couldn't find their way out of a paper bag."

For the first time he showed a little parental anxiety. His fist came down on the arm of the chair. "Damn it, man, I can't simply sit here! What do you think it's like for me? Waiting. Waiting. He may be dead now for all we know."

"Perhaps, but I don't think so. Kidnapping's one thing, murder's another. How about introducing me to those people?"

He nodded. "Very well." Every eye in the room was on me as we made the rounds. I didn't suppose there would be anyone too anxious to meet me after the demonstration a little while ago.

The two gladiators were first. They were sitting on the love seat trying not to look shaky. Both of them still had red welts across their cheeks. The introduction was simple enough. York merely pointed in obvious disdain. "My nephews, Arthur and William Graham."

We moved on. "My niece, Alice Nichols." A pair of deep brown eyes kissed mine so hard I nearly lost my balance. She swept them up and down the full length of me. It couldn't have been any better if she did it with a wet paintbrush. She was tall and she had seen thirty, but she saw it with a face and body that were as fresh as a new daisy. Her clothes made no attempt at concealment; they barely covered. On some people skin is skin, but on her it was an invitation to dine. She told me things with a smile that most girls since Eve have been trying to put into words without being obvious or seeming too eager and I gave her my answer the same way. I can run the ball a little myself.

York's sister and her husband were next. She was a middle-aged woman with "Matron" written all over her. The type that wants to entertain visiting dignitaries and look down at "peepul" through a lorgnette. Her husband was the type you'd find paired off with such a specimen. He was short and bulgy in the middle. His single-breasted gray suit didn't quite manage to cross the equator without putting a strain on the button. He might have had hair, but you'd never know it now. One point of his collar had jumped the tab and stuck out like an accusing finger.

York said, "My sister, Martha Ghent, her husband, Richard." Richard went to stick out his hand but the old biddie shot him a hasty frown and he drew back, then she tried to freeze me out. Failing in this she turned to York. "Really, Rudolph, I hardly think we should meet this . . . this person."

York turned an appealing look my way, in apology. "I'm sorry, Martha, but Mr. Hammer considers it necessary."

"Nevertheless, I don't see why the police can't handle this."

I sneered at her in my finest manner. "I can't see why you don't keep your mouth shut, Mrs. Ghent."

The way her husband tried to keep the smile back, I thought he'd split a gut. Martha stammered, turned blue and stalked off. York looked at me critically, though approvingly.

A young kid in his early twenties came walking up as though the carpet was made of eggs. He had Ghent in his features, but strictly on his mother's side. A pipe stuck out of his pocket and he sported a set of thick-lensed glasses. The girl at his side didn't resemble anyone, but seeing the way she put her arm around Richard I took it that she was the daughter.

She was. Her name was Rhoda, she was friendly and smiled. The boy was Richard, Junior. He raised his eyebrows until they drew his eyes over the rims of his glasses and peered at me disapprovingly. He perched his hands on his hips and "Humphed" at me. One push and he would be over the line that divides a man and a pansy.

The introductions over, I cornered York out of earshot of the others. "Under the circumstances, it might be best if you kept this gang here until things settle down a bit. Think you can put them up?"

"I imagine so. I've been doing it at one time or another for the last ten years. I'll see Harvey and have the rooms made up."

"When you get them placed, have Harvey bring me a diagram showing where their rooms are. And tell him to keep it under his hat. I want to be able to reach anyone anytime. Now, is there anyone closely connected with the household we've missed?"

He thought a moment. "Oh, Miss Grange. She went home this afternoon."

"Where was she during the kidnapping?"

"Why . . . at home, I suppose. She leaves here between five and six every evening. She is a very reserved woman. Apparently has very little social activity. Generally she furthers her studies in the library rather than go out anywhere."

"Okay, I'll get to her. How about the others? Have they alibis?"

"Alibis?"

"Just checking, York. Do you know where they were the night before last?"

"Well . . . I can't speak for all of them, but Arthur and William were here. Alice Nichols came in about nine o'clock then left about an hour later."

This part I jotted down on a pad. "How did you collect the family . . . or did they all just drift in?"

"No, I called them. They helped me search, although it did no good. Mr. Hammer, what are we going to do? Please . . ."

Very slowly, York was starting to go to pieces. He'd stood up under this too calmly too long. His face was pale and withered-looking, drawn into a mask of tragedy.

"First of all, you're going to bed. It won't do any good for you to be knocking yourself out. That's what I'm here for." I reached over his shoulder and pulled a velvet cord. The flunky came in immediately and hurried over to us. "Take him upstairs," I said.

York gave the butler instructions about putting the family up and Harvey seemed a little surprised and pleased that he'd be allowed in on the conspiracy of the room diagram.

I walked to the middle of the floor and let the funeral buzz down before speaking. I wasn't nice about it. "You're all staying here tonight. If it interferes with other plans you've made it's too bad. Anyone that tries to duck out will answer to me. Harvey will give you your rooms and be sure you stay in them. That's all."

Lady sex appeal waited until I finished then edged up to me with a grin. "See if you can grab the end bedroom in the north wing," she said, "and I'll get the one connected to it."

I said in mock surprise, "Alice, you can get hurt doing things like that."

She laughed. "Oh, I bruise easily, but I heal fast as hell."

Swell girl. I hadn't been seduced in a long time.

I wormed out through a cross fire of nasty looks to the foyer and winked at Richard Ghent on the way. He winked back; his wife wasn't looking.

I slung on my coat and hat and went out to the car. When I rolled it through the gate I turned toward town and stepped on the gas. When I picked up to seventy I held it there until I hit the main drag. Just before the city line I pulled up to a gas station and swung in front of a pump. An attendant in his early twenties came out of the miniature Swiss Alpine cottage that served as a service station and automatically began unscrewing the gas cap. "Put in five," I told him.

He snaked out the hose and shoved the nose in the tank, watching the gauge. "Open all night?" I quizzed.

"Yeah."

"On duty yourself?"

"Yup. 'Cept on Sundays."

"Don't suppose you get much to do at night around here."

"Not very much."

This guy was as talkative as a pea pod. "Say, was much traffic along here night before last?"

He shut off the pump, put the cap back on and looked at me coldly. "Mister, I don't know from nothing," he said.

It didn't take me long to catch on to that remark. I handed him a ten-spot and followed him inside while he changed it. I let go a flyer. "So the cops kind of hinted that somebody would be nosing around, huh?"

No answer. He rang the cash register and began counting out bills. "Er . . . did you happen to notice Dilwick's puss? Or was it one of the others?"

He glanced at me sharply, curiously. "It was Dilwick. I saw his face."

Instead of replying I held out my right hand. He peered at it and saw where the skin had been peeled back off half the knuckles. This time I got a great big grin.

"Did you do that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, pal, for that we're buddies. What do you want to know?"

"About traffic along here night before last."

"Sure, I remember it. Between nine o'clock and dawn the next morning about a dozen cars went past. See, I know most of 'em. A couple was from out of town. All but two belonged to the upcountry farmers making milk runs to the separator at the other end of town."

"What about the other two?"

"One was a Caddy. I seen it around a few times. Remember it because it had one side dented in. The other was that Grange dame's two-door sedan. Guess she was out wolfing." He laughed at that.

"Grange?"

"Yeah, the old bag that works out at York's place. She's a stiff one."

"Thanks for the info, kid." I slipped him a buck and he grinned. "By the way, did you pass that on to the cops too?"

"Not me. I wouldn't give them the right time."

"Why?"

"Lousy bunch of bastards." He explained it in a nutshell without going into detail.

I hopped in and started up, but before I drove off I stuck my head out the window. "Where's this Grange babe live?"

"At the Glenwood Apartments. You can't miss it. It's the only apartment house in this burg."

Well, it wouldn't hurt to drop up and see her anyway. Maybe she had been on her way home from work. I gunned the engine and got back on the main drag, driving slowly past the shaded fronts of the stores. Just outside the business section a large green canopy extended from the curb to the marquee of a modern three-story building. Across the side in small, neat letters was GLENWOOD APARTMENTS. I crawled in behind a black Ford sedan and hopped out.

Grange, Myra, was the second name down. I pushed the bell and waited for the buzzer to unlatch the door. When it didn't come I pushed it again. This time there was a series of clicks and I shoved the door open. One flight of stairs put me in front of her apartment. Before I could ring, the metal peephole was pulled back and a pair of dark eyes threw insults at me.

"Miss Grange?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to speak to you if you can spare a few moments."

"Very well, go ahead." Her voice sounded as if it came out of a tree trunk. This made the third person I didn't like in Sidon.

"I work for York," I explained patiently. "I'd like to speak to you about the boy."

"There's nothing I care to discuss."

Why is it that some dames can work me up into a lather so fast with so little is beyond me, but this one did. I quit playing around. I pulled out the .45 and let her get a good look at it. "You open that door or I'll shoot the lock off," I said.

She opened it. The insults in her eyes turned to terror until I put the rod back under cover. Then I looked at her. If she was an old bag I was Queen of the May. Almost as tall as I was, nice brown hair cut short enough to be nearly mannish and a figure that seemed to be well molded, except that I couldn't tell too well because she was wearing slacks and a house jacket. Maybe she was thirty, maybe forty. Her face had a built-in lack of expression like an old painting. Wearing no makeup didn't help it any, but it didn't hurt, either.

I tossed my hat on a side table and went inside without being invited. Myra Grange followed me closely, letting her wooden-soled sandals drag along the carpet. It was a nice dump, but small. There was something to it that didn't sit right, as though the choice of furniture didn't fit her personality. Hell, maybe she just sublet.

The living room was ultramodern. The chairs and the couch were surrealist dreams of squares and angles. Even the coffee table was balanced precariously on little pyramids that served as legs. Two framed wood nymphs seemed cold in their nudity against the background of the chilled blue walls. I wouldn't live in a room like this for anything.

Myra held her position in the middle of the floor, legs spread, hands shoved in her side pockets. I picked a leather-covered ottoman and sat down.

She watched every move I made with eyes that scarcely concealed her rage. "Now that you've forced your way in here," she said between tight lips,

perhaps you'll explain why, or do I call the police?"

"I don't think the police would bother me much, kiddo." I pulled my badge from my pocket and let her see it. "I'm a private dick myself."

"Go on." She was a cool tomato.

"My name is Hammer. Mike Hammer. York wants me to find the kid. What do you think happened?"

"I believe he was kidnapped, Mr. Hammer. Surely that is evident."

"Nothing's evident. You were seen on the road fairly late the night the boy disappeared. Why?"

Instead of answering me she said, "I didn't think the time of his disappearance was established."

"As far as I'm concerned it is. It happened that night. Where were you?"

She began to raise herself up and down on her toes like a British major. "I was right here. If anyone said he saw me that night he was mistaken."

"I don't think he was." I watched her intently. "He's got sharp eyes."

"He was mistaken," she repeated.

"All right, we'll let it drop there. What time did you leave York's house?"

"Six o'clock, as usual. I came straight home." She began to kick at the rug impatiently, then pulled a cigarette from a pocket and stuck it in her mouth.

Damn it, every time she moved she did something that was familiar to me but I couldn't place it. When she lit the cigarette she sat down on the couch and watched me some more.

"Let's quit the cat and mouse, Miss Grange. York said you were like a mother to the kid and I should suppose you'd like to see him safe. I'm only trying to do what I can to locate him."

"Then don't classify me as a suspect, Mr. Hammer."

"It's strictly temporary. You're a suspect until you alibi yourself satisfactorily then I won't have to waste my time and yours fooling around."

"Am I alibied?"

"Sure," I lied. "Now can you answer some questions civilly?"

"Ask them."

"Number one. Suspicious characters loitering about the house anytime preceding the disappearance."

She thought a moment, frowning her eyebrows. "None that I can recall. Then again, I am inside all day working in the lab. I wouldn't see anyone."

"York's enemies. Do you know them?"

"Rudolph . . . Mr. York has no enemies I know of. Certain persons working in the same field have expressed what you might call professional jealousy, but that is all."

"To what extent?"

She leaned back against the cushions and blew a smoke ring at the ceiling. "Oh, the usual bantering at the clubs. Making light of his work. You know."

I didn't know anything of the kind, but I nodded. "Anything serious?"

"Nothing that would incite a kidnapping. There were heated discussions, yes, but few and far between. Mr. York was loath to discuss his work. Besides, a scientist is not a person who would resort to violence."

"That's on the outside. Let's hear a little bit about his family. You've been connected with York long enough to pick up a little something on his relatives."

"I'd rather not discuss them, Mr. Hammer. They are none of my affair."

"Don't be cute. We're talking about a kidnapping."

"I still don't see where they could possibly enter into it."

"Damn it," I exploded, "you're not supposed to. I want information and everybody wants to play repartee. Before long I'm going to start choking it out of people like you."

"Please, Mr. Hammer, that isn't necessary."

"So I've been told. Then give."

"I've met the family very often. I know nothing about them although they all try to press me for details of our work. I've told them nothing. Needless to say, I like none of them. Perhaps that is a biased opinion but it is my only one."

"Do they feel the same toward you?"

"I imagine they are very jealous of anyone so closely connected with Mr. York as I am," she answered with a caustic grimace. "You might surmise that of any rich man's relatives. However, for your information and unknown to them, I enjoy a personal income outside the salary Mr. York pays me and I am quite unconcerned with the disposition of his fortune in the event that anything should happen to him. The only possession he has that I am interested in is the boy. I have been with him all his life, and as you say, he is like a son to me. Is there anything else?"

"Just what is York's work . . . and yours?"

"If he hasn't told you, I'm not at liberty to. Naturally, you realize that it centered around the child."

"Naturally." I stood up and looked at my watch. It was nine fifteen. "I think that covers it, Miss Grange. Sorry to set you on your ear to get in, but maybe I can make it up sometime. What do you do nights around here?"

Her eyebrows went up and she smiled for the first time. It was more of a stifled laugh than a smile and I had the silly feeling that the joke was on me. "Nothing you'd care to do with me," she said.

I got sore again and didn't know why. I fought a battle with the look, stuck my hat on and got out of there. Behind me I heard a muffled chuckle.

The first thing I did was make a quick trip back to the filling station. I waited until a car pulled out then drove up to the door. The kid recognized me and waved. "Any luck?" he grinned.

"Yeah, I saw her. Thought she was an old bag?"

"Well, she's a stuffy thing. Hardly ever speaks."

"Listen," I said, "are you sure you saw her the other night?"

"Natch, why?"

"She said no. Think hard now. Did you see her or the car?"

"Well, it was her car. I know that. She's the only one that ever drives it."

"How would you know it?"

"The aerial. It's got a bend in it so it can only be telescoped down halfway. Been like that ever since she got the heap."

"Then you can't be certain she was in it. You wouldn't swear to it?"

"Well . . . no. Guess not when you put it that way. But it was her car," he insisted.

"Thanks a lot." I shoved another buck at him. "Forget I was around, will you?"

"Never saw you in my life," he grinned. Nice kid.

This time I took off rather aimlessly. It was only to pacify York that I left the house in the first place. The rain had let up and I shut off the windshield wipers while I turned onto the highway and cruised north toward the estate. If the snatch ran true to form there would be a letter or a call sometime soon. All I could do would be to advise York to follow through to get the kid back again then go after the ones that had him.

If it weren't for York's damn craving for secrecy I could buzz the state police and have a seven-state alarm sent out, but that meant the house would crawl with cops. Let a spotter get a load of that and they'd dump the kid and that'd be the end of it until some campers came across his remains sometime. As long as the local police had a sizable reward to shoot for they wouldn't let it slip. Not after York told them not to.

I wasn't underestimating Dilwick any. I'd bet my bottom dollar he'd had York's lines tapped already, ready to go to town the moment a call came through. Unless I got that call at the same time I was liable to get scratched. Not me, brother. Ten G's was a lot of mazuma in any language.

The lights were still on en masse when I breezed by the estate. It was still too early to go back, and as long as I could keep the old boy happy by doing a little snooping I figured I was earning my keep, at least. About ten miles down the highway the town of Bayview squatted along the water's edge waiting for summer to liven things up.

A kidnap car could have gone in either direction, although this route was unlikely. Outside Bayview the highway petered off into a tar road that completely disappeared under drifting winter sands. Anything was worth trying, though. I dodged an old flivver that was standing in the middle of the road and swerved into the gravel parking place of a two-bit honky-tonk. The place was badly rundown at the heels and sadly in need of a paint job. A good deodorant would have helped, too. I no sooner got my foot on the rail when a frowsy blonde sidled up to me and I got a quick once-over. "You're new around here, ain't you?"

"Just passing through."

"Through to where? That road outside winds up in the drink."

"Maybe that's where I'm going."

"Aw now, Buster, that ain't no way to feel. We all got our troubles but you don't wanna get a drink, it'll make you feel better."

She whistled through her teeth and when that got no response, cupped her hands and yelled to the bartender who was busy shooting trap on the bar.

"Hey, Andy, get your tail over here and serve your customers."

Andy took his time. "What'll you have, pal?"

"Beer."

"Me too."

"You too nothing. Beat it, Janie, you had too much already."

"Say, see here, I can pay my own way."

"Not in my joint."

I grinned at the two of them and chimed in. "Give her a beer why don't you?"

"Listen, pal, you don't know her. She's half tanked already. One more and she'll be making like a Copa cutie. Not that I don't like the Copa, but the dames there are one thing and she's another, just like night and day. Instead of watching, my customers all get the dry heaves and trot down to Charlie's on the waterfront."

"Well, I like that!" Janie hit an indignant pose and waved her finger in Andy's face. "You give me my beer right now or I'll make better'n the Copa. I'll make like . . . like . . ."

"Okay, okay, Janie, one more and that's all."

The bartender drew two beers, took my dough instead of Janie's and rang it up. I put mine away in one gulp. Janie never reached completely around her glass. Before Andy could pick out the change Janie had spilled hers halfway down the bar.

Andy said something under his breath, took the glass away then fished around under the counter for a rag. He started to mop up the mess.

I watched. In my head the little bells were going off, slowly at first like chimes on a cold night. They got louder and louder, playing another scrambled, soundless symphony. A muscle in my neck twitched. I could almost feel that ten grand in my pocket already. Very deliberately I reached out across the bar and gathered a handful of Andy's stained apron in my fist. With my other hand I yanked out the .45 and held it an inch away from his eye. He was staring death in the face and knew it.

I had trouble keeping my voice down. "Where did you get that bar rag, Andy?"

His eyes shifted to the blue-striped pajama bottoms that he held in his hand, beer soaked now, but recognizable. The other half to them were in Ruston York's bedroom hanging on the foot of the bed.

Janie's mouth was open to scream. I pointed the gun at her and said, "Shut up." The scream died before it was born. She held the edge of the bar with both hands, shaking like a leaf. Ours was a play offstage; no one saw it, no one cared. "Where, Andy?"

". . . Don't know, mister. Honest . . ."

I thumbed the hammer back. He saw me do it. "Only one more chance, Andy. Think hard."

His breath came in little jerks, fright thickened his tongue. "Some . . . guy. He brought it in. Wanted to know . . . if they were mine. It . . . was supposed to be a joke. Honest, I just use it for a bar rag, that's all."

"When?"

". . . 's afternoon."

"Who, Andy?"

"Bill. Bill Cuddy. He's a clam digger. Lives in a shack on the bay."

I put the safety back on, but I still held his apron. "Andy," I told him, "if you're leveling with me it's okay, but if you're not, I'm going to shoot your head off. You know that, don't you?"

His eyes rolled in his head then came back to meet mine. "Yeah, mister. I know. I'm not kidding. Honest, I got two kids . . ."

"And Janie here. I think maybe you better keep her with you for a while. I wouldn't want anyone to hear about this, understand?"

Andy understood, all right. He didn't miss a word. I let him go and he had to hang on to his bar to keep from crumbling. I slid the rod back under my coat, wrung out the pajamas and folded them into a square.

When I straightened my hat and tie I said, "Where is Cuddy's place?"

Andy's voice was so weak I could hardly hear it. "Straight . . . down the road to the water. Turn left. It's the deck . . . deckhouse of an old boat pulled up on the . . . beach."

I left them standing there like Hansel and Gretel in the woods, scared right down to their toes. Poor Andy. He didn't have anymore to do with it than I did, but in this game it's best not to take any chances.

As Janie had said, the road led right to the drink. I parked the car beside a boarded-up house and waded through the wet sand on foot. Ten feet from the water I turned left and faced a line of broken-down shacks that were rudely constructed from the junk that comes in on the tide. Some of them had tin roofs, with the advertisements for soft drinks and hot dogs still showing through.

Every once in a while the moon would shine through a rift in the clouds, and I took advantage of it to get a better look at the homemade village.

Cuddy's place was easier to find than I expected. It was the only dump that ever had seen paint, and on the south side hung a ship's nameplate with CARMINE spelled out in large block letters. It was a deckhouse, all right, probably washed off during a storm. I edged up to a window and looked in. All I could see were a few vague outlines. I tried the door. It opened outward noiselessly. From one corner of the room came the raspy snore of a back-sleeper with a load under his belt.

A match lit the place up. Cuddy never moved, even when I put the match to the ship's lantern swinging from the center of the ceiling. It was a one-room affair with a few chairs, a table and a double-decker bed along the side. He had rigged up a kerosene stove with the pipe shooting through the roof and used two wooden crates for a larder. Beside the stove was a barrel of clams.

Lots of stuff, but no kid.

Bill Cuddy was a hard man to awaken. He twitched a few times, pawed the covers and grunted. When I shook him some more his eyelids flickered, went up. No pupils. They came down ten seconds later. A pair of bleary, bloodshot eyes moved separately until they came to an accidental focus on me.

Bill sat up. "Who're you?"

I gave him a few seconds to study me, then palmed my badge in front of his face. "Cop. Get up."

His legs swung to the floor, he grabbed my arm. "What's the matter, officer? I ain't been poachin'. All I got is clams, go look." He pointed to the barrel. "See?"

"I'm no game warden," I told him.

"Then whatcha want of me?"

"I want you for kidnapping. Murder maybe."

"Oh . . . No!" His voice was a hoarse croak. "But . . . I ain't killed nobody at all. I wouldn't do that."

He didn't have to tell me that. There are types that kill and he wasn't one of them. I didn't let him know I thought so.

"You brought a set of pajamas into Andy's place this afternoon. Where did you get them?"

He wrinkled his nose, trying to understand what I was talking about. "Pajamas?"

"You heard me."

He remembered then. His face relaxed into a relieved grin. "Oh, that. Sure, I found 'em lying on Shore Road. Thought I'd kid Andy with 'em."

"You almost kidded him to death. Put on your pants. I want you to show me the spot."

He stuck his feet into a pair of dungarees and pulled the suspenders over his bony shoulders, then dragged a pair of boots out from under the bed. A faded denim shirt and a battered hat and he was dressed. He kept shooting me sidewise glances, trying to figure it out but wasn't getting anyplace.

"You won't throw me in the jug, will you?"

"Not if you tell the truth."

"But I did."

"We'll see. Come on." I let him lead the way. The sand had drifted too deep along the road to take the car so we plodded along slowly, keeping away from the other shacks. Shore Road was a road in name only. It was a strip of wet Sahara that separated the tree line from the water. A hundred yards up and the shacks had more room between them. Bill Cuddy pointed ahead.