

#1 New York Times—Bestselling Author

HOWARD FAST

Writing as **E. V. Cunningham**



THE MASAO MASUTO MYSTERIES

VOLUME ONE

The Masao Masuto Mysteries

Volume One

**The Case of the Angry Actress, The
Case of the One-Penny Orange, The
Case of the Russian Diplomat, and
The Case of the Poisoned Eclairs**

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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*—BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SPARTACUS*

HOWARD FAST

Writing as **E. V. Cunningham**

THE CASE OF THE ANGRY ACTRESS

A Masao Masuto Mystery

The Case of the Angry Actress

To the memory of
Nat Goldstone
good friend

The Main Cast

STOCKHOLDERS IN NORTHEASTERN FILMS

Al Greenberg, who is married to Phoebe
Murphy Anderson, who is married to Stacy
Sidney Burke, who is married to Trude
Jack Cotter, who is married to Arlene
Mike Tulley, who is married to Lenore

POLICEMEN

Beverly Hills: Detective Sergeant Masao Masuto (Kati, his wife)
Detective Sy Beckman
Officer Frank Seaton
Medical Examiner Dr. Sam Baxter

Los Angeles: Lieutenant Pete Bones
Detective Kelly

And numerous others who appear in good time and without confusion.

CHAPTER ONE



Al Greenberg

IN Beverly Hills, as in so many of the cities, towns and villages of the United States, there is a right and a wrong side of the tracks. The tracks in this case belong to the Southern Pacific Railroad, and they bisect the town from west to east, departing, as they say, no more than a whoop and a holler from the Pacific Ocean. North of Santa Monica Boulevard—upon which the railroad runs—is possibly the most compact conglomeration of rich people that exists anywhere in the world. Southward, to Wilshire Boulevard, is a very posh little shopping area, and south from Wilshire Boulevard lies the “poor” section of Beverly Hills, where you can still buy a one-family house for forty-five thousand dollars.

Detective Sergeant Masao Masuto, of the Beverly Hills Police Force, did not live in the “poor” section of Beverly Hills. He lived in a cottage in Culver City and considered himself most fortunate to be possessed of the cottage, a good wife, three children, and a rose garden upon which he lavished both love and toil. He secretly dreamed of himself as a gardener who devoted all of his working hours to his garden.

He was driving home this evening and dreaming this particular and favorite dream, when the radiotelephone in the car flickered. He picked up the telephone and was informed by the sergeant in charge of dispatching that evening that a man named Al Greenberg was dead in a house on North Canon Drive, and that the circumstances under which the death had occurred might be regarded as somewhat suspicious.

Would he go directly there?

He would. He was on Pico Boulevard, and now he swung into Beverly Drive—a matter of minutes from the address on North

Canon Drive.

Detective Masuto knew the address, the place, the house, just as he knew almost every address, place and house in Beverly Hills. This was not as much of an achievement as it sounds. Where he entered Beverly Hills from the south, driving from Pico across Olympic and then up to Wilshire, the city was only thirty-five blocks wide, and that was about its greatest width, even though it extended a long finger into the foothills of the Santa Monica range. North of Santa Monica Boulevard there were the great elegant streets with their palms, their perfect lawns and their quarter-of-a-million-dollar houses, and these streets Detective Masuto could visualize and name, from Trenton Drive on the west, to Walden, Linden, Roxbury, Bedford, Camden, Rodeo, Beverly and Canon—and after Canon, moving east, Crescent, Rex-ford, Alpine, Foothill, Elm, Maple, Palm, Hillcrest, Arden, Alta, Sierra and Oakhurst—and there the city within a city ended and became Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, there were people and poverty and poolrooms and whorehouses and high-rise apartments and various other ordinary, publicly owned urban equipment. In Beverly Hills, there were property, money and some people.

As his chief of police had explained it to him once, “This is like no other place in the world, Masao. The money is God; the property is sacred; and the people are to be handled with kid gloves until you know who they are—and mostly they are the kind of people you handle with kid gloves after you know who they are.”

“Kid gloves.” He was a California-born Japanese, and therefore he was an Oriental and not a white man by any means, but excellent with kid gloves.

“The hell with that,” he said to himself now. “You have a job, my boy—not a bad job.”

He knew the house on North Canon, and he knew who lived there and when they had moved in and how much they had paid for the house and what it was worth today, three years later. Naturally. He knew every house. He knew that “Canon” without accent or similar indication was pronounced “Cannon” by some natives—if you can speak of dwellers in Beverly Hills as natives—and “Canyon” by others. He used the latter pronunciation, as had Al Greenberg, who

now lay dead in the house on North Canon. He remembered a small conversation he had with Greenberg concerning the word “Canon.” Greenberg, very rich, had also been very curious, and Masuto could not help liking curious people—he was so hopelessly curious himself.

Now Greenberg was dead, a short, stout wistful man of sixty-two or three, in a great antebellum type of house with outside pillars two stories high, a proper part of a *Gone with the Wind* sound stage dropped between a Spanish Colonial and an eighteen-room Irish cottage. Greenberg had never been greatly at ease in that house, as Masuto remembered. He had sensitivity, and there was always a shred of shame hanging out of his pocket as if he had never answered the question as to what a small Jew, born and brought up in Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, was doing here in this garden of dreams, repose and dolce vita. It was certainly not de rigueur to be seen on your front lawn at any hour of the day if you lived in Beverly Hills and north of Santa Monica, but Detective Masuto could remember many a late afternoon when he saw Al Greenberg standing in front of the misplaced plantation house, puffing a cigar and regarding the green palm and ivy world that surrounded him with wonder and disbelief.

No more wonder and no more disbelief. Al Greenberg was dead, and they had called the cops.

Masuto double-parked in front of the huge Southern-Colonial plantation house on North Canon. In the driveway of the house were three cars, and five more were parked in front and two more already double-parked; among them, as Masuto noticed, two police cars and two medical cars, one of them belonging to Dr. Sam Baxter, the medical examiner. When Masuto got out of his car, he was met by Detective Sy Beckman, who informed him that Officer Frank Seaton was inside the house and another officer stationed at the door.

“What was it? What went on here tonight?”

“Dinner party—black tie, old buddies, but very formal. Four couples and the host and wife. That’s Al Greenberg. He’s dead.”

“I know. I got that in the car. How was he killed?”

“He wasn’t killed. Maybe. He died.”

“Of what?” Masuto asked as he and Beckman walked up the path to the house. The planting was old and good, and the air was full of the sweet smell of jasmine. Masuto was never unaware of a planting, and he tasted the cool evening air, mingling his pleasure at the smell with his forlorn reaction to death.

“A heart attack. Baxter’s inside and so is Dr. Meyer, Greenberg’s physician. I think you better talk to both of them.”

“Oh?”

“I mean before you talk to the others.”

“All there?”

“They want out, but I’m holding them for you. Nothing has leaked yet, unless some smart reporter was listening on the radio band. There was nobody up at headquarters, and the boss is of the opinion that we should keep it absolutely quiet until we know something.”

“What?”

“That it’s murder or not murder.”

“You said he died of a heart attack.”

“That’s what the doctors say. One of the guests says different.

“Who?”

Detective Beckman peered at his pad in the poor light that seeped from the windows onto the veranda.

“Feller named Jack Cotter.”

Masuto nodded, and then the door was opened by a young and very pretty strawberry blonde, who silently and with a funereal air ushered them into the house. Officer Seaton, a tall uniformed patrolman, came up then and apologized for his partner, who was using the bathroom at the back of the house.

“The doctors are in the living room there,” he said, pointing over his shoulder. “The rest of them are in the viewing room.”

The viewing room was par for this particular course, Masuto reflected, hardly listening to the blonde’s explanation that this was where “poor Al” showed films. He was looking at the stately double staircase and the spread of the living room beyond, and without even glancing at the blonde, he asked her name.

“Trade Burke—Mrs. Sidney Burke.”

“Then would you join the others in the viewing room, Mrs. Burke, and tell them that I would like to talk to them in a few minutes.”

“You’re very official, aren’t you, Detective—?”

“Masuto.”

“I thought you were Japanese. Good-looking. You know—”

“Please do as I say, Mrs. Burke.”

“I just thought I’d be here to greet the big brass and let them know that there’s no murder, and it is all a lot of nonsense, and suppose we all go home and leave poor Phoebe with her grief, such as it is.”

“Please do as I say, and later you can tell me all about that.”

The other officer came back to the front door. Masuto regarded him without pleasure, waited for Trude Burke to disappear, and then followed Beckman into the living room, where two middle-aged physicians were restlessly observing their wrist watches. Dr. Baxter, the medical examiner—tall, skinny, gray, and tired—shook hands with Masuto and introduced him to Dr. Meyer. Masuto had heard about Meyer, successful, reputable, and expensive.

“What happened?”

“Tell him,” Dr. Baxter said impatiently. “The facts, not the nonsense. Beckman can feed him the nonsense after you and I go about our business.”

“Mr. Greenberg was a patient of mine,” Dr. Meyer said. “He has suffered for many years from angina. Quite bad. Tonight he had an attack and he died. Very quickly.”

“What kind of an attack?” Masuto asked him.

“A heart attack, of course. Coronary. There was a myocardial infarction, and he passed away.”

“Quickly?”

“Yes. Before he could reach his medicine.”

Masuto turned to Baxter. “Do you agree, doctor?”

“Absolutely.”

“No other possibility?”

“There is none that I can see, officer,” Meyer said. “No other is being offered. Jack Cotter, who is here and who is Mr. Greenberg’s business associate, has made a very serious accusation—namely that Mr. Greenberg was threatened and frightened to death. He calls it murder. I have no desire to comment on the legal aspect or even on the social aspect concerning what happened in this house. I came here. My friend and patient was dead. I examined him and did

what I could—which was nothing. This is not a house I enjoy being in at this moment, and there is no grief here for me to assuage. So I wish to go.”

“Could Mr. Greenberg have died of fright? Or excitement?” Masuto asked.

“Of course. That’s the nature of the disease. Or of ten other trigger causes.”

“Is there no way to tell?”

“None.”

“Even with an autopsy?”

“No way.”

“And you agree?” Masuto asked the medical examiner.

“Yes, Masao. Absolutely.”

“Just one or two more questions, Dr. Meyer, and then you can leave. Did you expect Mr. Greenberg to die so suddenly?”

“How does one know?”

“But you must have had some idea of how bad the disease was.”

“Of course I had some idea. I had a very good picture of his sickness.”

“Suppose he was a lucky man—which he was not. How long might he have lived?”

“Ten years—twelve. You simply cannot pinpoint it. Maybe five years—maybe twice that. Would you like to see his body?”

Masuto nodded, and Meyer led him upstairs to the master bedroom, where under a sheet the mortal remains of Al Greenberg reposed. Masuto uncovered Greenberg’s face and looked at him for a long moment.

The living room was French, a combination of several Louis’, with a huge, pale Aubusson carpet. The viewing room was practical leather—two enormous leather couches and half a dozen leather lounge chairs. At one end, the projection room, at the other the screen—but both now concealed behind beige drapes. A third wall, where the drapes were drawn back, revealed the planting behind the house, a small tropical jungle which separated the house from the swimming pool. A well-equipped bar and an orange rug completed the furnishings.

There were nine people sprawled on the couches and chairs, and they all looked at the door with a more or less common expression of sullen annoyance as the two men entered, Detective Beckman with Masuto behind him. Death muted them, yet they were annoyed and put upon. One of them, a lean, good-looking man in his middle forties, said something about house arrest being a little less than to his liking. "I have had about enough of it," he said tartly.

There were four men and five women in the room. Masuto recognized the man who had spoken. His name was Mike Tulley, for years a small part player in Westerns, who now was a sort of star in television terms. He had a program of his own called "Lonesome Rider," and his rating was high and he earned well over three thousand dollars a week.

Another man, older, tall, with white wavy hair and very certain of his presence, rose and came toward the detectives. "Easy does it," he said, "We're all under a strain, you know. My name is Murphy Anderson. I was Al's—that is, Mr. Greenberg's lawyer. Also his business associate. We've all been shaken by his death—" He had addressed his words to Masuto.

"You are a policeman, aren't you?" he added.

"That's right."

"You're in charge here?"

"With my colleague, Detective Beckman."

Masuto absorbed the room. You listened and absorbed; you were conscious of many things, which was in the manner of his life and way, and you pressed conclusions away from you. He noted the five women in the room. There was the strawberry blonde, whom he had seen at the door. There was a girl with dark hair. The other three were blondes. But all five, in the particular manner of Beverly Hills, could have been cast from the same mould. Two of them rose after he entered and then slipped onto the chair arms. Another went to the bar and mixed a drink. All appeared to be about the same height, each with the same trim, tight figure. Even their faces were alike, noses tip-tilted, mouths full. They were a part of a social organism that demanded beauty and likeness, yet each was different, separate, unique. One of them he recognized—Phoebe Greenberg, widow of the dead man. She was neither prostrated nor weeping, but

since she could hardly be more than thirty, with a husband who had been sixty-three and ill and very rich, this was not a matter for surprise.

Of the men, he had recognized only the actor, Mike Tulley. Now he added Murphy Anderson, lawyer, to the file. Anderson would be about fifty. He introduced the widow, then his own wife, Mrs. Anderson, the girl with the dark hair. Then Murphy Anderson introduced Trude Burke, the strawberry blonde.

"I am Detective Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills police," Masao Masuto said politely. "I understand that this is a strain for everyone concerned."

The youngest man in the room rose and introduced himself as Sidney Burke, the head of a successful PR agency. That made him the husband of the strawberry blonde. He was about thirty-seven, small, tight, competent, with pebble-black eyes. Tough, dangerous, wily—all words that Masuto remembered and discarded. You simply did not know. It took time.

"More than that, it's a stupid imposition," Burke said.

Masuto's eyes deliberately avoided the final couple. The remaining man, fleshy, balding but once quite handsome, with a long, thin nose and excellent chin and mouth, pinged on the detectives's memory. He had been a sort of a star—just after World War II—but briefly. Then a very successful agent—or was it a producer?

He rose and said, "My name is Jack Cotter, officer. This is my wife, Arlene—"

Of course, the agent. And now Al Greenberg's vice-president in Northeastern Films.

"—and I am afraid that I am responsible for the imposition. Entirely responsible. You see, I have made a damn nuisance of myself by insisting that Al was murdered."

"You can say that again!" Tulley snorted.

"A veritable goddamn nuisance," said Burke.

"Suppose you shut up, Sidney. You talk when you're told to talk," Tulley, the TV actor, said.

"Just who the hell do you think you're putting down?" Burke demanded. "I don't work for you, Mister. You're a client of mine, and now that Al's dead, I don't want such clients. So up your ass!"

“Take it easy, Sidney,” Murphy Anderson said. “You too, Mike,” he told the actor. “Just take it easy. Jack heard something, and not to report what he heard would make him an accessory after the fact.”

“What fact?” Sidney Burke demanded.

“The fact of a murder—if a murder took place. I don’t like the whole thing any more than any of you, but there it is—”

Masuto held up his hands for silence at this point. Being a policeman in Beverly Hills might not be exactly like being a diplomat to the Benelux countries. It might be better compared to being a UN representative to a small, new country. It required tact, judgement, and above all, good manners—and control.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “the sooner and the more quietly we conclude this, the better. As you know, Mr. Greenberg was quite ill, and it would appear that he died of natural causes. But appearances are frequently deceiving. Now if you heard something, Mr. Cotter, that bears on Mr. Greenberg’s death, I think you should state it for me in as few words as possible, while we are all still here.”

Cotter nodded. “We finished dinner a few minutes after nine. Ordinarily, we might sit at the table a while, but Al did not feel too good, and he said that he’d go upstairs and have an Alka Seltzer. Everyone got up. Then the girls left with Mike and Sidney and Al. I am told that Al went up to his bedroom on the second floor. The kitchen people said that. Al went through the kitchen to the pantry, where he has a little private elevator. The others went into the living room.”

“Sidney and I went into the viewing room—here,” Mike Tulley interrupted. “The girls went to freshen up.”

“All right,” said Cotter. “Murph—Mr. Anderson—and I sat at the table with cigars. We had things to talk about, and then Murph said about something that before we discussed it any further, we should get Al’s point of view. It was almost a yes or no matter, so Murph said that he would wait at the table while I went upstairs. I went through the living room and up the stairs. No one in the hallway up there. I knocked at Al’s bedroom door. Then I heard Al say, ‘For Christ’s sake, put that gun away and give me my medicine—please —’ He was pleading, crazy, desperate, pleading. He was pleading for his life.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Masuto saw Dr. Baxter, the medical examiner, come into the viewing room, and he moved his head for Baxter to join him. Cotter waited. The room was very quiet now. Baxter walked over to Masuto, who whispered to him, "Medicine?"

"He was on quinidine according to Meyer, but also armed with nitroglycerin sublingual. He would have that in his pocket. Every angina does. But his jacket was off and across the room from where he lay."

Baxter spoke softly, but not so softly that everyone in the room could not hear him. Phoebe Greenberg began to cry. She must have washed off her makeup and she was pretty without it. It occurred to Masuto that perhaps she had wept earlier. Emotion and the display of emotion by the population of Beverly Hills was not anything that Masuto felt competent to analyze or predict.

"Please continue," he said to Cotter.

"Yes—of course," Cotter said. "Al was pleading, and then this dame's voice says, 'Like you gave me mine, you bastard—remember?' And Al pleads again, 'Please, please—' Then I start banging on the door and I hear a thud. I hear Al fall, I guess, but the door is locked. I know that Al's room and Phoebe's are connected. Each of them has a dressing room that leads into a bathroom, and the two bathrooms connect. So I run to Phoebe's room—I guess I did some shouting. In Phoebe's room, I saw Stacy—Murph's wife—she was lying on the bed, resting. Then I bust through the connecting rooms to Al's room, and there's Al on the floor, dead. I didn't know he was dead then, but that's what Meyer said. So I go to unlock the hall door and get help, but it's already unlocked. And that's it."

Still silence. Most of them were watching Cotter, not the detective, who said, "Whose voice did you hear, Mr. Cotter?"

"Don't you think we asked him that?" Sidney Burke said. "The other cop asked him. But he's playing cute. Real cute. Now he's going to take you into the next room and pin it on his choice."

"Oh, why don't you shut up," Cotter said tiredly. "What I got to say, I say right here. Murph's my lawyer, and he's here. I don't know whose voice it was. Whoever the dame was, she was crazy mad. Her voice was choking and hoarse. I don't know whose voice it was."

“But it was a woman’s voice—of that you’re certain?”

“I never gave it a second thought.”

“A man’s voice can sound like a woman’s voice.”

“No.”

“Very well,” Masuto said, smiling sympathetically. “Dr. Baxter here —” pointing to him, “—is our local medical examiner. It is his opinion at this moment that no crime has been committed, that Mr. Greenberg died of natural causes—”

“How in hell you can talk like that after what I heard, I don’t know!” Cotter burst out.

“Please, Mr. Cotter—what you heard indicates that violence might have threatened Mr. Greenberg. It would appear, from what you tell me, that a woman was in the room with Mr. Greenberg and that she threatened him with a gun. But it would also appear that Mr. Greenberg’s heart attack had already started. Possibly this woman or person refused to hand Mr. Greenberg the sublingual tablets upon which his life depended. We don’t know, and we also do not know that a crime has been committed. Murder is a very ugly matter, Mr. Cotter, and for the moment I feel it would be best for everyone concerned to refrain from using the word. This does not mean that we will not pursue our investigation. We certainly shall. But for tonight—well, I think Mr. Anderson will agree with me.”

“I certainly do!” Anderson said emphatically.

“Then I think that if I may ask a few questions, brief and to the point, you can then leave. No more than ten minutes.”

“I think I have had about all I can stand,” Phoebe Greenberg said softly.

“Then two questions and you can leave. Firstly, do you own a gun or is there a gun anywhere in this house?”

“No.”

“And where were you when Mr. Cotter shouted?”

“Apparently I was in the pantry elevator on my way up to the second floor. When I got out, there was the commotion—and Al was dead.”

“I felt bad,” Stacy Anderson said. “That’s why I went up to Phoebe’s room to lie down. Phoebe said she would bring me a cup

of tea. But Al was in his room already, and the doors were closed—two doors, so I could not hear anything. Not possibly.”

“Then you went into the kitchen?” Masuto asked Phoebe.

“The pantry. We have a hot-cold water cooler there. No one saw me, if that is what you mean.”

“Thank you,” Masuto said, bowing almost imperceptibly, a tribute to the lady of a house where he once had a friend, for even the small warmth of slight acquaintance is a form of friendship. “You may leave us now, and we will trouble your house only a few minutes more.”

“Stay as long as you need to, please.”

Masuto decided that he liked her. She either mourned the dead in her own way or not at all; it was her affair. He nodded to Baxter’s unspoken question, and the doctor said, “I would like to have an autopsy done, Mrs. Greenberg.”

“If you wish. If it will help.”

“I think it will only help to put away doubts—but that’s important.”

“Then do as you see best.”

And with that, she left the room.

Detective Masuto turned to Trude Burke.

“I was in the john,” the strawberry blonde smiled. “I guess supper agreed with none of us.”

“Where?”

“Front hall. Came out, heard the commotion, hotfooted it upstairs and almost fell over Arlene.”

“You mean Mrs. Cotter?”

“Yes. Jack, her husband, was in the hall then, yelling for a doctor.”

“Mrs. Cotter?”

Arlene Cotter rose, glanced quizzically at her husband and then nodded at Masuto. “No alibis—poor Oriental detective. I did not know there was a Nisei on our darling little police force. I was in the guest powder room, upstairs, when I heard the commotion and bounded into the hall. I went in there with Lenore Tulley—didn’t I, darling?”

Lenore Tulley stared narrowly without replying. No love between them, Masuto decided. They were too alike: Beverly Hills twins, same height, same figure, same hairdresser.

“But then Lenore disappeared somewhere. Where did you disappear to, darling?”

“The pot, you bitch. You saw me go in there.”

“Temper, temper,” Arlene Cotter said.

“Then I went into the guest room, which connected with the guest bathroom,” Lenore Tulley told Masuto. “To tell the truth, I was prowling. I have never been to this particular castle before. I was curious. Then I heard the commotion and stepped out into the hallway and joined the crowd in Al’s bedroom.”

Arlene Cotter smiled tolerantly. Mike Tulley watched them both intently, his wife and Cotter’s wife.

“You remained at the dining room table?” Masuto asked Murphy Anderson.

“My cigar and I. I heard the commotion and then Sidney joined me. There is a small, spiral staircase in the projection booth, there—” He pointed. “—and first we thought something had happened in the viewing room. But it was empty. We went upstairs by the projection room staircase, which lets one into the far end of the upstairs hall.”

“And before that, Mr. Burke?”

“I was with Mike Tulley in the viewing room. We were going to watch some shorts, and Mike was going to run them. He went into the projection booth. I mixed myself a drink and went into the dining room to see what had happened to the girls.”

“Mr. Tulley?” Masuto said.

“Like Sidney says, I was in the projection booth, setting up the film. I heard the yelling from upstairs and I went up the staircase.”

Beckman had been making notes. Now Masuto said, “I don’t think we need trouble you further now. I would appreciate it if you would give pertinent facts, name, place, telephone to Detective Beckman here. Then you can leave. I think it would be wise if you say nothing about what Mr. Cotter heard—for the time being, that is.”

“In other words, you are closing this up,” Cotter said.

“No, Mr. Cotter, I am closing nothing. You can give your story to the press if you wish. I only feel that it might be better for everyone concerned if we waited a bit.”

Detective Beckman was copying out his notes for Masuto, and Dr. Baxter was sipping at a glass of his dead host’s excellent brandy, which the Japanese butler had poured for him. The house was

staffed by a Japanese couple, not Niseis but recently come from Japan. The guests had departed. Mrs. Greenberg was asleep under the influence of a sedative; the guests had departed; and Al Greenberg's body had been taken to the hospital for the autopsy. The Japanese houseman was dutifully waiting for the policemen to depart, and Masao Masuto was explaining to his wife why he would be late. He spoke in Japanese quite deliberately. He wanted the houseman to overhear him, and when he had finished with the phone, he turned to the butler and said in Japanese, "What do you and your wife think of this?"

"Honorable official, we have no thoughts on the matter."

"That is nonsense, countryman of my father, as you well know. It is too late for witless formalities. I am not going to entrap you or arrest you, and not for a moment do I believe that you had anything to do with this. Do you think Mr. Greenberg was murdered?"

"No one hates such a man," the butler answered simply.

"All murders do not signify hate. What of the wife? Did they love each other?"

"They approached each other with respect. He was more than old enough to be her father."

"Would she kill him?"

"No."

"You are very sure."

"I am a man of small purpose—a house servant. I am poor and I must take what work is offered to earn my bowl of food. But I am not a fool."

"And where were you and your wife when this happened?"

"In the kitchen—where she is now. Would you speak with her?"

"No, it is not necessary. Go to her. I will call you when we are ready to leave."

The butler departed for the kitchen, and Baxter, the medical examiner, asked what it was all about.

"I asked him whether Phoebe Greenberg would have scalped her husband. He says no. He's a student of human nature, so I believe him. I don't have your Occidental gift for telling Jews from Gentiles. But Phoebe is not a Jewish name, is it?"

“Anything’s a Jewish name today,” Beckman said. “All the rules are broken. I’m a Jewish cop. But if you want to know about the girls—none of them is Jewish.”

“How do you know?”

“I know. Take my word for it. About the men, I don’t know with any confidence. I would guess that Greenberg was the only Jew in the lot. Maybe Murphy Anderson—”

“With a name like that!” Baxter snorted.

“I told you, names don’t figure. It’s all mixed up. By the way, Masao, this Mike Tulley, he whispers to me that you should give him half an hour to get home and then call him. I got his number here.” He handed the number to Masuto, who nodded and said to Baxter, “What do you think, doc?”

“I don’t think. The autopsy will show absolutely nothing. Nothing. Greenberg died of a heart attack.”

“Could fear have caused it?”

“Are you going to prove that, Masao? Come off it. If this is a murder, it’s a perfect murder. File and forget. Even if one of those babes confesses to being in that bedroom and pointing a gun at Greenberg and refusing to get him the sublinguals, and you put me on the stand and read me the confession ten times over, I will still say that there is no evidence of murder or even reasonable doubt that the heart attack came from natural and inevitable causes. And I think any physician you get will agree with me. So if you got a murder, you got a perfect murder.”

“A very few people on this earth,” Masuto said thoughtfully, “perfect themselves in all of their being and actions. Such people do not murder.”

Then he dialed Mike Tulley’s number.

Tulley answered and waited. Masuto reminded the TV actor that he had asked him to call, and then Tulley said, “I think we had better talk, Detective Masuto.”

“It’s past midnight. Can’t it wait for tomorrow?”

“Maybe you sleep good. I take pills but that won’t help tonight. I agree with Cotter. Greenberg was murdered.”

“You’re out in Benedict Canyon?”

“That’s right. Five minutes from where you are.”

"I'll be there," Masuto said. "Ten or fifteen minutes." He put down the phone and turned to Beckman. "He thinks Greenberg was murdered and he's frightened."

"Oh, balls," said the doctor. "I am going home to bed if you don't mind."

"Want me to come along with you, Masao?" Detective Beckman asked.

"No—no, you knock off, Sy. I'll see what he has to say. By the way, it seems to me that Anderson and Cotter were Greenberg's partners. Is that right?"

"I think so. Greenberg was the president of an outfit called Northeastern Films."

"And if I remember, I read somewhere that they produced the "Lonesome Rider" or whatever that thing Tulley plays in is called."

"That's right—very big, successful. Number two on the Neilsen for seven months now. I read the *Hollywood Reporter*," Beckman explained to Dr. Baxter. "It's a sort of a damn trade journal, when you labor in Beverly Hills. I know where all the stars live. So does Masao. It gives us some kind of status among cops, but the pay remains lousy. Sidney Burke is press agent for Northeastern, according to what I hear tonight."

"Good night," Dr. Baxter said sourly.

Masuto called the Japanese houseman, said his good-bys formally, and then he and Detective Baxter left. Officer Seaton was still outside, but Masuto felt it would be better to call no attention to the house, and he sent Seaton back to duty.

CHAPTER TWO



Mike Tulley

MIKE Tulley's home was in Benedict Canyon just north of Lexington, or something over half a mile north of Sunset Boulevard. Three months before, the tourist sightseeing buses had taken to making a right turn on Sunset along Benedict—which was a tribute to his rating. The house was one hundred and fifty thousand dollars modern with a bean-shaped swimming pool and a carport wide enough to hold five cars.

Tulley was standing in the carport when Masuto drove up, and he was visibly relieved. He led Masuto toward the house, through the entranceway and living room to the library. Statuswise, this had replaced the den. There was a whole wall of fine leather bindings, Heritage Club, Limited Editions Club, and also several shelves of plain, common books purchased at Martindale's and at Mary Hunter's Bookshop. It made a good wall; people like Mike Tulley had little time for reading. There was an enormous antique globe and four Eames chairs. The couch, upholstered in black vinyl, was built in along one wall.

Tulley motioned for Masuto to sit down and asked whether he would have a drink. Masuto shook his head. Coffee? Again Masuto shook his head, and at that point Lenore Tulley stepped into the library and said, "You don't offer an Oriental coffee. Give him some tea."

"Lenore, suppose you go to bed. What I got to say to the detective here is private."

"You mean it stinks."

"You've had too much."

"Drop dead," she said, and swung around and left. Tulley stared hopelessly at Masuto.

Masuto waited. He was tired and unhappy, but he attempted to be patient and objective, without judgement or identification.

“Great! Great!” Tulley said. He poured himself a drink. “It’s a great, stinking life. I am going to tell you something quick—because if I don’t tell it quick, I can’t tell it.” He went to the door, opened it and then closed it again. “I wouldn’t put it past her to have this place bugged,” he said.

“Why don’t you simply tell me whatever you wish to tell me.”

“All right. Now look—this happened eleven years ago. I had a rotten small part in a TV thing they were doing at World Wide. They brought in some idiot kid who wanted a part—you got to know how these kids want a part. There are maybe ten thousand girls in this town who came here to make it big, and none of them do and they would sell their souls and their mothers for one stinking little part. So this kid is promised a part if she lets herself get banged once or twice—”

“Just spell that out, please,” Masuto said.

“This guy makes a deal with her. He brings her into one of those little movable dressing rooms. She promises to have some sex with a couple of buddies. Then he invites me to be his guest. So I am a louse—you know a man who isn’t a louse?”

“Go on, please.”

“So I go in with this kid. I don’t know how many there are before me. All I know is that I am invited to take a free ride, and I do it. In a crummy little dressing room with some kid I can barely see—except that she’s a blond with a good figure. And she tells me her name and I kid her about the part and I hate myself a little and that’s it.”

Again, Masuto waited. Tulley was sprawled in the Eames chair. Masuto sat on the edge of the built-in couch. He was never at ease sprawling or reclining, and now he sat rather primly.

“I even forgot about it,” Tulley said. “It was eleven years ago. Who remembers?”

“There are people who remember,” Masuto said.

Tulley glanced at him sharply. Then he reached into his pocket, took out a card case and from it a folded piece of pink note paper. He unfolded it and handed it to the policeman. It was strongly scented and typed on it were the following words:

Mike, you've had your time and I have been patient.

Samantha.

Masuto handed it back to him. "I suppose Samantha was the girl?"

"That was her name. Would you believe it, I forgot. But when I got the note, I remembered."

"When did you get it?"

"In the mail, yesterday. I also know what typewriter was used."

"You do?"

He pointed to the wall opposite the couch, where a portable typewriter sat on a built-in teakwood table. "That one. I compared the type. There's a convenient broken 't' to make it easy. Do you want to keep this note?"

"If you wish." Masuto took the note and put it in his pocket. "Do you think your wife wrote it?"

"You saw her. She's not stupid, is she? Wouldn't she pick another typewriter?"

"I don't know. That is why I asked you."

Tulley stared at Masuto for a while, and then he said, "Something like this happens and you begin to think twice. I mean, nobody's stupid enough to do it this way, but she's smart enough to know we wouldn't believe she was stupid enough."

"Why?" Masuto asked softly. "Do you think your wife is Samantha?"

He sat without answering.

"Eleven years ago, how old was this kid? Samantha?"

"Eighteen, nineteen, twenty—how the hell do you know?"

"You just told me it was eleven years ago. When did you meet your wife?"

"Six years ago."

"An actress?"

Tulley nodded.

"When you go to bed with a woman, don't you look at her?" Masuto asked coldly.

"I told you it was dark in that lousy dressing room."

"Was Al Greenberg involved?"

"I think he was. I can't be sure, but I think I remember him on the set that day."

“Cotter? Murphy Anderson? Sidney Burke?”

“I think so. Burke brought the girl onto the set.”

“How old is your wife, Mr. Tulley?”

“Thirty-one.”

“Do you think that your wife was in the room with Mr. Greenberg?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you own a gun?”

“We have a small thirty-two automatic. I keep it in the bedroom.”

“Obviously, you looked for it when you came home tonight. Was it there?”

“No.”

“And you asked your wife whether she knew where it was?”

“She didn’t know. She said she couldn’t care less. She hates guns and she has been after me to get rid of it.”

“Why don’t you, Mr. Tulley? We have an excellent police force here in Beverly Hills.”

“Which couldn’t do one cotton-picking thing about keeping Al Greenberg alive.”

“We are policemen, not physicians. Those men and women you had dinner with tonight—they have all been here at your home?”

“They have.”

“Within the past two weeks?”

“That’s right. We entertain a lot—dinner parties, cocktails. Sometimes when Al wanted a conference about the show, we would have it here.”

“I see. But to get back to what you were inferring—is it your notion that this Samantha waited patiently for eleven years to have her revenge, and that she began by murdering Al Greenberg?”

“It sounds stupid when you put it that way. Maybe she waited for the one opportunity. Maybe she’s patient. It still seems stupid.”

“Farfetched, let’s say. Still, someone wrote a note on your wife’s typewriter and signed it ‘Samantha.’”

“Don’t you want to compare the note with a sample from the typewriter?”

“What will that prove, Mr. Tulley? If Samantha is patient enough to wait eleven years for her revenge, she’s patient enough to wait for a chance at your wife’s typewriter.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I can’t say, Mr. Tulley. If you believe you are in danger, you can inform my chief and he will no doubt station a policeman in front of your house.”

“Just one thing,” said Tulley, shooting out a hand at Masuto. “You’re a cop—and this is Beverly Hills. So don’t throw your weight around with me.”

“I am very sorry if I gave that impression,” Masuto said, smiling deferentially. “Thank you for your information.”

Tulley’s apology was contained in the gesture of rising and escorting Masuto to the door.

Masuto’s wife was awake and waiting for him when he got home. She was very gentle and full of many fears, and when a case kept him hours past his regular working time, she could not sleep, and hovered over her two children and allowed her mind to fill with awful possibilities. Although she had been born in Los Angeles, her first years had been spent in an old-fashioned and protected environment, and she had many of the mannerisms of a girl brought up in Japan. Without trying, and very tastefully, she had given a Japanese decor to their little house in Culver City. She liked paper screens and low, black enamel tables, and both she and her husband, when they were alone for the evening, would wear kimono and robe; and tonight she had his robe waiting and tea ready, and she sat dutifully staring at him with great affection and waiting to hear whether he proposed to speak of what had happened.

“Al Greenberg died,” he said finally, after he had tasted the tea and relaxed somewhat. “You will remember that when we ride with the children in Beverly Hills and I point out houses, his is the house with the great columns, like the big house in front of the old Selznick Studio.”

“I am sorry to hear that. He was your friend.”

“I think so. As much as anyone is a cop’s friend.”

“But why did they need the police?”

“One of the guests said that Mr. Greenberg was murdered.”

“Was he?” she asked anxiously.

“I don’t know. In the guise of being a philosophical Oriental type—which I am not—I would say that these people murder endlessly. Then there could be no death among them without the charge of murder being justified.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“I am not sure that I want you to. Let’s go to bed, and perhaps I will stop dreaming, because this is like a nasty and turgid dream, pointless and with neither dignity nor honor.”

“Has it ever occurred to you,” Rabbi Matthew Gitlen asked Masuto the following morning, “to ponder on the curious parable of the camel and the needle’s eye, and the rich man and the gates of heaven? A member of my congregation once coined a rather famous line to the effect that he had been rich and he had been poor and rich was better. The poor are too often maligned when they are accused of happiness, and the rich are maligned by the same accusation. As incredible as it may seem, I preach occasionally to my congregation—in my own words of course—that the Kingdom of God is within them. Which can be a dilly, you know. Are you a Christian? I ask in the most perfunctory professional sense, not to pry—simply to find a manner of discussing your inquiry. I trust the question does not embarrass you?”

“Not at all,” Masuto replied, smiling. The rabbi was an enormous man, almost six-foot-four, Masuto would guess, very fat and apparently very civilized, but big enough in his frame to wear his weight with great dignity and to give the impression that a very large and hard-muscled man carried around another, a fat man, not out of indulgence but out of compassion. It had a curious effect on Masuto, who was put at his ease and who continued, “But I am not a Christian. I was never baptized. I am a Zen Buddhist—but that is not to be thought of as a religion in your sense.”

“I reject the obvious comment, and I am utterly fascinated,” the rabbi rumbled, rising from behind his desk and going to one corner of his study, where there was a small refrigerator with a wood finish. He opened it and peered inside. “Will you join me in a yogurt, Detective Masuto? Supposedly, it reduces me, which is nonsense. A Zen Buddhist.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Masuto said.

“Plain or orange or strawberry?”

“Plain, if I may.”

“Of course.” He handed Masuto a cup of yogurt and a spoon and sat on a corner of his desk as he opened his own. “Zen,” he said. “What do they say? ‘Those who know, speak not. Those who speak, know not.’ Do you subscribe to that?”

“Oh, no—not at all,” Masuto answered. “Everything can be spoken of, poorly perhaps, but English is a rich language. But a detective’s time is not his own.”

“Naturally. I might even say that a rabbi’s time is not his own. This is the curse of a civilization that rushes so desperately. We must talk about Al Greenberg, may his soul rest in peace.”

“He was a member of your congregation.”

“In the most nominal sense. He was not a religious man—but pleasant and anxious to quiet his guilts with money. His contributions were generous, and when he married Phoebe three years ago, she decided to become Jewish. She was very grateful to him. Perhaps with reason. She was in the hospital, you know, with TB—in a ward, broke, two suicide attempts behind her. She had worked for him in what they call a ‘special’ some years before, and when he discovered she was in the hospital, he spared nothing to help her. The best doctors, the newest drugs—and then somehow he got up the nerve to ask her to marry him and she agreed. Gratitude. He endeared himself to her. But it was essentially a father-daughter relationship, no more than that. He was a widower. Of course, her becoming Jewish was not as serious as it might have been. I instructed her for two weeks and then her interest waned. But I got to know her a little—only why should this matter to the police?”

Detective Masuto told him why it mattered to the police, and the rabbi ate his yogurt and listened with interest, and then when Masuto finished, said, “I called the house when you telephoned me. Mrs. Greenberg was still asleep. I think I had better go over there now. She’ll need someone to lean on.”

“You don’t appear surprised.”

“At murder?” asked Rabbi Gitlin. “But you don’t know that it is murder, and nothing should surprise us in this world.”

“I am not completely at home with the social relationships and overlaps of your Western religions, but would a man like Mr. Greenberg, under great stress, cry out the name of Jesus Christ?”

The rabbi shrugged. “Who knows what any of us would do under great stress.”

“May I ask you an unspeakable question?”

“Of course,” the rabbi smiled. “But you must forgive me if I give you an unspeakable answer.”

“In your opinion, could Mrs. Greenberg have murdered her husband?”

“Not unspeakable, but interesting. You do not ask whether I think she had reason to, incitement to—but only whether she could have. But how could either of us, Detective Masuto, even know what the human mind and soul is capable of? Murder is a terrible ultimate. It is the ghost, the monster that lurks wherever human beings live. It is not your question that is unspeakable, but murder itself. I cannot accept the proposition that Al Greenberg was murdered, but if he was murdered, then that defines the murderer. You told me that you met Al Greenberg?”

“Several times.”

“Then you must understand that if he was murdered, then your murderer is without heart or compunction, someone who will stop at nothing. The very thought of such a murderer is particularly terrifying. I would be relieved if you told me your own thoughts.”

“That there was no murder?”

“I would like to think that, Detective Masuto.”

“Have you time enough for me to call Dr. Baxter—our medical examiner? He should be at the hospital now, completing the autopsy.”

“If you wish.” The rabbi pointed to his telephone, and Masuto dialed the hospital and was transferred to the autopsy room. A nurse answered and asked whether he would wait a moment or two, since Dr. Baxter was washing up. The rabbi watched Masuto thoughtfully. Then Baxter got on the phone and told him testily that he had spent three hours on a lot of nonsense.

“What did you find?” Masuto asked.

“That he died of a heart attack.”

“Suppose—Doc, suppose that he fell down and someone held a pillow over his face for a minute or two. Would it show up in the autopsy?”

“No.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. No. What do you want, an autopsy or the kind of nonsense you read in novels?”

“But the pillow would cause his death?”

“Well, of course it would. You don’t breathe, you die.”

“That would be murder.”

“Not with me on the witness stand, it wouldn’t. I told you he died of a myocardial infarction. That still goes.”

“But the pillow?”

“I could invent a lot of other ways to kill him, and it would still be a heart attack. So you’re on your own, my lad.”

Masuto replaced the telephone and turned to the rabbi, who smiled sadly. “I’m afraid I prefer to agree with your doctor,” he said. “If you want a murder, Mr. Masuto, you must find it.”

“Perhaps whether I want it or not, it’ll find me.”

“Perhaps.”

In school, on being asked his mother’s name—that is, her maiden name—Masuto’s son had once replied, “Katherine Asuki.” Masuto was distressed when he heard about it, as he always was when he noticed any sense or action of inferiority on the part of his children. Her name was Kati or Katy, depending on how far the Anglicization went, and now Masuto pulled up at the loading walk of the Food Giant Supermarket, leaned out of the car and shouted, “Hey, Kati—I’m here!”

It was one of the very few aggressive, extroverted actions he indulged in, and he only did it because he detested supermarkets. Now Kati came rushing out with her cart, exclaiming as always, “Why do you embarrass me so? They will think we are people of no manners whatsoever.”

“Let them,” he said, stowing the bags into the car. “Come—in with you and off.” She would not drive. He drove to his house and she apologized for interrupting his work so often.

“Today I have nothing to do,” he said. “The chief gave it to me. Today, tomorrow—so that he will be able to tell the press and everyone else that poor Mr. Greenberg died of a heart attack. If it had happened in Culver City or in West-wood or in Hollywood, that would be something else. Not in Beverly Hills—and least of all north of Wilshire Boulevard. So today I will prove there was no murder, and tomorrow I will go to the funeral and the next day we will all have a picnic at my uncle’s farm.”

“That’s very nice, but you’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“Where were you this morning?”

“With a rabbi,” he said.

“A rabbi? That’s a Jewish priest, isn’t it?” He burst out laughing, and she said plaintively, “Why must you laugh at me? I don’t pretend to know all these things. You knew I was an old-fashioned girl when you married me. Now you’re sorry you married me.”

“If you are such an old-fashioned girl,” he said, “then why do you allow me to carry the bundles into the house?”

“Because I try to learn the things you teach me,” she said sweetly.

The lady at the Screen Actors Guild had that quality of faded beauty that is so abundant in Hollywood and so occasional in the rest of the country. She was in her late sixties, Masuto judged, but with the bone structure of a star and the practiced dignity of at least a bit-part player. He seemed to remember having seen her in this film or that, and he wished he could refer to one of them with any certainty and thereby win her wholehearted cooperation. But he knew that if he faked a memory of her playing opposite Mary Pickford she would be insulted, and if he made it Joan Crawford, she would inform him that she had never been an actress. Things turned out that way for him.

When he showed her his badge, she studied him curiously and challengingly. It was plain that she did not approve of Oriental policemen or trust in geographic accidents of birth. Irritated a little, she wondered what she could do for him.

“You do keep membership records from year to year?”

“Not for the public,” she informed him.

"I am not the public. I am Detective Sergeant Masuto, of the Beverly Hills Police Force. I told you that. I showed you my badge."

"Have you a warrant?"

"No, I have no warrant. I don't want to pry into your records. I want one simple fact. I want the address of an actress who may or may not belong to the Guild."

"This is Hollywood, not Beverly Hills. I think I should call the police here—"

"My dear lady," Masuto said softly, "I do not get angry or provoked, but if you insist on interfering, you will end up by being quite uncomfortable. Now listen to me. Eleven years ago, a girl called Samantha may or may not have joined this organization. I understand that you can play a speaking role once without joining, but then must join before the second job. Is that so?"

"Yes, and you might as well tell me her name."

"And yours, Miss?"

"Arthur."

"All right, Miss Arthur. Her name was Samantha."

"Samantha what?"

"I don't know. I have one name—Samantha."

"Then don't you think you ought to come back with the second name before you throw your weight around a poor, defenseless old lady?" she asked icily.

"I may or may not be able to find the second name. That is not your problem. I want every Samantha who joined the Guild eleven years ago, give or take a few months on either end. The name is not a common one and there can hardly be too many."

"Indeed!" said Miss Arthur.

"Indeed," Masuto smiled.

Whereupon Miss Arthur led him into another office where two girls sat, both of them younger even when their ages were added together, and where she figuratively washed her hands of Masuto.

"Who is she?" Masuto asked them. "I mean, who was she? The name sort of rings a bell."

"Della Arthur? And you didn't remember?" asked one.

"He didn't remember," said the other.

“She hates you. She’ll cut your heart out. We’ll let you out the back way, officer. We’ll protect you.”

“Are you married?”

“I’m married.”

“Then we’ll let her kill you. You know, all the Beverly Hills policemen are very handsome. Is that how they pick you?”

“I want—” Masuto began.

“We know,” said one of them. “We heard. Enough of this light-hearted girlish talk. Only we don’t file membership by year of admission. We file by name, and you don’t have the family name.”

“But there must be some annual bookkeeping.”

“Oh, yes—yes. If she paid dues, we should have the receipts and the duplicate statements.” The girl was dark haired and bright eyed, and she licked her lips when she looked at Masuto. “Why are they always married? Never mind. Come on, we’ll go in the file room and study 1955 and we’ll find a Samantha. Of course, you know that’s a phony name,” she said to Masuto.

She had led him into the next room, facing a whole wall of files, when he turned and looked at her curiously.

“Why do you say that, Miss—?”

“Just call me Jenny.”

“OK, Jenny. Why?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious?”

“Not to my inscrutable Oriental mind. I grew up in a Japanese community, let us say a little apart from your folkways.”

“You know, Sergeant, you got a nice sense of humor. Cool, if you follow me.” She had opened a file drawer and was riffling through it with practiced fingers as she spoke. “Suppose this Samantha is a kid of twenty or so in 1955. That makes her born in 1935, right?”

“Give or take a few years—yes.”

“Middle of the depression—who’s going to give a kid a nutty name like Samantha? Today’s another matter, but around then, from what I hear, people weren’t thinking about these stylish names.”

“Good. Go on.”

“I bet you a pretty her last name’s a phony too.”

“How’s that?”

“You know—like Glendale or Frazer or Buckingham or Sanford, but no Kaminski or Levy or Jones or Richter—”

“You’d make an excellent cop,” Masuto said admiringly.

“Nah. Half the names here are phonies. It’s part of the profession.”

“Do they also have to register their real names?”

“No rule about that. Some do. Most don’t. If an actor takes a stage name, it becomes part of him. He usually can’t live with two names. Hold on—here’s a beginning. What do you know about that! Samantha Adams. Here’s the address, on Sixth Street in Hollywood. That’s a sorry block of bungalows turned rooming house a long time ago—so this kid was no millionaire.”

Masuto copied down the name and address in his pad. There was no telephone number.

“No payment either,” continued Jenny. “The large sum is for membership,” she told Masuto, showing him the statement. “Almost two hundred with the dues, which is not hay by any means. You see, Sergeant, that’s the initiation fee, entrance fee, lifetime. But it was never paid. Neither was the dues payment—that is, the first payment. Here’s the follow-up statement and the second statement. That finishes the year. So this kid you’re looking for never joined the Guild. She had one job, maybe two—but not three. I mean in the profession. Maybe she went back to slinging hash. That’s another union. And she’s the only one. No more Samantha’s for 1955.”

“You amaze me,” Masuto nodded.

“You want me to amaze you some more, officer? I’m only doing it because you’re the sexy type. I’ll tell you something else about this kid. She never played anything real legitimate. Translated, that means adult theatre. She was never AEA.”

“What’s AEA?”

“Actors Equity. Legitimate theatre. Also, she was never AFTRA, which is TV and radio artists, and she never did the clubs—no stripping, no Las Vegas, not even the crumb joints. That’s because she never claimed AGVA. So either she dumped it all—or else.”

“How do you know all this?”

“No mystery. Look, we have this big overall membership fee of two hundred dollars. But there are also three other major theatrical unions, and if one had to duplicate the entrance fee for every

membership, some of these kids would die first. So we scale it. If you're an Equity member, we give a credit of one hundred dollars. We also have a code of notation for the statements. So that's how I do it. And if your wife locks the door on you, give me a ring right here. Nine to five. You just ask for Jenny. One Samantha, one Jenny. I told you the last name would be a phony too. Samantha Adams—get that.”

Out on Sunset Boulevard and walking toward his car, Masuto wondered vaguely how it would be to be single and to date someone like this Jenny. He had only dated a Caucasian girl once, and she had been shapely but stupid. It had not been a satisfactory evening at all. He was impatient at himself for allowing his thoughts to wander. It was wasteful and childish, and he gathered them together.

Sixth Street, east of Gower; it was an old, old Hollywood bungalow built of spit and slats, as they said, almost half a century before, with the sign out, “Furnished Rooms. Transients Accommodated.” In the old manner—the way most California houses had been before air-conditioning—the windows were closed and the blinds were drawn against the hot noonday sun. Masuto rang the bell, and a fat, frowzy woman of fifty or so, her feet in old slippers, her ample body in a bathrobe and her breath alcoholic, opened the door and said sourly. “I know—you're a cop.”

“You're very perceptive.”

“Nuts. You got it written all over you, and I ain't fooled by the Charlie Chan makeup. What do you want? I run a clean, if a lousy house. Only men. This ain't no Beverly Drive, so I don't want no hookers giving me heartache.”

“I'm looking for a girl.”

“Then you're looking through the wrong keyhole, Officer Chan. I only rent to men.”

“That wasn't the case eleven years ago, I am sure.”

“Good God Almighty, nothing was the case eleven years ago. I was a hootchie-kootchie dancer eleven years ago, believe it or not. Sure, I took in a lady now and then in those days. But what do I remember? I ain't no elephant, except in appearance.”

“This girl's name was Samantha Adams.”

“Samantha Adams. You don’t say.”

“Maybe eighteen, twenty years old. Blue eyes, blonde hair, good figure, maybe five feet six or seven inches tall—”

“Poor Officer Chan—what are you, an LA cop?”

“Beverly Hills,” Masuto replied, taking out his billfold and showing her his badge.

“That accounts for it. Some day they give you a day off, wander along the Sunset Strip—you’ll find maybe ten thousand babes to answer your description—no! No, wait a moment. Samantha Adams. That wasn’t her real name. Some other name—no, I can’t remember the other name for the life of me, but I remember her. I used to kid her about that Samantha business. Poor kid—poor, stupid kid.”

“Why do you say that?” Masuto asked softly.

“Ah, she had no brains. You know, mister, for a dame this is the hardest, lousiest, dirtiest dark bunghole of a town in all these USA. Make it—you don’t even exist out here unless you got a stainless steel ramrod up your you-know-where. This kid was soft—all the time soft and scared. Then one day she is going to lick the world and she goes off on a job at some studio—I think at World Wide, over in the Valley. Something happens. I don’t know what—but here’s a kid has the heart torn out of her. She has the curse after that, and we can’t stop the bleeding, so I finally get a doctor and pay him. She comes out of it finally, but very weak and not good up on top. She’s broke and a month behind. What the hell, I never threw a kid out on the street. That’s why I stopped it with the dames. I know what it is to be one, and I ain’t got the cabbage for an institution. So I don’t even mention it to this Samantha kid, but one day she walks out. Leaves me her lousy suitcase and her few lousy clothes for payment—I should sell them. Can you imagine? Yes, sir, this world is one big joyride.”

“You said your name is Mrs. Baker?”

“Dolly Baker, sonny.”

“You never saw her again?”

“No. That was ‘Goodby Samantha.’”

“And you can’t remember her name—the other name?”

“It’ll come to me.”

“You wouldn’t have a register or anything like that?”

“Buster,” she smiled, “what do I look like, a sap? They can make their space ships without my poor widow’s mite.”

He grinned back at her. “Thanks, Mrs. Baker. You have great heart, and I think that when you reflect on it and realize that I bear no harm for this poor girl, you will remember. Here’s my card. Will you call me when the name comes back to you?”

“Masao Masuto,” she read from the card. “I like you, Buster. I’ll call you, but if that poor kid is in something that stinks, find the lousy male bastard that put her there and go easy on her. Will you?”

“I’ll try, Mrs. Baker.”

“You’re Leo, aren’t you?” she asked, looking at him narrowly.

“How did you know?” He was impressed but not astounded, recalling that he had shown her the open wallet with badge and identity card.

“I’m sensitive to such things. I am Scorpio myself—very perceptive. That girl didn’t steal anything. She did not hurt anyone. You take my word for that.”

“It’s eleven years later.”

“People don’t change—not the deep nut of them. You ought to know that, Officer Chan.”

CHAPTER THREE



Murphy Anderson

It was just 12:15, just past midday, when Detective Sergeant Masuto parked his car behind one of the new savings and loan office buildings on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills. Northeastern Films had the entire sixth floor, with at least one hundred thousand dollars worth of modern-Italian-Southern-California decor; but today the bright edge of wealth was muted by the haze of death. The men and women who worked in the offices of Northeastern were depressed by the fact that it was incumbent upon them to be depressed by the death of Al Greenberg.

The girl at the reception desk looked upon Masuto bleakly as he told her that he had an appointment with Mr. Anderson. She spoke into the phone and then she rose and led Masuto through a section of minor offices to the rear of the floor. This whole end of the floor was divided into three offices. According to the names on the door, the center office belonged to Al Greenberg, the one on the left to John D. Cotter, and the one on the right to Murphy Anderson.

Expressionless faces examined them as they walked through, and when they reached Anderson's office, the big, white-haired man opened the door himself, invited Masuto to be seated, and closed the door behind him. Masuto lowered himself into a straight-backed Italian import, and Anderson apologized for not having Cotter there with them.

"You don't know what this has done to us, Sergeant. Jack's been at the bank all morning, and that's only the beginning. I have been talking to five hundred people and trying to help Phoebe arrange the funeral proceedings at the same time." He looked at his watch. "As a matter of fact, I have a very important luncheon meeting at one. I imagine we can finish by then. I have been talking to your boss at

the police station, and he agrees that there is absolutely no sense in pursuing the murder angle. We have no evidence of murder, no real suspicion of anyone, and a very definite knowledge of poor Al's illness. Jack Cotter is willing to forget what he heard. Do you agree?"

"It hardly matters whether I agree or not," Masuto said, spreading his hands slightly. "Mine is a negative search—simply to dispel any lingering doubts. I think the very fact that this was kept out of the papers helps your desire."

"Thank God for that. I don't mind telling you—but in confidence—that we are in the middle of the biggest move in the history of this business, the acquisition of the remaining library of World Wide Films—for eighteen million dollars. Jack Cotter finished signing the papers this morning. If this had broken as murder, the deal would have been postponed or killed completely."

"Then if we were fanciful," Masuto smiled, "we could say that the murderer attempted to frustrate your deal."

"Then why didn't she break the story to the press?"

Masuto shrugged. "Who knows? Could you tell me something, perhaps, about your company."

"To what point?"

"Again—who knows? But I am curious. If I am not mistaken, Mr. Greenberg began the company some fifteen years ago?"

"Closer to twelve years. He and I began together, and then we took Jack Cotter in. Al began to produce TV shows about fifteen years ago. He was one of the first. I was his lawyer, and he organized the company to produce and I went in with him. But I don't take any of the credit. I am a lawyer and a businessman, a good lawyer and a pretty good businessman, but I think I would make a lousy producer. Whatever Northeastern is, Al Greenberg is mainly responsible."

"How did Jack Cotter come into it?"

"Jack was a sort of Western star back in the late 'thirties. He made five feature films for Asterlux, and they went bankrupt in 1940—or almost bankrupt. They liquidated their assets and settled. They owed Jack a hundred thousand dollars in back wages, and as a settlement they gave him the American distribution rights to the five Westerns. Who ever knew then how TV would eat feature films! Back in 1957,

Jack proposed to throw his five features into our operation in return for a piece of stock and a vice-presidency in the company. We needed the features and we took him in.”

“Is Sidney Burke also in the firm?”

“Not exactly in it. He began with our publicity right from the beginning. He’s good. At first he worked almost for nothing. Then he got some stock. He still does our publicity, but he has his own company.”

“Would you mind telling me who the stockholders are?”

“Why?”

“Because it would be easier if you told me,” Masuto said, “than if I had to track down the information. I could, you know.”

“You still want to make something out of this, don’t you?”

“No. What is there, is there, Mr. Anderson. If nothing is there—”

“OK. There are five stockholders—or were. Al held sixteen thousand shares. His wife, Phoebe, five thousand, a gift from him when they were married. Sidney has two thousand and Jack has four thousand. I own six thousand shares, which makes me the second largest stockholder.”

“And Mr. Tulley—Mike Tulley?”

“He has no shares. Why should he? We hired him three years ago and we made him a TV star. But at this point our shares have a book value of almost three hundred dollars each. There’s no market on them, but if there were, it would be enormous.”

“And now what happens to Mr. and Mrs. Greenberg’s shares?”

“Nothing happens to Phoebe’s—unless she decides to sell. And I have advised her not to and I will continue to so advise her. But Al’s personal stock, according to our initial agreement, goes back into the company treasury, and his estate is paid fifty percent of book value. Providing Jack and I refuse to purchase.”

“How’s that?”

“If any one of the three officers dies, the remaining two have the right to divide his stock and purchase it at twenty-five percent of book value. The remaining twenty-five percent is then paid by the company treasury. It’s a peculiar arrangement, but perfectly legal and it protects the officers and major stockholders.

“And what do you and Mr. Cotter intend to do?”

“We’ll buy the stock, of course. Are you thinking of that as a motive? But whose motive for Al’s death, Sergeant? I am the only one who profits. I gain control, God help me. There’s no reason for you to believe me, but I’d blow this business and ten like it to give Al a week of extra living.”

“We were not to talk of murder, but simply to eliminate any possibility of it. Forgive me if I raise a rather shameful matter, Mr. Anderson, but do you remember an incident with a girl called Samantha? Eleven years ago.”

Murphy Anderson stared at Masuto for a long moment. Then he swung on his heel and walked to the window. When he turned back, his face was cold and set.

“What the hell business is that of yours, Sergeant?”

“Last night, Mike Tulley asked me to come over. He told me about the incident. He was very frightened. I gathered that he is under the impression that one of you—one of your four men, or five if we include Greenberg—is married to Samantha.”

“Let me tell you something about Al Greenberg, Sergeant. I never spoke of this until now. But Al never touched that kid. I’m not defending myself or Jack or Mike or Sidney. What we are, we are. But Al went into that dressing room, looked at the kid, had a few words with her and came out. He was the last. Don’t worry—I remember, I goddamn well remember. Jack had disappeared, and when Sidney saw Al’s face, he took off. Al said to me, ‘If anything like this ever happens again on one of my sets, Murph, I will kill you and everyone else concerned with my own hands. And I’m not kidding. You were high in my esteem, and now you are low as a turd—you and that stinking shithead Sidney.’ Maybe not those exact words, but that was the tune.”

“Then if what you say is true,” Masuto said slowly, “why are we all quietly thinking that Samantha murdered him?”

“Baloney. Why would she wait eleven years?”

“Then would you mind telling me the gist of your discussion with Mr. Cotter, concerning Samantha?”

“I would mind. It has no bearing here.”

“Have you also spoken to Sidney Burke about it?”

“You know, I don’t like those questions, Sergeant Masuto. Not one goddamn bit. Your job is to protect the citizens of this community, not to harass them. I am no stranger at City Hall—”

“You know well enough what my job is, Mr. Anderson. You are an officer of the court, so don’t threaten me. I don’t threaten you. This case is as sticky as flypaper, and my hands are full of it and I am trying to walk a tight rope at the same time. I ask you something, and you could blow your top and slug me, and what would that solve?”

“I don’t blow my top. So if you got any questions, ask them and then get to hell out of here!”

“Do you believe your wife is Samantha?” Masuto asked flatly.

Anderson’s face whitened and he clenched his fists. He took a step toward Masuto, and then his telephone rang. He picked it up, shouted into it, “I told you, no calls!” and slammed it back into its cradle. It rang again. He picked it up and listened. The white of his face became whiter.

“Oh, my God,” he said. “My God—my God.”

He put the telephone down and stared hopelessly at Masuto.

“What happened?” Masuto asked him.

“Mike Tulley has just been murdered. Shot. With his wife’s gun.”

There were cars all around the Tulley house. This one had not been kept quiet. There were newspapermen at the place and more still arriving. Over a dozen cars were crowded in and around the driveway.

Officer Frank Seaton supervised the half-dozen uniformed men who were trying to keep the newspaper people and the curious out of the house—and at the same time keep the traffic moving on Benedict Canyon Road. Inside the house, Detective Beckman was in charge. They were waiting for Masuto to arrive before they removed the body, and Beckman immediately led Masuto into the study. Murphy Anderson stayed in the living room. Anderson remained silent. Like so many big, fleshy men, a mood could age him. He had not spoken a word on the way over with Masuto, and he said nothing now as he slumped into a chair in the living room.

“Why?” asked Detective Beckman, nodding at him.

“He’s the boss now,” Masuto said. “I want him here. Something’s going on inside him that I don’t know about.”

Beckman closed the door of the study behind them—the same room Masuto had been in the night before, except that now it was full of smoke from Dr. Sam Baxter’s cigar. There were also the fingerprint man, the photographer and two men from the hospital, Beverly Hills being too small a community to boast its own police autopsy facilities. The mortal remains of Mike Tulley lay on the floor, covered by a thin rubber sheet, which Dr. Baxter callously threw back. Tulley’s body was stripped to the waist. There were three small, ugly bullet holes in his chest.

“There you are, Masao,” said Baxter. “Close range. Thirty-two lady’s gun. Smith and Wesson automatic. Victim died of heart failure but not of a heart attack.”

“Your sense of humor leaves something to be desired,” Masuto said. “God help him.”

“Macabre job, macabre humor. I don’t get too many murders, Masao, but they mash themselves up in cars day in and day out. Half the human race is in a frenzied race to eliminate itself. Can we take him away?”

Masuto nodded, and the hospital attendants put the body on a stretcher and carried it out.

“What about them?” Beckman asked, motioning to fingerprints and photography.

“They should be finished now.”

Reluctantly, the fingerprint man and the photographer allowed themselves to be ushered out of the room. Dr. Baxter dropped into a chair and relit his cigar. Detective Beckman seated himself on the built-in couch. Masuto remained standing, staring at the blood blot on the carpet. Tall, sliding aluminum doors at one side of the study opened onto planting and swimming pool—that heady badge of status that is almost obligatory in Beverly Hills. The contained vista was very beautiful, and Masuto thought he recognized the work of Hono Asaki, the landscape gardener who was very much in demand at the moment. Standing there, Masuto attempted to feel something of what the dead man had felt. It was not good to die in the face of

such beauty—in youth and vigor. But then, it is not good to die, anywhere, anyplace.

Beckman rose, went to the table, and picked up a card-board box. It contained the gun.

“You want to look at this, Masao?”

“Her gun?”

“Right.”

“She admits it?”

“Right.”

“Send it over to ballistics. Where is she?”

“Upstairs, lying down. She was hysterical. Doc gave her something to quiet her down.”

“What did you give her?” Masato asked Baxter.

“A placebo. Two aspirin. No shock, just lady hysterics. She quieted down almost immediately.”

“You’re a witch doctor,” Beckman said.

“Aren’t we all?”

“Do you want to see her now?” asked Beckman.

“Later. Tell me about it. It seems I make a practice of coming in after everyone else is seated.”

“As long as you’re on time for the next one. As far as we can put it together, this is it. According to the wife. She’s the only witness. The lady who did the killing—”

“Lady?”

“So it would seem. I am giving you Mrs. Tulley’s version, because it’s the only version we got. This lady killer, who seems to be the coldest dish around this town, evidently parked her car down the road toward Lexington. One of our cops saw it there when he was making his rounds, but he didn’t give it a second glance. It was a cream-colored car, he thinks, but it could be dull yellow, and it could be either a Pontiac, an Olds or a Buick, or maybe just something that looks like one of them. That’s what you train a cop for, to be observant. Well, she walked up to the driveway, and either Tulley let her into the house himself or she came around here and in through the windows. They have a housekeeper, who was in the kitchen. They have a maid, who was upstairs. Maybe Tulley knew she was coming. Anyway from when the cop saw the car, we guess that this

killer-type broad arrived here at about noon or thereabouts. Ten or fifteen minutes later, Mrs. Tulley comes down. She is dressed and on her way to make a lunch date at the Beverly Wilshire. The lunch date is a Susie Cohn, and we checked that out because she called here to see what was keeping Lenore. But Mrs. Tulley has to have a word with her husband before she leaves the house and she comes to the study, tries the door, finds it locked. 'Mike!' she calls out. 'Open up.' Then she hears a woman's voice, 'The mills of the gods, you—'

At this point, Detective Beckman consulted his notebook.

"Yeah, this is it, 'The mills of the gods, you dirty louse!' Then Tulley yells, 'What are you talking like that for? Are you nuts? Put away that gun!' Then three shots, deliberate, one, two, three. Then the sound of Tulley's body hitting the floor. Then Mrs. Tulley begins to scream. The cook comes running. The maid comes running. There is Mrs. Tulley screaming and pounding on the door. They think they hear a car start—but it doesn't send any message to them. Then the maid gets the idea to run around to the big sliding windows. As she leaves the house, she sees Tulley's car swing out of the driveway to the right. It's parked on Benedict Canyon Road, where the killer picked up her own car and drove off, just as cool as a cucumber. Apparently, she knocked off Tulley and then walked through the sliding doors into the garden, like a lady should, got into Tulley's car and took off."

"Fingerprints on the gun?"

"Are you kidding?" Beckman said.

"What do you think?"

"What should I think? If Mrs. Tulley let him have it, how did she get around to the other side of a locked door in all of ten seconds, and who drove Tulley's car out and down almost to Lexington? They all seem to have heard the car start, and the maid saw it swing out of the driveway. Mrs. Tulley left the maid upstairs so that accounts for her. The cook is an old Mexican lady, and Doc had to give her the real thing, not a placebo. So what is left?"

"Speculation," Masuto said thoughtfully. "Fascinating speculation."

"You put the two broads together?" Beckman asked.

"At least the two deaths," Masuto replied. "The poor Chief wanted so desperately not to have a murder in Beverly Hills."

“Come in,” Lenore Tulley said in reply to Masuto’s knock. She was not in bed, but sitting by the window, fully dressed and smoking a cigarette. Unlike the rest of the house, Mrs. Tulley’s bedroom was aggressively nonmodern, with a mahogany four-poster bed, a large hooked rug, dotted Swiss curtains, and two very fine and expensive early American chests. While Masuto’s knowledge of furniture and decor was by no means encyclopedic or wholly discriminating, he was possessed of good taste and he recognized that while the room was odd, or at least at odds with the rest of the house, it was neither vulgar nor pretentious.

“My hair used to be brown,” Lenore Tulley said evenly. “I graduated Smith, class of ’56. I am not a bona fide California product, and the furniture in this room was in my room in Connecticut when I was a kid. I am frightened but not grief-stricken, Sergeant. Let me make that plain. It is an ugly thing—and very upsetting too—to have your husband murdered while you are forced to stand on the wrong side of a locked door and do nothing about it. Believe me, if it were possible, I would have saved my husband’s life. I disliked him intensely, but I had no desire to see him murdered. If I do any weeping, it is only for myself. One never really recovers from a murder, does one?”

“That all depends,” Masuto said, smiling slightly. “The victim never recovers, does he? The murderer sometimes recovers, I suppose. The innocent bystander—well—tell me, if you disliked Mike Tulley so, why did you remain married to him?”

She shrugged. “That’s almost too complex to unravel. We separated twice. I am very wealthy—much more than he—but more recently. My father died last year, and I inherited a great deal. There’s a community property law in this state. I was not in love with anyone else. I am neurotic as hell and I see an analyst five times a week, and in this rotten social blister called Los Angeles, there’s a certain value in being married to a TV star. There’s no other status out here. Also, Mike made divorce a rough thing—”

“Then generally speaking, his death benefits and liberates you,” Masuto said softly, not knowing what reaction this would evoke from her.

But she only shrugged and nodded. “If you want to look at it that way. I suppose poor Mike made it a little easier for me. I don’t know.”

“And the murder—can you talk about it now?”

“Why not?”

“Dr. Baxter said you were hysterical.”

“So I was upset. That idiot doctor of yours gave me a couple of aspirin. He partakes of a general Beverly Hills belief in the stupidity of women. I’m all right now.”

“As I understand it, you were on your way out to make a luncheon date and you knocked at the door of the study. You were coming from upstairs?”

“That’s right.”

“From this room?”

“Yes.”

“How long had you been here in this room?”

“About an hour—dressing, makeup. My maid, Binnie, was with me—not to help me dress. I can dress perfectly well by myself and I prefer to. But Binnie had a fight yesterday with some stupid kid she’s dating, and she was crying on my shoulder.”

“You left her in the room when you went out?”

“No, she followed me out on the landing and began to whine about what should she do.”

“Giving you an absolutely perfect alibi,” Masuto reflected.

“Well, don’t hate me for that, Sergeant. No one will believe it. By tonight, everyone will have made up his or her mind that I killed poor Mike.”

“I don’t think so. Now, you knocked on the door. Did you hear the woman’s voice immediately?”

“No. there was an interval of silence. I suppose you could count ten. Then that crazy voice.”

“Crazy? Why crazy?”

“That’s it. I don’t know.”

“But you said crazy voice. Why?”

“Because it was different, I suppose. A high, hysterical voice. It shook and trembled. I just never heard a voice like that before.”

“Then it did not remind you of anyone you know?”

“Maybe. I am not sure.”

“Look, Mrs. Tulley, either it did remind you or it did not. Which is it?”

“It reminded me. It reminded me of someone’s voice.”

“Who’s?”

“I don’t know.”

“Dear lady, please. Be reasonable. If it reminded you of a voice, you must know who it reminded you of.”

“I don’t.”

“All right. Was the voice mocking? Hateful?”

“Mocking, I would say.”

“And your husband’s voice?”

“Afraid. Oh, my God, he was so afraid—you know, I can’t feel any real grief and yet it breaks my heart. He was so afraid.” She began to cry and went over to one of the chests for a fresh handkerchief.

“Are you all right?” Masuto asked.

“Quite. Go on, please. I want to see the bitch who did this drawn and quartered. Why? What gave her the right? Because a man’s a louse? If you go around killing every man who is a louse to some dame, then you’ll end the male population, period! I hate her. Tulley—Tulley was just a permanent adolescent, an all-American boy who never grew up, just like every other all-American boy. Why did she kill him? He wasn’t even a real, high-class louse. He was only a slob, a good-looking TV slob.”

“What bitch?” Masuto asked. “Samantha?”

She studied him narrowly for a moment. “What do you know about Samantha?”

“A bit here. A bit there. What do you know about her?”

She cried a bit again, and then she dried her eyes and said, “I wish I was like you, Sergeant.”

“How is that?”

“Japanese. Out of it. So I could stand back and look at it. You must get some kind of special kick out of looking at a sewer.”

“I live in the same sewer,” Masuto said. “Also, I’m a Nisei. Here I am and here I live. I would like to talk about Samantha.”

“Oh, I just bet you would!”

“Will you?”

“You are damn right I will. Talk and anything else that will put a rope around that bitch’s neck. Shall I tell you something, Mr. Detective? I had not seen my father for two years, but when he died it was the worst thing that ever happened to me until now. Maybe worse, because I loved him and I could never break down the wall between us. Do you know who I ran to the day he died?”

“Al Greenberg?”

“That’s right, Al Greenberg. And that rotten bitch murdered Al Greenberg and now she murdered Mike.”

“When did you find out about Samantha?”

“Last night. After you left. It was a stinking, dirty mess, just the way this whole thing is. I don’t know how to tell it to you.”

“Any way. Try. I’m not a human being. I’m a cop.”

“He accused me of being Samantha, Sergeant. Can you imagine? He accused me of being Samantha.”

“Well, that’s not so strange. He was overwrought, terrified, filled with guilt. Did you know about Samantha at that point? When he accused you?”

“No. I did not. Furthermore, I made him understand that when he and his anthropoid buddies were having their gangshag, I was in Smith College in western Massachusetts. And then that fool—that poor fool had the nerve to ask me whether I could prove it.”

“Then you knew what had happened to Samantha?”

“No. Not then. I’m mixing up the sequence last night—that’s because I’m upset.”

“I understand,” Masuto said. “He accused you of being Samantha, but you did not know what he meant?”

“Exactly. I said to him, ‘Mike, are you nuts?’ Oh, I was no joy. I hate myself. But I did not know he was going to be killed. I said, ‘Mike, I always knew you were a louse, but I always figured you for a louse with marbles. Do I have to tell you that I am your own miserable, everloving wife, Lenore? Smith College, class of ’56. Have you really flipped? Haven’t you looked at my yearbook? What kind of a nut are you? And who is this Samantha?’ Then he wanted out of the whole thing, but I wouldn’t let go. Then he told me. I think he enjoyed telling me.”

“The dressing room, the part in a TV show, the arrangements that Sidney Burke made?”

“Right down the line. Oh, he was a daisy, my Mike—right down the line. Do you mind if I have a drink?”

“Go ahead.”

“Will you join me?”

Masuto shook his head. Lenore Tulley went to a cedar chest, opened it and by that motion caused a small but well-equipped bar to rise out of its depths. She poured herself a straight vodka and threw it down her throat.

“You’re sure you won’t join me?” she asked Masuto again. “You know—you’re a good-looking cop. How old are you?”

“Old enough not to drink in a lady’s bedroom while I am on duty.”

“How about that? Shouldn’t you have a stenographer in here taking notes and all that?”

“No. You’re not a suspect—”

Detective Sy Beckman knocked on the door, and then entered. “Masao,” he said, “what about the news boys talking to Mrs. Tulley? Also the CBS and ABC and NBC trucks are outside. They all want Mrs. Tulley.”

Masuto looked inquiringly at Lenore Tulley, who shook her head and said, “I have had it. They can drop dead, the lot of them. Los Angeles, farewell. They can get lost in the smog.”

“You’ll have to talk to them sooner or later,” Beckman said.

“Then later.”

“Tell them she is prostrated and unable to talk to anyone.”

“No!” she exclaimed.

“Tell them that,” Masuto said.

Beckman left, and Lenore Tulley said to Masuto, “You got a hell of a lot of nerve for a—”

“For a Jap?”

“Just don’t push me around. I have had enough of being pushed around.”

Masuto rose abruptly and started for the door.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

“To look for whoever killed your husband, instead of pushing you around.”

“Oh, stop being a horse’s ass and sit down,” she said. “I never met a male who didn’t have all the engaging tactics of a frustrated six-year-old. You’re married, right?”

“Right.”

“I never met a decent man who wasn’t. Only the slobs are *libres*.”

“*Libres*?”

“That’s what they call the cabs in Mexico. It means they’re free for customers.”

“Murphy Anderson is sitting down in your living room.”

“Let him set. You keep testing, don’t you?”

“That’s what they pay me for, Mrs. Tulley—”

“Call me Lenore. You’ve moved into my bedroom.” She poured herself another vodka and tossed it down, shivered, and said to Masuto, “What are you, anyway? I mean, Christian or Mormon or ancestor worship or what?”

“I am a Buddhist, Mrs. Tulley. You’ve been married six years. No children?”

“That is none of your damn business. Christ, maybe it is. I don’t know what is your business. I was married to Mike. You know, he kept a little book of every dame he took to bed, one hundred and twenty-seven entries, names, places, dates and physical descriptions, just in case he should confuse them.”

“He showed it to you?”

“No, my dear Detective Masuto. I got at it when he was away. Dirty curiosity. And you want me to have kids with that? Oh, no—thank God, that’s one I missed.” She stared at him then with awakened interest. “Good Lord, you still think that maybe I am Samantha, don’t you?”

“No, you’re not Samantha. But suppose we take four of your friends, Mrs. Tulley—Trude Burke, Phoebe Greenberg, Stacy Anderson and Arlene Cotter—”

“My friends?”

“You know them well, don’t you?”

“What is well? Arlene Cotter is a bitch with the mouth of a snake. Stacy folds her hands across her belly and she drinks too much. She’s contented Beverly Hills. Phoebe Greenberg—well, no one knows her. I don’t even think Phoebe knows her. The day after she

married Al, she became Great Lady of Beverly Hills. It's the only part she ever had and she decided she would play it better without any speaking lines. And Trude Burke is a little tramp."

"Oh? What do you mean when you call someone a tramp?"

She downed a third vodka and replied, "I mean I'm being a bitch. And if you don't know what a tramp is, my inscrutable Oriental, look it up in Mencken on slang."

"And which of the four is Samantha, Mrs. Tulley?"

"You must be kidding."

"Not at all. Will you answer a question truthfully—one question?"

"You're impugning me, and I no longer like you, Mr. Chan. I know damn well what you intend to ask me. You are going to say, 'My dear Mrs. Tulley, is one of them Samantha?' The answer is yes. One of them is Samantha. You're goddamn right one of them is!"

"Which one?"

Lenore Tulley shook her head. She was a little drunk and she was becoming thoughtful.

"Which one?"

"Fuzz," she answered with distaste. "What am I doing here in my own bedroom with an Oriental fuzz playing psychological games with me? Drop dead, Mr. Detective."

"You said you wanted to get your husband's killer."

"Did I? What could I have been thinking of? Killing Mike was a public service. She deserves a medal."

In the bedlam downstairs, Murphy Anderson sat like a lost child, hunched over in his chair, warding off the reporters and hiding from the TV cameras, which were still barred from the house.

Masuto watched him as Beckman said, "Do you want to talk to the maid, housekeeper?"

"No. Get their statements."

"There's no one you want to arrest?" Beckman asked hopefully.

"No—no one."

"Let me get out of here, would you?" Murphy Anderson asked.

"You don't want to talk to the widow?"

"No, I don't want to talk to the widow. I only want to get out of here."

“All right,” Masuto nodded. “I think I have had enough of this place too. I’ll drive you over to your office. Now remember, they will crawl all over you when you leave here. Just walk straight ahead with me. Say nothing.”

“I’m a lawyer,” Anderson growled.

“Of course you are. How stupid of me!”

Out in the sunshine, they pushed past reporters, the curious, and the TV people. A cop came alongside of Masuto and said softly, “They got a call downtown from a Mrs. Baker. She wants you should drop by and talk to her.”

“All right. I’ll get to it.”

He got Murphy Anderson to his car and into it, and then they were worming their way through the traffic, down Benedict Canyon Drive to Sunset. Anderson lay back in his seat, his eyes closed.

“How stupid of me,” Masuto repeated. “Forgetting that you are a lawyer and asking you whether you thought your wife was Samantha. A nasty question, and an invitation to give evidence against your wife.”

“Evidence? What the hell, nothing I say to you means anything in a court!”

“And what does Tulley’s death do to your company?”

“It’s a blow. It’s a shot in the belly. It means that the show is over. No more ‘Lonesome Rider.’ Well, we’re insured—I mean Mike was insured in our favor.”

“How much?”

“A quarter of a million dollars.”

“That’s a comfort, isn’t it?”

“It’s a comfort, as you say, but we’re still in the red. We lose a lot more than a quarter of a million.”

“Well, to a cop such numbers have no practical meaning. I do apologize for an inconsiderate question. But tell me, please, who do you think is Samantha?”

“Now that’s nicely put, isn’t it, Sergeant? Who do I think is Samantha? I can tell you who Samantha is—she’s a little tramp who bit off more than she could chew. I’m sick of all this weeping over a stupid kid who invites disaster. But who is Samantha? The answer is no one. This whole Samantha kick is a phony.”

“Then you don’t think Samantha murdered Tulley?”

“I do not.”

“And you don’t think that one of your associates might be married to Samantha?”

“Nuts.”

They were at Wilshire now. Masuto said that he would like to come up to the offices for just a moment. Anderson protested only a bit.

“The whole world has fallen in. There are only twelve hundred things for me to do, Sergeant. Why don’t you give me a break for today.”

“Murderers are always inconsiderate. But Detective Beckman tells me that Cotter is in the office, and I would like to have a word with him.”

But it turned out that Cotter had been there and left.

“Did he say where he was going?” Anderson asked his secretary.

“I imagined he was going over to poor Mr. Tulley’s home.”

“When was that?”

“At least a half hour ago. I had two ham-on-ryes and two coffees sent up. They’re inside. The coffee is still warm. I felt that perhaps you would not have time to eat.”

“You felt right,” Anderson replied, leading Masuto into his office.

The sandwiches were on a tray on his desk. “Actually, they are ham and cheese. The world caves in, but you go on eating—especially when you’re a compulsive eater. That’s my problem. You know, I’m becoming fond of you, Sergeant. That snotty Oriental manner is intriguing. How about I put you in a TV pilot? We got to have something to replace the ‘Lonesome Rider,’ who’s plenty lonesome now, believe me. Ever thought of being an actor?”

“Who hasn’t?” Masuto smiled. “It’s the occupational daydream of Los Angeles. I have a cousin who works all the time. He’s that heavy-set, sadistic General who always sits at a table eating, and says, ‘Take American out, shoot him.’ My wife’s sister was in the Brando film.”

“Have a sandwich.”

“I am honored,” Masuto said, taking the sandwich gratefully. He was starved. He bit into it and chewed thoughtfully and then said, “Didn’t anyone like Tulley?”

“Everyone loved him. He received over a thousand letters a week—fans. They adored him. In Chicago, they tore off his pants.”

“Just between you and me, Mr. Anderson—who do you think killed him?”

“Have some coffee.”

“Of course,” Masuto said, accepting the coffee, “that’s the trouble with this case. Every one of you knows who the killer is. Maybe the candidate isn’t the same in every case, but you all know. Only, there’s one thing you apparently can’t get into your respective skulls—that this killer is a homicidal maniac, and that he will kill again and again and again.”

“That’s your guess.”

“No. That the way the symbols are arranged—but you don’t believe in symbols anymore, and you don’t see them. You are a people enlightened—”

The loudspeaker intercom on Anderson’s desk crackled at that moment, and his secretary said, “I have a call for Detective Sergeant Masuto.”

“Any name?” Masuto asked.

“Oh, yes. She said you would know her. Her name is Samantha.”

Anderson reached for the phone, but Masuto gripped his arm and said quickly, “Do you have a private line in the office?”

“There, in the corner,” pointing to a phone on an end table next to the couch.

“Get on it. Call the operator. Use my name, give her the main number, and trace us. Quick.”

Then, as Anderson ran across the room to the other phone, Masuto lifted the one on the desk and said, “Hello. This is Sergeant Masuto.”

“All right, Masuto—this is Samantha. Now listen carefully. I am not going to repeat.” The voice was the precise, controlled theatrically trained voice of a professional.

“Now wait a minute. Let me get my pad.”

“Come off it, Masuto. I know you’re having the call traced right now. That will take you at least eleven minutes. I don’t propose to give you more than five.”

“You’re optimistic if you think we can trace a call in eleven minutes. How do I know you’re Samantha?”

“How? Because I know what went on in that lousy trailer room when that little louse, Sidney Burke, arranged for his gangshag.”

“A good many ladies seem to know,” Masuto said.

“No, no. Not at all. Let me give you the rundown, Sergeant. Max Green was in that room, and he’s dead—”

“Who is Max Green?” Masuto interrupted.

“Interrupt me once more, mister, and I hang up. Now are you ready to listen?”

“Go ahead.”

“Max Green was there, and he’s dead. A rotten little creep called Fred Saxton was there, and he’s dead. Al Greenberg was there and he’s dead. Mike Tulley was there, and he’s dead. Which leaves Jack Cotter, Murphy Anderson and Sidney Burke. Four down, three to go. You know, Sergeant, just to convince that heathen and doubting Oriental mind of yours, the gun that killed Mike Tulley was a 32-caliber Smith and Wesson. It was his wife’s gun. I shot him three times in the chest. None of that has been on the air yet. Check me and see. As for the other three—tell them to expect me.”

She hung up, and Masuto replaced the phone and said to Anderson, “Let it go, Mr. Anderson. She’s off.”

“Was it Samantha?” he asked eagerly.

“That’s what she said.”

“What else did she say?”

Almost word for word, Masuto repeated what the woman had said—all of it, leaving nothing out, and watching Murphy Anderson’s face as he spoke. At the end, he said to Anderson, “Who is Fred Saxton and who is Mike Green?”

“Oh, my God,” Anderson whispered.

“Who are they?”

“Fred Saxton was the production manager on the ‘Lonesome Rider.’ Max Green was the assistant producer.”

“Isn’t that sort of the same job?”

“Sort of.”

“Then I presume they’re both dead?”

“Yes, they’re dead. We had changed the title from assistant producer to production manager and then we gave the job to Fred Saxton.”

“How did they die, Mr. Anderson?”

“Max died a normal death. My God, this thing is insane enough without making it crazier. Max died of a heart attack, over a year ago.”

“How old was he?”

“I don’t know—forty-six, forty-seven.”

“Then it wasn’t so normal, was it?”

“Why? It’s young, but people die of heart attacks in their forties. It happens.”

“And how did Fred Saxton die?”

“One of these stupid accidents—” He broke off, rose suddenly, and went to a little bar in the room and poured himself a glass of brandy.

“You want a little brandy, Sergeant?”

“No. So maybe it was not an accident. What happened?”

Anderson drank the brandy, wincing and making faces. “His skull was crushed. On one of the sound stages we rent over at World Wide. A hundred-pound sandbag counterweight fell from the beam where it was rigged. He never knew what hit him. Died instantly. Terrible—just terrible.”

“I thought everything was lead counterweights and electric winches today.”

“This was an old stage. Those bags could have been up there for years—I don’t know. But it could have been an accident too.”

“I suppose so,” Masuto admitted.

“Can I tell Jack and Sidney about what she said?”

“Why not? A few minutes ago, you refused to give an inch about our Samantha. Have you changed your mind?”

“I don’t know,” Anderson replied.

CHAPTER FOUR



Peggy Groton

WHEN Masuto entered City Hall on Santa Monica Boulevard, he was already aware of a glow of notoriety in which the city would alternately squirm and bask. Beverly Hills was hardly a place for violent murder. He sometimes thought of the place as a toy city, with a toy police force to guard people who dreamed away their lives, but those were very private thoughts and not proper to any bona fide policeman. Usually, he came and went unnoticed, but today reporters tried to buttonhole him, and curious ones, town bureaucrats and employees, begged to be let in on the facts.

His chief also begged. "What I want to know, Masao, is do the two deaths connect? Do we have some kind of a double killing on our hands?"

"Maybe a triple killing," Masuto said. "This is one with a taste for blood and death. This is a demon. But you don't believe in demons, do you?"

"I also do not buy any high-class Oriental philosophy at this moment. I also don't like a cop who gets on a connecting bug and goes off on the mass-killer kick. Just before you came in, it was on the wire that some dame goes off Mulhol land Drive on the Valley side. You'll connect that up too."

"What dame?"

"I don't know. It's Hollywood anyway. Haven't we got enough trouble? Let the city worry about it."

"Who's up there?"

"I don't know, rescue service and city cops, I suppose. What's the difference?"

"Did the car burn?"

"How do I know if the car burned?"

“Chief, do me a favor,” Masuto said, trying to control his excitement. “Believe me—something is happening, something is working out. Get them on the radiophone and tell them to hold everything until I get there. Not to touch the car. I don’t mean they should not take the woman to the hospital—”

“The woman’s dead, Saito.”

“Of course—of course. Will you phone them?”

“They’re city cops—all right, I’ll phone. I had to go and hire a Japanese cop. But what about all this? Where are we? Was Al Greenberg murdered?”

“He was murdered.”

“You’re sure?”

“No one’s ever sure about such a killing.”

“And Tulley?”

“The same killer. That’s a very strong opinion. More opinion is that the same civilized joker murdered a third man, one Fred Saxton, on the World Wide lot about seven weeks ago. Perhaps a fourth man—that waits to be seen. And nothing is going to wish it away.”

Mulholland Drive was a high rib out of a sea of yellow smog. To Masuto, as always, the sight was unreal and hideous, and his eyes burned. He parked on the edge of a snarl of cars and people that had stopped traffic entirely, and only halfhearted efforts were being made to put the traffic through. As Masuto learned and as he had expected, there were no witnesses. The rescue car was there and two police cars and a sheriff’s car and the crawling traffic. And eight motorcycles. The riders were between eighteen and twenty-four years old. They were all bearded and most of them were stripped to the waist. Motorcycle boots, black leather trousers and cigars. They sprawled by their bikes, surly, angry, frustrated. Masuto walked past them to the edge of the slope. The car was about a hundred and fifty yards below, not burnt but thoroughly smashed. Stretcher bearers were crawling carefully up the slope with the woman’s body. She was strapped into the stretcher, her face covered, so apparently she was dead. Some cops were around the car.

Lieutenant Pete Bones of the Los Angeles police saw Masuto and called to him, “Howdy, Masao. I thought you had your own stiffs to

bury.”

“When death comes to town, he stays for a while, doesn’t he?”

“That’s nicely put. What are you doing up here?”

“Who are the Hell’s Angels boys?” pointing to the motorcycle riders.

“They saw the car tumble from around the bend, across that little canyon there.”

“Did they see it leave the road?”

Bones shook his head. “They saw one turn and then it come to rest against that rock—the way they tell it.”

Masuto nodded thoughtfully, closed his eyes for a long moment, and then nodded again.

“Well, what?” Bones demanded. “It’s a Mulholland Drive accident. The books are full of them. If a month went by without someone killing himself on this crazy road, I’d ask for my pension. You live in a crazy town, you get crazy deaths. Look at those bareass lunatics on their damn motorcycles.”

“They are more comprehensible and less terrifying than that car down there,” Masuto said.

“Why? Furthermore, what does your boss mean, hold it? What should we hold?”

“I didn’t want you to drag the car away.”

“Without a crane? Furthermore—ah, the hell with it. You want to see the body?”

“Yes. Just to satisfy myself that her skull was caved in from behind—maybe back of the temple.”

A cop in plain clothes pulled himself up on to the road, and Pete Bones said to him, “Kelly, this here is Masao Masuto from the Beverly force and he has got himself a sort of crystal ball. He says the lady’s skull is bashed in from behind.”

The man called Kelly gave Masuto a sharp glance and said hello suspiciously.

“Let’s go have a look,” he told them.

They walked over to where the ambulance man was easing the stretcher into the ambulance.

“How did she die?” Bones asked him.

“Isn’t it obvious, officer? You go over Mulholland in one of those tin cans and you die.”

“I mean what happened to her physically? And don’t be a wiseguy.”

“She got banged up. Broken bones, shock, internal injuries, and heart failure.”

“What about her skull?”

“Bad fracture.”

“How bad?”

“Her skull was smashed in. In nontechnical language, she was struck a hard blow slightly behind her right temple—a very hard blow.”

“From the accident?”

“How else?”

“We’re asking you!” Kelly snarled. “Don’t be such a goddamn wiseguy. How did it happen? Could it happen from the accident?”

“Please uncover her,” Masuto asked.

“OK—OK. Don’t get excited. You ask me could this skull injury happen from such an accident. Jesus Christ, just look over the edge at that car down there.”

He was uncovering the body, when one of the motorcyclists walked over and demanded, “What have you got on us? Every goddamn thing happens in LA County, you got to pin it on us. We want to move on.”

“Drop dead,” Kelly said.

“Sure. That’s the prerogative of fuzz. I answer you back, and you break a pair of brass knucks across my mouth—”

“What the hell is eating this creep?”

“Why don’t you just simmer down—” Bones began, but then he and Masuto noticed that the boy’s eyes were fixed on the face of the dead woman.

“You know her, buster?” Bones asked him.

“I know nothing. I don’t even know my right name. I don’t even know how I got here.”

“Now just a minute, young feller,” Masuto said. “This is not my own place. I’m here as a guest of these officers. But I think they will go along with me if I put my oar in.” He glanced at Bones and Kelly who

nodded slightly, and Masuto went on, "On the one hand—treat us as people, we treat you as people. I don't really care if you tour the country in a jock—until you break some law. I don't know of any law you broke. Be decent and you ride away from here in ten minutes, because I'll put myself on record for you. But if you make it hard for them, they'll make it hard for you. Is that all right?" he asked Kelly, who nodded without answering.

"What do you want?" the bearded boy asked.

"Who is she?"

"So I know her—so ten thousand guys knew her. She's an old stripper called Peggy Groton. I guess she's almost forty years old. Ran out of steam. She became a hooker, but what's the percentage for an old hooker in this town? You go down on the strip and bend a finger and the chickies come running. Who needs to pay? That's all I know about her. I caught her act, it was lousy. Then I been to parties where she performed and after that for a couple of bucks she would make it. She turns my stomach—lousy whore."

"Sure, she turns your stomach," Bones said.

"I'd like to turn your stomach," Kelly said. "I sure could turn your stomach."

"You said you'd let us go if I cooperated."

"Who the hell wants you?" Bones asked with disgust.

"Is she a user?" Masuto asked.

"How do I know?"

"She's a user," the ambulance man replied. "Or was. You always lose your tenses with these stiffs. Look." He raised her arm, pointed to a cluster of punctures. "She was a big one—user and loser. They all are—all alike."

"But you didn't know she had a habit?" Kelly said to the bearded kid.

"How should I know?"

"Let him go," Masuto said tiredly. "Let the lot of them go. They are unreal. They play a game with you. They irritate you. They take our eyes away from the target."

"Let them go. You tell me, I jump to it," Kelly scowled.

"Oh, hell, let them go," Bones said. "If Masao says they are clear of this, they're clear of it. Send them away. They make me itch and

want to scratch just to look at them.”

Kelly went to tell them to move on, and Bones said to Masao, “Enough?”

Masuto was looking at a drawn, tired, ravaged face that might once have been lovely. Once. Even in death, Peggy Groton was robbed of identity, of meaning. He shivered.

“Yes, you can take her away.”

They bundled the stretcher unceremoniously into the ambulance and drove off. Then the motorcycles roared by, the riders leaving a string of Anglo-Saxon words behind them. One of the rescue men came up the slope with Peggy Groton’s purse and handed it to Bones.

“Want to have a look?” Bones asked Masuto.

“There should be about five hundred dollars in there. There might also be the murderer’s address and phone number. Maybe. Maybe not. You know, Pete, this monster we are contending with has made every error, every stupid play that a killer can make—and still we can’t pin it or stop it.”

“And you say there’s half a grand in here—right here in the bag of a broken down hooker.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“X-ray eyes,” said Kelly. “You going to tell us she was murdered?”

“She was.”

“How? Who?”

“I’ll tell you how—”

Bones had meanwhile opened the purse, and now he was holding out a stack of twenty dollar bills.

“—probably with a lug wrench that the murderer lifted from a filling station. Then, I guess, he threw it down in the yucca there.” Masuto bent, picked up a rock, and flung it down the slope. It landed a long way down, far beyond the car. “Somewhere around there—”

“And the money?”

“She was paid off, God help her.”

“Six hundred dollars,” Bones said.

“She was good,” Masuto said thoughtfully.

“How do you know?”

“Names—addresses?”

Bones held up a worn address book. “Do you want to go through it?”

Masuto shrugged. “When you’re through with it, I’d appreciate a list of the contents. You might send it up to City Hall.”

“Don’t you want to see it?”

Masuto shook his head.

“You mean because it’s our murder?” Kelly demanded hotly.

“Who said it’s murder?” Bones reminded him. “Ain’t we got enough problems?”

“He says so. He says the name of the killer is in that book.”

“No, I didn’t say that at all,” Masuto objected. “Still—”

He reached for the little book, riffled through it, saw nothing to catch his eye and then gave it back to Bones. He walked over to his car, and Bones called after him.

“Be in touch!”

“I will,” Masuto promised.

The day was wearing through. Masao Masuto had that feeling—not extraordinary for a Buddhist—that the day was a repeat. It had all happened before. It had happened a thousand times before; perhaps nothing changed, perhaps a little changed. He was a stranger in a strange place. He drove east on Mulholland Drive to its connection with Laurel Canyon Boulevard, past the housing developments on top of the skinny ridge of hill. On the Valley side the smog was yellow and noxious; on the other side, on his right, the buttocks of the lower hills were gashed and sheared for the ninety-thousand-dollar homes, where you could sleep above the smog. It occurred to him idly, but with certainty, that he had once known another existence, lived and perished. This was his purgatory. He smiled rather sadly at the thought, remembered the face of Peggy Grotton, hooker and onetime stripper, and then turned right onto Laurel Canyon Boulevard. His mind was open and receptive. When he reached Hollywood Boulevard he knew what to do, and he turned east and then south on La Brea.

The bungalow on Sixth Street was even more forlorn revisited than it had been on first sight. In itself—its form, shape, its single tired palm tree in the postage stamp front yard—in itself it was all the brief

history, the tawdry illusion that was Hollywood. Just as its mistress was the past of Hollywood, the single long generation that had turned some bright-eyed young girl into this slatternly rooming-house keeper.

She must have been sitting by the window and waiting, for she opened the door, smiled slightly and said, "I knew you'd come back, Mr. Moto."

"How did you know?"

"Horoscopes and stuff. Anyway, I like you. I had dreams about you. That brought you back. What shall I call you? I can't keep on being a crummy racist and calling you Mr. Chan and Mr. Moto. It makes me ashamed of myself."

"Call me Masao."

"All right, Masao. Will you join me in a cup of tea?" She was quite serious. She was dressed now; her hair was combed; and Masato liked her better than ever. He did not seek for reasons why. He allowed himself to like her because he liked her.

"I would be honored," he said, bowing slightly. "May I revert to poor politeness? I would find nothing more refreshing than a cup of tea."

She led him into her kitchen, and he was pleased by its cleanliness, by the fact of a modern refrigerator, a good electric stove, and a new vinyl floor. Obviously, the kitchen was all that she retained as her home. She brewed tea and sliced up a grocery store poundcake. But she did not offer him a drink of liquor or take one herself.

"I want you to know that I got an attitude toward cops," she said. "I don't like cops. I think that's a healthy attitude, but that's from my point of view."

"I understand. Why do you exclude me?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you don't seem to be a part of this lousy establishment. That's a nice word. When I was a kid, that word didn't exist for us. But it says something. Don't you agree?"

"It says something."

"And you figure you'll come back here and start talking to me and maybe jog my memory and I'll remember about Samantha."

"Possibly."

“What do you want her for, Masao? When they put a high-class educated Beverly Hills cop like you on something, and you keep asking questions, then it must be pretty big. Does it connect up with Mike Tulley’s murder?”

He watched her without answering.

“It’s been on the radio. Look, sonny, everyone knows, but how you work that poor kid into it is more than I can take. Is the tea all right?”

“Fine.”

“No sugar?”

“No.”

“You know, I read a lot,” she said.

“That’s a habit an actress gets into. To wait and wait, to be destroyed and frustrated endlessly—”

“How did you know I was an actress, Masao?”

“That’s not such a brilliant guess in Hollywood, is it?”

“There are old bums in Hollywood who aren’t actresses.”

“You’re not an old bum,” he said sharply. “Don’t lower yourself. Don’t denigrate yourself.”

“Then don’t play games with me, Masao.”

“You think I come here and taste your tea to play games with you? If you think that, then you are most mistaken.”

She regarded him thoughtfully and silently for a while, and during that time, he sipped his tea and said nothing. Then she tasted her own tea, and asked him, “You’re not a Christian, are you?”

“No. I am a Buddhist.”

“That’s different, isn’t it?”

“Yes, quite different.”

“How?”

He shook his head and smiled.

“That’s no answer.”

“How can I answer you?” he asked seriously.

“You can try.”

Masuto held out his hand above the table, the fingers spread. “To you, Mrs. Dolly Baker,” he said softly, “skin is something that separates a human hand, a human being from the rest of the universe. Is that so?”

She nodded.

“As I think, the skin connects me with the rest of the universe. Do you understand?”

For almost a full minute, she sat in silence; and then she said to him, “I told you before that I read a lot. You pick up odds and ends of things.”

“What sort of thing?”

“Like the expression the British have for it. They call it a ‘copper’s nark.’ That’s good. It sounds like what it is. What do we call it? A fink? A stoolie?”

“I must know about Samantha. Human lives depend on that. Can you say that you will let anyone go to his death if you have the power to change it? Can you sit in judgement? Can you exercise the power of life and death?”

Tears welled into her eyes. Her cheeks became puffy. Suddenly her moment of competence was over and she became a fat, frightened old lady.

“You knew the name all the time,” he said.

She nodded.

“Do you want to tell me.”

“Her name was Gertrude Bestner, poor kid. God help her. God help her whatever she’s into. She was such a loser—”

He walked into the Chief’s office, and Kelly and Bones were there, the three of them angry; the Chief annoyed angry, Bones puzzled angry, and Kelly burning angry. Kelly did not like him; Kelly did not like the way he carried himself. Masato could put himself in Kelly’s place. Kelly would tolerate a Nisei, but there are limits to toleration. Kelly and Bones were in Beverly Hills now, and they did not like Beverly Hills or its pocket-size police force. That was understandable.

“You got explaining to do, Masao,” the Chief said.

“We all have. That is a condition of mankind.”

“Screw the philosophy,” said Kelly. “We found the lug wrench.”

“The what?”

Bones was the least angry of the three, the most intrigued, the most puzzled. “You remember, Masao, you said that she was murdered with a lug wrench. Then you tossed that rock down into

the canyon. Well, we put everyone we had down there and combed out the place. We killed two rattlers—can you imagine?”

“I seen one on Mulholland a week ago,” Kelly said. “The hell with that! I want to know how come he knew this broad was knocked over with a lug wrench.”

“You got explaining to do, Masao,” the Chief repeated seriously.

“I didn’t know it,” Masuto said. “I guessed.”

Kelly threw a flat hand at him and said, “Sure, you guessed. First you guessed she was scragged. Then you guessed the lug wrench. Then you guessed the money in her purse. Balls! That’s just too goddamn much guessing for me, and you know what I think about your guesses? I think they’re phony as you are!”

“Wait a minute—hold on!” the Chief snapped. “You’re in my house now, Kelly. Don’t dirty my floors.”

“To hell with whose house I’m in! I’m talking about murder—murder that took place in the City of Los Angeles. We got a corpus and we got a murder weapon, and we got enough blood and hair on the lug wrench to link them together. So don’t tell me about spitting on the floor. Just tell me where your cop fits in.”

Face white, the Chief rose up behind his desk and said very softly, in a voice that Masuto and every other cop on the force had learned to dread, “Just who the hell do you think you’re talking to, Kelly! Let me tell you something. I try to be a good neighbor, but one more yap out of you that anyone here is trying to bunco you, and so help me God, I’ll lock you up. Make trouble for me you may, but right now you’re in Beverly Hills and just keep that in mind.”

Kelly was as white as the Chief, and watching them, Masuto felt calm and detached. He himself had been forgotten; they were two men making a power play, and what they felt was their honor had been irritated, scraped bare. Now Bones stepped over to Kelly and took his arm and said, “Just work easy.” And then he said to the Chief, “So Kelly’s got a big temper and a big mouth. I been his partner six years, Chief. He’s a good cop, I am, Masao is. I don’t know what we’re ripping at each other for.”

“Forget it,” the Chief growled. “What have you got to say for yourself, Masao?”

“Nothing explains intuition,” Masato said. “Shall I try to turn it into reason?”

“Try,” the Chief said drily.

“Murder explodes, a sort of chain reaction. We make it too difficult to be a human being, and then something snaps and the person is no longer a person but a killer, and this thing keeps snapping and the killer kills. We are filled with horror, because we inhabit the same unreasonable world—and how long can we remain human? The killer has ceased to be human, and I fit myself into the killer’s world. Now I will try to see with his eyes, feel with his nerves, and move as he moves. So everything becomes something else. A car goes over the shoulder on Mulholland Drive. I see it with the eyes of the killer and it becomes a part of the logic of the killer and his progress through our world—”

“But cars go over Mulholland,” Bones objected. “It happens every day.”

“Then I could be wrong. But what are the odds at this moment? At exactly this moment? I could be wrong, but the odds are that I am right.”

“And the lug wrench?”

It was lying on a sheet of paper on the Chief’s desk, a garage tool, three-quarters at one end and half an inch at the other, about a foot long and roughly straight.

“You can pick one up in a garage. The attendant turns his back and you’re armed. How many things like that are lying around? It could have been a monkey wrench, but the odds are on this. And the money is no mystery either. She had to be paid off in advance.”

“Then why didn’t the killer take back his roll?”

“No time, maybe. The killer could hear the kids on their motorbikes. Or maybe the money didn’t mean enough for the killer to try.”

“Six yards and you toss it away like confetti!” Kelly snorted.

“Why was she killed?” the Chief asked.

“The payoff was one thing, but the killer couldn’t take any chances.”

“OK, Masao—who killed her?” the Chief asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you guess,” Kelly said.

“Tomorrow I’ll guess,” Masuto told him.

“But you know,” the Chief insisted.

“I don’t know.”

“Masao, if you’re playing games with me—”

“I told you I don’t know.”

“But you tie this in with Greenberg and Tulley?”

“Both of them. They were both murdered by the same person.” He hesitated, and the Chief caught it and said, “It was three, before the car went over.”

“All right—you want me out on a limb, I’ll go there. His name was Fred Saxton. He was 49 years old and he was production manager for Al Greenberg. He was murdered out at the Wide World studios seven weeks ago.”

“I know the case,” Bones said. “That was an accident. A counterweight came loose and hit him.”

“It wasn’t an accident,” Masuto said.

“How the hell do you know?” Kelly demanded. “We don’t have a police force in LA—we just got a bunch of bums, bums who sit around on their asses all day and do nothing. We don’t bother investigating a case. No, sir. A guy gets his head broken with a sandbag, we don’t give it a second thought. It never occurs to us that maybe someone scraggs him. We just write it down as an accident. That’s because we’re stupid.”

“Who’s bugging you?” Bones demanded. “Every accident is an accident only until you know better.”

“But this joker knows better than anyone.”

“It happens.”

“The hell it happens,” Kelly said. “I’m not satisfied—not one bit. And speaking for myself, you haven’t heard the end of this—not by a long shot.”

He went to the desk and began to wrap the lug wrench in the piece of paper.

“Fingerprints?” Masuto asked innocently.

“Fingerprints? You been reading too much Fu Manchu.”

He put the lug wrench in his pocket and stamped out. Bones stood looking after him hopelessly, and the Chief sat behind his desk,

staring moodily at Masuto.

“Do me a favor, would you, Pete?” Masuto asked Bones.

Bones looked at the Chief, then at Masuto, and said, “You know, Masao, you could do me a favor. What do I do about this? A car goes over the shoulder on Mulholland Drive, and I got to come back to the boss with Kelly riding me and tell him how it’s a murder, but we can’t tell him who did the murder because you won’t guess no more.”

“Tomorrow.”

“And suppose tomorrow you don’t want to guess?”

“Masao,” the Chief said, “is this the only way you can play it?”

“I have three of them. One is the killer. They all spin threads, like damned little spiders. Three killers, three motives, three possibilities. I think I could guess. Then I guess wrong, and I have done precisely what the killer desires. This killer is not smart—diabolical but not smart. Every mistake in the book. Blunder after blunder, but because we are dealing with a lunatic, even the blunders work.”

“Bones, do him his goddamn favor,” the Chief said. “And as for you, Masao—you haven’t even filed a report.”

“When do I write it? In my sleep?”

“What do you want, Masao?” Bones asked him.

“I want to find out what happened to a kid called Samantha Adams. That’s her stage name. Her real name is Gertrude Bestner. She was born in 1936 or 1937, and her last known address was here in Los Angeles on Sixth near Gower. I’ll give you all the facts and details. The last fix I have on her is 1955, a rooming house on Sixth, run then and now by Mrs. Dolly Baker. So you start with 1955 and bring it up to today or as far as it goes. Where is she? Dead or alive? Doing what? Where was she?”

“You don’t want much, do you?”

“I want it tonight.”

“You’re nuts,” Bones said.

“Well, then how soon? Shave the hours, and maybe you give a life to someone.”

“Will you back him up, Chief?” Bones asked.

The Chief nodded.

“Tomorrow. Maybe,” Bones said. “But only if she stayed in LA. If she took off, maybe a month, a year—or you can kiss your whole

project goodbye.”

“Try?”

“I said I’d try.”

“I want it the first moment you have it. I’ll keep my band open in the car. The moment you have it, you can phone here, and the dispatcher will give it to me.”

“All right. And what do we do with the Peggy Groton thing? Keep it open?”

“You damn well do. It’s murder, isn’t it?”

“That’s what you say, Masao.”

“Tomorrow night I’ll buy you both a drink.”

“Saki—and take me out for one of your Japanese meals.”

“If I can fix it with my wife.”

“I thought you Japanese—”

“I am a Nisei,” Masuto explained.

CHAPTER FIVE



Phoebe Greenberg

ON his way out, the girl at the dispatch desk called after him, “Masao!”

He came back, and she told him that there was a call for him. “A Mrs. Greenberg.”

It took him a moment to relate it to a face and a person, and then he took the phone, and a low and pleasant voice said, “Sergeant Masuto, this is Mrs. Greenberg—Phoebe Greenberg. Rabbi Gitlin told me you spoke with him this morning.”

“Oh, yes—yes, we had a talk.”

“He was impressed with you.”

“I was impressed with him,” Masuto said.

“He said that you were a friend of my—of my husband.”

“Yes, in a way.”

“In any way—then I would like you to come to the funeral tomorrow. But that isn’t what I called you about. I would like to speak to you, if I might.”

“When?”

“Now. Is that possible?”

“In ten minutes—or less. I am leaving now.”

But the Chief intercepted him and said, “What about it, Masao? You’re way out on a limb and I’m with you.”

“I told you, tomorrow.”

“I sure as God hope so, Masao.”

Even with the interruption, Masuto was at the Greenberg home in eight minutes, and now it was a little after four o’clock in the afternoon. The driveway was full and there were cars in front of the house; and in the living room, Murphy Anderson and his plump wife, Stacy, Jack Cotter alone, and Sidney Burke alone.

They would be off to the chapel later to pay their respects to the deceased. Now they were here to pay their respects to the living.

“Two chapels.” Sidney Burke said pointedly. He resented the fact that they were on opposite sides of Beverly Hills, as if he could see no reason on earth why two people in dying should not have the thoughtfulness to be of the same faith.

“Where is Mrs. Greenberg?” Masuto asked.

They explained that she was in the viewing room with Rabbi Gitlin. “I suppose he’s some comfort to her,” Jack Cotter said, “but the last thing in the world I would have imagined is that Phoebe needed that kind of thing.”

“Why?”

“Her relationship with Al—”

“Oh, why don’t you shut up, Jack,” Anderson interrupted.

“I don’t like to be talked to like that,” Cotter said coldly.

Stacy Anderson burst out, “Have you met Rabbi Gitlin, Sergeant Masuto? He’s absolutely fascinating. He’s—”

Rising, Murphy Anderson said, “I think we must go, Stacy, if we want to get to both chapels tonight.”

“Poor Lenore,” Stacy said, as if she only now remembered that Mike Tulley was dead. “What a dreadful thing she went through. Just imagine—to be trapped on one side of a door while your husband is being murdered by some dreadful woman on the other side of the door. It’s perfectly dreadful. Dreadful.” She enjoyed the word.

“Sergeant Masuto,” Anderson said, “the three of us—Mr. Cotter, Mr. Burke and myself—would like to talk to you tonight. We feel that it’s very important.”

“Where?”

“My house. I’m on North Rodeo. Say about nine?”

“I’ll be there,” Masuto agreed.

The Japanese houseman came back into the room at that point and speaking in Japanese told Masuto that Mrs. Greenberg would like to see him.

“Why in hell doesn’t he talk English?” Cotter growled.

“I am sorry,” Masuto apologized. “He apparently forgot himself with me—there is a natural desire to use one’s own language. He simply told me that Mrs. Greenberg would like to see me.”

Masuto followed the houseman into the viewing room. Pale, deep circles under her eyes, Phoebe Greenberg greeted him with evident relief. Rabbi Gitlin, sprawled in a chair at one side of the room, nodded at him. Phoebe asked him whether he would have a drink. She had a drink in her hand. She wore a pale green at-home that was most becoming and gave her a sort of ethereal appearance.

"If you wonder why I don't wear black, Mr. Masuto," she said, "it is because my husband hated symbols as a substitute for reality. He bought me this dress himself. I have very few abilities and very few ways to pay tribute to him."

"You have the only ability that counts," Masuto answered.

"And what is that?"

"To see yourself as a human being."

"I don't really understand that," she said, frowning. "But I am glad that you came here. I was very troubled about what I should do, and Rabbi Gitlin suggested that I talk to you. He said that you would hear whatever I had to say with understanding."

"That's very kind of you," Masuto told the rabbi.

Gitlin rose and said, "Perhaps it would be best if I left you alone—both of you."

"No, no," Phoebe protested. "I want you to remain."

"All right." Gitlin sank back into the chair. Masuto remained standing and Phoebe Greenberg paced nervously as she spoke.

"I didn't want to bring this whole thing up. I wasn't going to. My husband was a very sick man, Mr. Masuto. I knew this, because his physician told me and also instructed me in what to do in an emergency. I can't talk very well about the relationship between my husband and me. We were only married three years, and his illness precluded any normal relationship. But I think I worshipped the ground he walked on. I never looked at another man after I married him, Mr. Masuto. Well, that's done, and I cannot weep or carry on. Some can, some can't. I was going to wash this whole wretched thing out of my mind until Mike was killed today. Tell me, do you think that the same person who murdered Mike Tulley killed my husband?"

"Let me answer that obliquely, Mrs. Greenberg. No one will ever know, unless there is some sort of a confession, whether or not your husband was murdered. But I do know this—that if he was

murdered, it was the same person. And I can tell you that this same person coldbloodedly killed two others.”

“Oh, no! Who?”

“Did you know a man called Fred Saxton?”

“Yes—yes, I knew Fred. He worked for Al—for my husband. But his death—it was one of those awful accidents.”

“I don’t think so, any more than the death of a woman called Peggy Groton, whose car went over the shoulder up on Mulholland Drive today, was an accident. There is very little doubt in my mind that both of these people were murdered.”

“That’s a pretty terrifying statement,” Gitlin said. “What are you trying to tell us, Sergeant? That four murders were committed? Then what kind of horror is loose among us?”

“You’re asking for a philosophical conclusion, rabbi. I am only a policeman.”

“It’s not fashionable to faint, is it?” Phoebe asked.

Masuto and the rabbi helped her to a chair. Very pale, she sat there and said, “When I was a little girl, my mother used to tell me about fainting and smelling salts and that sort of thing. It was very fashionable once, but I guess no one faints any more. You never hear about it. I don’t even have smelling salts in the house, whatever they are.” She took a deep breath and went on, “I am going to tell you about this, Mr. Masuto. It may be wrong and vile to speak about it, because it happened a long time ago. But I must tell you about it—I must.”

Masuto waited. The rabbi glanced from Phoebe to Masuto, opened his mouth to say something, then clamped it shut.

“A terrible thing happened eleven years ago on a set where my husband was producing a TV segment. A man—well, it was Sidney Burke, because I will have to name names or this whole thing is meaningless. Sidney got some young kid actress to agree to have sex with some men on the set in return for a tiny part in the show. You have to be an actress yourself to know what these crazy kids will do for a part—any part. They all live with some kind of childish, pathetic dream that once they are seen, they will all instantaneously become Natalie Wood. So Sidney arranged this ghastly affair and—oh, it’s so hard for me to speak about it.”

"I know about it," Masuto said shortly.

"You do?" She was genuinely surprised.

"Who told you about this? Your husband?"

She nodded.

"What did he tell you was his role in the affair?"

She stared at Masuto for a long moment, and then she shook her head. "No. Oh, no. You are not going to tell me that he lied to me—"

"I didn't say he lied to you. I only asked you to tell me what he said was his role in the affair."

She turned desperately to Rabbi Gitlin, who said, "Tell him, Phoebe. Let's get this whole filthy business out into the open. There's no other way."

Then she said deliberately, "My husband did not lie to me, Mr. Masuto. He told me that the moment he found out what was happening, he put an end to it. He was sick and angry."

"I don't think he lied," Masuto said. "That's essentially the same thing that Murphy Anderson told me—that he came on it and put a stop to it."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Still, it is very important that you tell me exactly what your husband told you about this affair—and anything else you ever heard about it."

"But if what my husband told me was true, why was he murdered? She must have known—"

"Who must have known, Mrs. Greenberg?"

"Samantha."

"Oh?"

"I said Samantha. Do you know who she is?" she cried.

"As much as anyone knows who she is."

"Then why—"

"That will not help," Masuto said. "You are piling up premises. You are trying to be logical. But most of the logic we live with is a lie, and most of our attempts to be logical are only attempts to evade the reality. So if we have a puzzle, stop trying to solve it. Don't cling to thoughts and notions. Let them pass through your mind and then dismiss them—or treat them all with equal indifference. Nothing that

will ever happen or become known to you can change anything about your husband's relationship to you."

She turned to the rabbi pathetically. "Is that true?"

"Quite true," Gitlin said.

"But if you will answer my questions, *you* can help," Masuto told her.

"What questions?"

"As far as you know, who were the men involved in this incident eleven years ago?"

"Must I?"

"I know their names," Masuto said. "I am asking for corroboration, which is very important."

She took a deep breath and nodded. "Very well. You know about Mike Tulley. Poor Mike. He walked into all these things. He always had to prove that he was a man, and that bitch he was married to never let him believe he was a man for more than five minutes. Oh, I am sorry over poor, silly Mike. Then Jack Cotter." She made a face.

"How can you explain about Cotter? Jack is a Hollywood cowboy. Maybe the only time he was actually alive was when he put on his cowboy suit and his six-guns on the back lot. It's a special spongy kind of brain. They really think they are cowboys. The back lot is the universe. It's real. Do I make any sense?"

"You make sense," Masuto said. "And Murphy Anderson?"

"Murphy. I could never understand it about Murphy, but then I appear to understand very little about men. Sidney Burke, of course. What can one say about Sidney? Max Green—poor Max. He was such a fool—poor Max died of a heart attack a year ago, and then Freddy Saxton. Of course. That's why you asked me about him. And it wasn't an accident?"

"I am afraid not," Masuto said.

"What kind of a devil is she? Freddy has six children. Six kids. So he did something vile eleven years ago. Does that condemn him to death and his six kids—what does this all mean?"

Masuto turned to the rabbi, who shook his head. "I am past speculation on that point. I don't know what anything very much means—except that we store up horror. We prepay for it, so to speak, and then we are astonished when it happens."

“What can one say about Sidney Burke?” Masuto asked her.

“What? Really, what?” She sighed. “When I asked Al why he didn’t break Sidney’s back, he said a very peculiar thing—that you cannot make a moral judgement of a person who is utterly without morality. Anyway, Sidney is Hollywood—I mean the place is full of Sidneys. Sidney doesn’t do evil—he is just completely unaware of any difference between good and evil. Sidney is the ultimate amoral. If you asked him about that wretched gangshag he set up eleven years ago, he might be nervous—but not ashamed. He was doing everyone a favor. He was doing Samantha a favor by getting her a job on TV. He was doing the boys a favor by getting them a free lay on the set. And he was being progressive. He was forwarding the whole industry in his own way. That’s the way Sidney is. He comes in dressed in his black silk suit with his pointed shoes and his thirty-dollar white-on-white tab shirt, and he gives you that big grin of his and a big kiss, and he never really gets angry at anything you say to him and he’s also thinking of some kind of favor he can do for you. That’s because he wants so much to be liked—”

Her voice trailed away. Masuto was listening with astonishment. This was Phoebe Greenberg, who should have been a senseless blonde who never made it as an actress. He looked at the rabbi, who permitted himself a slight smile.

“I go home,” Masuto said—“that is, sometimes I go home, and then when I do my wife says to me, tell me about today. What kind of a day was it?”

“It might surprise you,” the rabbi said, “to find that her day is equally inscrutable.”

“Perhaps. But we have been talking about this and that, Mrs. Greenberg. You didn’t call me over here to chat. You called me here to tell me who is Samantha, didn’t you?”

“What a notion!”

“But you did.”

“I think you fancy yourself, Mr. Masuto, because you happen to be Japanese. It gives you a sort of racial crystal ball which you can bring out whenever the mood suits you.”

“I think we both fancy ourselves,” Masuto said flatly. “All people do. All people build their own aura, their own mask that separates them

from the world. Perhaps mine is that of the inscrutable Oriental—I imagine the rabbi chose that word deliberately—and Rabbi Gitlin goes through life as a large, confused innocent, as much of a mask as my own Oriental magic kit. And you, Mrs. Greenberg—”

“And me?”

“You are the professional Hollywood dumb blonde. Do you mind me being a bit shaken by what is underneath?”

“And how do you know that I am a professional dumb blonde?” she asked coldly.

“A word here and a word there. I listen. So why don’t we stop fencing. Who do you think is Samantha?”

“Shall I tell him?” she asked the rabbi.

“That’s up to you, Phoebe.”

“Very well. Samantha is Trade Burke, Sidney’s wife.”

The Japanese butler brought tea and tiny sandwiches, and he told Phoebe that there had been a call from the funeral chapel and that people were beginning to arrive, and that some relatives of Mr. Greenberg were arriving from the East and would go directly there, that his two sons were expected—his daughter was in Europe and could not be reached—and when would she be there?

“I should go now,” she said, “but I must talk to Mr. Masuto. Please have some sandwiches, Mr. Masuto.”

“I’ll go there directly,” said Rabbi Gitlin. “I can arrange for my wife to be there.”

“The truth is, I am afraid to go there,” she said.

“Well, that’s natural, Phoebe. Take your time, but come. You must. Meanwhile, my wife and I will constitute ourselves a sort of semifamily committee. There are no other relatives here in Los Angeles, are there?”

“No, but Murph is the closest friend Al had, and he and Stacy will be there. I’ll try to come within the hour.”

Masuto, his mouth full of sandwich—eating with the feeling that this would be as close to dinner as circumstances might permit—motioned for the rabbi to wait.

“Please.” He swallowed quickly.

“What is it, Sergeant?”

“Have you spoken about this, Mrs. Greenberg,—about your feeling that Trude Burke is Samantha—to anyone else?”

“No. Only to you and Rabbi Gitlin.”

“Good. Now listen to me, Rabbi—you are not to mention this, not even in passing, not even as a nameless suspicion, not to Anderson or Cotter or Burke. And not to their wives—”

“But surely,” Phoebe broke in, “you don’t—”

“I damn well do, and I tell you, Rabbi, that one word about this can mean Mrs. Greenberg’s death. No—one word about it *will* mean Mrs. Greenberg’s death.”

“Damn well,” the Rabbi repeated. “Slang sits oddly with you, you know. Of course—just as you say.”

He left them then, and Masuto stuffed another sandwich into his mouth, worked it down quickly, dialed the City Hall, got the Chief and said to him.

“I want two cops on motorcycles, one in front of the Greenberg place on North Canon and one in the mews behind it, and I want it covered all night.”

“You know that means I got to put two men on overtime,” the Chief pointed out.

“With all respect to my esteemed boss,” Masuto said, “I am aware of his financial difficulties. My heart bleeds for the poverty of those who guard the wealthiest city in the world.”

The Chief’s “Go to hell!” was audible across the room. Masuto turned back to Phoebe to apologize, and she, in the midst of pouring tea, had stopped and was staring at him bleakly.

“What have I done!” she said.

“Oh? What have you done, Mrs. Greenberg?”

“You believe what I said about Trude.”

“Don’t you?” he asked.

“No. No. Of course not! Oh, what a precious Oriental dunce of a detective you are to believe me.”

“Then why did you tell me what you told me?”

“Because I believed it. But I didn’t believe it because it was true. I believed it because I detest her, and because Rosie Valero, who does my hair, told me that Trude’s gorgeous strawberry blonde is a

bottle job, and that they do her once a week, and they not only do her hair but her eye lashes and her eyebrows and her damned pubic tufts and whatever other hair she has on her body, and Rosie thinks she had some sort of nose job. And why should she go to that kind of trouble for a worm like Sidney unless she was pretending to be a horse of another color. And the thought of Al—of poor, fat, good Al, who was so kind to everyone and who never hurt a soul in his life—the thought of him being murdered by some rotten little slut, well, it was just more than I could stand, and so I told you. But I didn't believe it. I just had to tell you."

"But you told the Rabbi first?"

"Yes."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that he didn't put much stock in it and that he didn't think you would put much stock in it, so it couldn't do Trude any harm, but that I should go ahead and tell you and get myself a good, deep condition of guilt, which would act as some kind of a psychic purge, and then I would hate myself, and then I would feel better."

"He's a remarkable man," Masuto answered thoughtfully. "Yes, indeed. And now you hate yourself."

"I think I hate you, because you are stupid enough to believe me."

"How do you know that I believe you, Mrs. Greenberg?"

"Because you called for those cops to be around the house all night."

"To protect you from a killer. You know, there are a dozen holes in your story, but isn't one thing absolutely obvious?"

"What?"

"That Samantha would have to be diabolically clever, and that the only one of the lot of you clever enough to be her is you—yourself, Mrs. Greenberg."

"How dare you!"

"And that lovely hair of yours—isn't it what you call a bottle job?"

"Oh, what a miserable, wretched—oh no. No. You can't do this, because I am a woman all alone here. Insult me. Accuse me of the murder of my husband."

"Dear Mrs. Greenberg," he sighed. "Have I accused you of anything? I am afraid my deadpan humor is perfectly wretched. I will

tell you flatly what you already know—that you are not Samantha and that you are a very clever, and more importantly, a reasonably wise woman. I admire you a great deal. But I think I know people enough to realize that you would weep if you had to kill a mouse.”

She nodded silently.

“You know,” he added, “Mr. Burke was the only one who knew Samantha before he got her into that dressing room. So he could hardly blunder into a marriage with her.”

“I wonder,” she said. “I’ve been beastly, haven’t I? Please do have another cup of tea and some sandwiches.”

CHAPTER SIX



Sidney Burke

MASUTO was surprised to see that Sidney Burke was still in the living room, sitting in a corner silently and listening to one of the friends of the deceased. There were about a dozen people there. Burke was listening and waiting, and when he saw Masuto, he jumped to his feet and intercepted the detective—who already, simply because he was a Nisei—was the object of all the eyes in the room.

“Let’s shake this place,” he said softly to Masuto. “I got to talk to you.”

“I thought you went to the chapel with the others,” Masuto said.

“Changed my mind.” They were Outside now. “I don’t have a car here, Sarge. Can we get in yours and drive a little and talk a little? I know a little place up on La Cienega and Sunset, where we can have a quiet corner and I’ll buy you a hamburger.”

“I’ll buy my own hamburger,” Masuto said.

“That’s an honest cop for you,” said Burke. “So I won’t corrupt you with a hamburger. Buy your own and I will remember it as the last untarnished hamburger in Hollywood. Can you spare me half an hour? And is the place OK with you?”

“What do you call it?”

“The Quiet Cow.”

They got into Masuto’s car, and he called the station on his phone and told the Chief that he was going to a place called The Quiet Cow with Sidney Burke, and would the Chief have the dispatcher call his wife and tell her he would not be home for dinner.

“And I have a meeting with Cotter and Anderson and Burke later at Anderson’s house.”

“Did you ask for it?” the Chief demanded sourly.

“Anderson asked for it.”

They drove off, and Burke said, "Great cops have bigger cops upon their backs to bite them, and bigger cops have bigger cops and so ad infinitum."

"That's very good," Masuto admitted. "What can I do for you, Mr. Burke?"

"It ain't original."

"I didn't think so."

"OK. So by now you know about Samantha."

"A little."

"You know more than a little," Burke said. "Everybody's crapping in their pants because each and every one of them thinks he is next on Samantha's little list."

"But you're not worried."

"Worried? Jesus God, would I be riding around with a cop if I was not worried? Of course I am worried. It's the goddamn power complex. Kill one; you know it can be done. With the second, you are riding high; and with the third, she is a lousy little tin god—"

"Who is?"

"Samantha Adams—who else."

"What do you mean—third?"

"Don't put me on, Sarge. You know about Fred Saxton."

"An accident, I am told."

"Then you are told wrong."

"Samantha?"

"Don't kid me, Sarge. Don't put me on. I'm no hero and I don't intend to live the rest of my life with loose bowels. I am tired of being nervous."

They were up on Sunset now, and as they approached the Strip the traffic stopped, and there was a sound like a thousand kids yelling. A half a dozen deputies came running by, carrying riot batons, and across the avenue, a stream of teenagers, shouting taunts and defiance, poured in among the cars.

"That's the way it is with those long-hair creeps," Burke said. "Never taught them any discipline or morality. That's the way kids are brought up today."

Masuto managed a turn into Larrabee and headed for Wilshire. "That's no place for a Beverly Hills cop," he said. "I know a little

Danish place on Wilshire. Will you settle for that?”

“Anyway you say. I got no more appetite anyway, and you can’t afford what I consider a place fit to eat in. Just so long as I put it to you.”

“Go ahead,” Masuto said.

“You’re running this case? Correct me if I am wrong.”

“I like to think so,” Masuto said.

“All right. Now listen—today, only a few hours ago, maybe two o’clock, maybe two-fifteen, I am driving along Mulholland toward Laurel Canyon, and a little red MG zips by me from the opposite direction. I see a strawberry head and I do a double take, and maybe half a mile along, I say to myself, that’s got to be Trude, my wife. But I am not sure, because when a hot car passes you on Mulholland, you are watching the road not the car, but it fits her car and her head. Maybe. Next thing I know, I see prowls cars and an ambulance and kids with motorbikes—those lousy creeps with the beards—and I know there’s some kind of accident, but the sight of blood makes me ill. I throw up when I see a lot of blood. Not good. So I crawl past, and that’s that, except that I do a second double take. I see you. First I see you and I don’t think nothing about it, because where there’s an accident, there should be cops. Period. Then I say to myself, this part of Mulholland is Los Angeles, so what is a Beverly Hills cop doing casing a job in Los Angeles, when he should be sitting with his head in his hands trying to figure out who knocked over Mike Tulley and Al Goldberg?”

“That’s pretty good.”

“Well, it’s no Charlie Chan film, but I got cops and murder on my brain, and I get home and there’s Trude’s MG in the carport, and now I am a nervous type, so I feel the hood. It’s hot. So I go into the house and Trude’s doing her nails to go to the chapel tonight, and I say to her, ‘What were you doing up on Mulholland Drive, baby? I thought you were a big girl and grown out of doing tricks with the MG?’ So she says to me, ‘Drop dead. I never went near Mulholland Drive.’”

In the little Danish restaurant, Masuto sipped coffee and munched pastry and regarded Sidney Burke with interest and a degree of

wonder. Burke ate little. He tried to explain to Masuto his distaste for a restaurant that was low-priced.

“Regardless of the quality of the food?” Masuto had asked curiously.

“My drawing is four thousand dollars a week, Sarge,” Burke said. “Apart from expenses. What I eat in a restaurant is expenses. I can’t explain that to you. It is not simply a matter of screwing the government. I get kicks from that, but that ain’t all. I got the biggest and best PR outfit on the Coast. I got a very important interest in Northeastern Films. I got other interests. So I don’t eat in a place like this. I can’t afford to. Suppose someone says, I seen Burke—see? No good.”

“How about The Quiet Cow?”

“That’s a hamburger joint where the hamburgers are three bucks.”

“I can’t afford three bucks for a hamburger.”

“I wasn’t going to bribe you,” Burke said. “I was just going to tell them you’re a cop. You don’t think Joey Donsen who runs the place is such a shmuck he’s going to charge a cop.”

Now, however, Burke was trying to tell Masuto about his wife, and he kept saying that he had to be sincere. “I got to be sincere,” he told Masuto, “otherwise I can’t make you understand about this girl I’m married to. Not that I got anything against Trude—you understand—she’s just a louse. But that doesn’t mean that Sidney Burke is a schmuck. I knew she was a louse when I married her. This is a kid, I just had to look at her and I was off. I want to be sincere. I am not the kind of a guy who flips over a tomato. What was worth banging, I banged—”

“But just to come back to the problem that confronts us,” Masuto said, “with due deference to your sincerity, how can you believe that your wife is Samantha? You knew Samantha. You brought her to the studio—”

“I knew Samantha? Listen, Sarge, in the past fifteen years, I knew maybe two, three hundred broads who are maybe enough like Samantha to be her sister. The blonde American way of life, with the little round puss, the turned up nose, the blue eyes, and the shapely ass. You can pick out ten any morning at the counter at Schwab’s. At Central Casting, they decorate the walls with them. You wave a

contract out at Santa Monica Beach, and you got a thousand of them. What do I know about Samantha? I picked her up at the counter at the Beverly Wilshire, paid for her hamburgers, gave her a ride and a night of pleasure. I thought the kid was grateful. She wanted a job more than anything in the world, so I got her a job. The boys would have been nice to her if she had just said two words. What's to get excited about?"

"Did Anderson tell you about the phone call from her?"

"That's right."

"And you think your wife could be Samantha. Isn't that a little farfetched? That she married you for revenge?"

"Farfetched! Sarge, you been spoiled by Japanese girls. This tomato of mine had her revenge in the first thirty days, and I been married to her for two years. I married my first wife when I was twenty-three. We got divorced two years later. She had a lousy disposition, if you know what I mean, the cranky kind. But compared to Trude, she was an angel. Believe me, I am being sincere."

"Still, you must remember Samantha."

"Absolutely. Just take a good look at Trude. She weighs at least ten-fifteen pounds more than Samantha. Samantha was a skinny kid. Samantha had that kind of pale, yellow-white do-it-yourself blonde hair. She wore it like a kid, combed down straight. Trude's got a head of strawberry-blonde curls that just sit natural all over her head. It must cost her a hundred dollars a week—all over, every place on her body there's a hair, it's dyed. She had a nose job seven years ago, not for looks but for what they call a deviated septum. Would you believe me, she hasn't got one picture from before that nose job—not one."

"That's understandable," Masuto said.

"Understandable? Sarge, on the question of broads, I am maybe an expert—in a small way. Would I want to pin this on my own wife, if I did not have a position? I am trying to be absolutely sincere. It is not understandable. A dame like Trude, she lives by her pictures. She can't always be looking into a mirror, can she?"

"When did you first have a suspicion that your wife might be Samantha?"

“Seven weeks ago—when that sandbag killed Freddie Sax-ton. One of the grips on the set saw a girl beat it out—just got a glimpse of her, and that was right before he found out about Freddie. The cops over there in the Valley talked to him, but he couldn’t describe the girl. He just saw her run past and out of the soundstage, and he caught a glimpse of her.”

Masuto filled his cup with coffee again and began to consume another Danish pastry, reflecting on the fact that so much evil is mediocre beyond belief; so much vileness, the writhing of frustrated children trapped in the bodies of adults. Anyway, it was not his to judge. He even felt a little ashamed of himself when he said, “Naturally, Mr. Burke, you brought the grip a picture of your wife.”

“That’s my duty as a citizen, Sarge.”

“Naturally. But the grip could make no identification.”

“No.”

“Did he remember the girl having red hair?”

“All he could remember was blonde. So what? You think Trude’s some kind of idiot? She’d wear a wig.”

“Does she have wigs?” Masuto asked.

“Sarge, wake up. You’re running with the wrong crowd. There ain’t a dame in this town doesn’t have a closet full of wigs.”

Leaving this statement unchallenged, Masuto asked about detective agencies. “Surely, you would have thought of that, Mr. Burke?”

“I did.”

“Which agency?”

“Intermountain. They’re up on—”

“I know where they are.” Masuto nodded. “Who do you deal with there—Frank Gillespie?”

“No, his partner, Adam Meyerwitz. I been dealing with them for years and they can be trusted one hundred percent. So I put them on the job. I told Meyerwitz the whole story. I told him I wanted it quick.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Masuto said, “what do they charge for a job like that?”

“Six hundred dollars a day. They were on it five days.”

Masuto whistled.

“Well, there you are,” said Burke. “You don’t see them making no heroes out of Beverly Hills cops, do you, Sarge? A private eye, that’s something else. He’s America’s lover boy.”

“And what did Intermountain give you for six hundred dollars a day?”

“Nothing. Not one stinking, lousy thing. They found out that Trude Steffenson, the name she had when I married her, was not the name she was born with. But they couldn’t come up with the name she was born with. They found indications that she had come to Hollywood in 1952, but from where they don’t know, and they can’t put a finger on her before 1961. Can you imagine? Can you imagine being married to a broad who’s a phony from the word go? When I think of the way that broad took me in—”

“Are they still on it?”

“Are you kidding? At six hundred dollars a day? Anyhow, she’s a smartass broad and she felt something, and then she went to the Pinkertons and hired her own man and found out and she comes home and tells me that she’d ruin me forever in the industry if I ever try something like that again.”

“Could she?”

“She could make plenty of trouble for me. That’s gratitude, Sarge. I marry a broad like that, who’s worth maybe a yard for a night to some jackass from Kansas, and I give her everything in the world, but everything, and what do I get?”

“You know when Mike Tulley was killed?”

“Today.”

“I mean the time.”

“About twelve-thirty,” Burke replied.

“Did you ask your wife where she was at that time?”

“I did,” Burke said.

“And what was her answer?”

“Drop dead.”

“What?”

“I mean that was her answer, Sarge. That’s what you asked me, isn’t it? Isn’t it?”

“I asked you that.”

“So I told you. She says to me, ‘Drop dead.’”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing else. We don’t have conversations these days. Does the butcher talk to the goose he picks out? So why should she talk to me?”

“You haven’t tried to divorce her?”

“With what she’s got on me?”

“Will she be at the chapel now?”

“Who knows? Murph invited her to his house tonight for the meeting or whatever he intends to do.”

“He did?”

“That’s right. He did.”

“Suppose we drive over to the chapel now,” Masuto said. “I don’t think Mrs. Greenberg will be offended by my presence there.”

The chapel was on Wilshire, about a mile toward downtown. Here Greenberg’s body would lie through the night, and from here it would be taken for burial the following day. There would be a brief service at Mt. Ephriam Cemetery the following day, after which the actual burial would take place. Now, at the chapel, close friends and relatives were gathering. Anderson and Cotter would both be there. From there, they and their wives would go to Anderson’s house.

As Masuto drove his car into the parking lot behind the chapel, Sidney Burke voiced his uncertainties. “It’s not like I don’t regard you as a gentleman, Sarge,” he said, “but won’t it look peculiar?”

“Because I am a cop or because I am a Nisei?”

“Well, you got to admit that the combination is peculiar.”

“Yet curiously enough,” Masuto said quietly, “I was a friend of Al Greenberg.”

“You?”

“Myself,” Masuto nodded. “So if you don’t mind, I’ll pay my respects.”

“Mind? Why should I mind?” He led the way toward the chapel. “Mind. You talk like I’m running this show. I don’t mind. I’m the last one in the world to mind.”

They entered the chapel, where they were met by a man in tails with a professionally funereal countenance. He asked them which of the several rooms in use that evening they were concerned with, and

when they specified Al Greenberg, he sighed just enough and guided them to the proper place. There were about fifty people in the room, a high-ceilinged room, decorated in a popular West Coast style known as dubious-Hollywood-Gothic. Masuto entered and stood silently just inside the doorway. Burke joined Anderson and Cotter, and then Cotter walked purposefully over to Masuto and said hoarsely, "You ought to know better than to come here. Is nothing sacred to a cop?"

"I am a Beverly Hills cop, Mr. Cotter," Masuto said without rancor.

"What is that supposed to mean? That there's nothing sacred in Beverly Hills?"

"It's my own poor sense of humor, Mr. Cotter. I know this is neither the time or the place. But I must ask you something."

"You're right when you say this is neither the time nor the place."

"But if you would give me a moment—"

"OK—OK—ask."

"Did Samantha get the bit part she was brought down there for? I mean, was she actually filmed?"

"Big thought!" Cotter said sarcastically. "You really got it pinned."

"Do you mind answering?"

"No. Jesus God, man, do you think she was in any condition to act?"

"I wasn't there," Masuto smiled, "so I don't speculate on her condition. Just as I make no judgements about what happened there."

"You could go too far, buddy boy. And you still haven't explained by what process you horn in here tonight."

"I felt I had to talk to Mrs. Greenberg and persuade her to join us tonight," Masuto said patiently.

"She is joining us. So that's that."

"Still, I must explain my presence. She's seen me now. I must explain the misunderstanding."

Cotter shook his head and walked back to join Anderson and Burke. Phoebe Greenberg, who had seen Masuto now, came over to him and said, "Why did you come here, Sergeant? Has some new terrible thing happened?"

"No. But I must speak to you."

“I’ll see you later at Murph Anderson’s house. I can’t talk here. My husband’s family is here. They have no notion that there was anything unusual about his death.”

“I must talk to you now. If you would only step out into the corridor with me. I won’t take more than five minutes of your time.”

“Very well.” She sighed, and he held the door open for her and she walked through. Outside, he looked at her sharply, and then said, “No one will ask you whether you loved your husband. Did you?”

“I loved him very much,” she said flatly. “He saved my life. He gave me back to life. He was one of the few good men I have ever known. He did everything for me, and I did very little for him. Does that answer your question, Mr. Masuto?”

“Yes. Will you do something for him now?”

“What can I do for him? He’s dead.”

“Help me to take his murderer.”

“He was murdered?”

“Yes. I have no doubt about it.”

“How?”

“I think the murderer held a cushion over his face. He had an attack and died.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to be at World Wide Studios tomorrow at ten-thirty or so in the morning. Do you have anything filming now?”

“Yes, we have two pilots in work. But you don’t understand. The funeral is tomorrow.”

“I do understand. Then you have makeup people there. I don’t want you to make any arrangements in advance. Just turn up and tell them to make you up immediately.”

“Who? Mr. Masuto, you simply do not have the faintest notion of how a studio operates. I can’t just walk on to a soundstage and tell the makeup people to go to work on me. You have a film in process. You have a production manager, a director, a cast—”

“I know all that,” Masuto said impatiently. “Aren’t you forgetting one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“That you own Northeastern Films.”

“I do not. The partners will buy my husband’s shares.”

“Next week, next month. At this moment, you are the widow of the president. No one will question anything you ask—just so long as you make it plain that you are the boss. Believe me.”

“Even a crazy request like makeup—?”

“Yes. Any request.”

“And what shall I make up as?” she asked hopelessly.

“A middle-aged woman. Dark wig. Glasses. Padding around your middle.”

“And that will help catch the murderer?”

“Yes.”

“You give me your word?”

“Yes—except that all plans have a point of failure. This is dangerous, very dangerous. I will protect you as much as one human being can protect another. But it will still be very dangerous.”

“And if I refuse, Mr. Masuto?”

“Then it will be even more dangerous, because the killer will kill you. We will try to protect you, but for how long?”

“I will do it,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Good. You get into costume. Do you know where Stage 6 is?”

“The stage where poor Freddie died?”

“That’s right. At exactly 11:10, I will be outside of Stage 6. I will look for you. If you don’t see me, walk on and then return. But under no circumstances must you enter Stage 6 without me.”

“Suppose I don’t see you at all?”

“Then go back to where your people are shooting and call the Beverly Hills police and find out what happened to me, or whether there is any message for you.”

“All right.”

“And tonight, not one word of this. Not to anyone. Not to Anderson and not to his wife. Not to the Rabbi, Do you understand me?”

“I understand you, Mr. Masuto.”

“Good. You are a very brave woman. Will you tell Mr. Burke to go with the others. I am going to leave now.”

She nodded and returned to the mourning room. Masuto left the chapel and walked around to the parking lot. He got into his car, started the motor and drove slowly past the chapel into Wilshire Boulevard. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that a side door into

the chapel was half open. Behind the door, only darkness, and then as he came close to it, the darkness was broken by a tiny tongue of light, almost like the flicker of a firefly. There must have been a silencer on the gun—or perhaps the slight whip of a twenty-two caliber pistol was absorbed into the sound of his own motor.

It was when he stopped his car out on Wilshire and looked at the small, neat hole in his windshield that he realized the gun was a twenty-two, probably one of those tiny, deadly little pistols that nestle so well in a lady's handbag.

He leaped out of the car and ran back into the chapel, stumbling and skinning his knuckles in the Stygian blackness of the side door. He crouched there, licking at his hand and cursing himself for a fool. What had he expected to find? If the murderer had waited, he, Masuto, would now be dead. Nothing put down Masuto so completely as to discover a wide, foolish hole in his own intelligence.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Stacy Anderson

MASUTO took a liberty that his chief would certainly note and resent and called his wife on his car radiophone. The children were asleep, and she was reading a mystery novel by Rex Stout. She was rather nervous, and pleased that he had called her; and after telling him about the children, she suggested that it would be a nice thing some day to take a vacation and go to New York City.

“A very long and expensive trip.”

“In this book, it is a very pleasant place. Perhaps you will stop being a policeman and earn a great deal of money.”

“That’s not likely,” he said.

“Will I ever see you again?”

“I think it’s possible,” he said.

“Now you tease me.”

“Never.”

“You have no more use for me, your wife, but only for the beautiful blondes one sees in Hollywood.”

“That’s right.”

“I know. I know. There was a picture of Mike Tulley’s wife in the evening paper—in the *Times*. She is so beautiful.”

“The *Times* is a morning paper.”

“Don’t we get it in the evening? Is she as good as she is beautiful?”

“Who?”

“Lenore Tulley.”

“I am happy to speak to you, and I love you very much,” he said.

“But you never tell me about the wonderful things that happen to you.”

“I love you anyway,” he said.

“Michael has a sore throat.”

“Is it bad?”

“No. I gave him some aspirin. I am sure he’ll be better tomorrow.”

Then Masuto said his goodbys, put away the telephone, and fingered the tiny hole in his windshield. He felt better since speaking to his wife. He felt better able to face the rest of the night.

Murphy Anderson’s house on Rodeo Drive was gigantic Beverly Hills-half-timber-Tudor. Stacy Anderson must have left the chapel soon after Masuto, since she was already home to open the door for him and usher him into the red leather, brass nail, Oriental rug interior and through the baronial hall into an immense sunken living room, which sported medieval banners from its cross-beams. In a fire-place large enough to drive a sport car through, two huge imitation logs glowed with light and warmth, and in one corner a suit of armor leaned moodily on its spear.

“I felt someone had to be here to welcome you, Inspector,” Stacy Anderson said, “so I made my apologies and rushed home.”

“Sergeant, Mrs. Anderson.”

“Sergeant?”

“I mean, we don’t have inspectors. We should, I often feel.”

“You are humorous. I mean, for a Japanese. We never give Orientals any credit for a sense of humor, and I fear we make a dreadful mistake—don’t you?”

“I really couldn’t say, Mrs. Anderson. I have never been in the Orient.”

“What a shame!”

Could she be as stupid as she appeared, Masuto wondered, as insensitive and gauche? Or was she putting him on? Was she possibly one of those extraordinary women who can move through life playing the role of the fool, and who wears a fool’s mask to cover the intelligence? Now it was hard to say, and he rejected any quick judgements. Certainly, she was a beautiful and seductive woman, about thirty-one or thirty-two, round, just the slightest bit plump, pale blue eyes contrasting strangely with her black hair. For the chapel, she had put on a dress of black velvet—a stunning repeat for her glowing hair. Masuto reflected that in today’s America, it is almost

unthinkable that a blonde woman should dye her hair black. Blondness was big business, a passion, a semiracist ingredient of the mythology current in the land. Yet few women could adorn themselves with anything more beautiful than Stacy Anderson's hair. Why shouldn't she dye it black?

He became conscious of the fact that he was staring at her and pulled his gaze away. She was in no way disturbed. Quite to the contrary, she was pleased at being the object of his admiration. Masuto had the very strong feeling that she would be pleased to be the object of any man's admiration, and he was in no position to draw conclusions. Why Murphy Anderson had married her was only too evident, and why she had married him was almost equally obvious.

"Isn't this a huge room?" she asked. "You know, Murph has two children from his first marriage and they spend their summers with us and they're absolutely divine youngsters, so when Murph and I decided to buy a place here in Beverly Hills, I felt we should have something that was both homey and big enough for the kids to romp around in. This seemed just to fill the bill perfectly, and there's a wonderful big pool and a tennis court out back. But do you know, Inspector—"

"Sergeant," Masuto said.

"Of course. Sergeant. You know, they always seem to be a little overawed by the house until they get the hang of it. That takes time, you know."

"I suppose so."

"Do you like my dress?"

"It's very attractive."

"Thank you, dear Inspector. I wonder whether you would suggest something I might serve. I thought of champagne, but this isn't that kind of a party, is it?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then each to his own desire."

"You don't appear to be very upset by anything today," Masuto said quite deliberately.

"Upset? You mean by Al's death?"

"And Tulley's murder."

“My goodness, Inspector, when you’re a Mike Tulley you have to expect it, don’t you? I mean, we used to watch the Perry Mason program on TV every now and then, and you always know who is going to get it, because it’s the kind of person you feel so nasty about you could kill him yourself, and once I said to Murph that if we were running one of those programs in our own set, why it would be Mike Tulley, naturally.”

“Then you have no sympathy for Mike Tulley?”

“Goodness, I adored Mike. What has that got to do with him being a louse? If I had to eliminate every man who’s a louse, I’d become a Vestal Virgin or something. Is that right? Vestal Virgin? You know, I dated Mike. When we were kid actors. Did you know that I was an actress, Inspector?”

It was thick, turgid. He was in a dream. She was playing with him or she was an idiot—or he was an idiot. The smile was fixed on her face, and her sharp, tiny white teeth reminded him of a cat’s fangs. Every so often, she would touch her lips with the point of her tongue and leave them red and glistening—and then she would pass the back of a thumbnail across the velvet that covered her breasts.

“Oh, a very good actress indeed. Not that I ever really got a chance—don’t you think I am a good actress, Inspector?” she asked archly.

“And weren’t you moved by Mr. Greenberg’s death?”

“Al was a sweetheart, but he was so sick, Inspector—so sick. You have no idea. Murph used to tell me that Al would sometimes stay up all night, he was so afraid of dying in his sleep. Well, that’s one of the risks you take when you marry a popsie. Not that I haven’t dated popsies, and there was one from Houston, Texas, who was worth a hundred million if he was worth a dime, but he could barely walk, and his doctor said he might live another ten years. Well, that’s a long stretch for a girl to wait, Inspector. I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that Murph’s a popsie, but that white hair of his puts you on. Murph was fifty last week, and I don’t call that a popsie, not by a long shot. So Phoebe knew exactly what she was getting into, and who can cry over five million dollars—or whatever Al leaves Phoebe?”

At that moment, Masuto heard cars stopping outside, and Stacy rose and said wistfully, "Oh, there they are. And we were having such a wonderful chat, weren't we, Inspector?"

But in the first group were only Arlene Cotter and Trude Burke. The men had gone on to the other chapel where Mike Tulley's body lay, and when they returned with Lenore Tulley, it was almost ten o'clock. Then they waited for Phoebe Greenberg, who arrived a few minutes later.

But in the waiting time, Arlene Cotter and Trude Burke managed three drinks each. Arlene drank straight gin on the rocks, and Trude mixed brandy, sherry and ice. They sat in the enormous living room and grinned maliciously at Masuto. They begged him to take a drink.

"One little sip, Sarge," Arlene Cotter urged him. "I have never seen a Nipponese drunk."

"That's a real nasty thing to say," Stacy observed. As hostess, she forbore to actually drink, but instead nipped dainty sips from the sherry bottle. "You ought to apologize."

"Come to think of it," Trude observed, "you take a lot of garbage, don't you, Sarge?"

"All in a day's work," Masuto shrugged.

"What does it take to burn you?"

"I don't burn."

"Come on, Mr. Chan," Arlene said nastily, "everybody burns. It's not a question of susceptibility but of degree. Even our dark, comfortable little hostess here burns—right through the pretty pool of sherry that keeps her lit all day."

"How can you!" Stacy exclaimed dramatically.

"Because she's a bitch," Trude said. "It's easy enough, Stacy, if you only got a talent for it. Why be a louse, when with a little thought and effort you can be a thoroughgoing bitch like dear Arlene?"

"That's a lovely speech," Arlene replied, going to the bar and refurbishing her drink. "I've often wondered why Sidney never put you into the office, but I suppose your talents for public relations lie in other directions."

"Touché!" Trude grinned. "Did you hear it on TV or read it in a book?"

“Will you please stop!” Stacy cried. “How do you think the Inspector feels? He’s a guest in my house.”

“Oh, climb down, Stacy,” Arlene said. “You know, you give me a pain in the ass. That’s crude—”

“Say that again,” Trude agreed.

“—but there are times when crudity is obligatory,” she went on, paying no attention to Trude. “In the first place, Mr. Chan is a sergeant, not an inspector. In the second place, he is not one bit bothered by anything we say here. He welcomes it, and he considers himself very clever to be sitting there and waiting for the proper moment to pounce on some stupid remark we make.”

“Then why don’t you shut up,” Trude said.

“Because I got nothing to hide from him, but with you the case is a horse of another color,” Arlene said.

“My dear lady,” Trude said, patting the pink curls that covered her head, “you don’t even talk coherently, and before I’d crawl out on any limb and cut it off behind me, I’d think twice. Maybe three times. Because little old darling Arlene from New Orleans is maybe a little old sitting duck to Trude here.”

“Stop it!” Stacy said again. Masuto felt that she was trying to weep with vexation and was equally frustrated by the fact that the tears would not come.

“Now she’s insinuating that I don’t come from New Orleans,” Arlene said to Masuto, a trace of a southern accent suddenly appearing in her voice. “But if I were married to Sidney Burke, I would stop insinuating. Because wherever I come from, doll, my husband doesn’t practice a little pimping on the side.”

“Balls,” Trude said.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me, lovey. Because if there is any kind of pimping ever invented, dreamed of, or even speculated upon, Jack Cotter has had his finger in it. Sidney Burke may be a crumb, but at least he weighs in at one fifty and not at a ninth of a ton like that ex-Lothario butterball of yours.”

“That’s a beauty,” Arlene said grandly. “I won’t argue it—not for a moment. The truth is that Jack weighs two thirty, and most of it is hard bone and muscle and he could still break Sidney in two.”

Stacy began to giggle. She stood in front of the bar, holding a tiny shot glass half full of sherry in her hand and giggling uncontrollably.

“What’s gotten into you?” Arlene demanded.

“Oh, the two of you—you’re just like two little girls in finishing school. And then they begin boasting about how strong their daddies are—”

“What!” Arlene exclaimed.

“Finishing school!” Trude shouted.

“God save us!” Arlene cried.

“Say that again, lovey.”

“Tell us more about finishing school.”

“And your daddy, honeybunch.”

“All the daddies that you used to boast about.”

Masuto was watching them, but particularly watching Stacy. Her giggles stopped. She flung the shot glass at Arlene, missing her by a hair’s breadth. Her body tensed. The softness left it. And under the black velvet dress, her body seemed to have the flowing strength of a giant cat, and her pale eyes flashed. Stacy thrust out one hand toward the two women, and spoke coldly and menacingly. “That’s enough. I’ve had a bellyful of you two bitches! Now just shut up or I’ll break your necks—both of you! And don’t think I can’t do it!”

Even Masuto recoiled from the suppressed hate and violence of Stacy Anderson. Arlene Cotter and Trude Burke simply sat in their chairs and said nothing and stared at the rug.

And then the men arrived with Lenore Tulley, and shortly after that, Phoebe Greenberg arrived.

There was a corner arrangement in the living room of two big Lawson couches—both in red leather and brass studs—and four facing armchairs. Lenore Tulley and Phoebe Greenberg sat on one couch, and facing them, Sidney Burke, Arlene Cotter and Trude Burke. Sidney sat in the middle. Murphy Anderson had an armchair, and his wife, Stacy, hovered between the guests and the bar. Masuto was in another armchair and Cotter, self-appointed to begin the meeting, had wrapped himself over a cockfight chair and rocked gently as he faced the others. He was a big man, and while he ran to fat, Masuto agreed with Arlene that he could handle himself. He had

that look about him. Masuto recalled him now in the old Westerns he had played, and thinking of those films, Masuto realized with a curious sense of hopelessness and resignation that like the others, he was a particular product of this thing called the United States, shaped by Westerns and other mythology; a strange, strange product of his time, a slant-eyed, dark-skinned, Zen-Buddhist—California-Yankee—a condition that made him shiver a bit. Still he responded to Cotter with some tinge of that ancient hero worship. Cotter was consciously playing a role now. The great Tudor room was the set, and as players, the circle of people he faced were both dramatic and interesting. Masuto had no doubt but that he had rehearsed an opening statement over and over, when he spoke, he said the line well.

“One of us,” he told them, flatly and without emotion, “is a murderer.”

There was an explosion of silence, a reaction Masuto understood very well indeed. Not one of the women said a word. Sidney Burke smiled self-consciously. Murphy Anderson shook his head slightly.

The silence stretched. It reached its breaking point. And Jack Cotter savored his moment. Then Stacy Anderson said crisply, “Jack, don’t be an ass. These people are my friends. They are not murderers.”

And Masuto asked himself, “What will I tell my wife tomorrow then—that there are two women here I admire enormously?” Of course he realized that he often chose strange people to admire. A man of prudence depended upon his own understanding more than upon his wife’s.

“One of us is a murderer,” Cotter repeated. “What’s the use of horsing around? When I said that poor Al was murdered, the doctors pooh-poohed the whole thing. Well, I say, let’s face it. You knew damn well, when Murph asked us here, just what we had in mind.”

“Did I know it too, Jack?” Phoebe inquired.

“Let’s stop beating around the bush. In one way or another, we all knew it. Aside from Sergeant Masuto, there are eight of us here, and one of the eight is a killer. Seven came because they had a genuine desire to see the killer exposed. The killer came because if she didn’t come, she would give herself away.”

“She?” Stacy Anderson raised a brow.

“Come on, Stacy—enough.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means that you know as well as I do that we’re dealing with a woman,” Jack Cotter said. “Mr. Masuto will bear witness to that.” He turned to Masuto and demanded, “Am I right, Sergeant?”

“That I will bear witness to your statement?”

“Exactly.”

“But how can I, Mr. Cotter? Do you think I know who the killer is?” The others were watching him intently now, and Masuto allowed his narrowed eyes to scan their faces.

“I think you have a damn good notion who the killer is.”

“Suppose we were to grant that,” Masuto said. “Suppose we were to grant that, simply for the sake of argument—and understand that I will accept your contention on no other basis. Suppose we say that I have a damn good notion of who the murderer is? What could I do with a damn good notion, as you put it? It’s not proof. It will not stand up in any court of law. And if I had any real proof, do you imagine that I would have come to a charade like this? I think that you and Mr. Anderson have read too many murder mysteries, sir.”

“That’s a hell of a note!” Cotter snapped. “I think you got one hell of a goddamn nerve, Mister—”

“Oh, hold on, hold on, Jack,” Murphy Anderson said. “Just take it easy. I was dubious about this idea in the first place, and I agreed to go along and give it a try because you were so certain that it would bring some results. But the fact of the matter is that Detective Masuto is right. We have no proof, and we have no right to keep anyone here who desires to leave. All we have is about seven yards of insinuations.”

“Is that so,” said Sidney Burke, rising abruptly. “Well, as far as I am concerned, some of these suspicions and insinuations got to be busted wide up.”

“Oh, Sidney, sit down and don’t be such a cockamamie shmuck,” Trude said.

“Like hell I will. I am going to say my piece.”

“Well, there it is,” Trude sighed, spreading her arms. “He is going to say his piece.”

“And to you too,” he snapped, turning on Trude.

“I’m all ears.”

“God damn it, Sidney,” Anderson said, “whatever you got to say—say it and let’s not have a family squabble.”

“Oh, Murph doll, you are dreaming if you think we won’t have family squabbles tonight,” Arlene said. “By the dozen—believe me.”

“You weary me so, why don’t you shut up!” Trude said.

“All right—all of you!” Cotter ordered. “Now say your piece, Sidney.”

“OK. I don’t have to go into the Samantha thing again. You know about that bitch. Now I am going to be sincere—fully sincere, and let the pieces fall where they may. I was driving on Mulholland today, and I passed Trude in her MG going in the other direction. I went on and came on the accident. You all know about the accident by now. A onetime stripper named Peggy Groton went over the shoulder and was killed. The Sarge was there. He’s on this case, but he was there in LA—and I say the two cases connect. You don’t have to be no genius for that. I spoke to you and Murph about it before,” he said to Cotter, “and you agreed with me. The two cases got to connect.”

“Not necessarily,” Masuto said.

“Then what in hell were you doing up there on Mulholland Drive in Los Angeles?”

“I have friends in the LA Police Department,” Masuto told them. “Pete Bones is the name of one of them. I had business with him. I found him up there at the accident.”

“Well, what about that, Sidney?” Anderson asked seriously.

“What about it? Does it account for the fact that I passed Trude driving away from the scene of the accident?”

Now Trude was on her feet. “Do you know what that crumbly little bastard is trying to do?” she cried. “I’ll tell you what he’s trying to do! He’s trying to set me up for the gas chamber! He’s trying to finger me as Samantha! Does that make a record or does it not? My own husband fingering me for murder!”

“Take it easy,” Anderson said. “No one is fingering you for any murder.”

“Murph, for Christ’s sake, open your eyes and stop being a calm, objective lawyer!” his wife shouted. “It’s bad enough to have to live in

the same town as Sidney Burke. Now I got him under my own roof talking like the little pisspot he is!”

“Oh, that’s fine language!” Anderson exclaimed. “That’s real fine language.”

“The hell with my language,” Stacy shouted. “Next thing, he’ll open a cathouse in the maid’s room.”

“Sure, you’re a dame!” Sidney yelled back at her. “Go ahead. Call me anything you like. I’m gentleman enough not to bat you one.”

“Shut up—all of you!” Cotter roared. “You’re all behaving like a bunch of delinquent kids. Now just shut up for one lousy cotton-picking moment!”

A sort of silence prevailed. Sidney took a turn away from the couch and stopped to lean against the bar. Trude sank back into the couch. Phoebe watched Masuto, who sat back in his chair, breathing softly and evenly, his face blank, composed, receptive. Murphy took out a handkerchief and wiped his face, and Stacy walked to the bar and poured herself a shot glass half full of sherry. She ignored Sidney, and Masuto considered it as fine a job of ignoring as he had ever seen. His respect for Stacy Anderson rose another notch, and he considered how it would be to spend an evening with her. Just an evening, he assured himself.

“Anyone want a drink?” she asked.

“Give me a sherry and dry vermouth on the rocks,” Lenore said. “It’s intermission. Do you know they sell liquor in the New York theatres now—between the acts?”

“Just like London,” Arlene Cotter said.

“Then you’ve been to London, darling,” Lenore said. “What a well-travelled, cultured little dear you are!”

“Enough of that,” Cotter told her. “Let’s cut out this back-biting and get to the center of things.” He addressed himself to Trude. “Where were you today between twelve noon and twelve-thirty?”

Trude laughed. “You are a lulu, Jack. The ever-living end, aren’t you?”

“I am going to repeat that question,” Cotter said. “Where were you today between twelve and twelve-thirty?”

“Drop dead, lover boy.”

“You refuse to answer?”

“Are you nuts?” Trude demanded. “I don’t have to answer your stupid questions. Where do you come off putting your nose into my business? You want this Samantha of yours—go find her. But I don’t have to answer any of your stupid questions.” She turned to Masuto. “Do I?”

“Not if you don’t want to,” Masuto said.

“Well then, you ask her the question,” Cotter told Masuto.

“She doesn’t have to answer me either.”

“What? You mean you can ask her questions, and she can tell you to go run around the block?”

“Exactly.”

Cotter turned to Anderson. “Murph—is that so?”

“That’s so. I don’t know what the hell you expect to accomplish here tonight, Jack.”

“You poor jerks really think I am Samantha?” Trude said.

“They think we’re all Samantha,” Stacy said.

“Stacy!” Anderson protested.

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“I’ve had enough of this,” Arlene Cotter said. “I am going home before I start thinking about this crew we married and throw up.”

“Stick around, lovey,” Trude said. “If you walk out, they’ll pin it on you.”

“What I can’t understand,” Jack Cotter said to Masuto, “is why, now that we’re all here together, you don’t start asking questions and rooting out the truth.”

“Because there’s no truth in that.”

“Don’t tell me that!”

“Mr. Cotter,” Masuto said softly, “suppose I began to ask questions, as you suggest. No one has to answer.

“Then when they don’t answer, you got guilt.”

“Is she guilty then?” the detective asked, pointing to Trude. “Because if she is, then our search is over.”

“I didn’t say she was guilty.”

“Don’t even infer it,” Trude said, smiling pleasantly. “Because, Jackie dear, we are not inside some silly novel but here in this room and surrounded with witnesses. That jackass, my husband, over there by the bar, has already practically called me a murderer. But he

is my husband, and so long as he pulls down better than six figures a year, he remains my husband. But you, Jackie, you ain't my husband, and just make one lousy crack about me and I will sue you for defamation of character so hard you'll be knocking at the gates of the actors' old age home. I'll sue you for every nickle you got, so don't go pushing the Sarge to ask me questions."

"Can she do that?" Cotter demanded of Anderson.

"I'm afraid so."

"I never called you a murderer. That's for the record. I want everyone here a witness to that fact. I never called you a murderer."

"Just what did you think you would accomplish with all this?" Stacy asked him.

"You know what I think," Sidney Burke said suddenly. "I think the company should hire the best private eyes here on the coast. We get as many privates as we need, and we blow this thing wide open. That's my sincere position."

"I don't believe it," Stacy said with disgust.

"Sidney is Sidney," Phoebe said tiredly, speaking for the first time. "He's been around for fifteen years, and suddenly, big deal, you discover that he's a louse. How about you and Murph?" she asked Cotter. "Aren't you lice? Aren't you the worst pair of lice that ever drove a pair of convertible Cadillacs in Beverly Hills? And you, Stacy—dear old Stacy."

"I'm willing to forget what you just said," Anderson told her. "You've had too much stress."

"I think we have all had too much stress," Stacy Anderson agreed. "We have all talked too much and said too much—which perhaps was exactly what our dear Mr. Masuto wanted."

"Not at all," Masuto said.

"Then why have you come?"

"I was asked to come."

"And only that? And that's why you've been sitting there all evening like a superior cat waiting to select the proper mouse to eat?"

"That's a very poetic image, Mrs. Anderson, but I am not a psychological detective. I am only a policeman in plain clothes."

“Then just what do you propose?” Cotter demanded. “That Murph and Sidney and I just sit on our hands and patiently allow ourselves to be murdered?”

“What, only the three of you? Why not the women?” Masuto asked.

“And you’re not putting us on?” Sidney complained. “Oh, no—no, you’re not putting us on, not one bit. Three men in this outfit are scragged, and you ask why the men.”

“How about Peggy Groton?” Masuto said.

“Who’s Peggy Groton?”

“The dead are quickly forgotten, aren’t they?”

“She’s the dame on Mulholland Drive,” Cotter said.

“Anyway,” Anderson said, “it seems that we three men are the most likely sitting ducks. Don’t you agree with that, Mr. Masuto?”

“Possibly.”

“Look,” Anderson continued, “I have been thinking about this all evening, and I see no reason why Jack’s statement should be taken at face value.”

“What statement?” Cotter demanded.

“That the murderer is here in this room. How do we know that this Samantha is here? She might have never come near any of us. She might be a maid in someone’s home. She might be a typist or secretary at the office. She might work on the set. The point I am making is that she might be anywhere.”

“Haven’t you worked over that Samantha business sufficiently?” Phoebe Greenberg said.

Stacy Anderson then turned to Masuto and said, “My dear policeman, since you refuse to question us, may I question you?”

“By all means.” Masuto smiled.

“Where is this Samantha that these three dirty old men can’t unhook from?”

“I have no idea.”

“Does she exist?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, you are a great crystal ball. Is the murderer in this room? Jack says yes, Murph says no. Well?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean, yes? You’re breaking your track record.”

“You asked me whether the murderer is in this room. I said yes. The murderer is in this room.”

“Then why don’t you arrest him?”

The whole place tightened now. Masuto could hear their breathing, the difference in quality, the softness of some, the rasping quality of others. Sidney and Arlene lit cigarettes. The thin threads of smoke curled among the group.

“It is very interesting,” Masuto observed, “that when a man speaks of the killer he designates him as a woman, and when a woman speaks of the murderer, she designates him as a man. There should be a neutral designation in a society as complex as ours—wouldn’t you say? Some criminologists hold that murder never occurs without the presence of homosexuality—”

“Who the hell needs philosophy?” Cotter snapped.

“I don’t like this talk about faggots,” Sidney said. “To me, a man is what he is. That’s all. That’s my sincere feeling. A man is what he is. That’s the way you judge him.”

“You were asked a question, Sergeant Masuto,” Murphy Anderson said. “You said you knew who the murderer is. Then you were asked why you don’t arrest the murderer.”

“No. Not at all,” said Masuto. “I was not asked whether I knew who the murderer is. I was asked whether the murderer is in this room. I answered in the affirmative.”

“Then I am asking you. Who is the murderer?”

Masuto waited for a long moment before he replied. No one moved. Each and every one of them there in that room was completely self-conscious about not moving.

“There are two reasons why I don’t answer that,” Masuto said. “First, I am not certain, not totally certain. Three men and a woman have been murdered. The murderer has been a fool, but a lucky fool. But this is a monstrous crime, and there must be certainty before I make the accusation. Second, I must have proof. An arrest is meaningless without proof.”

“And until you get this proof?” Cotter demanded. “Do we just wait and die?”

They were all beginning to relax—as if the accusation of any one of them there and then would have been more than they could take.

“No. I think the case is breaking.”

“Just what do you mean by that?” Anderson asked.

“There was a witness to one of the murders,” Masuto said. He had been holding it all evening and waiting to drop it. He dropped it now. He dropped it almost casually and watched them.

Nothing. They tightened as a group, and they watched him.

“Which murder?” Cotter asked finally.

“Fred Saxton—your production manager who was killed by a counterweight seven weeks ago. That would appear to be a nearly perfect murder, but like every nearly perfect act it faces too many imponderables. One of them was this woman.”

“What woman?” Trude asked softly.

“Just an actress, a character actress, age fifty-one, not too much work, only now and then. She lives. She has a husband. She minds her own business.”

“Who is she?” Stacy asked sharply.

“How does she come into this?” Anderson wanted to know.

“She was a witness, Mr. Anderson,” Masuto said. “The day Fred Saxton was killed, she wandered over to Stage 6. No reason for it. There is never any reason for the imponderables. She had been standing by for hours waiting for her take, and she was bored. So she poked into Stage 6 out of idle curiosity, and she saw someone with a hand on the rope release. Then the counterweight fell and Saxton was dead. In the excitement that followed, she slipped away. But as the day wore on she became aware of all the details involved, and being a reasonably intelligent woman, she put two and two together and came up with murder. But being a timid woman, she did what a great many people would do. She decided to keep her mouth shut and not get involved.”

“And when did she change her mind?” Phoebe asked coldly, staring at Masuto. Their eyes met.

“Today, of course,” Masuto replied.

“Why?”

“Because she heard about Mike Tulley’s murder, and she put two and two and two together, and she called the Los Angeles police.

They put a call out for me and we talked. They agreed to let me do it my way, because the Beverly Hills need took preference.”

“And what is your way?” Anderson asked.

“Very simple, very direct. She’s working out at World Wide tomorrow—you do have a permanent lease on Stage 6?” he asked Anderson.

“Not permanent, but we have it for another ten days. There’s nothing shooting there now. We wound up our work there after Freddie’s death. We made an arrangement with Grapheonics to keep their tour costumes there.”

“What is Grapheonics?” Masuto asked.

“They’re an animated cartoon outfit. ‘Captain Devildom,’ ‘Space Ace Ambrose,’ ‘Major Meridean,’ ‘Tentacle Horror,’ ‘Captain Sharkman’—they have a slew of things that the kids eat up. Four to five on prime kiddie time. They’ve been so successful that World Wide asked them to become a part of the tour.”

“The tour?”

“The ‘studio tour.’ They have those motor buses, you know, little open things, and they take tourists all over the sets and sound stages and the back lot. It’s been enormously successful—so much so that they incorporated into the tour the characters from Grapheonics—in costume, of course. World Wide likes it and Grapheonics likes it, and we allow Grapheonics to keep their costumes on Stage 6—in the wardrobe there. It’s convenient for them. Just a gesture on our part.”

“That won’t interfere with my plan,” Masuto said. “I would like all of us to get together tomorrow on Stage 6 at about ten minutes to eleven in the morning. Then I’ll bring her to Stage 6, and she’ll pick out the murderer.”

“Just like that,” Anderson said coldly.

“It’s very simple. Yes. Just like that.”

“And your murderer will come there like a lamb to the slaughter?”

“What alternative does the murderer have, Mr. Anderson?”

“I don’t buy it!” Sidney Burke declared shrilly. “I don’t buy it. It’s a lousy, stupid scheme and I don’t want any part of it. I have tried to be sincere through this whole crumby business, but now I’ve had a bellyful!”

“Sidney,” Trude said sweetly.

“Now you listen to me—” he began.

“Oh, no—no, you cockamamie idiot, you just listen to me. A moment ago, you were calling me a murderer. But let’s lay it on the line. You’re too stupid to be Samantha, even if you had enough guts to be a woman, which you haven’t. So no one here is going to think you are the killer. We both go to World Wide tomorrow, and we wind this business up. Once and for all, because I don’t intend to live with it another day.”

“I second that,” Jack Cotter said. “The Sergeant makes sense. Do you agree?” he asked his wife.

Arlene shrugged. “I’m just along for the ride.”

“Al’s funeral is tomorrow,” Anderson reminded them. “I don’t see how Phoebe is going to get there.”

“Can’t we leave Phoebe out of this?” Stacy asked. “I just can’t cast her as some bloody, maniacal killer.”

“Then suppose you leave me out, cookie,” Lenore said. “My alibi is as good as hers.” She looked around from face to face. “And just in case you forget, I have my own dead to bury.”

“Darling,” said Arlene, “that line goes so much better in the original with Bogart than second hand with you.”

“Go to hell!”

Phoebe looked at Masuto, who nodded just the slightest bit, and then Phoebe said, “I’ll come. The funeral’s in the afternoon, and if poor Al won’t rest easier, at least I’ll shed a few tears less for knowing who did it and why.”

“Sidney?” Murphy asked.

“All right. I’m in the middle of this. I’m trying to be sincere—so I’m the number one louse. I’ll be there.”

“I’ll be with him,” Trude said.

“If I’m not dead,” Sidney said. “I got to live through the night. Remember that.”

“My heart bleeds for you.”

“I just bet.”

“All right, Sergeant,” Anderson said, running his fingers nervously through his thick white hair. “We’re agreed, we’ll be there, and God help all of us.”

Masuto followed Phoebe home. The cop on duty outside of her house was alert, and before Masuto had taken three steps, there was a gun in his ribs, and a harsh voice inquired, "What's wrong with the path, buster?"

He had deliberately stepped over the low hedge by the driveway to move through the shrubs in front of the veranda. A moment later the cop recognized him and apologized, and Masuto said, "Never mind the apologies. You guard this place as if it were Fort Knox."

"I'll do that, Sarge."

Masuto rang the front doorbell, and Phoebe opened the door herself.

"Don't open doors!" he snapped. "You have servants."

"Don't order me around either, Mr. Masuto. I have had my fill of you. You're a liar."

"I am, you are—" He walked into the entranceway, and she closed the door behind him. "We're all liars. I lie for my work. That's not a matter of morality."

"But it is morality to set me up like a sheep for slaughter. Or is that in the line of good police work."

He stared at her for a long moment, and then he shook his head. "Oh, no—Mrs. Greenberg. You misjudge me. I am a happily married man, but I have met a few women in my life who make me wonder whether being happily married is enough. You are one of them. You are a fine and beautiful woman—"

She burst out laughing. "Dear man," she said.

"Did I say something stupid."

She began to cry now. He gave her his handkerchief. "It's clean," he said. "I haven't used it today. But what have I done to make you cry?"

She shook her head.

"I am not risking your life," he said definitely. "There will be studio policemen there, both armed—two good men that we can count on. Nothing will happen to you."

"I don't care."

"But you must care."

"There's really not one damned thing left to care about."

“There’s the world to live in,” he said. “To live in it and taste it and feel it—open your eyes to it.”

“Don’t preach to me.”

He shook his head. She seemed to sway, and then he took her in his arms. Afterwards, he wondered whether the act was of specific volition or not. He only held her against him, tightly, for one long moment. He didn’t kiss her, and when a moment later he loosed his arms and she stepped back away from him, he felt a sense of awful loss. He had not kissed her. The embrace was not an embrace. A wind of foolish memory blew away what had never been, and he stood there feeling bereft and stupid.

She handed him his handkerchief. It had lipstick on it. He knew he would throw it away. He had no desire to try to explain to his wife why it had lipstick on it.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Greenberg,” he said.

“Would you try to call me Phoebe, just once. Or don’t you like the name?”

“It’s a beautiful name.”

“Then please call me Phoebe.”

“Very well. I am sorry, Phoebe.”

“For what?”

“For embracing you.”

“Would you just tell me why you should be sorry because you embraced me?”

“There are three reasons, Phoebe. One, I am a cop. Two, I am a Nisei. Three, I am married. Perhaps a fourth reason more important than any—that you are Al Greenberg’s widow.”

“Oh, don’t be such a precious damned fool! I loved my husband. I think I would have died for him, if need be—but not as a husband, and he never expected me to love him as a husband. But that’s beside the point. You didn’t even make a pass at me. You don’t want to, and I don’t want you to, and I do wish that you would stop acting like something out of a Japanese print. You’re a man—a strong man who is reasonably decent and who turns up on the one day of my life when I need a man desperately. If things were different—”

“But they are not different,” Masuto said.

“No, they are not different, are they? What is your first name?”

“Masao.”

“Very well. Then from here on until the end of this, you will call me Phoebe and I will call you Masao. Is that agreed? Openly. Right?”

“I will call you Phoebe, and you will call me Masao.”

“As good friends should.”

“As good friends should,” he repeated.

Then he left. On his way home, he threw away the handkerchief, just as he had known that he would.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Gertrude Bestner

WHEN Masuto entered his home in Culver City, his wife was waiting, her face drawn. She was an anxious mother. The house and her family were her world and all the world that she wanted, and she stubbornly refused to be Americanized. There were times when Masuto took great pleasure in this, and usually her anxieties were flattering to his own strength. But he had his own anxieties now, and he listened with some irritation to her story of Michael, the eight-year-old son, and his sore throat. Apparently, the sore throat was worse.

“Did you go to the doctor?” he asked.

She looked at him reproachfully. They had one car and she did not drive. She was always promising to learn to drive.

“Then why didn’t you call the doctor to come here?”

“That’s ten dollars, Masao. If I call the doctor every time a kid has a sore throat, we’ll soon be penniless.”

“We are penniless, the way you watch every dollar!”

“Masao!”

She always knew when something happened inside of him. It was not the things that occurred outside of him that worried her, but the strange responses that sometimes overtook him. That was the way it was tonight. In bed she left a space between their bodies, and when he whispered to her, she pretended that she was asleep.

Sleep came hard to him. He would doze off and come awake again. He dreamed of being lost in strange places—jungles and cities and boundless plains—but in each and every place there was Beverly Hills. Yet finally, he fell fully asleep and slept until the alarm awakened him at seven in the morning.

This morning, he was more than solicitous of his wife, Kati. He went out of his way to help her with the smallest child and then he made the seven wonderful faces for Michael, who would spend the day in bed. He was almost ready to leave when the telephone rang. Kati answered it. Masuto was outside the kitchen door when she called him, "It's Pete Bones."

He came back and picked up the phone and said, "Masao, Pete. I'm on my way out."

"Well, just hold still for a moment. We got a make on Gertrude Bestner."

"Who?"

"Oh, no—no, I don't believe it. You only give us the life and death howl, and research works fifteen hours straight, and now you ask me, who is Gertrude Bestner."

"Wait—you mean Samantha Adams, nee Gertrude Bestner?"

"Exactly."

"You mean you've found her?"

"In a manner of speaking," Bones said. "All that's mortal. She's buried in the County Pauper's Reserve."

"Dead."

"Very dead, Masao."

"You know—funny thing, but I felt it. The poor kid was a loser."

"Maybe."

"When did she die?" Masuto asked.

"Nineteen fifty-six, age nineteen, pneumonia, Mt. Sinai Hospital, emergency case; picked her up in the street where she had fainted; malnutrition, semistarvation, pulmonary—she died seven hours after admission to the hospital. Her death certificate was signed by the ward resident, name of Harry Levine. Practices medicine in Brentwood. I have name, address and telephone. Do you want it?"

"No," said Masuto.

"Funny thing, Masao, when she was admitted she gave them the name of Samantha Adams—the way these kids cling to the dream that it's theirs to make big, real big. It wasn't until she died that they got her real name from the ID in her purse."

"Where did she come from?"

“Chicago—but no connection, no family, no nearest of kin, nothing. A kid dies and it’s like she’s never been. Jesus, there are times when you could take this job and shove it right up your ever-loving.”

“It’s not the job, it’s just the way things are,” Masuto said.

“I suppose so. Look, we got her effects from the morgue file. Not much. A purse, a few incidentals—you know what a kid keeps with her—and a little leather-bound day book with a few phone numbers and some diary entries.”

“Have you checked the phone numbers?”

“Aside from agencies and the unions and that kind of thing, they’re all discontinued. She’s got the number of Sidney Burke’s PR outfit, but I guess you expected that.”

“I expected it,” Masuto said. “Did you read everything?”

“Well, it wasn’t no *War and Peace*. Sure, I read it all.”

“Anything?”

“Well, it depends on what you want. I got it here in front of me. On December 25th, 1955, she wrote, ‘This is Xmas. It’s a lousy Xmas. That’s all I can say. It’s a lousy, lousy Xmas. I had no date on Xmas Eve, and I walked around and I walked up to the Strip and. I almost began to cry for feeling sorry for myself. Then I walked over to Fairfax and I bought a fruit cake for thirty-five cents. That left me with eighteen cents, but I had to have something even for a lousy Xmas like this. So I went home and stuffed myself with the fruit cake. It wasn’t much good. It wasn’t anything like the fruit cakes Mrs. Walensky used to make in Chi. They were great fruitcakes. God, I wish I was a kid again. I don’t. It was lousy to be a kid. But God, I wish I was a kid again. Today, I’m sitting here in my room waiting for Santa Claus. This is Samantha, Santa Claus. Wishing you a lousy merry Xmas—”

“That’s enough,” said Masuto.

“There’s more. A million laughs.”

“Go to hell.”

“That’s a fine way to thank a buddy. Do you know what I told the boss—I told him to bill Beverly Hills for the time spent. You can afford it. You can afford to pave your streets with two-bit pieces.”

“I’ll tell them that at City Hall.”

“Do you want to look at this stuff?”

“No.”

“At least be grateful.”

“Thanks,” said Masuto. He replaced the telephone and then stood there staring at it.

“Masao,” his wife said.

Not moving, he stared at the telephone. Perhaps not hearing, because she asked him again.

“Masao, please, what happened? Did something terrible happen?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“A girl died. A little girl died.”

“How awful! Is it someone close to you? Who is it?”

“I don’t know her. I never saw her.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She died ten years ago, and they buried her in a pauper’s grave. Her name was Samantha. That was her stage name. Her real name was Gertrude Besther, and in the whole world today, maybe only Pete Bones and I speak that name aloud.”

“Samantha. Pete Bones. What strange names the Anglos use!”

“Anglos?”

“You don’t like the word?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a word. We’re not Mexicans.”

“Is it a word only for the Mexicans? What do we call them?”

“People. Just people. That’s enough.”

“You’re in a strange mood,” she said. “This case has changed you. When will it be over?”

“Today, I think.”

“Oh, God—Masao—”

“I will be in no danger,” he said impatiently. “Nothing will happen to me. We will have a good dinner tonight, and I will tell you all about it.”

“And it will be over?”

“All over and done with. I promise you that, and then I can go back to being a Beverly Hills policeman.”

“And tomorrow is your day off,” she said with delight. “We can have a picnic.”

“If Michael is well enough.”

“And where will we go, Masao?”

“To San Fernando, I think, to Soko’s place. He promised that he would have the Sashu Roses from Japan. They are new, quite small, almost a mustard color, and they have a very good, strong smell. I am tired of these new beautiful tea roses that have no scent. We will eat in his garden, and then I will bring home the rose bushes and plant them.”

“Good. Good.”

He kissed her and went out to the car. The windshield was blurred with the wet morning mist, and upon it, in big block letters, he traced out SAMANTHA. Then he wiped it away with the palm of his hand, and then got in the car and drove off.

CHAPTER NINE



Frank Jefferson

IN the mood that gripped him this morning, Masuto was unable to face the freeway with its maniacal roar of seventy-mile-an-hour traffic, and he decided to take a few minutes longer on his journey to the Valley and World Wide Studios by going through Beverly Drive to Coldwater Canyon. He was glad that he did. This was one of those utterly improbable Los Angeles mornings when there is neither smog nor fog and the air is as sharp and as clean as crystal. When he passed over the rise of Coldwater, the Valley lay etched below him, so clean and clear that he imagined he could see San Fernando in the distance.

Almost, the Valley reminded him of the way it had been when he was just a kid, with its acres of orange grove and mango grove and avocado and pecan, its woods and stately avenues of eucalyptus and little brooks and Mexican and Japanese farmers, its tiny towns, its fiestas and roadside picnic places. Scattered around the Valley were relatives and friends. Masuto's father then had an old, old Model A Ford, and when it was loaded with venerable family and grinning children, it was always a great adventure to see whether it could puff and grind its way over wonderful Coldwater Canyon Road.

All that gone—and overnight. The proliferating hundred thousand dollar houses had turned Coldwater into a sort of street, and every inch of the Valley below was subdivided and covered with frantically built wooden houses. The orchards were gone and the ranches were gone. Thirty thousand dollars an acre was a price no farmer could resist, and most of the year its green wetness lay under a cover of yellow, noxious smog.

He pushed all this away from him, telling himself that he was only a cop and that too much halfbaked philosophy was notoriously bad

for policemen. And then, when he reached Ventura Boulevard, he deliberately went on to the freeway and raced over the last few miles to World Wide Studios at seventy miles an hour, as any proper Southern Californian should.

It was not yet nine o'clock in the morning, but the vast sprawling studio was already awake and working: the stream of extras parking their cars in the great expanse of the employees' lot, the stars parking their Ferreris and Rollses and Thunderbirds in the few precious shaded spots; the little studio electricians shunting back and forth; the grips and carpenters and electricians walking from their cars to the stages where they would work this morning; the executives, the producers and directors, halting in little groups of emphatic importance; the office workers pouring into the cafeteria for the cup of coffee they missed at home; the writers dragging their feet, bowed in the inevitable gloom of their profession; the cowboys and badmen and Civil War soldiers and gowned and beribboned ladies giving that final and delightful sense of color to the gigantic dream-factory—all of it a never-ending wonder to Masuto.

He always watched and reacted; it was always new and exciting. He waved to the guards at the gate as he drove in, and he preempted one of the spaces marked off for security and then he walked over to the security cottage, where Frank Jefferson presided. Frank Jefferson was a grizzled man in his middle sixties, a onetime cop, onetime head of one of the largest private detective agencies on the West Coast, and now, at a better salary than he had ever earned, in charge of the private police force of forty uniformed and un-uniformed men who guarded World Wide Studios.

He sat back in his swivel chair now, his feet—in the low, embossed cowboy boots he affected—up on his desk, and regarded Masuto with interest and respect.

“Masao,” he said, “you are not the model of a public servant. You got a mind in that noodle of yours. Come out here and I'll start you at twelve thousand. A year from now you'll head up my plainclothes division at eighteen thousand. What do you say?”

Masuto smiled and shook his head.

“All right, the hell with it. No cop really has brains, or what for would he be a cop? What can I do for you?”

“Got fifteen minutes?”

“I got the whole morning if you need it.” He opened his intercom and said to the girl outside, “Bubby, hold any calls, and if you do it real nice, I’ll give you a brand new set of black lace panties I got in my drawer.”

He grinned at Masuto. “Lousy sense of humor, huh? But I got a good reputation. I stopped patting behinds five years ago, so I can say anything I want to. I’m an eccentric—just like you, Masao. For half a century I been a coarse old bastard, but now I’m an eccentric. How about that?”

“It’s an improvement.”

“Ah! Like hell it is! It’s a case of gonadal decay. Now what can I do for the police force of Beverly Hills?”

Masuto told him. He told him the entire story, and Jefferson listened with interest and approval.

“Pretty good,” he said when Masuto had finished. “Pretty damn good.”

“You agree with me?”

“Well! That’s the question, isn’t it? As a cop, Masao, I am inclined to agree. As a member of the jury, I don’t convict on what you got. It’s a series of indications but not evidence. The curse of a cop is no different from the curse of the world—subjectivity. Like you, I liked Al Greenberg. He was direct, simple, and kind—and if that ain’t unusual in this business, I don’t know what is. It’s too easy to get mad at the thought of some swine knocking him over that way. As for Mike Tulley—well, I’ll tell you. With actors it’s this way, you either like them or you don’t. Same as with kids. You either like kids or you don’t, and if you don’t there’s nothing a kid can do that’s right. Myself, I like actors. I know what they are. They are vain, narcissistic, totally self-absorbed, selfish, self-pitying, self-indulgent, and maybe a few other things. They are also generous, outgoing, emotional and sometimes the best kind of people to have around. So maybe I’ll cry a few tears over Mike Tulley—and you might too. So judgement is not to be trusted one hundred percent. I think you’re right, but even if you are wrong, it’s good odds that you’ll smoke out the bastard responsible for all this. I don’t like the thought of a murder at World Wide. I don’t like the thought that a killer can operate in this studio with impunity.

God knows, you got enough going in a studio to give any cop gray hair just in the ordinary run of things. I don't want any carte blanche for murder, and I like to keep my own house clean. Now what do you want from me?"

"Can you take a walk over to Stage 6?" Masuto asked.

"All right."

They walked across the studio grounds toward Stage 6. Jefferson wore a big, expensive, pearl-colored Stetson, a sport coat with gray checks, and he packed a forty-five caliber revolver in a shoulder holster. "Protective coloration," he had once told Masuto. "It makes me a part of the place." But he was consciously a character, a big man, well over six feet. He knew everyone and said hello to everyone.

"Always let them underestimate you, Masao," he said. "But you know that as well as I do."

State 6 was a large, cement-covered square block of a building. It completed a street of stages and processing houses, and then there was a big open space, bounded on three sides with stages and storerooms, but open on the fourth side to the thousand-acre stretch of sage and mesquite-covered hills that made up the vast back lot of World Wide Studios. Up in those hills was all that was necessary to the operation of a modern, contained studio: ranches, blockhouses, frontier forts, Indian villages, lakes, rivers, falls, sections of steamboats, an African village, a French town a medieval castle, a casbah, a New York street scene, a London Street scene, alpine peaks, cliffs—all of it linked by a winding, improbable road which was the basis for the studio tour.

"This square," said Jefferson, "is the first stop for the tour. You know, star's dressing room, sound stage—they go through Stage 11, over there. Then they snoop through the carpentry shop and the plaster shop. Neither shop does the real work anymore. We've moved the main effort over to West Studio, but we still do enough here to give it a feeling of validity. This tour gives me a headache, and I'll have to put on six or seven extra men, but it is still the most original piece of entertainment anyone has thought of for a long time. Well, like I said, all the tour cars stop here. There's the first one coming now."

He pointed down the studio street to where a gaily painted bus of sorts had appeared. An open bus, its seats stretched full across like the seats in a San Francisco cable car, with front, back and sides, were open except for a striped yellow and black awning. The awning was supported by six upright posts. The bus carried some twenty-four people. There was no question but that they were out-of-state sightseers. They wore sport shirts, carried cameras, and ran strongly to old folks and children; and they had the incredibly innocent, ready-to-believe look of people transported to some place as unlikely as the moon.

“The bus is a six-cylinder GM special job, geared very low,” Jefferson said. “The best it can do is twenty miles an hour, but on that one-lane road, that’s more than enough. There are hairpin turns up there on the mountain that you wouldn’t want to joyride over. Well, enough of that. You want to bring your kids out here for the tour, I’ll get them passes.”

“That’s good of you,” Masuto said.

“It is, bubby. Even the studio executives pay. Now let’s get down to cases. Here’s Stage 6. What do you want me to do?”

“You understand, Frank, that I can’t map out all that’s going to happen. Maybe nothing will happen. Maybe our killer knows it’s a bluff.”

“Maybe.”

“But the odds are that I was believed, and if I was believed, the killer is as cool as ice and will plan to take out the witness. The killer is insane, and therefore the plan will be somewhat insane. Now we cannot anticipate the plan, but we can lay down certain rules for the game. Phoebe Greenberg will be outside. By the way—where will she make up?”

“They got their makeup department on Stage 9. They’re shooting two pilots, one on Stage 9 and the other on Stage 10, but they coordinate the makeup and do it all on Stage 9. The makeup girl there is Jesse Klein, a real bubby. Why don’t we walk over and talk to her?”

“Good enough.” They started over to Stage 9. “She comes over from Stage 9 to Stage 6. By then, I’ll have the whole lot of them, with the exception of Phoebe, in Stage 6.”

“If they show.”

“They’ll show. You can be sure of that. Now here’s what I mean when I say that I can lay down certain rules for the game. I tell them that they must stay on stage—that under no condition is anyone to leave the stage until I return. Then I go outside and meet Phoebe. Then, when I have left, one of them will find some way to evade the others and get out of the soundstage.”

“Won’t the others miss him right off?”

“No. The place is too big—and they’re all mavericks. They won’t stay together no matter what I tell them. Leave it to our killer to work it out.”

“This is a mighty iffy business, bubby,” Jefferson said.

“Of course it is. But what other way can we play it? I must gamble that only one of them will come out—and that’s our cookie. How many doors does the stage have?”

“The hanger doors are locked. On the side facing the street, there are two doors, one at each corner. Then there’s the alley, with a third door. That’s the side alley. Back alley has two fire exits from the flying bridges and outside fire escapes.”

“Is there anything about this studio that you don’t know?” Masuto asked.

“Very little, bubby—very little. If they pay me thirty-five thousand a year to walk around here in a cowboy hat, there’s got to be a reason why.”

“All right. I come out of that door—the one nearest us.” They were at Stage 9 now, and Masuto pointed across the big square to Stage 6. “So that’s covered. I want a man in the street to cover the other street door. I want a man in the alley, and I want a man behind the building to cover the fire exits. That’s three men. Got them?”

“They’re yours. When?”

“I want them behind the building at 10:40. On the nose. I’ll meet them there.”

“You got it. What else?”

“I want them armed.”

“They’re armed. But I don’t want any shooting, Masao. They’re good men and they know how to use their hands and they carry

billies. I got a clean record on this lot. We never had shooting, not in the eighteen years I been here, and I don't want any now."

"The killer will be armed."

"Then if a gun is pulled, it's up to them to get the drop. Don't worry about that. When your killer shows, they will control the situation. I told you they're good men.

"I just hope to God they are."

"And I want to do it quiet and quick, Masao, because the tours keep coming. A bus moves into this square every three minutes and another one moves out. Everything is timed, controlled and staged. We could put five thousand people through the tour on a busy day, so just think of how that could be loused up. I get paid to keep things from getting loused up. All right, we'll work it out. Let's go into makeup now."

The room was for extras, for bit players, for second leads and any others who didn't have their own dressing rooms or their own makeup people. It was crowded, noisy, and dominated by a tall, hawk-faced, efficient woman with dark eyes and grey hair. This was Jesse Klein, and when she spotted Jefferson, her dour hatchet face broke into a grin and she yelled, "Hey, cowboy! We got a part for you in this one."

"Not me, bubby. You don't make no actor out of me."

"Why don't you stop with that bubby-business, you big ape? How do you think it sounds to people, the way you go around, bubby this and bubby that? Anyway, we're busy here. You don't want to act, you want to tear down the profession—beat it."

He took her arm, introduced Masuto softly, and asked her to step outside with them.

"That sounds like a dirty invitation."

"Come on, come on—stop with the wisecracks already, bubby."

"You know," she said, going out with them, "you got 1930 slang, old Franko. The kids don't say wisecracks anymore. There are no more wiseacres. That has gone the way of 23 skiddoo. Today you break them up or you're putting them on or you're bleeding on them or you're talking cockamamie or something. What do you want, anyway?"

“You know Phoebe Greenberg, bubby?”

“Sure I know her, poor kid. She inherited nothing but lousy. Then she married poor Al, and the whole world said she had it made. Everyone—Phoebe, you got it made. You got the world by the short hairs. And everybody tells Al he married an angel. Are you a religious man, John Wayne?”

“I’ll tell you what,” Jefferson said. “You stop calling me John Wayne, I stop calling you bubby. Is that a deal?”

“It’s a deal.”

“So I’m not religious, bubby.”

“All right—you religious?” she asked Masuto.

“It’s a foreign religion, so go right ahead.”

“Then I’ll tell you about God. You want to know what God does for kicks? He’s got these angels roaming the world, trying to find someone’s happy or got it made. Then one of ’em yells up to God, ‘Hey God, here’s Phoebe down here. She’s got it made!’ Then? You know what then? Then—wham!”

“Sounds reasonable,” Jefferson said. “The point is this. Phoebe is coming in in maybe ten, fifteen minutes, and she wants to be made up. She’ll tell you how she wants to be made up. You make her up. You ask no questions. You make her up.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. She wants a costume, get it for her. Who’s on wardrobe?”

“Bessie Kenning.”

Jefferson took a pad from his pocket and scribbled a few words. “Give that to Bessie,” he told Jesse Klein, handing her the slip of paper.

“You don’t want to tell me any more?”

“I don’t want you to ask any more, bubby,” he said. “I’ll meet you at the cafeteria at one o’clock and I’ll buy you lunch and I’ll buy you an ice cream soda for desert, and we’ll set the whole place talking about me. Then, if you behave, I may tell you what kind of tricks we’re up to.”

“You’re all heart,” she said.

He walked down toward Stage 6 with Masuto. “Wait in the alley at the back,” he said. “I’ll have the three boys with you in ten minutes.”

“Time’s running out,” Masuto said.
“Don’t worry. They’ll be there.”

CHAPTER TEN



Captain Sharkman

MASUTO was nervous. Time crowded him and caught up with him, and the whole machine was running too rapidly. He was a man who liked to think, who mistrusted quick conclusions, and now there was no time to think. He spent ten minutes waiting in the back alley, increasingly irritated as the minutes ticked by; and then when the three studio policemen appeared in uniform, his annoyance reached the bursting point.

“Why aren’t you in plain clothes?” he demanded.

“Because nobody told us to get into plain clothes,” one of them explained. “If you want us to, we’ll go back and change.”

Masuto’s watch said ten-forty. “No, it’s too late. We’ll make out.” Masuto caught himself and calmed himself. In any case, it was not their fault. They simply did as they were told. Suddenly, he was almost physically sick with a wave of mistrust of Frank Jefferson. But then he overcame that. It was insane and pointless—and unless he controlled his thoughts and rode hard on his suspicions the entire fabric he was weaving would collapse. The point was not to mistrust Frank Jefferson, but to recognize an area of stupidity—which was always obvious in another person. It was his own errors, his own misjudgements and stupidities that might destroy him and Phoebe, not another’s.

He explained the situation in as few words as possible. “I want the killer,” he said, “but above all, I want Mrs. Greenberg unharmed.”

“Don’t worry about that, Sergeant.”

“Don’t worry,” Masuto said bitterly. “How the hell can I not worry when I am told that no guns are to be fired?”

“Unless we have to.”

“What determines that?”

“Circumstances.”

“I am armed,” said Masuto. “If the killer has a gun, I’ll use mine—that is, if the killer’s gun threatens Mrs. Greenberg or myself. If the killer shows no gun, I won’t use mine. Is that agreed?”

They nodded slowly.

“All right. I am going into the stage now. Remember—if possible I will come out of there into the street at nine minutes after eleven. I don’t think so, but conceivably I could have a gun in my hand. Just take a long, hard look before you make any decision. That’s nineteen minutes from now—right?”

“Right.”

“Then take your posts and stay on them.”

Then Masuto walked out of the back alley, turned right at the side alley, through the hard shadow into the burning white sunlight of the studio street. The candidates for murder were prompt, but perhaps that was to be expected. Trude Burke’s MG was parked in front of the stage, and a grip was climbing in to return it to the parking lot. Sidney and Trude were standing at the door to Stage 6, and Sidney said cheerfully, “We’re waiting, Sarge. I don’t go in there without an escort.”

At the same moment, a huge black Northeastern company limousine drew up to the soundstage, and the uniformed chauffeur opened the door for the five people inside: Murphy Anderson, Stacy Anderson, Jack Cotter, Arlene Cotter, and Lenore Tulley.

“We thought we’d come together,” Anderson explained to Masuto. “We wanted to bring Phoebe, but she had already left when I called her home.”

“There was a message from her at the gate,” Masuto told them. “There was some mix-up at the cemetery. Evidently, they had some sort of title problem about the grave site. She had to buy seven square feet of additional land, and there was nothing to it but they must have a certified check. She went to the bank first, then to the cemetery, and then she’ll be here. It doesn’t matter.”

“We’ll hold it up, then?” Cotter asked. They were all tense and nervous.

“No—no, we don’t need Mrs. Greenberg.”

“How do you know?” Cotter demanded.

“For Christ’s sake, Jack—don’t be a damn fool!” Stacy said.

Sidney and Trude Burke stepped over to join them, and Murphy Anderson said, “Hello, Sidney.”

“I’m putting that in the record,” Sidney said. “A leper needs hellos. He files them away. Take it from me, Murph—don’t be Mr. Goodguy. No percentage.”

“I don’t like that,” Cotter said. “You’re too damn quick with that tongue of yours, Sidney, and one day you’re going to choke on it.”

“For crying out loud—” Anderson began. Cotter snapped at him, “Who the hell is Masuto here to act as any kind of judge and jury? It’s no worse to think of Phoebe as the killer than it is to think of Trude as the killer—”

“Oh, drop dead,” Trude told him. “I never knew a cowboy player who wasn’t an idiot—so why don’t you stop trying to be a bigger shmuck than God made you! Let’s get inside and get this lousy horror over with.”

“I’m for that,” Lenore Tulley said.

Masuto opened the door to the soundstage, and Sidney went through and opened the inside sounddoor. One by one, they entered—Masuto last. It was exactly one minute after eleven o’clock.

Inside the door, they stood in a tight group, allowing their eyes to become used to the dim light. Directly in front of them, a pile of cable lay like a tangle of enormous snakes in a jungle of arc lights and reflectors. There was a standing set of a modern kitchen, tiny and surrealist in the great inclosed space, and in the background one side of an ocean liner. Otherwise, only two high, half-drawn cycs and the shadowy spaces of roof, catwalks and far walls. Still, it was a dark forest—full of lairs and windfalls.

“Mrs. Greenberg left word that she would be here no later than eleven-five, and it’s almost that now,” Masuto said.

“If Phoebe’s pegged for the killer,” Stacy said, “then I am getting out of here right now.”

“No one said she is pegged for the killer,” her husband reminded her.

“I hate this stage. Let’s get out of here.”

“I just realized,” Trude said.

“What?”

“He got his first one here. This is where Freddie Saxton was killed. Of course.”

“Which is why we’re here, bright eyes,” Sidney said. “And it’s no he. We got a dirty-minded broad doing all this scragging.”

They were drifting apart now, just as Masuto had predicted, gathering courage as they realized that the soundstage was only a soundstage—no more, no less.

“Clean-minded Sidney,” Trude said. “That’s why I married you, my turtle dove, because you’re so clean-minded and sincere.”

“You married me for my money.”

“Big discovery.”

Masuto said loudly, “Look everyone—stay together and stay inside. For your own protection, stay together—and under no circumstances is anyone to leave the soundstage without permission from me—not until the witness arrives.”

“Where is Phoebe?” Cotter demanded petulantly. He was over by one of the great cycs now, and he called out to Anderson, “Murph, this is ripped—did you know? They’ll bill us for a new cyc—they come to about seven hundred dollars.”

“The hell with it!” Anderson said. “Stop worrying about the goddamn cyc.”

“Mr. Anderson,” Masuto said, “I’m stepping to the door to see if Mrs. Greenberg arrived. I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Sure.” Then Anderson called to Cotter, “Anyway, I think that cyc was torn before. Forget it.”

Masuto stepped through the soundstage door into the street, blinking in the hot sunlight. The soundstage had been dim, cool and silent. Out here, a steam calliope was blaring circus music from the other side of the square. Busses with their brightly striped awnings of yellow and black were rolling in and out of the square, and under the guidance of young men and women in costume, crowds of tourists were being ushered through the carpentry shop and the plaster shop and the mocked-up Soundstage 11 to see all the wonders of how movies were made. There were kids eating icecream cones and popcorn and frankfurters, boys and girls holding hands, cowboys, Indians and gay Western ladies of the movie saloons. And through it

all moved the grotesque lumbering figures who were America's cartoon heroes—Captain Devildom, with five wiggling tentacles and a ray gun; Major Meridean, dressed like a gladiator but with a rocket belt that could zip him anywhere in the world to right wrongs and defeat master criminals; Space Ace Ambrose in his gleaming space suit of red, white, and blue anodized aluminum, and other symbols of character and courage.

The calliope was screaming out a Sousa March as Masuto crossed the street, turning to face the soundstage. At the far end of the stage, the uniformed studio guard stepped out of the alley and lounged a few steps down the street, so that he could watch the door without appearing too obvious.

At the same moment, out of the corner of his eyes, Masuto saw Phoebe leave Stage 9 and start toward him. At least, he was certain that the stout, dark-haired woman—hair greying and wearing a cheap blue cotton dress that fell four inches below her knees—was Phoebe Greenberg. It had to be. Yet he wouldn't have believed that any makeup could be so perfect.

Then she met his eyes and they exchanged glances and he made a slight circle of approval with his middle finger and his thumb and she dropped one lid, and he knew that it was Phoebe. But in that time, for one part of a moment, for one part of a second, he made the error of negligence and sheer stupidity that he was destined to make. For one instant, he took his eyes off the soundstage door. When he glanced at it again, Captain Sharkman stood in the street in front of the stage.

Even in that instant, Masuto could not help thinking what a remarkable and impressive costume it was. It was mad, but then the world was mad and this was a dream factory out of which rolled, day in and day out, the phantasies, romances and nightmares of an entire nation. This was why a thousand generations had lived and died and fought and toiled—so that an apparition called Captain Sharkman could strut slowly toward him on the sun-soaked studio street. Captain Sharkman was six and a half feet tall. From the waist down, each leg was the separate body of a shark, an astonishing imitation of the pasty white skin of the fish itself. The torso was white

and pale grey, and the arms were two ugly appendages that ended in sharkfins, and the head was a shark's head, ugly, expressionless, uptilted with the undercut jaw open. Through that opening, Captain Sharkman had vision, but the mask was cleverly constructed and no eyeholes were apparent. And on either side of Captain Sharkman's head, a pair of moist red gills moved in slow rhythm. Two red, white and blue striped epaulets gave him his rank.

During the next few seconds, things happened very quickly. Masuto saw the studio guard staring at Captain Sharkman but making no move to stop him. "Look for a murderer," he had been told. But no one told him to look for Captain Sharkman. If a decision was difficult for Masuto to make, it was impossible for the guard. If the guard followed Captain Sharkman, the door would be left unguarded.

"And what do I do?" Masuto asked himself.

But there was nothing to do. Captain Sharkman shuffled up the street toward him. Phoebe walked across the square toward him. Masuto stood and waited, and a tour bus slowly moved across the top of the street toward the high mesquite hills on the back lot. The plan, prepared so carefully, had come to pieces.

Masuto made his decision. He let go of his plan and he let go of Phoebe. It was wrong, and he wanted her out of there, and as the bus crossed in front of her, he yelled, "Get on that bus!"

She had a mind and she had good reactions. Masuto watched with pleasure how specifically and quickly she reacted to his command, stepping onto the bus as if she had been waiting for it, standing on the running board and hanging onto one of the steel uprights that supported the awning. The passengers giggled with pleasure at her makeup and costume, and the driver-guide spoke into his microphone, "One of our Western ladies of small repute, friends, right out of a border saloon, yes, sir—one of the many surprises—"

Captain Sharkman broke into an entirely unexpected and most unlikely sprint, swinging onto the running board on the opposite side of the bus, hooking an arm-fin around the steel support. Masuto raced after him, caught the upright at the very end of the bus and hung on there as the bus rolled out of the square and onto the beginning of the mountain road, and still Masuto did not know for

certain whether the murderer was on the bus here with him or back on Sound-stage 6, chatting with the others and laughing quietly at Masuto's stupidity. Well, that's the way it was; you were brilliant and intuitive and you built a plan step by step and removed every wrinkle and considered that finally it was foolproof, and then the unexpected.

"An unexpected pleasure," the driver said into the microphone that curved toward him from under his rear view mirror. "Here we have Captain Sharkman himself. Well, that's something to talk about, isn't it? We are taking the hairpin climb up there to the Peak of Despondency, and you can see the Norman tower up there built for the great remake of 'The Conqueror'—and we have two studio guests, this little lady from the old West and Captain Sharkman. In case any of you have not had the pleasure of watching Captain Sharkman perform his great deeds on TV, I can tell you that he is one of the great cartoon stars of Grapheonics, and he does his part in righting wrong, preventing crime, and defending the American way of life. In his college days, Captain Sharkman was all-American—at the Naval Academy. Three years after his graduation he was in command of an atomic submarine, the ill-fated Finray that exploded off the coast of Africa in 1961. But by some miracle of electronics, instead of dying in that atomic blast, Captain Sharkman and his crew were transformed in a strange evolutionary process provoked by the atomic blast. They became sharkmen, and so were able to continue their lives and adventures in defense of the free world and the American way—"

As the spiel droned on, the driver was manipulating the hairpin turns of the studio road, climbing higher and higher, until Masuto could see below him the studio laid out, sound stages like small blocks, and beyond the studio the whole hazy vista of the San Fernando Valley.

"You will all recollect," the driver continued, "that unfortunate accident in which an atomic bomb was lost off the coast of Spain. Well, we like to think that Captain Sharkman and his crew of fearless underwater heroes were instrumental in recovering it, and in their dangerous underwater existence, this is only one of their many, many tasks. At the top of the climb, at the Peak of Despondency, there is a souvenir and refreshment counter where you can purchase

a small replica of Captain Sharkman, either entirely assembled or in plastic pieces, one dollar—”

They had slowed almost to a stop to take one of the hairpin turns and Masuto shouted, “Phoebe, drop off!”

Again, she obeyed. She dropped off the bus onto the edge of the road. Masuto dropped off. It hung in the balance, and then as the bus rounded the curve, Masuto saw that Captain Sharkman had also dropped off.

It had worked. Masuto faced the murderer. Phoebe ran a few steps, and then she was next to Masuto. “Behind me and down the road,” he snapped at her. He had drawn his pistol, and as Captain Sharkman came toward them, Masuto pointed the gun and said, “Don’t make me kill you.”

A hundred yards up the road and fifty feet above them, the bus had stopped, the passengers staring at what was happening below. The driver yelled, “What goes on there, old buddy?”

The passengers giggled self-consciously.

Phoebe paused a few yards behind Masuto, and now Captain Sharkman leaped toward Masuto.

Masuto fired twice at Captain Sharkman’s legs. Either the costume deflected the bullets or Masuto missed, and then Captain Sharkman was upon him, and a blow of the big arm-fin knocked the gun out of Masuto’s hand. As he attempted to lunge past Masuto, the detective caught him with a backhand karate chop, knocking him off balance. Sharkman, slipped, stumbled and then caught himself. The two of them dropped into karate position now, and Masuto realized that his right hand was bleeding from the blow with the fin. The fin was hard as steel and rough to simulate real sharkskin. It would only take a single karate chop with that rocklike fin to stop Masuto, to break a neck or an arm or a shoulder—and Captain Sharkman was determined to have the blow, to bring it in, to finish Masuto and get the girl. He was senseless now, mindless, and he rushed Masuto and screamed as he made his chop.

It missed. The audience in the bus shouted with excitement and howled with laughter.

Masuto’s own cry came with the blow he launched. It was the explosive karate sound, and his hand chopped into Sharkman’s neck

and hit plastic and foam rubber. He hit again as Sharkman lumbered for his own position. Masuto was quicker, like a mongoose with a cobra, but Sharkman was almost invulnerable in his cocoon of plastic and foam rubber. Again and again, Sharkman swung his lethal fin, and again and again Masuto avoided it—only once not entirely, and it opened his left sleeve and took the surface skin off his left arm, shoulder to elbow.

It was then that Phoebe was able to dart in and pick up Masuto's gun, and as the crowd in the bus hooted and yelled and screamed, "Fake! Watch it, Sharkman—they got a gun!"

Phoebe cried to him, "Masao—here's your gun!"

Masuto got the gun, but Phoebe was not quick enough and a glancing blow from the fin sent her sprawling on the road. Masuto fired point-blank at Captain Sharkman's head. Sharkman wheeled around, and Masuto fired twice into the open mouth—and Sharkman staggered back, back from the edge of the road, fell and rolled down, down the slope, breaking mesquite and cactus and finally coming to a stop in the little drainage culvert that was the edge of the lower turn of the road.

Masuto helped Phoebe to her feet. She rubbed her shoulder.

"It's not broken, is it?"

"It feels like it's broken into twenty pieces. Oh—Masao, it hurts like hell."

"See if you can move your arm."

She moved her arm tentatively. "It hurts, but I can move it." She pulled off the black wig. "I look rotten as a brunette," she said.

"It beats me," Masuto said softly. "It just beats me."

A bus climbing the hill had stopped, and the tourists were crowding around Mr. Sharkman, and the tourists from the bus above were arguing with the driver, who was trying to keep them from pouring down the road.

Helping Phoebe, Masuto went down the road, and when the bus driver began his protest, Masuto said tiredly, "Damn it, I'm a cop. So why don't you see if you can back down the road and get Frank Jefferson and tell him there's been trouble here and he should get to hell up here."

"You can't back down that road."

“Then run down it by foot, damn you!”

Meanwhile, two people in the crowd around Captain Sharkman were easing off his headpiece.

“What are you doing?” Masuto demanded.

“I’m a doctor,” a small man with glasses said. “This man is hurt. I don’t know what you did to him with that gun you have in your hand —”

“Then help him,” Masuto said without feeling.

Phoebe, next to him, was shivering. She pressed up against him as they removed the headpiece.

“Oh, my God, it’s Jack Cotter!” Phoebe said.

“Didn’t you know?”

A bullet had gone through his neck, but there was no blood on his face. It was pasty white, puffy; he looked like a pudgy, harmless man with pale blue eyes. The doctor bent over him for a minute or so, and then turned to Masuto and said, “Well, he’s dead.”

Masuto shrugged.

“Well, who are you, mister?” the doctor demanded.

“I’m a cop,” Masuto said, putting the gun away in his jacket pocket.

“And who is he?”

Phoebe began to cry, and Masuto put his arm around her.

“That arm of yours needs attention,” the doctor said to Masuto.

“That’s a pretty bad scrape.”

Still Masuto stared at Cotter, and then he said quietly to Phoebe, “Stop crying. There’s no need to cry now.”

“He was Al’s friend.”

“He was nobody’s friend,” Masuto said.

“There’s a dead man there,” the doctor said. “I’m asking you who he is?”

“He’s Captain Sharkman,” Masuto said, and then he pulled Phoebe out of the crowd and they began to walk down the road back to the studio.

The bus driver yelled after them, “Mister, if you’re a cop, what am I supposed to do with this stiff?”

“Leave it alone,” Masuto said.

But now Jefferson was on his way, his long black car with its spinning top light of bright red and its screaming siren careening up

the mountain road and then pulling to a stop alongside of Phoebe and Masuto. There was a driver, Jefferson and two uniformed guards, and the two guards leaped out of the car and Jefferson put on his best John Wayne manner, looming over Masuto and demanding, "What the hell kind of bad business is this, Masao. I tell you no shooting and you gun a man down."

Masuto glanced at his left arm, the blood welling out of the long, ugly scrape, and said that he was sorry.

"Was it your man?"

"That's right."

"Was your guess right?"

"It was right," Masuto said.

"Well, I'll be damned. You just never know, do you?"

"You never know," Masuto agreed.

"That arm looks ugly, bubby," Jefferson said. "Get it tended to. You know where the studio clinic is."

"I know."

"I'd ride you down, but we got things up here. Can you walk?"

"I can walk."

"It's not bleeding very much. Just an ooze."

"I'll walk and I'll survive."

"We stopped the tour for the time being," Jefferson said. "I guess we'll lose maybe two hours. You know what that costs the studio."

"My heart is breaking," Masuto said.

"I can just see that. Look, when you get that arm fixed up, come around to my office. I want a statement from you. Also, I got to call in the LA cops."

"I'll come around," Masuto said.

They got back in the car and drove up the road to where the bus was parked and where the crowd of tourists could not pull themselves away from Jack Cotter's body. Masuto and Phoebe were alone on the road now. They stood there for a moment, and then Phoebe said, "That arm does look awful."

"It looks worse than it is. It's not really bleeding, and unless you're going to dress one of those bad scrapes, the best thing is to leave it alone."

"But doesn't it hurt terribly?"

"It hurts."

"You're a strange man," she said.

He shrugged and pointed down the road. "It's a long walk," he said.

"They walked on in silence for a while, and then she said, "You knew right along that it was Jack Cotter?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to be sick," she announced suddenly.

"Try not to be."

"I can't try not to be. I can't control it."

He supported her by the side of the road as she heaved and cried out in pain.

"Easy, Phoebe—what is it?"

"My shoulder. It hurts so when I throw up. Oh, I am so miserable."

"Do you feel better now?"

"A little," she said. "I feel a little better."

They began to walk again, slowly, Phoebe hanging onto Masuto's right arm. Phoebe asked him, "When did you know it was Jack Cotter."

"The first night. In the viewing room at your house."

"No. How could you?"

"Because only he heard Samantha's voice. No one else. Every one took it for granted that it was a woman, but no one else heard the voice."

"Then whose voice did Lenore Tulley hear?"

"Jack Cotter's. Maybe he was a rotten actor, but how good do you have to be to talk in falsetto?"

She walked on for a while, and then she shook her head and said, "I don't understand, Masao. Why? Why did he kill Freddie Saxton? Why did he kill Mike Tulley? Why did he kill Al?"

"Why does a killer kill? He had a motive—he wanted Northeastern Films. He wanted to be it, the top man, the owner, the boss. But for that he only had to get rid of two men, Murphy Anderson and your husband. But that would point directly to him, wouldn't it? So he decided that Samantha would do it, and he killed Mike Tulley and Fred Saxton to establish the Samantha-revenge motive."

"But that's insane."

“He was insane.”

“You mean he began this seven weeks ago, and that he then murdered Fred Saxton only to lay the basis for linking Samantha to the other killings?”

“That’s right. As a matter of fact, I imagine he got the idea a year ago, when your assistant producer, Max Green, died of a heart attack.”

“It doesn’t seem possible.”

“Murder never seems possible—and this kind of insane, grotesque murder is even less than possible. Only, it happens.”

“And that poor woman, Peggy Groton, who died up on Mulholland Drive—did he kill her too?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“Do you remember the phone call from Samantha—the one received in the office?”

“In the office? Oh, yes—yes, Murph told me about it.”

“Well, Cotter could imitate a woman’s voice to the extent of a few words through a locked door—but not a whole conversation over the telephone. That had to be a real woman, and any woman who became a part of his lunatic murder scheme was doomed. He couldn’t allow Peggy Groton to live, not for an hour, not for a half hour. He had to kill her and kill her quickly.”

“Poor Al,” she said. “Poor Al. He never had an enemy. Can you imagine living in this place and not having an enemy? Do you know, Masao, if we walked down the street and a panhandler stopped him, he never said no. He was the industry touch. You were never in the industry, so you don’t know what I mean, but no one ever asked Al and was turned down. And then that fool of a Jack Cotter, that strutting, ridiculous cowboy hero—there’ll never be a day of my life when I won’t think of him killing Al, and Al pleading for that medicine that held his life—”

“But we’ll never know,” Masuto said. “It’s always possible that he didn’t kill your husband. Mr. Greenberg could have had a heart attack and Cotter could have taken advantage of it.”

“And we won’t know, will we?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“You know, I have a feeling that if you let go of me, I’d be hysterical.”

“No, you’ll be all right.”

“Will you come and talk to the others? Do you suppose they’re still there—on Stage 6?”

“Why not? It’s less than an hour since I left them.”

“Will you talk to them?”

“No,” Masuto said.

“Why not? Do you despise us so?”

“I don’t despise you.”

“What do you call it, Masao?”

“I don’t despise you. I don’t judge you.”

“And isn’t that a typical statement for those you despise?”

“No.”

“It’s so easy for you. You live behind that damned Oriental mask of yours—”

Masuto felt himself freezing, closing up.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Dear Masao—I am so terribly sorry. I don’t know why I said that.”

“You said it because you felt it.”

“Oh, Christ—no. No. Don’t talk to me like that, Masao.”

“I don’t know of any other way to talk to you, Mrs. Greenberg.”

“Sure. There it is. You’ve got that great big goddamn Japanese mask spread all over your face, and lump me and all that I am because I can never get past it, and what am I anyway but a skinny, washed-out Anglo-Saxon blonde bitch who was just hanging on to you and vomiting over the side of the road; and two days after my husband died, here I am trying to make a pass at you—so why don’t you just spit in my face instead of going through this damned *Sayonara* politeness routine!”

He stopped and turned to face her. They were almost down at the square now, and he could see that it was filled with tourists from the stopped buses, and an ambulance was squeezing through to come up the road, and behind the ambulance there was a Los Angeles police car, and they would be up next to him in a minute or two and what does one say in a minute or two that can explain the whole world and the way it is?

“Phoebe,” he cried, “Phoebe, what in hell are you doing to me? I’m a Japanese, and the hell with this Nisei business! I am a cop. I take home one hundred and forty-two dollars each week, and they give me a car. I am married. I have three kids. In all her life my wife never set foot in a home like yours, but she has a sister who works in one as a maid. My wife never used a foul word or ever lifted her voice in anger against me or one of my kids. I am not a Jew or a Christian or a Mormon or anything else that would have any meaning for you, and I love you but I will get over it. So help me God, I will get over it. And that’s it. The end of it. The finish of it. No more.”

Then the ambulance reached them, and she knew what he said was true and would hold.

At the studio clinic, while Masuto’s arm was being dressed and while his jacket was being mended by one of the wardrobe tailors, a stream of people passed by to check his credentials and to hear his side of the story. Studio executives, Los Angeles cops, the district attorney, sheriff’s deputies.

Finally his own Chief listened to what he had to say and then told him, “Good enough, Masao. You can have the rest of the day off.”

“The redheaded one, Trude Burke, you know what she would say to that?”

“What would she say, Masao?”

“You’re all heart. That’s what she would say.”

“Don’t rate me, Masao. It’s the taxpayers’ money.”

“Sure, it’s the taxpayers’ money.”

“Anyone else would drag you down to the office for a full statement. I’m willing to wait a couple of days.”

“Like I said, you’re all heart.”

“Yeah. Can you drive or do you want a chauffeur?”

“I can drive.”

The arm hurt a bit, but it did not interfere with his driving, but at home, when his wife, Kati, put her hand on his arm, he winced with pain—and then he had to tell her most of what had happened. As she listened, her eyes filled with tears at the thought of the danger he had faced.

She served him a very simple lunch of tea-rice and green tea, and then he went out to the garden to fuss with his roses. She brought out her basket of mending and she sat quietly by the back door of the house, doing her sewing while he pruned branches, cut roses, loosened soil and sprayed just a bit here and there. There was still an hour before the children returned from school, and an hour like this, with Masao in the garden and herself sitting by quietly with her work, was almost better than anything else in the world.

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*—BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SPARTACUS*

HOWARD FAST

Writing as **E. V. Cunningham**



**THE CASE
OF THE ONE-PENNY
ORANGE**

A Masao Masuto Mystery

The Case of the One-Penny Orange

JACK BRIGGS

They say that a house that might sell for a hundred thousand dollars in Scarsdale, New York, would easily fetch a quarter of a million on a good street in Beverly Hills, and without such niceties as cellar and attic. The Spanish Colonial house that Jack Briggs had just purchased, which was situated on Camden Drive between Elevado and Lomitas, would hardly rate one hundred thousand, even in Scarsdale. The price to Briggs was two hundred ninety-five thousand, of which he had put down one hundred twenty thousand in cash.

Detective Sergeant Masao Masuto was aware of the sale price, just as he was aware of the fact that the former owner of the house, Cliff Emmett, had had in quick succession a divorce, a film that bombed, and a heart attack — while the purchaser, Jack Briggs, was one-third owner of the very successful X-rated *Open Mind* — “a totally new departure in the porno field,” as one critic put it. The fact that Masuto carried with him a sort of Who’s Who in Beverly Hills — in his mind and unprinted — was a source of constant amazement to his colleagues on the fourteen-man detective force of the Beverly Hills Police Department. As for Masuto, this was not a matter of great effort; as a Japanese — a Nisei, which means a native-born American whose parents were Japanese immigrants — and the only Japanese on the force, he took his job a little more seriously than might otherwise have been the case. He was essentially of a curious disposition — and as he once put it, Beverly Hills provoked him to endless curiosity.

As, for example, the fact that Jack Briggs' house had been broken into and ransacked — and nothing was taken. He was on his way to headquarters from his home in Culver City when the word came through on his band, and the boss told him that he could look in if he wished to but that it was not absolutely necessary, since Detective Sy Beckman was already on the scene. For Masuto, a ripped-off house with its contents intact was more intriguing than a simple run-of-the-mill robbery. He was already on Santa Monica Boulevard when he got the word, and a few minutes later he parked his aging Datsun in front of the Briggs home.

Masuto had rather liked Cliff Emmett, whom he had met once in connection with a simple robbery and who had gone down with his own bundle of trouble; perhaps because he worked in Beverly Hills, Masuto did not envy the rich, and now as he looked at the sprawling ochre-colored house with its red tile roof, he wondered what had become of Emmett. Quick rich and quick poor — there was a lot of it in Beverly Hills.

Beckman's car and a police car were parked in front of the house, the police car occupied by Officer Frank Seaton, who was scribbling in a pad, and who nodded at Masuto and informed him that Beckman was inside.

"Nothing to it, Masao." He shrugged. Officer Seaton was not curious.

Beckman opened the front door for Masuto. He was alone in the tiled foyer. "This one's kinky," he said. "I don't like them kinky." Beckman was an enormous man, six feet three, slope-shouldered, with a large nose and chin and heavy brows, and belligerently Jewish and ethnically conscious. He adored Masuto.

"Why kinky?"

"Where there's breaking and entering, I like something stolen. They claim nothing's missing."

"Who claims?"

"Jack Briggs and his wife, Ellen. Occupants and owners. One child, Bernie, in school. Mother died, day before yesterday."

"His mother?" Masuto asked.

"Her mother. Funeral this morning. They come back and find the kitchen door jimmed open — lousy amateur job — and the place

ransacked.”

“Where are they?”

Beckman turned his head and nodded, and Masuto followed him into the living room. A huge wooden door connected it with the foyer. Two steps down. A big room, brown Mexican tiles on the floor, beamed ceiling, large ornate chairs and couch. For all that he had lived his life in California, Masuto could never get used to the local notion of what was decorative and what was beautiful. Briggs, a large, fleshy man, overweight, balding, was sprawled in an armchair, sipping a tall glass of whiskey and soda. His wife — good features, brown hair, slender — was slowly straightening the rooms, putting back in place the contents of drawers and sideboard that had been dumped aimlessly on the floor. Both of them depressed, morose — understandable enough, Masuto decided, in two people who return from a funeral to find their home ransacked and disordered.

Beckman made the introductions. “Detective Sergeant Masuto — this is Mrs. Briggs.”

“I am honored,” Masuto said. “I saw you in *Major Barbara*. You were very good.”

A faint hint of a smile. “In that wretched little barn on Las Palmas?”

“I love the theater — even in wretched little barns. I have seen many splendid actors in such places.”

The smile became more than a hint, and Masuto experienced the qualm of uneasiness he always felt when he allowed himself to fall into a formal speech pattern. It was part put-on and part a necessity that rose out of a section of his being; he was two persons, he always would be.

She thanked him, and Jack Briggs climbed out of the chair in response to Beckman’s curt introduction. His look said that he was dubious about Orientals — particularly on the police force.

“Detective Beckman tells me nothing was taken,” Masuto said.

“Because there was nothing worth taking.” He was not a pleasant man; his wife turned her back on him and returned to the disorder. “Every nickel I had went into buying this barn. I been a long time hungry, Lieutenant.”

“Sergeant,” Masuto said gently, nodding at a pair of silver candlesticks that lay on the floor.

“Plated, They’re not worth carrying away.” Suddenly, he exploded in anger. “You see this room? Every goddamn room in the house — like a mother-fuckin’ earthquake! And for what? You know what you can do with Beverly Hills, Lieutenant — you can take it and shove it you-know-where!”

“May I look at the other rooms?”

He was back in the chair with his drink. “Be my guest.” His wife folded down to the floor, cross-legged, and began to weep gently, a broken ashtray in her hands, her position as broken and forlorn as the cheap piece of crockery. As Masuto left the room, followed by Beckman, he felt a wave of compassion for the woman — yet objectively. Perhaps his greatest virtue as a policeman lay in the fact that he was always the outsider.

They went from room to room. Every room in the house had been searched, not with care or skill but wildly and stupidly, drawers emptied, contents flung around on the floor, pictures taken from the walls, some of them ripped from the walls, some of them torn from their frames. An image was reflected, the fury of barbarians, but then the world that Masuto inhabited was a world of barbarians. In the kitchen and pantry the destruction was even worse, dishes swept to the floor and shattered, flatware dumped from the trays, sugar and flour bins emptied.

“They sure as hell wanted to find something very bad,” Beckman said.

The kitchen door had been jimmed as unprofessionally as the search had been conducted, probably, Masuto decided, by the simple process of inserting the curved end of a short crowbar and forcing the door open.

“These are no pros,” said Beckman.

“Unless they wanted us to grant them amateur status.”

Beckman picked up a watch that lay on the kitchen table. “Why did they leave this? It’s worth fifty bucks.”

“Five with a fence. They weren’t looking for watches.”

They returned to the living room. Jack Briggs still sat where they had left him; Ellen Briggs was staring at a framed photo of a woman.

She held it for Masuto to see.

“You photograph well,” Masuto said.

“My mother. Years ago. Poor woman.” She placed the picture on a table. “One room done. I’m afraid to face the rest of the house.”

“Your home was searched,” Masuto said to Briggs. “Not neatly, but very thoroughly. What were they looking for?”

“You got me.” Briggs shrugged.

“You must have some idea.”

“None. Just none.”

He turned to Mrs. Briggs. “Your mother’s death — did you insert a death notice in the newspaper?”

“In the *L.A. Times*, yes.”

“So they knew the time of the funeral and when the place would be empty. I mean, there was no mistake, Mrs. Briggs. They wanted this house.”

The doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” Beckman said. He returned a moment later with Sweeney, the fingerprint man. “Fingerprints,” he explained to the Briggses. “This is Officer Sweeney.”

“Where do you want me to start, Sergeant?” he asked Masuto.

“Forget it,” Masuto replied.

Sweeney turned and left, and Briggs said, “That’s a hell of a note. Don’t you give a damn who did this?”

“People who do this kind of thing don’t have fingerprints, Mr. Briggs.” He turned to Mrs. Briggs. “I don’t understand — if you will forgive me, I have to ask questions. Why just the two of you? After a funeral ...”

“I know.” She nodded wanly. “I have no relatives. My mother was a refugee from Germany. I was the only relative who escaped — I was just a child. She had some friends in New York, but when we moved out here, two months ago — well, it was a small funeral. My son, my husband, and myself.”

“Your son?”

“We dropped him off at school and then drove here. We had lunch first, so there was no reason for him to miss the afternoon session. Better in school than to sit here and try to grapple with death. He’s only twelve years old.”

“Of course. I understand.”

“I thought of something,” Briggs said. “Maybe they figured I’d have a print of the film here.”

“*Open Mind?*”

Briggs grinned. “So you’re a porny freak.”

“I read the trades,” Masuto said coldly. “Suppose you had a print here. What would it be worth?”

“You can’t really protect a porny print,” Briggs said. “Certainly not in the foreign market. If the mob got hold of it, they could turn it into a hundred grand — no sweat.”

“They’re going to pirate it sooner or later,” Beckman said sourly.

“Later — later.”

“A print would be this size,” Masuto said, holding his hands eighteen inches apart. “Bigger than a breadbox. You don’t look for that in small drawers or behind the backing of a wall painting.”

“You tell me.”

The telephone rang. Ellen Briggs answered. “Yes, he’s here. It’s for you,” she said to Masuto. “A Captain Wainwright.” She handed the phone to Masuto.

“Masao,” the chief of detectives said, “are you finished there?”

“Just about.”

“Then get your ass over to Gaycheck’s on North Canon. The stamp place.”

“What’s up?”

“You’ll tell me. He’s just been murdered. In broad daylight. So help me God, I don’t know what this town’s coming to!”

2

IVAN GAYCHECK

Masuto was the observer, not the observed. By sight or name he knew at least half a thousand people out of the population of Beverly Hills, yet even those who had met him before would forget, and then evince surprise at the fact that this tall, slender Nisei was a policeman in their city. He had been to Ivan Gaycheck's stamp emporium only once, when the place had been burglarized, and Gaycheck, ranting, had claimed the loss of twenty-two thousand dollars' worth of stamps, but he remembered the man well — short, stout, a background of no ascribable nationality, an accent impossible to pin down, pale blue eyes, and a reputation in the trade for being only slightly on the brighter side of shady.

Now, in death, his blue eyes were wide open, his puffy face set in an expression of aggrieved surprise. He lay in the back room of his store, between two display cases and in front of the safe where he kept the most valuable of his treasures. The safe was un-opened; the display cases were unopened; but between his two open eyes, directly in the middle of his forehead, was the small, neat puncture of a .22-caliber bullet. He was covered with a rubber morgue sheet, and guarded, better in death than in life, by Officer Cutler. The two ambulance attendants were waiting for the detectives, and Gaycheck's assistant was in the bathroom, being sick.

Masuto bent over the body, turned back the sheet, and stared for a moment or two at Gaycheck's face.

"Twenty-two," Beckman said.

"Close. Those are powder burns."

“Twenty-two short,” Beckman said. “One of those little-bitsy guns. Ladies’ purse gun.”

“That’s a brilliant deduction,” Masuto said sourly.

At that moment, Dr. Sam Baxter, the medical examiner, entered the back room, rubbing his hands cheerfully and demanding to know where the corpse was. His question remained unanswered. He grinned, took out his glasses and polished them, then knelt by the body.

“He’s a damn freak,” Beckman said.

“Dead. Instantaneous. Bullet in the brain. Twenty-two caliber, I think, but I can’t be sure until I dig it out.”

“We didn’t know he was dead,” Beckman said.

Ronald Haber, the dead man’s assistant, a man of about thirty, usually pasty-faced and even pastier now, came out of the bathroom, looked at the body, and did a quick about-face. The sound of him puking came through the closed door.

“Any other wounds?” Masuto asked.

“One was enough.” Baxter pulled off the sheet. “Clean as a whistle. Didn’t even disturb the handkerchief in his coat pocket. The man’s surprised. The lady smiled at him, put her little gun in his face, and poof!”

“Why a lady?”

“Little gun, little lady.”

“Brilliant,” Masuto agreed moodily. “You should be a cop. When did it happen, Sam?”

“What time is it now?”

“Just three.”

The doctor patted Gaycheck’s cheeks and bent one of his arms. “Two hours ago — give or take a few minutes.”

“Can we take it away, or are we on permanent assignment here?” one of the ambulance attendants demanded. “You know, there might just be a live one waiting for the wagon.”

“Empty his pockets first,” Masuto told Beckman.

Beckman emptied Gaycheck’s pockets, piling change, bills, wallet, and keys on the display case. The attendants covered the body, lifted it onto a stretcher, and rolled it out. The assistant came out of the bathroom and stood in front of the bathroom door, shaking.

Dr. Baxter picked up his black bag and left with a cheerful goodbye. Sweeney then entered.

“You want prints?” he asked Masuto aggressively.

Masuto shrugged.

“You lift a guy’s spirits, Masao. You sure as hell do. You make him feel nice and secure in his job.”

“Oh, go ahead and dust the place.” Masuto sighed.

“Thanks.”

Masuto turned to Officer Cutler and asked him who had found the body and who had called him. Cutler pointed to Haber.

“That one.”

“Who’s outside?” Masuto asked.

“Jackson.”

“He can take off. I want you outside until we lock up and seal off.”

“Right.”

“And you answer no questions. None. No crowds. If the media come, shunt them over to the captain. No one gets inside. Fill in the captain on what we know, which is nothing. Throw the latch on the door and lock it behind you, and knock if you want back in.”

Officer Cutler nodded and left. Masuto turned to Haber. “How do you feel?”

“Better now — I think.”

“Would you like to sit down?” There was a small desk and a chair in one corner of the back room.

“Funny, there isn’t even a bloodstain,” Haber said, staring at the carpet.

“No. The bullet remained in his brain or in the back of the skull. Then, whoever shot him caught his body and eased it down. Very cool.” Masuto glanced at Beckman and smiled slightly.

“How do you know?” Beckman demanded.

“The way the body was. No one dies and falls that way — on his back, laid out. No way. No, indeed.”

“So it wasn’t a dame.”

“A strong, cool woman — who knows? You found the body?” he asked Haber. The assistant nodded. “Tell me about it,” Masuto said.

“I leave for lunch at twelve-thirty. One hour. Mr. Gaycheck leaves — I mean he would have left, he usually left when I returned. He

always had a two o'clock sitting reserved at Scandia. He would return about three-thirty, but if he had an appointment with a customer maybe earlier. I shouldn't say customer. He always insisted on the word *client*. I guess it doesn't matter now."

"No, it doesn't. Did he have an appointment today?"

"I don't think so. You can look at his appointment book."

"Where is it?"

Haber pointed to the desk, and Beckman walked over and picked up a leather-bound log book. He opened it and showed it to Masuto. For this day, nothing except two scrawled letters — *P* and *M*. Masuto held out the book to Haber.

"Does that mean anything to you?"

"PM — afternoon, I guess."

"He knew it was the afternoon," Beckman said.

"Yes, I suppose so."

Masuto riffled through the pages of the log. Dates, names, prices — no other notation of PM.

"He said nothing to you about any appointment today? Expecting someone?"

Haber shook his head.

"You went to lunch — where?"

"At Juniors. I had a corned-beef sandwich ..."

"All right. What time did you return?"

"One-thirty. Exactly."

"Exactly?" Masuto raised an eyebrow.

"I am a precise person."

"Go on."

"I went in. No one in front. I came back here, and ..." He spread his hands. "That's it. I saw him on the floor, dead. I called the police. Then I called an ambulance."

"How did you know he was dead?" Beckman snapped.

Masuto shook his head, and Haber began to blubber that nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

"All right," Masuto said, not unkindly. "You called the police. What then?"

"I was in front. I couldn't stay there."

"No one else came into the shop before the police?"

He shook his head. “We don’t have many customers — clients — off the street. Mostly by appointment. But what I don’t understand is, why didn’t anyone hear the shot?”

“A twenty-two don’t make that much noise,” said Beckman. “There was two doors between here and the street. But if he took him in here, it must have been somebody he knew.”

Masuto stared at Haber, who was frowning.

“Well?” Masuto demanded.

“I guess so,” Haber agreed.

“Who?” demanded Beckman.

Haber shook his head. Masuto motioned toward the cases. “Was anything taken — stolen — or sold, or removed?”

“I didn’t look.”

“Well, look now.”

While Haber brooded over the display cases and Sweeney finished his fingerprint work, Masuto called Captain Wainwright at headquarters. Wainwright was upset. “Now just hear me, Masao,” he said. “This is not East Los Angeles. When a store is ripped off in one of the streets north of Wilshire and the owner is shot, it means every damn one of them will be breathing down my neck, the chief, the city manager, the mayor, and maybe fifty prominent citizens — and this is not a place without prominent citizens....”

Haber stood in front of Masuto, shaking his head. “Nothing,” he said.

“It doesn’t appear to be robbery,” Masuto told Wainwright. “At least not yet. Just a clean, neat murder.” He put down the phone. “How sure are you?” he asked Haber.

“I know the contents of the cases. Anyway, they’re all locked.”

“Where is the key?”

Haber pointed to the small pile of stuff from Gaycheck’s pockets. Sweeney packed his stuff away, grinning at Masuto.

“Nice prints, very nice prints. Nothing like a print on glass. You don’t have the murder weapon?” he asked Masuto hopefully.

Masuto shook his head. He was going through the contents of Gaycheck’s pockets. “This key?” he asked Haber. Haber nodded.

“The trouble with you,” Sweeney said, “is that you got no faith in Western technology.”

“Opens all the cases?” Masuto asked.

“All of them.”

“Technology,” Sweeney repeated, and then left.

“That man,” said Beckman, “gives me a pain in the ass. He draws down eighteen thousand a year, and I never know his goddamn fingerprints to give us anything.”

“How valuable is the stuff in the cases?” Masuto asked Haber.

“All of it? I don’t know — maybe twenty, twenty-five thousand dollars.”

“That’s very interesting,” Beckman said. “When his place was ripped off last June, he claimed a loss of twenty-two grand — it was twenty-two, wasn’t it, Masao?”

“It was. One case smashed and emptied.” He looked at Haber thoughtfully.

“I had nothing to do with that.”

“Now those,” said Masuto, pointing to a set of American stamps in the glass case, “what are they worth?”

“That’s a complete set of the TransMississippi Exposition, 1898, mint — a very nice set.”

“Mint?”

“That means they’re uncanceled, never been used for postage. In U.S. stamps, we deal only in mint, except for the very first issues. This set, well, it’s very nice. We could get almost two thousand for it.”

“Are there fences for stamps?” Beckman demanded.

“Fences?”

“People who buy stolen stamps,” Masuto explained.

Haber hesitated. “I suppose so.”

“And what might they pay for such a set?”

“There’s really no way to identify mint stamps. I suppose a thief could sell these to a dealer in some other city for at least seven or eight hundred dollars.”

“Why some other city?”

“Because if they were stolen, we’d circulate the information here in L. A. and dealers would be looking for them.”

“And you’re absolutely sure there’s nothing missing from the cases?”

“I’m sure.”

“Do you have the combination for the safe?”

“No, sir.”

“Who has it?”

“Mr. Gaycheck.”

“Where? Where did he keep it?”

“In his head, when he was alive.”

“He must have written it down somewhere,” Masuto insisted.

“No.”

“How long have you worked here, Mr. Haber?”

“Five years — since Mr. Gaycheck opened the store.”

“And all the times he opened the safe in those five years, you never caught the combination?”

“No, sir.”

“Bullshit!” said Beckman.

“No, sir ...” Haber began to shake again. “Because Mr. Gaycheck was a very careful man. He never opened the safe without blocking the view with his body.”

“What did he keep in the safe?” Masuto asked.

“Any cash over fifty dollars. Also some bearer bonds of his own — I don’t know how much. And if we had a very valuable stamp, he would put it in the safe.”

“Like what?” Beckman snapped.

“Well, last week we had a ten-cent black 1847 George Washington. It was in fine condition and any collector would pay three thousand for it. He put that in the safe.”

“Is it in there now?”

“No. We took it on commission from Holmbey’s, downtown. The sale didn’t come through and I brought it back yesterday. Are you going to arrest me?”

“For what?”

“Well — Mr. Gaycheck was murdered.”

“Did you murder him?” Masuto asked gently.

“Good God, no!” Haber burst out. “Murder him? I never fired a gun in my life. I wouldn’t know how. I have a bad back, so I was never even inducted.”

“Then we won’t arrest you, Mr. Haber.” Masuto smiled. “Did Gaycheck have a wife, children, relatives? Have you notified

anyone?"

"No, sir. He wasn't married. No one. He would mention that, no relatives, no family."

"Friends?"

"None that I knew of. He would have lunch occasionally with some of the other dealers or with a client. That was business."

"How old was he?" Masuto asked, going through the wallet now. An American Express card, a Bank-Americard, a two-by-three photograph, but no driver's license.

"I don't know," Haber answered slowly. "I never asked him."

"Did he drive a car?"

"No. He has a small condominium on Burton Way. He either walked or used a cab."

"There's one hundred and three dollars here in his wallet. I want you to count it."

Haber's hand shook as he counted the money.

"These keys. For the shop and the apartment?"

Haber nodded.

"This key?" It was a third door key.

"This is the shop key," Haber said. "I suppose one of the others is his apartment."

"And the third key?"

"I don't know."

"No safe-deposit key. Did he have a box?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"All right. Give your address and telephone number to Detective Beckman. Then you can go home. But for the time being, I don't want you to leave the county."

"What about the store?"

"The store will be sealed until we can have the safe opened and examine its contents. The rest is up to the legal department at City Hall. Detective Beckman will give you a number you can call for information."

While Beckman took down Haber's address and phone number and ushered him out of the store, Masuto studied the photograph he had found in Gaycheck's wallet. It was a picture, head and shoulders, of a young woman, no older than twenty-five, no younger

than twenty. Straight blond hair, two buttons open on the blouse, good-looking, and not unlike any one of several hundred girls to be seen any day on the streets of West Hollywood. He was still staring at it when Beckman returned.

“Sy,” Masuto said, “take the keys and the wallet and check them into the property department. I’m hanging on to this photo, so make a note of that. When you get back to the station, you can start to type out the report. I’ll talk to the captain and I’ll fill you in if there’s anything.”

After Beckman left, Masuto continued to study the portrait for a while. Then he wandered around the back room, stared at the stamps in the locked cases, and went through the two drawers in the small desk. There were two ledgers, a large general cash book, and a smaller book. The larger book contained day-to-day transactions, but nothing under twenty-five dollars, as Masuto noted. In the smaller book were names and a sort of code mark next to each name, no identification of stamps and no prices. Not surprising, Masuto decided, in a man who must have had many cash transactions and who would have used any means he could to avoid paying taxes. There was also a comprehensive international stamp catalog.

Masuto put the ledgers and the stamp catalog under his arm, made sure the outside door was latched to lock, closed it behind him, and walked over to where Officer Cutler stood next to his patrol car. There was still a small crowd of the curious on the sidewalk, a KNX mobile unit parked behind Cutler’s car, and Hennessy of the Los Angeles *Times* and Bailey from the *Examiner*. Both reporters blocked Masuto’s way, pleading for something more than they had.

“You’re only two blocks from the station,” Masuto said. “Get it from the P.R. there.” Then he told Cutler to leave, and picked up his own car and drove to the station.

He sat in Wainwright’s office, waiting for the captain, who was with the city manager and the mayor, and when Wainwright returned his scowl was even more deeply etched than usual.

“Murder,” he said, “is all right in East Los Angeles, in West Los Angeles, in Hollywood, and in the Valley. Not in Beverly Hills. For a

half hour I was lectured on the impropriety of murder in Beverly Hills.”

Masuto nodded sympathetically.

“Well, goddamn it, Masao, what have you got?”

“An interesting day. A robbery where nothing was taken and a murder where nothing was taken.”

“The hell with the robbery at the Briggs home! What about Gaycheck?”

“They are both of interest. A day is a contrivance.”

“I am not interested in Oriental philosophy.”

“That’s a pity. Now about Gaycheck — he was shot at close range with a small twenty-two-caliber weapon.”

“So Baxter informed me,” Wainwright said. “Twenty-two short, from what they call a purse gun, probably a Smith and Wesson. The bullet went through the brain and lodged in the back of the skull. What else?”

“By someone he knew. No sign of a struggle, no sign of any resistance. Someone raised the gun to his head and pulled the trigger, then grabbed Gaycheck and eased him down to the carpet. That is why, purse gun or not, I’m not going to assume it was a woman. Gaycheck must have weighed at least a hundred sixty pounds. It would have to be an extraordinary woman — cool enough to deal with a corpse, strong enough to handle the body.”

“What about the next of kin?”

“None. A man alone. Did we check his prints?”

“Nothing at the F.B.I. or L.A.P.D.”

“Interpol?”

“I thought of that. We sent them a Telex a half hour ago. What about this man Haber?”

Masuto nodded thoughtfully. “He intrigues me. He overperformed, vomiting, hands shaking. He’s an eloquent liar. There’s a safe in back of the store, and he denies knowing the combination. I think he’s lying. I also think he could make an excellent guess at the murderer. He may know why Gaycheck was killed. He put on a show of going to pieces at the sight of the corpse, yet he’s cool enough to play his own game. He lives on Lapeer, in West Hollywood. I would put a man on him.”

“What kind of a safe?”

“Stayfix.”

“All right. We’ll have them send a man down in the morning to open it. And I want this cleaned up, Masao — quickly and efficiently.”

“By tomorrow, no doubt.”

“Don’t put me on, Masao. This is no casual street gunning. We got leads and we got connections.”

“And we also have a very cool and very self-possessed killer.”

“That’s what you draw your pay for.”

“Thank you.”

The door to Wainwright’s office opened, and a girl entered with a sheet of yellow paper, which she handed to him. “Telex, Captain, from Interpol.”

He read it and then said to Masuto, “You never know.”

“Gaycheck?”

“His name is Gaylord Schwartzman — captain in the SS, fourth in command at Buchenwald, wanted by West Germany, East Germany, Israel, and France, disappeared in 1944, reported at various times in residence in Brazil, Argentina, and Canada.”

“But not in Beverly Hills.”

“No, not in Beverly Hills.”

3

ISHIDO

Masao Masuto lived in Culver City, and for those unfamiliar with the geography of Los Angeles it may be said that while Culver City is only a few minutes by car from Beverly Hills, by property values and population it is a continent away. Masuto's small, two-bedroom cottage was on a street of small cottages, differing only in the lushness and perfection of the shrubbery in front and the garden in back; for when he was not a policeman, when he was off duty, Masuto's world was rather simple and contained. He had a daughter, Ana, aged seven, and a son, Uraga, aged nine, a wife, Kati, and a rose garden where he spent many pleasant and contemplative hours. The rose garden, surrounded on three sides by a wall of hibiscus, contained a world of forty-three different rose bushes, ranging from antique cabbage roses to ultrasophisticated, hybrid, scentless black and purple modern miracles of horticulture. Masuto knew each plant, its strengths, its weaknesses, its moment of bloom, and he was not beyond trusting that in their own way the plants knew him.

His wife, Kati, had been raised in the old-fashioned way. She was a small, lovely, timid woman, and although she had been born in California, she had led a sheltered life. She did not drive a car. Her ventures on foot to the supermarket and the few other places that demanded her personal attention were undertaken with trepidation. Her home was her world, and she lived there in constant anxiety about the strange and violent profession her husband pursued. It was a world she knew only from his reports of his work — carefully censored.

When he came into the house this evening, she greeted him with restraint, yet with the relief that was always evident. His bath was ready. He greeted his children, spoke a few appropriate words to them, bathed in steaming-hot water, then slipped into the kimono Kati had ready for him. Then he went into the tiny screened-off area that was his meditation room.

As a Zen Buddhist, he tried to find time for some meditation, regardless of how much his day pressed upon him, forty-five minutes if possible, and at least a few minutes if no more than that was available. He knew that five minutes of perfect meditation accomplished more than an hour of struggling with his mind, trying to tame an un-willing beast. Now he sat cross-legged for thirty minutes, then went to his wife.

They had tea, sitting on two cushions with a small, black enamel table between them. Masuto honored the pouring and drinking of tea in the old way, and Kati waited for him to speak about his day.

“A man was murdered,” he said finally.

Kati shook her head in horror and sympathy. She never understood how this man, who was her husband, could live and work with murder.

“I don’t judge, but he was a man who was responsible for the deaths of many innocent people. Death waited a long time before it welcomed him.”

“Did he suffer?”

“Less than those whom he killed,” Masuto replied.

“Then something else troubles you. You are troubled.”

“Oh, yes.” He smiled. “But you must not be troubled. It’s a small matter and very puzzling. Postage stamps.”

“Postage stamps?”

“About which I know absolutely nothing. Not the stamps one buys at the post office to mail a letter, but stamps that people collect with greed and passion.”

“But Uraga has a stamp album, which you bought for him. He bothers everyone for the stamps on letters from Japan.”

“Of course,” Masuto remembered. “And you recall why I bought it.”

“The packet of stamps that he received as a gift from my kinsman, Ishido. How simple. If you would know about stamps — then go to Ishido. They say that his stamp collection is worth many thousands of dollars.”

“Not so simple,” said Masuto. “I would have to humble myself, and that is something that does not come easily to me. Ishido despises my birth, my ancestors, and my occupation.”

“No,” Kati protested weakly.

“He is Samurai. My father was a gardener. He has never forgiven you for marrying me, and he has never forgiven me for being a policeman.”

“That is in your mind, not in his. You forget that he has lived in California for the past thirty years. He is not bound by the old ways. I have heard him speak highly of you.”

“And we have never been guests in his house. In all the years we have been married, we have not been guests in his house.”

“And did you invite him here?”

“Who am I to invite Ishido to my home?”

She refrained from observing that, for a sensible man, he could be both stubborn and foolish; she simply said that not only Ishido was proud, then followed it with that very Japanese expression, “So sorry, dear husband.”

Masuto was silent all through dinner. When he was silent, the children were silent. It was not the most pleasant dinner. When he had finished eating, he rose from the table, went to the telephone, and dialed a number. Kati listened.

He spoke in Japanese, and Kati smiled slightly. The servants in Ishido’s home spoke little English.

“I would speak with Ishido Dono. My name is Masao Masuto.”

A pause. He glanced at Kati, and she stopped smiling.

“A thousand apologies, Ishido Dono. I interrupt you at the worst of moments.... You are too kind. I am thoughtless, but this is a matter of my work and I need your assistance and your wisdom.... Of course. In one hour. A thousand thanks.”

Masuto put down the phone and said to his wife, “I will thank you to make no comment on what I have just done.”

“I love you very much,” she said. Then he smiled, and the children began to chatter.

Bel Air, while a part of Los Angeles, is if anything even more self-contained and more packed with wealth than Beverly Hills. It has its own private police force, which is called the Bel Air Patrol, and it has in its few square miles more castles, keeps, and baronial halls than one would find in a hundred miles of the River Rhine. Ishido’s home was high on a hill, and as Masuto drove that night up the winding road that led to the place, he reflected as so often before on the oddity that was America, where a samurai, once at war with these people, could in the same lifetime dwell in peace and luxury in their very midst, both welcome and respected. “Well, it is as it is,” he said to himself, which is a very Zen comment.

The single-story house was Japanese in style, surrounded by a wall of hedge and brick, glowing through its translucent walls. The doorbell was an ancient Chinese gong, and Ishido himself, clad in a black silk kimono, opened the door, a particular gesture of welcome. Masuto felt abashed by his own stubborn pride.

Ishido was a small man of about sixty, slender, with a round, moonlike face. “So pleased, so delighted,” he said, speaking in Japanese. “My kinsman honors my poor, humble home.”

“No, the honor is mine,” Masuto replied in Japanese, conscious of his bad accent but not to be outdone. “I am overcome. I do not know how to thank you for your graciousness.”

“My home is yours. You have been too long a stranger.”

Once inside, Ishido switched to English. He had a slight British intonation and almost no accent. He ushered Masuto into his living room, which was rather large, about thirty feet by twenty. It was furnished — or better said unfurnished — in the Japanese manner, with four splendid painted screens, cushions on the floor, low tables, a room for himself and his family. His study was in the Western manner; but it was a mark of consideration to take Masuto in here.

“You have a problem,” he said. “I am pleased. It has brought you to me.”

“I hesitate to burden you with it.”

“Is it police work?”

“Yes.”

“How fascinating! Tell me about it.”

“A man was murdered today. I am afraid that murder is my major province. You know I am chief of homicide in Beverly Hills.”

“No. I didn’t know. Fascinating. Who was the victim?”

“His name was Ivan Gaycheck.”

“Gaycheck? Really.” Ishido’s moon face remained expressionless.

“I see you know him.”

“I know him, but without pleasure.”

“Have you dealt with him?”

“Once. I found him rude and unpleasant. You know, Masao, his name is nondescript — Ivan Gaycheck. It means nothing, but it suggests a Slav or a Hungarian. He was a German.”

“Indeed? How do you know that?”

Ishido smiled. “I am right?”

“Yes.”

“His accent. I have an excellent ear for accents. Tell me, how did death find him?”

“Someone he knew well shot him in the forehead with a small twenty-two-caliber pistol.”

“Ah.” No judgment. Watching his kinsman, Masato read nothing. Well, a man like Ishido was not to be read easily.

“Your conclusions are part of your police work?”

“Hardly a very brilliant part,” Masato said. “We have the bullet and there was no sign of a struggle. The shot was at close range.”

“And since he dealt in stamps, you postulate that his death might be connected with stamps. And since I am a collector, you come to me.”

“But with apologies. I come only for information.”

“Nonsense, Masao — if you will forgive me. If a stamp is central to this murder, then every collector of consequence must be suspect. A collector is a unique type of personality. I have heard that you are a Buddhist?”

He appeared to have changed the subject aimlessly, but Masato knew that a man like Ishido did nothing aimlessly or thoughtlessly. “I am Zen. The Soto School.”

“Ah so. A Buddhist seeks for meaning, in his way. A collector, a true collector, also seeks for meaning, very narrowly, very fanatically,

but there are no ethical boundaries to his religion. Do you understand?"

Masuto nodded. They sat cross-legged, a low, polished teakwood table between them. Now a young woman appeared with tea things. She wore a kimono and obi and she was very lovely, but Ishido did not introduce her and Masuto knew that his wife was long dead. She set down the tray, poured pale yellow tea, and disappeared. Politely, Masuto made no inquiry. They sipped the tea, and then Ishido said:

"Therefore, I must be suspect."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You are my kinsman."

"That is no reason. You must ask me whether, for a true collector, there is any stamp worth killing for. Of course, with such a man as Ivan Gaycheck, there could be a thousand motives. Was he connected with the SS? Surely you have inquired at Interpol?"

"Yes."

"Then any Jew who discovered his identity would feel justified in an act of revenge."

"I don't think so," Masuto answered slowly. "That kind of act of violence is not in their pattern."

"But patterns change — as witness Israel."

"Perhaps. But I have a simple mind. When a stamp dealer is murdered, I look for a stamp." Masuto sipped his tea. "Now I will ask you — is any stamp worth an act of murder?"

"Who is to say what will prompt an act of murder? A man is killed in the street for a few dollars. You know that I was a colonel in the Imperial Army — war is a gigantic killing. Who is to say? My own passion is porcelain. I have always dreamed of owning a Bactrian horse of the T'ang dynasty — not the pottery horse, but that almost mythical T'ang horse which is said to have been made of Ch'ai ware, which they describe as being thin as paper, resonant as musical stone, and blue as the sky between the rain clouds. Does it exist? Rumor has it that there is one in Peking and another in the Imperial Palace in Japan — but that is only rumor. I have never spoken to anyone who actually saw such a horse. Would I kill for such a thing? But that would depend on so many circumstances. A man like

Gaycheck — I might well kill him, but not for a stamp. I only collect Japanese stamps. Well ...” Ishido paused, smiled, and sipped his tea. “Yes, one stamp. In the Dragon series. Two colors with an inverted center. But, you see, Masao — I already have it. So the question is academic.”

Masuto did an unforgivable thing. “Might I see it?” he asked.

Ishido stared at him evenly, his face reflecting Masuto’s own carefully controlled indifference. Then he nodded, rose, and went into another room. He returned with a small black album and opened it to reveal what Masuto considered a very ordinary stamp, the dragon in the center inverted.

“How much is it worth, if I may ask so improper a question?”

“You are a policeman,” Ishido said, his simple statement exiling Masuto from his world. “I bought it in Hong Kong twelve years ago. The seller was unsavory. I paid a thousand British pounds. At today’s inflated prices — well, over seventy-five thousand dollars.”

Still, Masuto did not go. He would not be invited back to Ishido’s house, so whatever questions he would ask must be asked now. Since he was a policeman and no more than a policeman, he would play the policeman’s role.

“Is this the most valuable stamp that exists?”

“Hardly. The land of my birth lacks that honor, but one does not judge a country or a person by the worth of his stamps. There is a stamp called the One-Penny 1848 Mauritius. Today, in perfect condition, it might sell for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I do not know whether any other stamp is more valuable.”

It was almost eleven o’clock when Masuto returned to his home in Culver City. Kati was waiting for him. “Was it pleasant?” she asked him. “Were you greeted well?”

“I was greeted well, yes. With great courtesy.”

“Oh?”

“I must make you unhappy, dear Kati. I came as a kinsman, I left as a policeman.”

“Oh, so sorry! Such a pity!”

“I asked improper questions. And as far as my manners were concerned — well, I am a policeman.”

“Who has ever complained about your manners?”

“Dear Kati.” He sighed and walked to the bookshelves, where he took down a volume of the Encyclopedia Americana — the fine set that he had bought for his children only a year ago and of which he was very proud. He riffled through the pages, and then handed the book to Kati. She liked to read to him. Not only did it relax him, it gave her a sense of participating in his thoughts. He pointed to a paragraph and asked her to read to him.

“Mauritius,” she began.

“No, dear wife — so sorry, but Ishido pronounced the word differently. He pronounced it Moreeshius. I am sure his pronunciation was correct.”

“Yes, yes. Moreeshius. ‘A densely populated island in the Indian Ocean about 550 miles east of Madagascar, is an independent nation within the Commonwealth of Nations. Its capital, Port Louis, also administers smaller island dependencies: Rodrigues, 350 miles east, and scattered coral groups, 250 to 580 miles away’” She paused. “The next paragraph is about population. Shall I read that?”

“No. And after that?”

“The land. Then the economy.”

“Are stamps mentioned?” Masuto asked.

“No, nothing about stamps. The next section is entitled ‘History.’ Shall I read it to you?”

“Only if it mentions stamps.”

“Nothing about stamps,” Kati said sadly. “But very interesting. Did you know that Mauritius was the home of the dodo bird?”

“The dodo bird is extinct.”

“You mean there are no dodo birds — anywhere?”

“I am afraid not.”

“How sad! But why are you asking about stamps — if it is something you can speak of?”

“Because there is a postage stamp issued in 1848 in that place called Mauritius that is worth in the neighborhood of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“A single postage stamp?”

“Yes, Kati.”

“But why? How can a tiny postage stamp be worth so much money?”

“I suppose because it is very rare. I would give a great deal to know whether one exists in Beverly Hills.”

4

RONALD HABER

The telephone burst in on Masuto's sleep like a fire engine gone berserk. As he reached out to pick it up, he saw that the luminous dial of his clock said 4:20. In the background, Kati made small sounds of despair. She could never grow used to the telephone in the middle of the night.

Wainwright was on the phone and he minced no words. "Masao, Haber is dead. Murdered."

"What? Where? When?" Masuto was still fuzzy with sleep.

"In his apartment on Lapeer. I'm there with the sheriff's men, and I want you to get your ass over here."

"Now?"

"Now."

"It's four-twenty in the morning."

"If these lousy deputies could get me out of bed at four in the morning, I can damn well get you out at four-twenty, so get your ass over here and stop yammering."

While Masuto dressed, Kati put the tea-kettle on to boil, but he was in no mood to wait. He gulped down a glass of milk to settle his sour stomach and then climbed into his car and drove through the night — or morning — for the strange gray thickness of dawn was already beginning. Once again, as so often before, he pondered the geographical insanity that called itself Los Angeles. There was a city of Los Angeles and there was a county of Los Angeles. The city of Los Angeles had its own police force. The county of Los Angeles had a sheriff, with a vast force of deputies. Within the city of Los Angeles were other cities, such as Beverly Hills, which had their own

police forces, and also within the city of Los Angeles were unincorporated areas, which were policed by the sheriff's deputies — and while there was a courtesy interchange of the right of movement and information, it did not make for efficiency.

Lapeer Street, where Masuto was bound, was in West Hollywood, an unincorporated area policed by the sheriff's deputies. When he arrived, three sheriff's cars were parked in front of the building, a small, unimpressive apartment house. He showed his credentials to the deputy at the street door. It was five o'clock now, a glint of dawn in the sky, but the stairway was dark, lit by a single weak bulb. The commotion had awakened other tenants, who, many of them half dressed or in robes, were standing curiously in their half-open doorways.

Haber's apartment was a one-bedroom, drably furnished flat. Always, on entering such a place, Masuto relied on his first impression — here a sense of bleakness, indifference, lack of imagination, and a degree of despair; the habitation revealed more than the man, even though the place was in disarray, furniture overturned, a lamp smashed, drawers emptied and dumped on the floor. Three deputies, a fingerprint man, a county photographer, two morgue men, and Wainwright crowded the living room. The morgue men had their rubber sheet still folded, evidently waiting for Masuto to see the body.

It was not a pretty sight. Haber lay in a corner, as if he had been flung there.

"Beaten to death," Wainwright said to Masuto.

"Animals," said one of the deputies. "This place is lousy with animals."

"Can we take him away, Sergeant?" one of the morgue men asked Masuto. He nodded. They put Haber's body on a stretcher, covered it with the rubber sheet, and marched out. Masuto stood silently, his eyes wandering around the room.

"Well?" Wainwright demanded.

Masuto shrugged. "Violence is the disease of our times. The sickness is not restricted to West Hollywood."

"I'm not asking for your damn philosophy."

"He's dead."

“Great! Brilliant! How does it tie in? It’s sure as hell a different M.O.”

“Murderers are not required to be consistent.”

“You give me a pain in the ass,” Wainwright said. “I ask you to clean up one lousy killing and now we got two.”

“This one’s in West Hollywood — theirs.” Masuto nodded at the deputies.

“That’s sweet.”

“You gave me until tomorrow. It’s not tomorrow yet.”

“Tomorrow’s today,” Wainwright said. “All right. I’m sorry. This happened at about three A.M., so I got no sleep at all. I’m edgy. For God’s sake, Masao, what have we got here?”

“I don’t know,” Masuto said thoughtfully.

One of the deputies said to Masuto, “Captain Wainwright here tells me that Haber worked for the dealer who was shot in Beverly Hills yesterday. Do you have a connection?”

Masuto was prompted to assure the deputy that there was a connection between every living creature and every event on earth; but he thought better of it and simply shook his head.

“Hell, Sergeant, you’re not telling me it’s a coincidence? Because if you are ...”

“It’s not a coincidence.”

“You just said ...”

“You asked me whether I have a connection. I shook my head,” Masuto interrupted, almost with irritation. He disliked deputies, not out of any specific behavior on their part but simply because he did not have a high opinion of their intelligence, and it irritated him that he should be disturbed by something that was almost a common affliction of mankind. “I did not say there was no connection. There is. But what the connection is, I don’t know.”

Grinning, the fingerprint man said, “I got some beauts, Sarge. You want to see them?”

“What?”

“The prints. I took a set of Haber’s. I got a dozen that don’t belong to him.”

“No, thank you,” Masuto muttered.

“He’s a lover,” the fingerprint man said to the deputy at the door. Hurt, he was on his way out.

“Didn’t you know, Billy,” said the deputy, “they got nothing but smartass cops in Beverly Hills. All class. It ain’t no asshole, like this place.”

The fingerprint man departed. Another deputy said to the deputy at the door, “Just keep your mouth shut and stop being a horse’s ass.” Then he went over to Masuto. “I’m sorry, Sergeant. But a night detail’s lousy, and around this time everyone gets edgy. My name’s Williams, and I’m on night Homicide. Any help you and Captain Wainwright can give us, we appreciate.”

“Balls,” the deputy at the door muttered.

Williams gave him a stony look. Wainwright said nothing. He was watching Masuto with interest. They had worked together for too long for him to question anything Masuto said or did.

“You questioned the neighbors?” Masuto asked Williams.

“All of them.”

“They were all awake?”

“There was a hell of a fight and racket in here. One of them called us. A young girl, name of Cindy Lang.”

“Just one? How many tenants in the place?”

“Four on this floor. Those were the ones who heard it.”

“And only one called you?”

“That’s the way it is, Sergeant.”

“Did any of them see anything?”

“They claim no.”

“They’re lying,” said another deputy.

“Maybe yes, maybe no,” Williams said. “Nobody wants to get involved.”

“Running feet? That could tell something. Two feet sound one way. Four feet sound different.”

Williams turned to the deputy at the door, who shrugged and said, “I never asked them that.”

“Well, goddamn it, ask them!” Williams snapped. The deputy left, and Williams said to Masuto. “They heard a car start.”

“They always hear a car start.”

“Did they hear anything else?”

“Like what?”

“Voices.”

“Men’s voices. Nothing very clear.”

“Any of the tenants know Haber?”

“No. Or so they say. He was a loner.” Williams looked around the apartment. “They must have searched the place first. After they killed him, they took off.”

“What was on his person?”

“Keys and wallet. You want to see it?”

Masuto nodded. Williams took a brown envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Masuto. Wainwright dropped into a chair, sighed deeply, and half closed his eyes. The deputy who had been at the door returned.

“Well?” Williams demanded.

“Some say two feet, some say four feet, some say six feet — which means one person or two or three.”

“I could have never figured that out,” Williams said.

“What did Cindy Lang say?” Masuto asked. He was going through the wallet: Master Charge, driver’s license, insurance card, but no bills. Three keys.

“If he had bills, they took them,” said Williams. “I don’t think they were after money, but it’s a habit with hoods. They didn’t want his credit card.”

“Who’s Cindy Lang?” the deputy asked.

“You got a brain like a sieve,” Williams said disgustedly. “She’s the kid who called us. The blond in apartment F.”

“Oh.”

“Well, what did she say?”

“She says she thinks there were three of them.”

Masuto nodded. Wainwright was dozing now. The photographer gathered his stuff and left.

“What killed him?” Masuto asked Williams.

“Skull fracture, over the left temple.”

“Brass knuckles?”

“That’s what the doctor thinks.”

“You mind if I look around?”

“Be my guest. But this place has been searched like an earthquake hit it.”

“They didn’t find what they were looking for,” Masuto said. “So they decided to beat it out of Haber. Except that he didn’t have it.”

“What?”

“Who knows?”

“Then how the hell do you know he didn’t have it?”

“They killed him.”

“Maybe after they took it.”

“Maybe.” Masuto went into the bedroom. The search was thorough, bedclothes torn off the bed, mattress turned over, pictures ripped off the walls — and in the bathroom, bottles emptied, toothpaste tube slit open. He went to the closet. Haber had been in his shirt-sleeves at the time of the murder. His jacket hung in the closet. Masuto took the jacket and spread it out on the bed. Wainwright had finished his nap, and he and Williams were watching now. Masuto folded back the lining, and there, attached to it with two strips of Scotch tape, was a small plastic envelope containing a single stamp.

“I’ll be damned,” Williams whispered.

Wainwright said nothing.

“Goddamn it, Sergeant, how did you know where that was?”

“I didn’t know. I tried to crawl into Haber’s mind — a little.”

“Is that what they were after? That stamp?”

Masuto took the stamp out of the envelope carefully and examined it. “No.”

“Masao, how do you know?” Wainwright demanded.

It’s a ten-cent black 1847 George Washington, and it’s worth about three thousand dollars. They weren’t after this and they weren’t after three thousand dollars, because if they were he would have given it to them.”

“What are you, a stamp expert?” Williams snorted.

“I don’t know a thing about stamps. Haber told me about this stamp yesterday. He invented some cock-and-bull story.” He turned to Wainwright. “Either Haber knew the stamp was in Gaycheck’s pocket and took it before he called us, or it was in the safe and he knew the combination of the safe and he was lying.”

“How about him killing Gaycheck for the stamp, and then we let the sheriff worry about it.”

“No way,” said Masuto.

“Anything else here?”

Masuto shook his head, replaced the stamp in the plastic envelope, and gave it to Williams. “I guess it belongs to Gaycheck, and he’s dead. What about it, Captain?”

“Hold it for evidence. Let’s see what happens. Anyway, I’m hungry. Let’s get some breakfast, Masao.”

“All right. But I want to talk to Cindy Lang.”

Masuto called his wife first. It was almost seven o’clock, and she had not slept since the telephone awakened both of them. “Masao,” she said, “you must have a night’s sleep and you must rest and we don’t even see you anymore.”

He tried to soothe her.

“Masao, I was reading a book on Women’s Liberation, and first I was provoked, but now I am not sure. Not at all.”

He put down the phone and told Wainwright that his wife was reading books on Women’s Lib. “I always felt I should have married a Japanese girl. Now you’re shaking my dream,” Wainwright said. “Let’s find Cindy Lang.”

They walked down the hall and knocked at the door of apartment F. It opened the width of the safety chain, and Masuto had the impression of straight blond hair and suspicious blue eyes.

“We’re from the Beverly Hills police,” he said. “This is Captain Wainwright. I’m Detective Sergeant Masuto.”

“Well, this is not Beverly Hills. I talked to the local fuzz. I told them what I know, which is nothing. I don’t know Haber.”

“If you could spare us a few minutes,” Masuto said gently. He showed her his badge.

She thought about it for a moment or two. Then, “Okay — but I got to get to work. I’m due in at seven-thirty.” She dropped the chain and opened the door, and they entered the apartment: one room, a studio bed still unmade, some bright prints on the wall, and a rag rug. Cindy Lang was in her twenties, a slight, pretty girl wearing blue jeans and a blouse — a girl little different, Masuto thought from a hundred others he would see on the streets of West Hollywood —

where blue jeans and loose yellow hair, dyed or real, were almost required uniform.

“You called the sheriff last night?” Masuto asked her.

“That’s right. It sounded like they were killing someone, so I called the fuzz. Does that make me anything?”

“It makes you part of the human race. No one else called them.”

“All right, so I’m part of the human race. Now can I go to work?”

“You told the deputy that three people ran past here. How did you know it was three?”

“It sounded like three.”

“What sounds like three?”

“Three people. Why don’t you do your thing, Sergeant, and I’ll do mine. I’m a waitress, and it’s a lousy job but it’s mine and it’s all I got. If I’m late, I get my ass burned.”

“I think you saw them. I think you opened your door and saw them.”

“I think I didn’t.”

“If you saw them,” Masuto said kindly, “then you may be the only one who did. That would be very important.”

“Sure. You want to know what’s important? Cindy’s important, because if I don’t take care of her, there ain’t nobody else going to. You know where you are? You’re in West Hollywood — not in Beverly Hills. This place is lousy with kinky creeps. Who’s going to call the cops if they decide to beat up on me?”

“We can arrange with the sheriff ...” Wainwright began, but she interrupted.

“Don’t sell me those lousy deputies. I was coming home the other night and one of them stops me and tries to shake me down for twenty bucks and tells me my car stinks of pot, and I never touched a stick for two months, and then he pulls me in on suspicion of being a hooker, and I got to get my girl friend out in the middle of the night to swear I don’t solicit, so don’t tell me about deputies. They stink.” She held the door open. “Now I got to go to work.”

“I like her,” Masuto said as they walked down the stairs to the street.

“I’d like her more if she talked.”

“She talked. She told us there were three of them. Where do you want to eat?”

“Ben Frank’s — up the Strip.”

Masuto had ordered eggs, hot cakes, and sausage. From behind his two boiled eggs, Wainwright regarded him gloomily and asked how he ate that way and remained thin.

“Genes, metabolism.”

“I don’t like this, Masao — I don’t like this whole rotten business. We got two murders. That stinks.”

“One is the sheriff’s.”

“Like hell it is! The newspapers and the goddamn TV will tell the world that a Beverly Hills stamp dealer and his assistant were murdered. They always got us harboring a war criminal. I swear I don’t want to go back to my office, because the city manager will be there, and the mayor, who’s got nothing else to do but nitpick the cops, and what have you got besides that smug Oriental look on your face?”

“Nothing.” Masuto was hungry. He kept eating.

“Boiled eggs. Why the hell don’t you level with me?”

“Because my guesses would only show me off as a smartass Oriental, as you like to put it, and last night I learned that I’m about as Oriental as Jimmy Carter, and anyway, fifty percent of the time I’m wrong.”

“And fifty percent of the time you’re right.” Wainwright looked at his watch. “It’s seven forty-five, and the guy from the safe company will be on North Canon at eight o’clock. I want to be there when he opens the safe.”

“It’s open,” Masuto said between bites.

“What’s open?”

“The safe.”

“What! What in hell are you trying to tell me, Masao?”

“You were pushing me for brilliant Oriental guesses. I made one.”

“You’re guessing?”

“I’m guessing.”

“You’re telling me that someone opened the safe and cleaned it out?”

“Only the first part. I’m guessing that last night someone opened the safe. If you want another guess, I would guess that it was empty, that Haber opened it and cleaned out whatever was worth cleaning out before he called the police. The second guess is easy, because no one will ever be able to prove whether I’m right or wrong.”

“Then why in hell didn’t you tell me that and tell me to put a man on the store?”

“Because I didn’t know until I found the stamp in Haber’s jacket, and then it was too late.”

Wainwright rose.

“Where are you going?” Masuto asked.

“To the store.”

“You haven’t finished your eggs.”

“Take the eggs and stuff them.” Wainwright tossed two dollars on the table and stalked out.

Masuto finished eating without haste. He was puzzling over the fact that there were three keys in Haber’s pocket. He had simply presumed that one of them was the key to the store, but if that were the case — no, it couldn’t be. He paid his check and drove back to the house on Lapeer. Williams was just leaving, getting into his car when Masuto pulled up.

“Could I see the keys again?” Masuto asked him.

“You had your breakfast. I been in that lousy hole for five hours.”

“Please forgive me.”

Williams handed him the keys. He separated the car key and tried one of the door keys in the outside door of the apartment, the door that would be opened by a responsive buzz. It fit.

“The other one is to the apartment upstairs?” he asked Williams.

“Right. Why didn’t you ask me? I could have told you.”

“I like to do things the hard way,” Masuto said. “Thank you.”

Then he drove to Beverly Hills, to the store on North Canon. There was a prowl car parked in front, and behind it, Sy Beckman’s car. Officer Frank Seaton opened the door for him. The place was a shambles, the cases broken open, stamps scattered everywhere.

“I thought you patrolled these streets,” Masuto said.

“For Christ’s sake, Sergeant, don’t lean on me. I took enough chickenshit from the captain. Anyway, those velvet drapes were

drawn, and anyway I didn't come on duty until seven o'clock this morning."

Beckman came out of the back room. "One lousy morning, Masao. What in hell's been going on?"

Haber's been beaten to death in his place in West Hollywood."

"So I'm told. The captain's burning. What's eating him?"

"This and that. Is he here?"

"He went back to the station. He says for you to get your ass over there as soon as you turn up."

Masuto nodded and went into the back room, followed by Beckman and Seaton. "They had the key to the front door," Seaton said. "Maybe if they had jimmed it open, someone would have noticed it."

"I'll tell them," Beckman said sourly. "Where do you suppose they got the key, Masao?"

"From Haber." He was staring at the safe. It was not a very good safe to begin with, but it was no professional job that had opened it. Neither was it strictly amateur, but rather somewhere between the two. They had drilled holes around the dial, torn off the dial, then forced the door open.

"What was in it?" he asked Beckman.

"Nothing. They cleaned it out and dumped the stuff on the floor with everything else." He motioned to the broken cabinets, the emptied desk drawers, the litter of stamps and papers. "Nothing that means anything. It's one hell of a mess, isn't it? I only got here half an hour ago and I got to straighten out this mess. You'd better get over to the station, Masao."

When Masuto entered Wainwright's office, a small, hawk-faced man of about fifty was already there, facing Wainwright, who sat behind his desk and greeted the detective without pleasure.

"This is Mr. Zev Kolan, the Israeli consul general in Los Angeles." And to the hawk-faced man, "This is Detective Sergeant Masao Masuto. He's in charge of the case."

Masuto shook hands — a very strong grip for so small a man. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Give me some proof that Ivan Gaycheck is actually Gaylord Schwartzman."

“I told him that we sent the prints to Interpol and they made the identification,” said Wainwright.

“Yes,” said Mr. Kolan. “I am sorry to trouble you, but this has happened before. The Interpol records of Nazi officials are not dependable. There was just too much confusion and chaos at the end of the war. We would very much like to lay hands on Captain Gaylord Schwartzman, preferably alive, but if it is so, then dead. My government would like to know for certain.”

“I don’t see what I can do for you,” Wainwright said.

“I saw Schwartzman once.”

“You saw him?”

“He killed me.” Both policemen stared at him. He did not appear insane, Masuto thought — no indeed, very sane. Kolan said softly, “Eight of us were condemned to death at Buchenwald. I was fifteen then. He commanded the firing squad. I was hit in the shoulder, low, under the bone. Then Schwartzman drew his pistol and administered the *coup de grace*.” He pointed to a pale scar on his temple. “He was careless. I was thrown into an open mass grave that they dug outside the walls. Hours later, I regained consciousness. I crawled out of the grave and made my way to a farm. They sheltered me. Not all Germans were Nazis. But I think I would recognize Schwartzman — even today, so many years later, even dead.”

For a while after he finished speaking, the two policemen were silent. Then Wainwright said, “If you would please wait outside for a few minutes, Mr. Kolan?”

Kolan nodded and left. Wainwright stared at his hands for a moment or two, then said to Masuto, softly and ominously, “I don’t like to be played for a horse’s ass, Masao. How did you know the safe had been opened?”

“I didn’t know. I made an educated guess. There’s a family named Briggs on Camden Drive ...”

“I know about the Briggs case. Nothing was taken.”

“Gaycheck on the same day. Nothing is taken. Then Haber — and from the look of it, nothing was taken except whatever bills he had in his wallet.”

“Whoever murdered Gaycheck didn’t take his money.”

“Someone else. The robbery crew was moving systematically. First Briggs, then Haber. They took the key to the store from Haber. You saw the store.”

“I saw it.”

“I guessed. It wasn’t a brilliant guess — just a guess.”

“And can you guess who murdered Gaycheck?”

“I might. But that would be the wildest guess of all — with nothing to support it.”

“And Haber?”

“I couldn’t even guess,” Masuto said. “Maybe later. What do you want to do about Kolan?”

“The body’s at Cleary’s Mortuary. Take him over there and let him have a look. It’s the least we can do.”

Driving to the mortuary, Masuto explained to Kolan that Beverly Hills was too small and too peaceful to have a police morgue.

“Peaceful?”

“Most of the time. So we have a contract arrangement with several funeral homes. It suffices.”

“You’re Japanese, aren’t you, Sergeant?”

“Yes. Nisei. That means born in America of Japanese parents.”

“Have you ever been to Israel?”

“On a policeman’s pay?” Masuto laughed. “I’d like to go. Someday — who knows? But I’ve never even been to Japan.”

“You’ll find it interesting.”

There was a funeral in progress at Cleary’s, and a tall, skinny man in striped pants and a frock coat whispered them into a back room. In front of the coffin, in what he called their “holding room,” he explained that there had been an autopsy and that they had been given no instructions for embalming. “It will be messy,” he apologized.

“His face?” Kolan asked.

“Very nice — very nice indeed.” Then he opened the coffin, and for a few minutes Kolan stared at the chalk-white face of what had once been Ivan Gaycheck, né Gaylord Schwartzman.

Then he turned away and nodded.

“Schwartzman?” Masuto asked.

“It’s Schwartzman — yes. It’s a face I will never forget. Do I sound regretful? But not for that man in the coffin, Sergeant. We Jews have a saying that one must have compassion — even for one’s enemies. But for that man I have no compassion, God forgive me. I had hoped it would not be him, so that one day we might take him alive. But it is. After thirty-three years, a death so peaceful, so easy.”

“I think no death is easy,” Masuto said. “And thirty-three years — how long is that in God’s time?”

“I don’t know,” Kolan said. “But it’s over now, isn’t it?”

“It’s over.”

JASON HOLMBEY

It is said that no one knows all of Los Angeles, and that perhaps is no more mysterious than the saying that no one knows all of Brooklyn, and when one adds to this the fact that within Los Angeles county there are over fifty separate cities, districts, neighborhoods, cities within cities, and that all of them dwell together in a sort of amiable confusion, one simply accepts this improbable puzzle without trying to understand it. Yet in the midst of this is a venerable and valid old-fashioned city, with narrow streets, old buildings, new buildings, skyscrapers — a tight urban cluster that is known all over Los Angeles as “downtown.”

It is said in Los Angeles that many people live out their lives in such places as Beverly Hills, San Fernando, Santa Monica, and Glendale without ever going downtown, but that is probably an exaggeration. Masuto, who knew the city better than most, having been born there, was a frequent visitor to downtown, and since he was an observant person, he remembered Holmbey's Stamp Center quite well. It was a most unlikely building, a small, three-story red brick Georgian house, nestled in a dingy section of Fourth Street, covered with ivy, and looking for all the world like a refugee from Berkeley Square in London. It was also the home of one of the largest stamp dealers in the United States.

It was nine-thirty when Masuto parked his car in the red no-parking spaces in front of Holmbey's, put his police card in plain view, and walked into the place, which looked more like an old-fashioned country bank than a stamp dealer's. There were oak counters, elderly gentlemen with green visors, and a gaunt,

spinsterish woman who regarded him suspiciously and asked what she might do for him.

"I am a police officer," said Masuto, showing his identification. "I would like to talk to the manager."

"There is no manager, as you put it. Holmbey's is run by Mr. Jason Holmbey III."

"Then I'll talk to Mr. Jason Holmbey III."

"Please be seated, Mr....?"

"Sergeant Masuto."

"Mr. Masuto, while I see whether Mr. Holmbey can see you. Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then I am afraid your visit has been in vain. Mr. Holmbey does not see people except by appointment."

Masuto was slow to irritation, and even when it occurred, he refused to allow it to show. Now he said softly, "Tell Mr. Holmbey that either he will see me and talk with me, or I will come back with a warrant and bring him in as a material witness to a murder." All of which was very sketchy and conceivably impossible, but which nevertheless made the required impression on the very gaunt and spinsterish woman and sent her hurrying away. A few minutes later, a man in his middle thirties, dressed in a vested herringbone tweed suit, with a cheerful face and wire-rimmed glasses, emerged through a door behind the showcases, glanced around, located Masuto, shook hands with him, and cheerfully asked what he might do for him.

"Agatha is our watchdog. She is very imposing, don't you think? She was my father's secretary, and her mission now is to protect me."

"Only a few questions," Masuto replied.

"Then suppose we sit down in my office." He indicated the way, and Masuto followed him into an imposing, oak-paneled room. There were two large oil portraits on the walls, which Masuto imagined depicted Holmbey I and Holmbey II.

"Now ...?"

"Sergeant Masuto."

“Sergeant Masuto. What can I do for you? And you, on the other hand — you would not mind showing me your credentials?”

Masuto opened his wallet and showed his badge.

“Ah! But you are a Beverly Hills policeman. Aren’t you rather far off base?”

“No, sir. In Los Angeles County, any police detective working on a case has reciprocal rights — even to the extent of making an arrest.”

“But you are not here to make an arrest. At least, I hope not. Of course — it’s the Ivan Gaycheck business. I read about it in this morning’s *Times*.”

“More or less.”

“Am I a suspect?”

“No, indeed.”

“Why not? I disliked the man intensely. He’s a dealer, I am a dealer. So why not?”

Masuto spread his hands disarmingly and smiled. “This woman — I believe you called her Agatha — you said her mission is to protect you. From what?”

“My dear Sergeant Masuto. I am sure the world of postage stamps is alien to you, but it is very much a world, and in that world I am considered — I say this without boasting — one of the half-dozen leading authorities. Holmbey’s is the third largest dealer in the United States, the largest west of the Mississippi, so you will understand that I am sought out by an endless flow of collectors and dealers, for purchase, for sale, for authentication, for identification. My provenance is usually accepted by any dealer or collector. If I were not protected, my life would be a nightmare.”

“So. You are very young for all that,” Masuto said with respect.

“I grew up with stamps. Quite natural for a Holmbey.”

“Well, I am grateful for the time you are granting me.”

“Not at all. I’m fascinated. Crime and stamps rarely mix. Ask and I will answer to the best of my ability.”

“Thank you. There is a stamp called the One-Penny 1848 Mauritius. How much is it worth?”

“The One-Penny 1848 Orange, imperforate ...”

“Imperforate?”

“The little holes, you know, perforations. Imperforate simply means cut with a scissors or a cutting machine. No perforations.”

“I see.”

“Canceled, five thousand dollars. Uncanceled, about twice that.”

Masuto shook his head. “No. Surely you are mistaken.”

“I am never mistaken — in stamps.” Holmbey smiled.

“But I was told ...”

“By an expert? How much?”

“One hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“Good heavens! Who was the expert — if you don’t mind telling me his name?”

“Mr. Odi Ishido.”

“Ishido? I know Ishido. Lovely gentleman, quite a competent amateur collector. Rather good on Japanese stamps, but he doesn’t know beans about the British colonies. You know, there is a Mauritius stamp that is the most valuable in existence. Not the Post-Paid One-Penny 1848, but the One-Penny Post-Office 1847. I suppose that’s what Ishido had in mind.”

“Then there is a One-Penny Mauritian stamp of great value?”

“Oh, yes, indeed. There certainly is. The One-Penny Orange of 1847 is the most valuable postage stamp in the world.”

“But what gives a tiny bit of paper such value?” Masuto asked.

“Ah! Good question. First of all, it’s the collector who gives it such value. If he did not desire it with demonic ferocity, well then, what would its value be? Nothing. And why does he value it? Mainly because of its rarity. When he has it, he has something that no one else or almost no one else in the world has. Why does one pay seventy thousand dollars for a Rolls-Royce? To have what few others have. Now I do not denigrate the collector. He is the lifeblood of our business. But there it is. And secondly — well, a stamp accumulates a mythology, thieves who try to steal it, kings and oil barons who vie for it, murderers who kill for it.”

“Murderers?”

“I thought that would interest you, Sergeant. There’s a whole history of murders to gain possession of stamps, but I am afraid I don’t have time to go into that today. Tell me — why does this One-Penny Mauritius interest you?”

“I have my reasons. Could you tell me something about it?”

“Well, just off the top of my head without going to the books: orange, you know, color of the ink. Shows the head of the young Queen Victoria. Engraved copper by J. Barnard — rather a skilled engraver for such an out-of-the-way place. He was a watchmaker. This was his first attempt at stamps. You know, Mauritius is a bit of an island in the Indian Ocean. Curiously, it was the first British colony to print its own stamps. It was engraved and printed in Port Louis, largest town in Mauritius, and when Barnard engraved it he made a bit of an error. Errors — they make stamps valuable, indeed they do. Instead of putting *post paid* in his engraving, Barnard put *post office* there. Corrected it the following year, but the deed was done. Imperforate, as I said. They had no perforating machine on the island then, so the stamp had to be cut by hand. And lo, it was born — the One-Penny Orange 1847 Mauritius.”

“Do you have one that I could look at?” Masuto asked.

“Do I have one? My dear Sergeant, if I had one — if I had one — well, I wouldn’t have it. There are only fourteen recorded copies of the One-Penny Orange in the whole world. I’d sell it to Clevendon down in Texas for a king’s ransom.”

“Clevendon?”

“A very wealthy Texan who is one of the great collectors.”

“Tell me, Mr. Holmbey, how many of these stamps are there?”

“In the world?”

“Yes.”

“Recorded — fourteen. Unrecorded — who knows? Every now and then, one of them turns up. I suppose that originally they printed several hundred at least. I would have to look that up. I do know that the original plate still exists. You know, it wasn’t until May 6, 1840, that Great Britain printed its first stamps. With us, it was even later, and it was not until twenty years later that anyone ever dreamed of collecting stamps in an album. What a pity, so much was destroyed and discarded. But one happy thing did come about. It almost immediately became quite fashionable to paper walls, screens, candy boxes with canceled stamps, and this did save many valuable issues.”

“May I ask you who owns the One-Penny Orange?”

“Ah, indeed you may. In the world — well, I can name eight collectors who have it. Undoubtedly, there are others I do not know about.”

“And in the United States?”

“Two. The Weill brothers in New Orleans own a cover with two penny stamps on it.”

“And if you had it, what would you charge for it?”

“That depends. The last time I looked at the price in *Gibbons* — that’s the British catalog — well, it was some years ago. It might have been the 1972 catalog. They had it for twenty-two thousand pounds. What was the pound then — two-sixty? Something of the sort. Well, I might put it up at auction with a base price of sixty thousand.”

“You said ...” Masuto began.

“Ah, you want it simple. It is not simple. You see, it depends on the stamp. If the stamp is on an original cover — well, then the sky is the limit. I think only five exist.”

“Cover?”

“Envelope, in your terms. But in those days, Sergeant Masuto, they had no envelopes. They folded a sheet of paper and sealed it with wax. That would be the cover. The 1847 Orange on the original cover — and proven authentic — well, don’t know. I could pick up the phone here, put in a call to Clevendon, tell him what I had, and tell him the price was four hundred thousand dollars. And by God I think he’d pay it. No — I wouldn’t do that. We have three generations of reputation to uphold. Oh, I’d let Clevendon know all right, let a few others know as well, and then I’d take it to London and put it up at auction with a bidding bottom of one hundred thousand pounds. Who knows? It might fetch half a million or more. Anything is possible in today’s inflated world.”

“And if such an original cover were to exist and be stolen, what would be the prospects for the thieves?”

“On the black market? No legitimate dealer or collector would touch it, but there are one or two Middle Eastern collectors and one in France — I mention no names. Of course, the price would be considerably less.”

“But if there were no report of the theft — if it simply surfaced?”

“Ah, then the sky’s the limit.”

“And would the thief try to sell it here?”

“I think not. Stolen here? Why sell it here? London would be a better market.” He cocked his head and regarded Masuto impishly. “Ah, Detective Masuto, behind that Oriental mask of yours lies an interesting speculation. You are apparently quite ready to be convinced that somewhere, somehow, the unpleasant Mr. Gaycheck found a One-Penny Orange — a motive for his murder. And you are also speculating that perhaps I could have done this not entirely unwholesome deed.”

Masuto smiled.

“But you have only to look at me. Surely I am not the type who murders?”

“Is there a type who murders?”

“You are a most unusual policeman — but of course you know that. Yes, I would imagine there is a type that is given to acts of violence. Unlike myself. I lead a sequestered life. By the way, how was the good Gaycheck sent to his reward?”

“You did not like him.”

“I found him distasteful.”

“He was shot in the middle of the forehead with a small pistol, probably an automatic, with a twenty-two-caliber short slug. Short as distinguished from the high-velocity bullet. He died instantly.”

“As a reward for his good deeds. By the way, he perished my debtor.”

“Oh?”

“He owes me eighteen hundred dollars for a stamp I gave him on consignment.”

“A ten-cent black 1847 George Washington?”

“Sergeant, you amaze me. Yes.”

“It’s being held in the sheriff’s station on San Vincente in West Hollywood — in the property office. As evidence. If you put your claim in there and show proof of ownership and indebtedness, you should be able to have it in a few days. I thought it was worth three thousand.”

“Catalog price. A collector might pay close to that. I gave it to Gaycheck on consignment. He said he had a customer for it.”

“Then you did do business with Gaycheck?”

“I do business with any stamp dealer whose credit is not subject to suspicion. In business, one does not make moral judgments.”

“Was there any reason to make a moral judgment of Ivan Gaycheck?”

“Come, come, Sergeant. You know precisely what I mean. By the way, how comes my stamp to the West Hollywood sheriff? Gaycheck was murdered in Beverly Hills.”

“The stamp was found in the possession of Ronald Haber.” Masuto’s face was impassive, his eyes fixed on Holmbey. “He lives in West Hollywood.”

“Gaycheck’s assistant. I don’t understand.”

“Haber was murdered a few hours ago.”

“Good heavens!” Holmbey drew a deep breath. “Murdered. What the devil goes on? Is it open season for stamp dealers?”

“I imagine that the person who killed Haber was looking for something of great value — which Haber may or may not have provided.”

“The One-Penny Orange?”

“Perhaps.”

“I still don’t understand. I don’t want to sound egotistical, but if there were a One-Penny Orange in Los Angeles or indeed anywhere in America, missing or presented for sale, I would know about it.”

“I’m sure you would.”

“Then what on earth gives you this fixation on the One-Penny Orange? Do you have any evidence, any reason to believe it exists?”

“Perhaps.”

“Hardly an expansive answer. Well, Sergeant —”. He glanced at his watch. “I’ve given you a half hour of my time. I have not done away with either Haber or Gaycheck, but you are welcome to add me to your list of suspects if it pleases you. And if you do come across that One-Penny Orange, I should be delighted to know about it.”

“Only one more question.”

“Yes?”

“You must know most of the important collectors in this area. Are there any of the stature of this man you mentioned — Clevendon?”

“There is no one of Clevendon’s stature as a collector — unfortunately.”

“Perhaps. But I speak of people who could afford the price of such a stamp.”

“Yes, a few. But I see no reason why I should supply their names.”

“I can’t force you to,” Masuto admitted. “On the other hand, I think the D.A. could be persuaded to issue a warrant that would permit me to examine your books — more time-consuming for me, and, I am sure, much more unpleasant for you.”

Holmbey’s mood changed. His face hardened and his blue eyes closed to slits. He stared at Masuto without replying.

“There are other ways,” Masuto said quietly. “There are dealers in Beverly Hills and Westwood who could supply the information. I am not threatening you.”

“Very well,” Holmbey said coldly. “There are only four of them, and you’re quite right. Any legitimate dealer would know who they are, so in fact I violate no confidence. Frank Goldway in Palos Verdes, Jerome Clayton in Pasadena, Raymond Cohen in Bel Air, and Lucille Bettner in Beverly Hills.”

Masuto jotted down the names. “Thank you,” he said, rising. “You’ve been very generous with your time.”

On his way back to Beverly Hills, Masuto pulled into a gas station to fill his depleted tank, and while waiting he telephoned his cousin, Alan Toyada, who was in the research department of Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith.

“Well, Masao,” Toyada greeted him, “I see you’re working again. Live in Beverly Hills and get scragged.”

“I am not interested in your poor sense of humor. I want to know about Holmbey’s — the stamp dealer in downtown L.A.”

“Masao, you know I specialize in Japanese stocks. Anyway, Holmbey’s is not listed. It’s a family outfit.”

“You have Dun and Bradstreet and other sources. I want to know their condition, their financial standing — or whatever you call it.”

“All right. Drop around this afternoon and I’ll have it for you.”

“Please, Alan, I want it now.”

“Now? I can’t drop everything....”

“You can. It won’t take you five minutes. I’m in a phone booth in a gas station, but I’ll call you back in ten minutes.”

“Masao, I can’t just ...”

“The next time you want a traffic ticket fixed ...”

“When did you ever fix a ticket for me? When?”

“I’ll call you back in ten minutes.” Then Masuto hung up, paid for the gas, and drove off. Back in Beverly Hills, he stopped at a pay phone and called Toyada again.

“Okay, Masao — I got what you want. To put it succinctly, their condition is lousy. They are up to their ears in debt, and they have a quarter-of-a-million bank loan callable in about thirty days. Unless they have resources not listed, it’s questionable whether they can meet it. Maybe they can float another loan to cover, maybe not. One doesn’t know. If you’re going to lend them money, think twice.”

“Thank you.”

“Look, Masao, if you’re on the pad and you got money to burn, come around and see me. Stay away from places like Holmbey’s.”

“Very funny. Goodbye.”

6

ELLEN BRIGGS

Driving to North Camden — north being north of the railroad tracks, the line through Beverly Hills that separates the middle class from the rich — Masuto recalled that he had not only seen Ellen Briggs play Major Barbara but he had also seen her play Hedda Gabler at the Huntington Hartford Theatre, which was quite different from the little shack on Las Palmas where she had performed in the Shaw play. The part was notably different as well, for while he had never cared for the Ibsen play as a dramatic work, he was always intrigued by the character of Hedda Gabler — the frustrated, hate-filled woman whose morality had disappeared under the pressure of her anger, who could kill and destroy without compassion or regret. He had always wondered whether there could be a great performance of the Hedda Gabler role without the actress sharing some part of the nature of Ibsen's character.

Well, he knew very little about actresses; but why hadn't Ellen Briggs mentioned the Hedda Gabler role? How could any actress resist saying, once he had complimented her on the Major Barbara role, "But did you see me as Hedda Gabler at the Huntington Hartford?"

Of course, there were the circumstances. Her mother's death, the funeral, and then the breaking into her house and the senseless chaos visited upon it. Perhaps the additional misery of the talented actress who does not make it. She was at least forty now, and Masuto had spent his life close enough to the entertainment industry to know that, with a few incredible exceptions, the actor who does not make it by forty will never make it.

It was half-past ten in the morning when Masuto parked his car in front of the Spanish Colonial house on Camden, and he had that strange feeling — not unusual when one is awake most of the night — that somewhere he had lost a day. Also, he had missed his regular early morning practice of meditation. Well, a day like today is not so different from a koan; he smiled a bit at the thought. He himself practiced in the Soto School of Zen, but in the Rinzai School one meditated upon a thing called a koan, a proposition that defies reason; and Masuto had always felt that murder, the destruction of one human being by another, defied both reason and civilization. It was certainly not an apt comparison, but it amused him.

When he rang the doorbell, Ellen Briggs opened the door for him, and the change in her appearance from the day before was so marked that he had to look twice to make sure it was the same woman. She wore old blue jeans that fit her slender figure tightly and a blue work shirt open at the neck, and her hair was drawn back and tied behind her head. She looked twenty years younger than the grief-stricken woman he had seen the day before, and the lack of makeup added to her attractiveness.

She stared at him blankly for a moment, then smiled. “Of course — Detective Masuto.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Briggs. May I come in?”

“Please.”

The living room was back in place and orderly. “I’m working in the kitchen now,” she explained. “It’s good for me to have all this to do. You know, I don’t suppose the thieves were in the house for more than an hour, but it will be three days before I clear up the wreckage.”

“It’s always easier to destroy,” Masuto agreed. “Actors will rehearse a play for weeks, and a critic will destroy it with a few words.”

“I like that notion.” She stared at him with interest. “You are a most unusual policeman.”

“You don’t have to stop what you were doing. I will be happy to sit in the kitchen, and I can talk to you while you work. I just have a few questions to ask you.”

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I would.”

She led him into the kitchen. “No, I shall not go on working. We will have tea together.”

He watched her with interest as she put up the water to boil, prepared the teapot, and set out a plate of sliced pound cake. She moved easily and gracefully, and he found himself admiring her and liking her.

“You have no accent at all,” he observed.

“Accent?”

“Foreign accent, I mean. You were born in Germany?”

“But I left there when I was three years old. So the fact that I have no accent is hardly remarkable.”

“That was in 1940?”

“Yes — but how did you know I was forty years old?”

“Just a guess.”

“Not a flattering guess, Sergeant Masuto.”

“It has nothing to do with your appearance. I simply felt it was before the war began. Later it would have been almost impossible.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Do you want lemon with your tea?”

He shook his head. “Your father was Jewish?”

“Half Jewish — but in Nazi Germany that was enough. My mother was not Jewish, but Hitler was not concerned with such niceties.”

“When did your father die?”

“He died in Germany, in a concentration camp. Some friends helped my mother to escape in 1940, and we got to England, and then here after the war.”

“That must have been a hard time for both of you.”

She put two slices of cake on a plate and handed it to him, looking at him rather quizzically. “I was very young. It was harder for my mother. But these things are not pleasant for me to talk about, and I don’t see what such matters have to do with my home being broken into.”

“Perhaps a great deal. I’m not sure. Please forgive me. I am trying to get to the bottom of something. It’s like a puzzle, and I am trying to fit the pieces together.”

“You mean the house being broken into? I don’t understand.”

“Partly that. You see, Mrs. Briggs, two people were murdered during the past twenty-four hours. I am investigating these murders. I imagine you haven’t seen the morning paper?”

“No, I haven’t. But what can this possibly have to do with my house being robbed?”

“I’m not sure. I think there’s a connection.”

“What kind of connection?”

“If you will only bear with me a little — and allow me some personal questions. It’s very important.”

“All right. But I’m very confused and I’m beginning to be frightened again.”

“There’s no reason for you to be frightened, and if we can get to the bottom of this, it will only add to your safety and your son’s safety. By the way, where is your son?”

“At school. Why my son? What has he got to do with this?”

“I’m not sure — yet.”

“Why don’t you tell me the truth? What are you after? What is happening?”

She was becoming very upset, her eyes wet with moisture now. Masuto realized that she was a very emotional woman; well, what good actress wasn’t. He said gently, “I will tell you what I am after, but let me do it my way. If you will simply answer my questions.”

“All right.”

“Yesterday — what time was the funeral?”

“Nine o’clock in the morning.”

“And you returned here at one?”

“Closer to two.”

“As I remember you told me yesterday, you had lunch and then you dropped your son off at school?”

“Yes.”

“You all had lunch together?”

“No, just my son and I. I dropped my husband off at his studio on Wilshire. He had some pressing things to attend to.”

“At what time?”

“I don’t remember, really. What difference does it make?”

“Try to remember.”

“I think about noontime.”

“Then how did your husband get back here to the house?”

“After I dropped Bernie off, I picked up Jack at his office. It was about one-thirty, maybe a little later.”

“Your son’s name is Bernard?”

“No, it’s Bernie. He was named after my father.”

“I see. Tell me something about your father, Mrs. Briggs.”

“Why? How can it have anything to do with this?”

“It might.”

“What shall I tell you? I hardly remember my father.”

“Was he wealthy?”

“I suppose so. At one time. He was a publisher. Not a very large publisher, but a very good one.”

“And what happened to his wealth?”

“What happened to the wealth of any German in Hitler’s time who was Jewish or half Jewish? They took everything he had, everything. When we escaped and got to England, we had nothing but the clothes on our backs. Nothing. My mother found work as a cook in a little restaurant. Then when we got to America, she became a servant, a live-in cook. She was only sixty-one when she died — so young but worn out.” Her eyes filled with tears now.

“I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s all right. My husband gets furious when I talk about the old times. He doesn’t care for Jews, and once he heard me tell Bernie that I was Jewish, because after what my mother and father had been through, what else could I say, but he was in a rage with me. Why am I telling you all this?”

“Please, I want to hear about it. That’s why you’re talking to me.”

She smiled through her tears. “I like you, Sergeant Masuto. I’ll tell you a story, and maybe you’ll understand better how I feel. I was once up for a very decent part, which I did not get. Well, I wasn’t right for it. But I was interviewed by the producer — his name was Deutschmaster. He was a Jew who had been a refugee and then had returned to Germany and become a very important producer. He’s dead now. Well, I noticed in the pocket of his vest, inside his jacket, he had two small silver spoons, and I asked him why. Do you know what he told me — he told me that when he was a refugee in Europe, he discovered that money could be worthless, of perhaps he

had none, but he had a sterling silver spoon and it bought him life for a week. So you see, the two silver spoons he carried were, as he explained to me, a sort of symbolic reminder. Do you know what I am trying to say?"

"I think so." Then Masuto was silent, staring at her until he realized that she was becoming uncomfortable under his gaze. "Forgive me. Does the name Gaylord Schwartzman mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?"

"I don't know. What concentration camp did your father die in, do you know?"

"Buchenwald."

"And you say he was well-to-do once, but when your mother escaped she had nothing. But how could that be? I am not impugning anything you say, please believe me, but many others escaped and many of them brought small things with them — jewels, things of that sort."

"Whatever she had went to pay for our way out."

"You said that you arrived in England penniless and empty-handed. Empty-handed — do you mean that literally?"

"But you are asking me to remember something that happened when I was three years old."

"Try. Luggage. A large handbag. Some treasured things — things that would be important to her but worthless even to the Nazis."

"What kind of things?"

"Perhaps letters from your father — pictures, a few small mementos, things a woman would treasure."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, she had some things like that. There were some snapshots of herself and my father, some letters, a few other things, a lock of my baby hair."

"Do you still have these things?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"In her room, but her room was so upset, like the other rooms. I haven't gotten to it yet. I worked on my son's room this morning. I felt that Mother's could wait — since she's gone."

"May I look in her room?"

Ellen Briggs stiffened now and faced Masuto squarely. “No, Sergeant. No. Not unless you tell me what you’re after and why. I have been very patient with you, but no more. You are not here with a search warrant or by any official right, but only through my tolerance. And my tolerance has run out.”

Masuto smiled. “Very well. I’ll tell you.

“Yesterday, shortly before I came here, a man was murdered. He had lived for years in Beverly Hills under the name of Ivan Gaycheck. He was a stamp dealer, with a shop on North Canon Drive. His real name was Gaylord Schwartzman, and he was once a captain in the SS — at Buchenwald. He was shot through the head with a small pistol. But his store was not robbed then. Nothing was disturbed. Last night his assistant, a man by the name of Ronald Haber, was beaten to death in his apartment in West Hollywood. His apartment was ransacked, as your house was. A few hours later, Gaycheck’s store was ransacked.”

Staring at him wide-eyed, she shook her head. “What has that to do with us?”

“I put together a scenario of sorts. I must, you know. Otherwise I would fumble around blindly. Gaycheck made a notation on his calendar — PM. Just the two letters. There is a stamp of enormous value. It was issued in 1847 on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. It is called the One-Penny Orange. Penny Mauritius, PM. I am guessing. Your house ransacked, nothing taken. Your father, dead in Buchenwald. Gaycheck — Schwartzman, and Buchenwald. Haber’s apartment, your house, Gaycheck’s store.”

“I still don’t understand you.”

“Try, Mrs. Briggs. Put yourself in the place of your father — in the 1930s in Germany. He knows that sooner or later he will be arrested — unless he escapes. But if he escapes, his property will be forfeit. He plans an escape from Germany, some way to take something with him, so that he will not arrive at his destination as a pauper. But what should he take? Money? Where can he hide it if he is stopped and searched? Jewels? The same problem. The SS were not novices at searching, and your father was not the first one to think of this problem. Now tell me something — do you know what books your father’s firm published?”

“Some of them. My mother loved books. She told me many stories about my father’s publishing house.”

“Did he ever publish any books that related to stamp collecting?”

Her face lit up with excitement. “Yes, he did! Of course! He published the German edition of *Gibbons* catalog.”

“The British stamp catalog. Then he knew the value of British colonial stamps, and he must have known dealers and collectors.”

“I would suppose so.”

“And he was a publisher, a well-read man. He would have known the stories of Edgar Allen Poe. Tell me, Mrs. Briggs, did you ever read *The Purloined Letter*?”

“I think so. Isn’t that the story where a letter of great importance, instead of being hidden, is simply turned inside out and put in a letter holder with other letters?”

“Exactly. Now this is what I think your father did — and of course it is only a guess. But the pieces fit. I think that when your father realized what course he must take, he bought a stamp of great value, but not simply a stamp. An original cover.”

“What on earth is an original cover?”

“I’m no stamp expert, but I have been informing myself today. An original cover means the stamp on the posted envelope. But I understand that in those times they did not put writing paper into an envelope. They wrote on a square sheet of paper and folded it to envelop size and sealed it. The envelope was the letter. Somewhere — perhaps we’ll never know where — your father found and bought an original cover, very probably of the One-Penny 1847 Mauritius Orange. He then put it away, probably with some mementos that would excite no suspicion. He didn’t try to hide it. He probably took the chance that no one who saw it would know what it was — thereby hiding it in the safest manner possible — by not hiding it at all.”

“And if all this happened,” she said in a whisper, “what would be the value of this — cover, as you call it?”

“Then, in 1939, I don’t know. Certainly substantial. Today, I am told, it’s worth over three hundred thousand dollars, perhaps more.”

“Oh, my God — all those years of poverty. And if what you say is true, it was lost, just thrown away somewhere in Germany.”

“I don’t think so. You see, your father must have been arrested suddenly.”

“He was.”

“Certainly before he had an opportunity to explain to your mother what he had done. Or perhaps she was not to know. Perhaps it was to be his secret — and then it was too late to tell her. But I think she took the cover out of Germany with her.”

“Oh, no. No. My mother worked as a servant.”

“Because she never knew.”

“What? What are you saying?”

“Understand me,” Masuto said evenly. “I am building a premise. I don’t know whether I am right or wrong. But I think that all these years that cover remained among your mother’s possessions. Granted, she had very little — only a few mementos. But I think that somewhere among her few possessions was this original cover. She may have kept it simply for sentimental reasons — or what is more likely is that your father told her that it was important to him, without ever telling her why.”

“She did have a little packet of letters,” Ellen remembered. “They were tied with a piece of ribbon. When I was a little girl she would look at them sometimes, but then she put them away and I don’t think she looked at them for years.”

“Where did she keep them?”

“I don’t think I know. You see, we only moved into this house a week ago — it’s such a splendid house. This is the first time Jack — my husband — made any money. I wanted her to have a few years of peace and happiness....” She broke into tears, covering her face with her hands. “She wouldn’t have! Oh, damn it, she wouldn’t have. Jack hated her. She had no peace and no happiness. I wasn’t even with her when she died.”

“How did she die?”

“Oh, let me wash my face. I feel so rotten. All those years of wretched poverty, and there might have been a fortune under my nose. She could have lived like a human being. Please — please excuse me.”

She fled into the bathroom behind the kitchen, leaving Masuto to sit there and stare at the half-eaten slice of cake on his plate and to

wonder whether the edifice he had created was a total fiction. He liked her, respected her, and felt his heart go out to her — and pondered the strange fact that women like Ellen Briggs so often married men like Jack Briggs. Then she came back, her eyes reddened but dry.

“I’m all right now. I suppose you want to see Mother’s room?”

“Yes. But I asked you before — and you don’t have to answer if it’s too painful — I asked you how your mother died.”

“She died of a heart attack, Sergeant Masuto. Alone. I wasn’t even there to be with her. Just three days ago. I had gone with Bernie to the school to register him. I left him there and came home. I went up to her room, and she was lying on her bed — dead.”

“I am sorry,” Masuto said. “I make you talk about things you don’t want to talk about, and I force you to remember things you should not have to remember. I am so sorry.”

She led the way up the stairs. All the bedrooms were off a central hallway. Her mother’s was a corner room, bright and cheerful, with a wooden balcony. But it was still in total disorder, clothes on the floor, the drawers emptied and flung about senselessly, papers and letters scattered about. Ellen walked around, picking up envelopes and folded letters. Without a word, she handed them to Masuto. They were written in German and carried old stamps of the time of the Third Reich.

“These are the letters, Mrs. Briggs?”

She nodded. Masuto handed them back to her, then walked around the room — aimlessly, it appeared to Ellen, except that his dark eyes were restless and excited. Then he got down on his knees and reached under the bed. When he stood up, he had a piece of faded blue ribbon in his hand.

“Is this the ribbon that the letters were tied with?”

“Yes, I think so.”

He stared at the ribbon until she was prompted to say, “What is it, Sergeant Masuto?”

“Don’t you see? The ribbon was cut with a pair of scissors. Not with a knife, but with a pair of scissors.”

“Well?”

He motioned at the room. "Do such people pick up scissors to cut a ribbon?" Suddenly he snapped the ribbon in his fingers. "See how easily it breaks." And even more abruptly, "Did you have the back door fixed?"

His tone of voice startled her. "Yes. The locksmith came early this morning. He not only fixed the lock, he put a bolt on the door."

Masuto looked at his watch. "It's twenty after eleven. What time does your son get out of school?"

"For lunch? Eleven forty-five. Why?"

"Come with me! We'll pick him up."

"But the school bus will bring him."

"I said we'll pick him up," Masuto snapped. "Now don't argue with me. Come."

In his car, she complained that he was arbitrary and rude.

"Not rude. I am never rude," Masuto protested. The accusation hurt him.

"You have no right to order me around like this."

"I have the right to keep a hurtful thing from happening to you and your son."

"What hurtful thing? What are you talking about?"

They were almost at the school now.

"Why doesn't your son have a hot lunch in school?" Masuto asked.

"You must know everything. You're the most inquisitive man I ever met."

"Yes, assuredly."

"He will have his lunch in school when I'm working. I'm not working now. I feel better when I prepare his lunch."

"I see." He pulled up next to the curb, with the school entrance plainly in sight. "It's just a few minutes. I'll wait here. Go to the door and bring him here when he comes out."

"But ..."

"Please do as I say."

She got out of the car, turned to look at Masuto, swallowed whatever she had intended to say, and walked across to the school. Masuto snapped on his radiophone and called the dispatcher. "This is Masuto. I'm parked in front of Rogers' Primary School. I want the

nearest patrol car on this street. Get him over here quickly, but slow as he goes down the street. I want him to park behind me, and then follow me when I pull away.”

He got out of his car then, wondering, as he had so often before, whether he was right in rarely carrying a gun. A time would surely come when he would regret that decision. He stood by his car, studying the area, the sun-drenched lawns, the empty walks. Not a soul was in sight. He told himself then, in that moment, that he had too much imagination for a good policeman.

A school bus pulled into the driveway next to the school; then a second one.

Then, down the street and parking next to the curb, facing his car, three men on motorcycles, wearing leather trousers, leather jackets, and helmets with sunproof visors; no faces were visible. This surprised him. Motorcycles were not a part of his calculations. Hadn't all the witnesses at Lapeer, where Haber had been murdered, spoken of the sound of a car starting? How could anyone confuse the sound of a car with the sound of three motorcycles?

Having parked the cycles and dismounted, they stood in a tight group; they watched Masuto, and they watched Ellen Briggs, who now stood in front of the school door. The door opened and the children began to come out. The three men in leather took a few steps and Masuto took a few steps. They watched him, and then they saw the patrol car pull up behind Masuto's Datsun.

Masuto waved an arm, and the policeman got out of his car and came toward him. Ellen Briggs took her son's hand. Masuto never took his eyes from the cyclists.

The uniformed cop joined Masuto. “What's up, Sergeant?”

The three men moved back to their motorcycles, mounted, and roared away down the street. Masuto relaxed. Ellen Briggs and her son walked toward them. The boy, small, light-haired, was chattering to his mother.

“It's all right, Bailey,” Masuto said to the policeman. “I'm taking them over to their home, on Camden. Just follow me, and then park outside until I come out.”

The policeman nodded and went back to his car. Masuto opened the door of his car for Ellen Briggs and her son. “Now, would you tell

me ...”

“I’m taking you home,” Masuto said. “I’ll talk to you there.”

“You don’t know how provoking this whole thing is.”

“I do.”

The boy whispered, “What is he, Mom? Is he some kind of cop? He’s a Jap, isn’t he?”

“Just be quiet.”

Masuto parked in front of the house on Camden. “Wait here,” he said to Ellen Briggs. The patrol car pulled up behind him. Masuto nodded at Officer Bailey, then walked down the driveway to the back of the house and looked at the kitchen door. He circled the house and came back.

“We’ll go inside now,” he said to Ellen.

“You are impossible,” she said slowly.

“Just do as I say, please.”

She and the boy walked with him to the door. She opened the door with her keys, and the boy went inside. Masuto touched her arm as she started to follow. “One moment, please, Mrs. Briggs.” She turned to face him. “Do you trust me?”

“I would like to — if you would tell me what that charade at the school was all about.”

“In time.”

“Why must you be so damn mysterious?”

“Because I am in something with a dozen loose ends dangling, and I haven’t put them together, and anything I say about it would only add to your worries. So would you please trust me?”

She hesitated, thought about it for a moment or two, drew a deep breath, then sighed. “Very well.”

“I don’t want you to send your son back to school today. Keep him at home.”

“But what shall I tell him?”

“Invent something. I want you to lock your doors. Stay in the house. The boy is not to go out to play.”

“Not even in the backyard?”

“No, not even in the backyard.”

“But I haven’t done my shopping.”

“Don’t do any shopping today. Don’t open the door for anyone.”

“But this is ridiculous.”

“No, it is not ridiculous. Will you do as I say?”

She stood there staring at Masuto. Then she nodded. “Very well.”

“I’ll try to come back this evening. I think it will be over by then — so it’s only one afternoon.”

“What shall I tell my husband?”

“What time will he be home?”

“Seven — perhaps later.”

“Then you will simply tell him that I said what I said — for your safety and for the child’s safety.” She nodded unhappily. “Thank you.”

He waited until she had gone inside and he had heard the door lock behind her. Then he walked back to where Officer Bailey sat in his patrol car.

“What the hell is this all about?” Bailey asked.

Masuto shrugged. “Can you come by here every half hour or so?”

“If it’s all right with the chief.”

“Tell him I asked for it — you or someone else.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Motorcycles.”

“The same three?”

“Maybe.”

“You’re really sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

Again, Masuto shrugged. “Just keep your eyes open.”

ZEV KOLAN

It was twelve forty-five when Masuto returned to Beverly Hill police headquarters. He sent out for a sandwich and coffee, and then in the records room he picked up the last three days' Los Angeles *Times*. He chewed his ham and cheese without tasting it, while he read the death notice:

"Hilda Kramer, beloved wife of Wolf Bernie Kramer and Mother of Ellen Kramer Briggs. Rest in peace."

Wainwright stopped by his desk. "What have you got, Masao?"

"A few pieces."

"Do you know who killed Gaycheck?"

"I think so."

"You wouldn't want to share that knowledge?"

"I could be wrong."

"You give me a pain in the ass — so help me God, you do, Masao."

"Being inscrutable is part of the ploy. Look, Captain, I think I know who murdered Gaycheck. I have no evidence, absolutely nothing. I also have a notion about Haber."

"Not the same party?"

"No, indeed. Hardly — but it's in motion. Maybe I can wrap it up by tomorrow, maybe never."

"That's cheerful."

"What I'm wondering," Masuto said, "is whether the L.A.P.D. would run an errand for us."

"Maybe. If we're nice to them. There have been times when they wanted errands on our turf. What do you have in mind?"

“I want to know about the gun — the little twenty-two-caliber job that killed Gaycheck. I think it was purchased in one of the gun stores downtown during the past week, maybe during the past three days. L.A.P.D. would know who carries that kind of merchandise. Ballistics is pretty certain it was an automatic, not a revolver, a purse gun, probably a fancy little toy with mother-of-pearl on the grip. I’m sure they don’t sell many of those.”

“Why downtown, Masao? This county is lousy with gun stores.”

“Just a notion. Maybe they can track it down and get us a reading on who bought it.”

“I’ll give it a try.”

As Wainwright turned away, Masuto said, “One other thing, Captain.”

“Oh?”

“I want you to authorize two telephone calls.” Detective Sy Beckman, sitting at the next desk, was listening and trying to look like he was not listening. “For Sy here,” Masuto said, nodding at Beckman. “I want him to make the calls for me.”

“I’m waiting,” Wainwright said coldly. “Goddamn it, Masao ...”

Masuto held up a hand and smiled.

“All right. Tell me.”

“One to Germany. One to England.”

“No.”

“It’s important.”

“Use the Telex.”

“It won’t do. I need the telephone.”

“No. That loudmouth will sit on the phone for an hour and I’ll get a bill for three hundred dollars, and the city manager will burn my ass off.”

“Don’t blame me,” said Beckman. “I don’t even know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Make the calls yourself,” said the captain.

“I have other things to do. I want to clean this thing up and get out of it. I want to go home and sit in a hot bath for an hour and eat some civilized food and feed my roses.”

“My heart bleeds for you. If you think I’m going to give Beckman a license to sit on the phone to Germany and England and bankrupt

this department, you're crazy."

"If I enjoyed the expression, which I do not," Masuto said quietly, "I would say that my heart bleeds for you, Captain. You're only the chief of detectives in the wealthiest city in the world, and you're arguing about two telephone calls."

"Go to hell," said Wainwright, turning on his heel.

"The calls?"

"Make them, but so help me, Masao, I'd better know the reason why." And then he stalked away.

Beckman was staring at Masuto and grinning. "You do have a way with you, Masao." He readied his pencil and pad. "Who do I call?"

"First of all, there's a publisher in England, Gibbons — put that down, G-i-b-b-o-n-s. They publish the definitive British stamp catalog. Or maybe Gibbons is the name of the catalog, and someone else publishes it. I don't know, but you can call Holmbey's, the stamp dealer in downtown L. A., and get that information. Get through to Gibbons and find someone there who knows his business, and find out all you can about a stamp called the One-Penny 1847 Orange Mauritius."

"How do you spell Morashus?"

Masuto gave it to him. "But don't flounder around, Sy. I want specific information. I want to know whether there was an original cover — got that original cover — floating around on the European continent in the late 1930s, and what happened to it. I suspect it disappeared. I want my suspicions confirmed."

"Come on, Masao. It don't make sense. How the hell would they know about one stamp in the 1930s?"

"They'd know, because this is maybe the most important stamp in the world."

"Okay." Beckman sighed. "I'll give it a try. Now what about the second call?"

"Get through to police headquarters in Bonn, West Germany. Maybe you want to pull in Guttman for that, you know, the cop of the night shift. He speaks German, or maybe they have someone over there who talks English."

"Guttman's asleep."

“Wake him up. No one worries about waking us up. Now I want to know this — whatever they have on Captain Gaylord Schwartzman of the SS. He was stationed at the concentration camp in Buchenwald, and after the war he disappeared. I want to know whether he ever had anything to do with a German publisher whose name was Wolf Bernie Kramer and who died in Buchenwald.”

“Slow up,” said Beckman, making notes on his yellow pad. “Spell ‘Buchenwald.’”

“And that reminds me of something else,” Masuto said. “When you talk to Gibbons, bring up the name of Kramer. He published the German edition of their catalog. Ask them specifically whether they can connect him in any way with the One-Penny Orange.”

“I’m as confused as hell,” said Beckman, “but I got it. What else?”

“I want to know two things — very important, if you can pin them down. I want to know how Kramer died in Buchenwald; and if it was by a firing squad, I want to know who commanded the firing squad. I also want to know whether they circulated Schwartzman’s photo and where and whether it appeared ...” Masuto broke off suddenly, lost in thought.

“Masao?”

“Look, there’s a German magazine called *Der Spiegel* or something like that. It’s a big news magazine, like *Time* in America. There’s a good chance they have it on file down in the L.A. public library.”

“Come on, Masao, I don’t read German.”

“Do we have a morgue shot of Gaycheck?”

“Front face and profile both. You know that.”

“When you finish telephoning, take both shots downtown and spend the rest of the day with this magazine — if they got it. If they don’t have it, we’ll have to put the shots on the wire to Germany. But I think they have it.”

“How far back?”

“Five years.”

“Oh, Wainwright’s going to love that.”

“He’ll love it. Now, is everything clear?”

“Clear as mud.” He stared at Masuto. “Wait a minute. What am I looking for in this German magazine?”

“Gaycheck’s face — thirty years younger.”

“Sure. Nothing to it. You’re a doozy, Masao.”

“Well, we win some and we lose some. Keep in touch.”

“Where will you be?”

“At the Israeli consulate, as soon as I find out where it is.”

“And after that?”

“I’ll find you, Sy. Either here or at the public library.”

The office of the Israeli consul general was at 6380 Wilshire Boulevard, on that single avenue that is the pride of Los Angeles, and which citizens of the City of Angels compare to Fifth Avenue in New York, and perhaps not without modest reason. The consulate was on the seventeenth floor of an office building. Masuto showed his credentials to the receptionist, and a few minutes later he was shaking hands with Zev Kolan.

“I was reading about the case,” Kolan said. “According to your chief of police, you have no leads. Am I one of your suspects, Sergeant Masuto?”

“Then what of our encounter at the funeral home?” Masuto asked, smiling.

“It would have been a useful defense — something to point suspicion elsewhere.”

“There was a Zev Kolan who was a colonel of the Haganah in Israel’s War of Liberation. Was that you?”

“I see you do your homework.”

“Oh, no — no indeed. I’ve had no time for homework. But a few weeks ago I was reading David Ben-Gurion’s memoirs. Only on my way over here I remembered your name.”

“Ah. I wonder sometimes why the Japanese have so intense an interest in Israel. Will you have a cigar?” he asked, opening a box on his desk. “These are H. Upmanns — not from Cuba; I do not believe in breaking the laws of a country where you are a guest — but from Las Palmas in the Canary Islands. They are superb. I do believe there is no better cigar in the world. They are my only extravagance. Otherwise, I live a rather spartan existence.”

“Thank you, but I don’t smoke. Do you really feel that the Japanese have an extraordinary interest in Israel?”

“Yes — oh yes. There are strange similarities between our two peoples. It would be a pleasure to talk about it sometime. But not now. You did not come here to discuss ethnic empathies.”

“I’m afraid not. Why do you no longer call yourself colonel?”

“I have neither love nor admiration for the military life. Once, it was a necessity. Now I am too old.”

“Ah so. Of course. May I ask a rather impolite question?”

Kolan clipped the end of a cigar and lit it. “Of course. You are a policeman. You must.”

“Very well. Given the opportunity, would you have killed Gaylord Schwartzman?”

Kolan leaned back and regarded his cigar smoke thoughtfully. “The same question I ask myself. No, Sergeant, I don’t think I would. Tell me, are you a Buddhist?”

“Yes. I practice Zen.”

“Then, like myself, you are no stranger to death. Death is not terrible. It is the taking of life that is unspeakable and unforgivable. I would want to see Gaylord Schwartzman tried before a court in Jerusalem. I would want to see his guilt made public. His sentence is a matter of indifference to me. But I am sure you did not come here to ask me whether I killed Gaycheck any more than to discuss Israelis and Japanese.”

“No. I came to talk about Buchenwald — if it doesn’t distress you too much?”

“Whatever I can tell you. I have not treasured the memories, so they are somewhat vague.”

“How long were you there?”

“About two years.”

“I am interested in a German publisher who was sent to Buchenwald and who died there. His name was Wolf Bernie Kramer. Do you by any chance remember him?”

Kolan thought about it for a while, then shook his head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Were many men executed in the manner you described — by a firing squad?”

“They preferred the gas chamber. The firing squad was special, a visible thing. To show — to make an example.”

“Was Schwartzman always in command of the firing squad — during the time you were there?”

“I’m not sure. I have not been of much help, have I?”

The telephone rang. Kolan answered it. “For you,” he said to Masuto, handing him the phone. “You can take it in the next room if you wish privacy.”

“It’s all right.” Masuto took the phone. It was Beckman.

“Did it occur to you, Masao,” he said, “that it is now nine o’clock in England?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Well, I lucked out. They have an answering service that was impressed with the fact that a Beverly Hills cop was calling London, and they put me through to one of the directors. He gave me the number of an old gentleman who has been with the firm for forty years — get that? Forty years. Feller by the name of Brisham, only you don’t spell it that way. Anyway, I hit the jackpot. Are you listening?”

“I’m here,” Masuto said.

“Well, stop being so goddamn silent. It seems there was a guy back in the thirties, name of Lord Skeffington, and it seems that lots of these British lords, they don’t have the money for a pair of shoes. So this Skeffington inherits a stamp collection from his father, and what do you think is a part of it? Guess.”

“The One-Penny Orange.”

“Jackpot. The original cover. So he turns it over to Gibbons, they should be the agents and sell it for him, and they let the word out that they got it and it’s up for grabs. It turns out they got a very good connection on the Continent, this same Wolf Kramer who publishes their catalog in German.” Beckman paused to let it sink in.

“Go on,” Masuto said.

“So Kramer comes up with a buyer, and the price is eight thousand pounds, and the pound was five dollars then, so that makes it forty thousand smackeros, which ain’t hay even back in those days.”

“Who was the buyer?”

“That, my boy, is something they never found out. Kramer acted as the agent. But this old Brisham character, he tells me that it’s his

suspicion that Kramer himself was the buyer.”

“What happened to the cover? Does he know?”

“Nobody knows. According to Brisham, it disappeared from the face of the earth. He claims that it could not have been sold or offered at auction anywhere without Gibbons knowing about it.”

“Good. Sy, that’s good — very good. Now get on the horn to Germany.”

“Wait a moment — Masao, for Christ’s sake, it’s after ten P.M. in Germany.”

“Police stations don’t close.”

“I didn’t make one call. I made three calls. One to the answering service, one to the director, and one to Brisham. I asked for charges — one hundred and seventy-five bucks. Do you know what it’s going to cost when I start tracking around Germany? Anyway ...”

“Do it! Do you have Guttman there to translate?”

“He’s on his way, sore as hell.”

“Well, fill him in and get on with it.”

He put down the phone and turned to Kolan, who was regarding him with interest.

“Forgive me for taking up so much of your time,” Masuto said.

“I am fascinated.”

“A few minutes more?”

“As long as you wish.”

“I am told that Israeli Intelligence is just about the best in the world.”

“Is it? Possibly, yet not good enough to tell us that the Yom Kippur War was coming. Perhaps it is estimable by comparison, since there is so little intelligence among any of the intelligence services. Intelligent human beings do not become spies, and it has become a rather loathsome profession. Perhaps we have more who are motivated by patriotism than other countries, perhaps because there is little else we can offer.”

“And yet you were unable to find Schwartzman.”

“That, Sergeant Masuto, is not the work of Israeli Intelligence. Do you know how many Schwartzmans there are still at large, still hidden among decent people? Hundreds.” He watched Masuto thoughtfully through the smoke of his cigar, and Masuto, studying the

hawklike face, the pale blue eyes, wondered how much he could ever know about such a man, regardless of how open and ingenuous his comments might be.

“You are trying to find out about Schwartzman in Germany,” Kolan observed.

“Oh?”

“I could not help overhearing your conversation on the telephone.”

“And you don’t think I will discover anything worthwhile.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Your manner.”

“I am not prejudiced against the German police. They are handicapped because they want so desperately to forget.”

“That isn’t your handicap, Mr. Kolan.”

“True. We want to remember. It is very important that we remember.”

“I can understand that. I have only one more question, and then I will take up no more of your time.”

“I assure you, my time is at your disposal.”

“Do you collect stamps?”

“What an odd question! But of course — Schwartzman was a stamp dealer. A peculiar profession for a pathological madman to finish with. As a matter of fact, I do collect stamps — but only Israeli stamps.”

“Thank you.”

“Not at all. It has been a pleasure to know you, Sergeant Masuto. By the way, if my opinion is worth anything, I would guess that you will not find out who murdered Ivan Gaycheck.”

Masuto smiled. “Oh, I will certainly discover who killed him. But whether I can arrest the killer — well, who knows?” At the door to Kolan’s office, he paused and said to the consul general, “You must not consider me slipshod in my methods because I did not ask you where you were between twelve and one o’clock yesterday.”

“I would not think of you as being slipshod in your methods. Not at all. Do you want to know where I was between twelve and one o’clock yesterday?”

“I think not,” said Masuto.

JACK BRIGGS AGAIN

Two o'clock. Masuto sat in his car, took out of his pocket the picture of the girl that he had found in Gaycheck's wallet, and brooded over it. Was it his own background that made him feel that fifty percent of the young women he saw in West Hollywood were identical with the girl in the photo? Or was it because a disproportionate number of young women with blue eyes and straight blond hair eventually make their way to Hollywood? On the other hand, wonders came out of a bottle, and there appeared to be an irresistible urge among such girls to look alike.

He put the picture back in his pocket and drove west on Wilshire Boulevard for about a mile to another high rise. There he scanned the directory, found the name of Jack Briggs listed under Pisces Productions, and wondered idly who was a Pisces, Jack Briggs or one of his partners — and how strange it was that so many Americans, bereft of any religion or faith, turned in such desperation to astrology. Pisces Productions was on the eleventh floor, and the reception room that Masuto entered proudly displayed blown-up stills from the current hit of Pisces, *Open Mind*. Trying not to appear too interested in nude women and oversized mammaries, Masuto asked the pretty girl at the reception desk whether Mr. Briggs was in.

"You're Mr. Kamiho, the Japanese distributor, aren't you?" she said. "Mr. Briggs was not expecting you until later, but Mr. Maper is in. Mr. Briggs is still out to lunch, but he said that if you came early, I was to give you our presentation book of stills, because you can usually get a more thoughtful appraisal of the product from the stills than from the print. You do understand me? You do speak English?"

“Yes, I do speak English,” Masuto said.

“Well, you certainly do. I think your English is marvelous. Absolutely marvelous. The way everybody in the world speaks English, and it just gives me an inferiority complex. I can’t even say sukiyaki in Japanese, and you don’t even have an accent.”

“That’s because I am not Mr. Kamino,” Masuto explained. “When do you expect Mr. Briggs?”

“Then you’re another Japanese distributor.”

“No. So sorry. I’m a policeman.”

“A Japanese policeman?” The outer door opened and she spread her hands. “There you are.”

Masuto turned to see Briggs, who regarded him without pleasure. “You want to see me?” Briggs demanded.

“If you have a few minutes.”

“I got an important meeting in ten minutes, Sergeant, and what happened yesterday is over, except for seventy-five bucks it cost me to have the door fixed.”

“Then ten minutes, if you can spare it.”

“Okay. Come on in.”

He led the way into his office. He was a big man, heavy in the shoulders, his neck layered with fat — an odd match for the slender sensitivity of his wife. He liked to be with his work. The walls of his office were like double spreads from *Playboy* magazine. He dropped into the chair behind his desk and stared moodily at Masuto.

“It pisses me off,” he said, “to be pushed around by a two-bit police force. If you clowns were doing your job my house wouldn’t have been ripped off.”

“No police force can prevent burglaries,” Masuto said quietly. “We are not pushing you around, Mr. Briggs.”

“Don’t give me that crap. First you third-degree my wife, and now you’re here. Who the hell are you to tell her she can’t step out her front door?”

“I felt your wife and son were possibly in great danger.”

“Horseshit. What danger?”

Masuto shrugged. “As you please. I only suggested it to her. But I am not only investigating a burglary. I am chief of homicide in what

you characterize as our two-bit police force. I am investigating a murder.”

“What murder?” It came out poorly. His surly aggressiveness had slipped away, and Masuto felt his simulated ignorance.

“Don’t you read the papers?”

“I have been up to my ears all day.”

“A stamp dealer in Beverly Hills was murdered yesterday — somewhere between twelve-thirty and one o’clock. I spoke to your wife about it. Didn’t she tell you?”

“No.”

“That’s strange, Mr. Briggs.”

“Why?”

“I told her that I felt there was a connection between the murder of Ivan Gaycheck and the break-in at your house. I’m amazed that she wouldn’t mention it to you.”

“She may have mentioned it. It slipped my mind.”

“Ah so. Of course. She telephone you today — or you telephoned her?”

“What difference does that make?”

“Just curiosity.”

“I phoned her. Goddamn it, you come in here with these stupid accusations ...”

“I make no accusations. Pardon me if that is the impression I give.”

“Why don’t you come out with what you’re here for and let me get back to work.”

“Did you know Ivan Gaycheck?”

“Who?”

“Ivan Gaycheck. The man who was murdered.”

“No. I didn’t know him. I never heard his name before.”

“But your wife mentioned him.”

“Look, mister — don’t try to pull anything on me. If my wife mentioned his name, it slipped my mind.”

Watching him keenly, Masuto said, “There is a Mauritius stamp called the One-Penny Orange. Does that mean anything to you?”

He was a few seconds slow. “What?”

“One-Penny Orange.”

“What in hell are you talking about?”

“Then your wife did not mention that either?”

“Mention what?”

“The One-Penny Orange.”

“Look, when I spoke to my wife, I was thinking of other things.”

“The One-Penny Orange,” Masuto said, rather didactically, “is a Mauritius postage stamp of great value. I have reason to believe that this stamp was in the possession of your mother-in-law, Mrs. Hilda Kramer. I also have reason to believe that it was stolen from her.”

“You’re out of your mind. My mother-in-law never had a pot to pee in.”

“Nevertheless, I believe that she had this stamp in her possession for years — without knowing that she owned it.”

“Play it any way you like.” He looked at his watch. “My time is up, Masuto. I don’t have to answer any questions. Furthermore, I don’t intend to see you again. You got anything to say, you can say it to my lawyer.”

“Why?”

“What in hell do you mean, why? Don’t you understand English?”

“I mean that I haven’t accused you of anything and I did not come here to arrest you for anything.”

“I’m finished. That’s all.” He got up, walked around the desk, and opened the door. Masuto rose, walked to the door, then paused.

“Mr. Briggs?”

Briggs shook his head grimly.

“Mr. Briggs, wouldn’t you, as a matter of plain curiosity, be interested to know what that particular One-Penny Orange is worth?”

Briggs stared at him without replying.

“Ah so — then I will tell you. It is worth over three hundred thousand dollars, and if you doubt my credibility you might call the Holmbey Stamp Center downtown and ask for Mr. Holmbey. I am sure he would be delighted to give you a price.”

Blandly, innocently, Masuto’s dark eyes met Briggs’ pale blue eyes. He could almost feel Briggs’ tension, the enormous effect he was making to control himself.

“Ah, so sorry,” Masuto said sympathetically. “So much for so little. So very sorry.” He smiled and walked out, feeling somewhat

ashamed of playing a silly role, yet taking a non-Buddhist and bitter satisfaction in what he had just done.

He drove back to the station then, and on his way to his desk he poked his head into the room where Cora ran the various machines without which no modern police force can function.

“Greetings, Masao,” Cora said. “Come in and let me try to tempt you.”

“You always tempt me.”

“And all I get is the inscrutable. What can I do for you?”

“Jack Briggs, B-r-i-g-g-s. Maybe the Jack stands for John on his birth certificate. From his accent, I’d guess he stems from Texas or maybe Oklahoma. He’s in the porny trade, so maybe there’s something there. Get a make on him if there is any from the F.B.I., and if there’s nothing there, try the Texas State Police.”

“The Texas Rangers.”

“What?”

“That’s what they call themselves — the Texas Rangers.”

“Go on.”

“Truth.”

“Okay, Texas Rangers. But sit on it. Tell them it’s critical, an emergency. I’ll be at my desk — for a little while anyway.”

Wainwright noticed Masuto coming into the squad room, and he stalked over to Masuto’s desk and flung two slips of yellow paper down on the desktop. “Read them and weep,” Wainwright snapped.

They were the charge slips for the telephone calls, one hundred seventy-five dollars to London, two hundred twelve to Germany.

“That’s beautiful,” said Wainwright. “That’s just beautiful.”

“What did Beckman get in Germany?”

“A big, fat nothing.”

“Where is he now?”

“At the public library, where you instructed him to spend the afternoon sitting on his ass. It don’t matter that the world goes on. Beckman spends the day in the library.”

“We hit the jackpot on the London call.”

“What jackpot? You know that forty years ago a German named Kramer maybe bought a very valuable stamp or maybe he didn’t. That’s one hell of a jackpot. Suppose you explain it to me, and

suppose you tell me how I explain the call to Germany. We already knew who Gaycheck was. We got that on the Telex.”

“You’re upset,” Masuto said gently.

“Sure I’m upset. We got two murders and we got nothing.”

“Actually, one — because Haber belongs to the sheriff.”

“Screw the lousy sheriff and his idiot deputies. We got two, because they’re connected.”

“I think we have three,” Masuto said, even more gently.

“What!”

“If that’s the way you look at it.”

“What in hell do you mean? We got three murders? What am I, a joke? We got a murder and nobody tells me?”

“I’m telling you.”

“All right, all right,” he said, controlling himself and pulling a chair up next to Masuto’s desk. “Suppose you tell me about it, Masao. And make it good.”

“The name of the victim is Hilda Kramer. She was the mother of Ellen Briggs. It was the Briggses’ house on Camden that was burglarized yesterday.”

“I know that. Hilda Kramer died of a heart attack.”

“Apparently she had a bad heart and suffered a thrombosis. I think it was brought on in a struggle with someone who stole the One-Penny Orange from her.”

“You’re hipped on that One-Penny Orange. The break-in took place yesterday, two days after her death.”

“I know.”

“You got any evidence?”

“None.”

“But you know who the killer is?”

“Yes.”

“The same one who killed Gaycheck?” Wainwright asked sarcastically.

“No.”

“Oh? Three murders and three killers.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“You know, Masao,” Wainwright said slowly, “you leave me speechless. It’s the first time, but you leave me speechless.”

“So sorry.”

“Okay. Look, Masao, I know you long enough and respect you enough to accept what you say — but it goes no further, not until you can bring me evidence and swear out a warrant and make an arrest. Not one word of this to the press or to anyone. Two murders in one day in Beverly Hills are enough. Three are impossible. Now who is the killer?”

Masuto shook his head. “Not now. Give me until nine tonight and I’ll pin it down.”

Whatever Wainwright might have said was interrupted by Masuto’s telephone. He picked it up. It was Beckman, from the library.

“Masao, I’ve gone through the two years of *Der Spiegel* they keep on file. Nothing. No picture of Schwartzman or anyone who resembles him.”

“Is two years all they have?”

“They have the eight years prior to that packed away in the basement. When I asked about it, they began to groan and whine.”

“Let them groan and whine. I want you to get it out and go through it, every page.”

“For God’s sake, Masao, I’ll be there until they close.”

“I expect you will.” He put down the phone and looked at Wainwright, who said:

“All right, Masao. Nine o’clock tonight. I’m going home and get a few hours of sleep. You might do the same.”

“Thank you, but I’m not tired.”

“Be patient and wait until I retire. You’ll be the boss then.”

Cora came over as Wainwright stalked away. “What was he whipping you about?”

“He didn’t sleep last night. That makes him nervous. He wants me to be patient and wait until he retires.”

“That’ll be the day.”

“What have you got for me?”

“From the F.B.I. — big zero. You get nothing from them unless you give them prints to put into their IBM machine. But the good old Texas Rangers came through.”

“Did they!”

“Providing,” Cora said, “that your Jack Briggs is the same as John Wesley Briggs. You didn’t even tell me how old he is.”

“The truth is, I didn’t ask him. About fifty.”

“Well, that fits. John Wesley Briggs, born in Dallas on the twelfth of March, nineteen twenty-six ...”

“Twelfth of March. What is that called in that silly astrology thing?”

“It is not silly. Pisces. Don’t knock what you don’t know.”

“Pisces Productions. Good. Go on.”

“Three arrests before the age of twenty. One conviction — car stealing, suspended sentence on a juvenile plea.”

“The others?”

“Both assaults. Charges dropped.”

“Anything else?”

“One nice one that fits in with what you told me. In 1958, he was arrested for what the Rangers call publication of impermissible nudity. Isn’t that cute? In other words, girlie magazines. That was before the lid was taken off pornography.”

“No conviction?”

“No conviction. The magazine closed down and the D.A. dropped the charges. After that, Briggs seems to have left Texas. At least, the Rangers have nothing else on him. Rangers. Isn’t that darling? Did I do all right?”

“You did beautifully,” Masuto said.

“This darling Ranger I spoke to, he says that if you get him a set of prints, he’ll work on it. Why don’t you send me down there with the prints, Masao?”

“Because I want you where I can see your sweet face each morning.”

“I’ll just bet.”

9

CLEO

Accused of having a complex mind, Masuto would protest that his own manner of thinking and being was simple and direct. He was aware that he lived in perhaps the most complex society that the world had ever evolved; his problem was always to find some simple and direct path through the complexity. He sat at his desk staring at the picture he had taken from Ivan Gaycheck's wallet the day before, the picture of a very pretty girl with straight blond hair. Putting together a jigsaw puzzle, there were only three pieces missing, and the picture of the girl was the only lead he had to one of the pieces, perhaps the key piece. Whereby he told himself that most very pretty girls came to Hollywood to become great stars and ended up waiting tables, selling clothes, turning to welfare, and in not a few cases practicing the world's oldest profession; but a fair number of them worked in film or television at least once, and in order to work in film or television, one had to join S.A.G., the Screen Actors Guild.

It was three thirty-five when he parked his car in front of the Screen Actors Guild building on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. He went inside and showed his badge to a stout, unsmiling lady at the reception desk.

"What I would like," he said, "is to talk to someone who would know most of the membership by sight."

"Wouldn't we all!"

"What I mean is that I am looking for someone. I have her picture." He showed her the picture.

"Is she a member of the guild?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm trying to find out."

“Is she wanted for a crime?”

“She’s not wanted for anything. I only want to talk to her, as part of an investigation.”

The fat woman sighed. “I’ll see what I can do. What’s her name?”

“I don’t know.”

The fat woman stared at him in amazement. “Out of sight, Officer! You are a beauty. We only have thirty-three thousand members in this organization, and you want me to tell you who this lady is. Do you know that some of them never come in here at all? Some of them come in once? Do you know how many look enough like this kid to be her twin sister?” She was indignant and affronted, and her voice rose, decibel by decibel. The telephone operator at the opposite end of the long reception desk called out:

“Give him the Academy Book and let him look through it.”

A third woman, who had been sitting in one of the chairs in the reception room, picked up a book as large as two telephone directories and carried it over to Masuto.

“Eighty-five percent of our members are unemployed,” the fat woman told him. “They could be anywhere.”

A fourth woman came out of the inside room, a big room where a dozen men and women sat at desks and typewriters. “He’s cute,” she observed. “Tall, dark, handsome — but there’s no work for Orientals, no work for women, no work for anyone but cops.”

“He’s a cop,” said the fat woman.

“You’re putting me on.”

“Why don’t you let him go inside and show his picture around?” the telephone operator asked.

“Because it goes against my grain to cooperate with the fuzz.”

The woman from inside took the picture from Masuto and stared at it. “I’ve seen this kid.”

“Everyone’s seen her,” the fat woman said.

Still staring at the photo, she took Masuto by the hand and led him into the big room. “Show it,” she said. “Maybe someone knows her.”

The fourth desk drew a response. The thin wistful girl who sat there in front of a computer nodded and said, “I’ve seen her.”

“Do you know her name?” Masuto asked eagerly.

"I can't even remember where I've seen her. Wait a minute. Yes. Absolutely. I saw her at a party up in the hills. Freddy Wolchek brought her."

"You don't know her name?"

She shook her head.

"And where do I find this Freddy Wolchek?"

"Look, Officer, he's a nice guy. I don't want to send him any grief."

"I only want a lead to the girl."

"Okay — what time is it?"

"Almost four."

"If he's not working, he'll be at Schwab's. Sitting at the counter, I guess."

"What does he look like?"

"Big, heavy. He must be six-two. He has a reddish beard."

"And if he's working?"

"Who knows? Any one of the studios — I should be so lucky."

"Do you have an address for him?"

"Janey!" she called out. "Get Freddy Wolchek's address for me, would you?"

Schwab's, on Sunset Boulevard just east of Crescent Heights, was only a few minutes from the Screen Actors Guild. It was, as Masuto knew, not simply a drugstore but a sort of social center and gossip and information exchange for actors who were not working. Masuto paced a long lunch counter, spotted three bearded men, chose the largest, whose beard was tinged with red, and sat down next to him. The red beard was bent moodily over a cup of coffee.

"You're Freddy Wolchek?"

The red beard nodded without looking at him.

"Tracy Levitt, over at the Screen Actors Guild, said I might find you here."

Now the red beard looked at him.

"I'm Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills police."

"I'm clean," the red beard said. "I'm so clean I'm antiseptic. I don't even have the price of a joint. I'm Honest John. I never even been busted, never."

Masuto showed him the photo. "You know the girl?"

He stared at the photo and then nodded slowly, "That's Cleo. What has she done, knocked over a bank?"

"Does she knock over banks?"

"I wouldn't put it past her. She's bad medicine."

"Cleo what?"

"Damned if I know. She never told me."

"Tracy said you dated her. You brought her to a party."

"I didn't bring her. I picked her up there. That was a night. She is bad medicine, old buddy. She is a cokey. She is crazy — crazy."

"Where does she live?"

"Who knows?"

"Didn't you take her home?"

"She took me, old buddy. No, I didn't take her home. I lost her somewhere that night. Tell you what, though — I know where she works."

"Oh?"

"If you call it work. At least that's what she told me. I never checked it out. You know that little sort of beat-up shopping center in Topanga Canyon, maybe halfway between the Valley and the ocean?"

"I know the place," Masuto said.

"Well, there's a massage parlor there, it's called the Pink Flamingo. She massages. So she told me. I don't like to call any kid a hooker, because I've known some hookers, they were a damn sight nicer kids than a lot of Beverly Hills dames, but this Cleo ..." He shook his head. "She is bad medicine."

Topanga Canyon is one of those strange anomalies that one finds in the vast spread of Los Angeles, a wild, beautiful, sparsely settled gash in the Santa Monica Mountains, cutting through from the San Fernando Valley to the Pacific. From Schwab's Masuto drove over Laurel Canyon Pass into the San Fernando Valley, picking up the Ventura Freeway and driving west. It was still before five o'clock when he turned off the freeway and drove into Topanga Canyon, yet in spite of the fact that this was late spring, the day-light long and mellow, the canyon was already shadowed, the deep cleft gathering the ominous gloom of night hours before night would fall.

There were only three cars in the little shopping center when he pulled up in front of the Pink Flamingo and parked. He had never noticed the Pink Flamingo before, but it occurred to him that there was nothing very unusual about a massage parlor in Topanga Canyon, which had everything else from communes to sensitivity centers and nudist camps and TM temples.

He walked to the door, rang the bell, and waited. After a few moments the door was opened by a small Oriental man. "Massage?" He smiled. Masuto walked in without replying. The small man studied him. "You want nice massage?"

Masuto had thought he was Korean, but the accent was Japanese. "I want to see Cleo," Masuto said.

"Ah so. You know Cleo. She very nice. Very clever. Fourteen dollar, please."

They stood in a tiny, dimly lit entryway. Down a narrow hallway, Masuto could see the entrances to six cubicles, each with its own small drape. The sound of two women talking; a shrill laugh; some low groans, which might have indicated that a massage was proceeding satisfactorily.

"I'm not here for a massage," Masuto said sourly.

"No? No massage? No good then. No screwing here. I run clean, legal place."

"You run a pesthole, you miserable creature," Masuto said in Japanese. "I am a policeman. I want to see Cleo."

"No Cleo here!" His voice was shrill.

"You will speak in your native tongue! Do you take me for a fool?" Masuto snapped at him, still speaking Japanese. "Where is the girl I want? Either tell me or I'll break you in two, you wretched piece of offal."

"Inside — in the last booth."

Masuto strode down the hallway and flung back the curtain on the last booth. It was empty except for a massage table and a chair. Then he heard the sound of a door closing. As he turned back to the front, his way was blocked by a massively fat blond woman in a loose housecoat. She began to curse him.

"Lousy Jap pig! You lousy yellow mother ..."

He pushed past her. The proprietor had disappeared. He ran to the door, flung it open, and dashed out. One of the three cars he had seen there, a red MG convertible, roared out of the parking lot and onto Topanga Boulevard, heading south. Masuto raced to his car, fumbled in his pocket for the key, cursing his stupidity, then got it started and swung around into Topanga. The red MG was already out of sight. He pushed his gas pedal down to the floor, got the Datsun up to fifty, managing somehow to hold the light car on the narrow, twisting road.

He turned on his radiophone and put out an A.P.B. call: "Red MG convertible. Driven by a girl. Name of Cleo. Blond hair, blue eyes, about twenty-five. Hold for questioning. I'm proceeding south on Topanga. She's about a mile ahead of me."

He was so intent on the road ahead that he heard the motorcycles before he saw them, and then they were on either side of him, two on his left and one on his right. Each rider carried a three-foot length of cycle chain clenched in gloved hands. He heard the chains crash against the body of the Datsun, and then his right-hand rear window was shattered. He bore down on his gas pedal, and still they were alongside him, systematically smashing his car to rubble. A chain end turned his windshield into a maze of cracks, the left-hand front window smashed — miraculously, none of the flying glass had cut him yet — blows thudded against the body of the car, again on his windshield, and he felt the glass shards on his face, heard the crazy drumming noise of the chains all over the car.

He did the only thing he could think of doing, instinctively. He stood on his brakes and turned his car violently to the left. The brakes screaming, the car almost turning over, he smashed into the metal guard rail, bracing himself with all his strength. The guard rail bent and bowed out over the precipice below, but it held, and at the same time the two motorcycles on his left crashed into his car, the first one striking the front of his motor, the rider flung like a thrown ball over the guard rail and down fifty feet into the rocky cleft of Topanga. The second motorcycle struck the back of the Datsun, and the rider was flung over the car and landed on the pavement.

The door on Masuto's left was bent out of shape and locked closed. He slid over the seat, pushing aside the broken glass,

opened the right-hand door, and got out. Blood was running down onto his shirt, and as he touched his cheeks he realized that he had tiny glass cuts on his face and hands. In front of him, the second rider lay in a pool of blood on the pavement. No time to think or to know how badly he was hurt. The third motorcycle was roaring down on him. He leaped back and dodged the swung chain. The cyclist braked to a stop about fifty feet down the road, dismounted, and advanced on Masuto, swinging the chain. His face covered by his blue windmask and helmet, his body encased in black leather, he was a nightmare man-at-arms out of another world; and to increase the nightmare effect, two cars drove by, slowing without stopping.

A third car stopped. The driver got out just as the cyclist made his first pass at Masuto with the chain. Masuto dodged it. The driver got back in his car and drove away. The chain began to spin around the cyclist's head as he advanced on Masuto again. As much as Masuto could think of anything in two seconds, he considered the problem of a policeman who refused to carry a gun in America today and who was very confident of his skill in the martial arts. The cyclist struck and Masuto dodged, feeling the wind of the chain as it passed his face.

"Come on, you yellow bastard!" the cyclist shouted, spinning the chain and charging Masuto. The detective spun on his heel, bent, and kicked high and hard. He felt the chain touch his hair and then his foot connected with the cyclist's chest, and the man was off balance, swaying, and then Masuto kicked out again, almost in a pirouette, his toe in the cyclist's groin this time. The man fell to his knees, crying out in pain and clutching his groin, and Masuto drove his knee into the blue windmask. The man crumpled, and Masuto, his hands shaking, staggered to his car, got the cuffs he kept in the glove compartment, twisted the cyclist's hands behind him, and cuffed him. Then he went to the iron rail on the side of the road, bent over it, and vomited, conscious somewhere in some recess of his mind that three or four more cars had driven past without stopping while all this went on. He felt better after he had thrown up. The blood on his face had coagulated and he was not bleeding anymore. The cyclist he had handcuffed was still lying on his face in the road,

groaning and whimpering. Masuto walked over to him and pulled off his helmet. He was a white man with long, sandy hair.

“Jesus, man,” he whimpered, “you smashed my face. My nose is bleeding. I’ll bleed to death.”

“Not likely,” said Masuto. He went to the second cyclist, who had been thrown over the car and flung onto the road, and now, for the first time since it began, a car stopped and the driver actually walked over to Masuto.

“I’m a policeman,” Masuto said.

“I’m Doctor Marvin Goldberg. Are you hurt?”

Masuto pointed to the cyclist who lay motionless in a pool of blood. The doctor went over to him and felt his wrist.

“I think he’s dead.”

“There was another one,” Masuto said. “He went over the rail and into the canyon.” He went to the rail and the doctor followed him.

“There he is,” Masuto said, pointing.

“I can’t get down there. You’d better call Rescue.”

“Could he be alive?”

“I don’t know. It’s fifty feet down and it’s rock.”

“I’ll try my radiophone,” Masuto said. “That one ...” He pointed to the cyclist he had cuffed. “That one has a nosebleed. I had to kick him in the face and in the testicles. You might have a look at him.”

“I’ll get my bag,” the doctor said.

The radiophone was not working. Masuto stood there looking at the wreck of his car. “The phone’s not working,” he told the doctor. “They’ll get here. They always do. How is he?”

“He’ll be all right,” the doctor said.

Masuto walked over to the cyclist, who was sitting up now, his hands clamped behind him.

“What’s your name?”

“Tom Cleerey.”

“All right, Cleerey. I’m putting you under arrest, and I’m going to read you your rights. You have the right to remain silent. I am arresting you for the attempted murder of Sergeant Masuto and for the murder of Ronald Haber. If you give up the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak with an attorney ...”

Other cars were stopping, now that it was over; a line began to back up on the canyon road, and the traffic halted in both directions. It was still daylight, but the shadows were long and deep on the macabre scene in the canyon. Masuto saw the flashing lights of the highway patrol, and a moment or two later two L.A.P.D. cops and a highway patrolman pushed through the gathering crowd.

“This one’s dead, and there’s another one down in the canyon,” Masuto explained to them. “I’m Sergeant Masuto, Homicide, and I arrested that one — his name is Tom Cleerey — for the murder of Ronald Haber. That happened last night, over in West Hollywood.”

“You’re crazy!” Cleerey shouted.

“But what he tried to do to me with a bicycle chain — well, that happened here — so I don’t know where it goes. I read him his rights. Dr. Goldberg here was witness to it.”

“You called in on the red MG?” one of the L.A.P.D. cops asked.

“That’s right.”

“We got the girl. She’s back in the black-and-white.”

“That Haber thing was on Lapeer Street, wasn’t it?” the other L.A.P.D. cop said. “Suppose we take them both over to San Vicente for starters.”

“I’d like to ride with you,” Masuto said. He nodded at his car. “It was a nice car, a really nice car.”

CLEO CONTINUED

It was half-past seven when Masuto arrived at the sheriff's station on San Vicente Boulevard in West Hollywood, and Wainwright was waiting for him there.

"You look like hell," Wainwright said to him. "Why aren't you in the hospital or something?"

"I'm always amazed at the politeness of Caucasians."

"Screw politeness."

"I'm not in the hospital," Masuto said, "because I am all right. When we get back to the station I'll wash up and change my shirt."

"What about those cuts?"

"They stopped bleeding."

"Why don't you go home and rest?"

"I can accept anything from you but solicitude," Masuto said, smiling slightly. "I told you that I intend to put the pieces together tonight."

"Sure, you told me."

At that point Deputy Williams joined them. "The other two are dead," he told them, and said to Masuto, "I know you made the collar and read Cleerey his rights, but wasn't that a hell of a way to go about it? You could have brought him back here."

"We don't want the credit," Wainwright said. "Goddamn it, what did you expect of Masao, with three demented thugs trying to kill him!" He turned on Masuto and said, "As for you, you give me one royal pain in the ass. Why in hell don't you carry a gun? If you had a gun ..."

“I might be dead now,” Masuto said amiably. “Look, Williams, drop the charge of attempted murder on me. You can make the charge for Haber’s murder stick.”

“How? Just tell me how. This Cleerey is screaming his head off, and we don’t have one goddamn thing on him except that he resisted arrest and tried to kill you, which is something, but it don’t clean the murder pad.”

“Why don’t we talk to Cleo,” Masuto suggested.

“On her we got nothing, but nothing.”

“We’ll talk.”

“She’s not even a user.”

“Cocaine.”

“There’s none on her and no tracks. So she sniffs. Go prove it. She’s already called some shyster, and he’ll have her out of here in ten minutes.”

“Let’s talk to her.”

“You talk to her. We’ll listen.”

The three of them, Masuto, Williams, and Wainwright, went into the interrogation room, and then a matron brought Cleo there. It was the first time Masuto saw her. She was smaller and more slender than he had imagined, with a face of such wide-set blue-eyed innocence that she might well have played Saint Joan. The voice was something else, hoarse and low and cold.

“I got nothing to say,” she told them. “You got nothing on me, and this ain’t the end. Wait till my lawyer comes. We got a false arrest that will make me a bundle. That’s it. I got nothing else to say.”

“That’s fair enough,” said Masuto. “You don’t have to say anything. Just listen, and I’ll tell you a story.”

“Bullshit.”

“You met a man at a party,” Masuto said. “His name was Ivan Gaycheck. He gave you cocaine. He wasn’t a dealer, but he used it.”

...

“I don’t know any Ivan Gaycheck.”

“You promised not to talk. Ivan Gaycheck was murdered....”

“If you think you’re going to hang Gaycheck’s murder on me, you’re crazy!”

“And after he was murdered, I went through his wallet, and found” — he took the photo out of his pocket — “this picture, which you gave him when you became his mistress.”

Her lips tightened.

“Then, one night, he boasted. He boasted that he was going to get his hands on a stamp that was worth a fortune, and that he would sell it for an enormous profit. He even told you where the stamp was. He told you that it belonged to an old woman who did not even know that she possessed it. He probably promised you a share of his profits, but you were greedy, and you told Cleerey and his two associates about the stamp. Then you read an announcement in the *Los Angeles Times* that this woman, whose name was Hilda Kramer, had died and would be buried at such and such a time. You knew the house would be empty during the funeral, so you went there with your associates, broke in, and ransacked the place. But you did not find the stamp because the stamp was not there. And then Gaycheck was murdered.”

“You lousy fuzz bastard! You think you’re going to pin Gaycheck’s murder on me. You’re going to frame me, you bastard! You lousy Chink bastard!”

“Oh, no — no. You didn’t murder Gaycheck. Neither did your associates murder him. I’m sure you thought about it, but you were too late. He was murdered while you were ransacking the Briggses’ house on Camden Drive, so, you see, you have a perfect alibi.”

Her face fell, as the anger washed out. She stared at him, confused now.

“But you did decide that Ronald Haber murdered Gaycheck,” Masuto went on, “and that night, you and your three associates drove to Haber’s apartment on Lapeer Street, and beat him and tortured him, and finally killed him.”

“You’re crazy!” she yelled.

“But you didn’t find the stamp. Yet you were persevering. You then went to Gaycheck’s shop and opened his safe. And still you didn’t find the stamp. So it was all for nothing, and stupid and senseless — as senseless as the scheme to kidnap the Briggs child.”

“Go to hell!”

Masuto rose, started to say something, then swallowed his words and began to pace back and forth across the interrogation room. Wainwright and Williams watched him keenly, but they said nothing.

“I don’t judge you,” Masuto said finally. “Who am I to judge anyone? It’s true that you stood by and watched your friends beat Haber to death, but don’t we all stand by and watch people suffer and die and never lift a finger? However, the law regards it differently. The law says that you are an accessory to a murder, and you will go to prison for the rest of your life. There’s no way out of that. You can hire every lawyer in California — and there’s still no way out for you.”

The wide blue eyes were full of terror now. “You’re lying. You haven’t any proof. You’re lying. You said Gaycheck gave me cocaine. He never gave me cocaine.”

Masuto sat down, leaned across the table, and said gently, “I’m not lying, Cleo. I have proof. There’s a girl who lives on the same floor as Haber lived on. When you left the place, she opened the door and she saw you. Do you understand? She saw you.”

Recognition, memory. It mixed with the terror, and Masuto found his heart going out to her. She was defenseless now. The terror drove away her veneer of toughness. The blue eyes filled with moisture. “You bastard,” she whispered. “Why don’t you try to make it in this lousy place — as a dame! Try! Get yourself worked over until you’re no better than a lousy lamb chop. I never killed nobody. It was Cleerey and Buck who wasted him. I begged them to stop. I pleaded with them to stop. Look at me! I weigh ninety-two pounds and you tell me I beat someone to death.”

She put her head down on the table and began to sob. Masuto looked at Williams, who said, “Okay, I’ll do what I can. I’ll talk to the D.A. Are you sure this Cindy Lang over on Lapeer will testify? Are you sure she saw them?”

“Give her a break and she’ll testify,” Wainwright said. “Come on, Masao. We’ll get you cleaned up.”

Driving back to Beverly Hills, Wainwright asked Masuto how he felt.

“Good and decent. There’s nothing I like better than to torture kids who have had the life beaten out of them.”

“She’s no kid. Don’t let those blue eyes fool you.”

“Then what is she, Captain? A monster of some sort? She never asked to be born into this hellhole that we call civilization. Where’s her family? I don’t see any hands stretched out to her.”

“That’s sentimental crap, Masao. She stood by and watched a man beaten to death.”

“We all do, Captain. We all do.”

“Look, I can live without your goddamn philosophy. We know who killed Haber. What about Gaycheck?”

“It’s still a half hour before nine o’clock.”

“And you’re going to turn him up before nine?”

“I don’t know,” Masuto said tiredly. “We may never know who killed Gaycheck. It won’t be the first unsolved murder, and it won’t be the last.”

“That’s beautiful,” Wainwright said.

At the station, Beckman was waiting, sitting on the edge of Masuto’s desk, grinning.

“What the hell are you grinning about?” Wainwright asked sourly. “I ought to dock that four hundred dollars of telephoning from your salary, and then you two clowns would stop playing Scotland Yard.”

“What’s eating him, Masao?” Beckman asked as Wainwright marched into his office and slammed the door behind him. “And what did you run into? You look like you put your face into an electric fan.”

“Small cuts and a lot of blood.”

“I hear you cleared up the Haber thing. It sounds wild. What happened?”

“Got a clean shirt here, Sy?”

“I got more than that.”

“Can you hold it until I wash up? Where’s the shirt?”

“In my locker. Be my guest.”

After he had washed up, rinsed his mouth, and gone over his face with a styptic pencil, Masuto felt better. He changed his shirt. His tie was patterned and the bloodstains hardly showed.

“That’s better,” Beckman said when he returned to the squad room. “You look almost human. What happened over at Topanga?”

“I had some trouble but then it turned out all right.”

“I hear you totaled your Datsun.”

“Is there anything on the lot I can use?”

“There’s a loose patrol car. The chief said you could have it for a couple of days. Here’s the keys.” He tossed them over at Masuto.

“Thank you, Sy. What did you find at the library?”

“Just what the doctor ordered.” He grinned again and took a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket. “Page twenty-two of *Der Spiegel*, September seventy-two — although what you want it for I can’t figure out. We know Gaycheck was Schwartzman, and whatever his name was, we know he’s dead.” He spread out the sheet on the desk. “I tore it out — stealing public property. Who the hell’s going to miss it anyway, five years old?” There, in the center of the page, was a five-by-seven portrait photo of a pudgy young man in the uniform of an SS officer.

“That’s the name,” Beckman said, pointing to the caption under the picture. “That’s all I can read, but there it is. Gaylord Schwartzman. Anyway, I’d recognize him.”

“Would you?”

“Masao, I spotted him before I read the name.”

“Maybe. Do you have the morgue pictures?”

“Right here.” Beckman took them out of his pocket and laid them next to the magazine photo. “Well, Masao — am I wrong?”

“No. He changed very little. Lost most of his hair, but otherwise ...”

“No beard, no mustache, lives here in Beverly Hills, right here out in the open, and nobody recognizes him.”

“Somebody did.”

The telephone on Masuto’s desk rang. It was Lieutenant Pete Bones from L.A.P.D. “Masao,” he said, “I hear you had us running errands for you.”

“I guess we did.”

“You sound down. Not the usual Oriental confidence.”

“I had a hard day.”

“I hear you totaled that crummy Datsun you drive. Real cowboys and Indians out there at Topanga. They tell me the good guys won.”

“You hear a lot down there.”

“We keep our ears open. That’s why we’re so good. You want to know about that twenty-two that killed Gaycheck?”

“No, I don’t want to hear about it,” Masuto said sourly. “We just asked to keep you busy.”

“Sarcasm, sarcasm.”

“How do you know it’s the gun that killed Gaycheck?”

“We don’t know, because we haven’t got the gun. You told us, and we consider you to be honorable.”

“All right. What have you got?”

“That’s the thanks I get. We had two men on this all day and we covered twenty-two gun stores, but what’s that to you? You don’t pay us taxes. You live up there with the swells in something that calls itself a city and doesn’t even have a legitimate flophouse.”

“Pete, I thank you. Now what have you got?”

“That’s better. All right, over the past two weeks, only one store sold the kind of a purse gun you describe. Sam’s Sporting Goods on San Pedro. Small automatic, five shots. A little British gun made by Webley-Fosbery. Most of their makes fire six cartridges. This one shoots five. It has a light trigger action and it only shoots the twenty-two short. They stopped making them before World War Two. This one had a mother-of-pearl handle. Funny thing, the dealer asked the customer whether she wanted extra cartridges. She said no, all she wanted was the full magazine. She didn’t know how to operate it. He showed her.”

“She. A woman bought it?”

“That’s right.”

“Did you get a description?”

“We did. Here goes. Straight blond hair, down to her waist, blue eyes, very blue — the dealer remembered them specifically. Bluest eyes he ever saw. Beautiful pair of knockers, he couldn’t stop raving about them. I’d say size thirty-six. Sweater, long skirt, the kind they drag around Hollywood — and an English accent.”

“How old was she?”

“He says maybe twenty, twenty-five. Somewhere around there. Said she lived in the Hollywood Hills, with ripoffs all around her. She wanted the gun for protection.”

“What did she sign on the register?”

“Angela Cartwright, 2240 Langley Drive. No such street in the Hollywood Hills. We checked it.”

“Did you run the name through?”

“We did. No Angela Cartwright. You want to hear something else?”

“Let me guess.”

“Go ahead, smartass. Guess.”

“She wrote left-handed.”

“How the hell did you know that? You’re right. She signed the register with her left hand. It was like a little kid’s scrawl.”

“Wouldn’t yours be if you wrote left-handed?”

“Now what the hell does that mean?”

“It means we’ll never trace the handwriting. Pete, thanks. I’m very grateful.”

“You want to leave it there, Masao?”

“For the time being.”

He put down the phone and sat at his desk, staring into space.

“Are you okay, Masao?” Beckman asked him.

“Sure. I’m all right, Sy.”

“You’re sure? You don’t look all right.”

“I’m okay.”

“Anything else?”

“No, nothing else.”

“Then it’s okay with you if I push off now?”

“Okay,” Masuto said.

“You don’t want me to drive you? You look lousy.”

“I can drive myself. Get out of here and go home and get some rest.”

“Should I leave you the morgue pictures?”

“No, I don’t need them.”

Beckman picked up the photos. “Good night, Masao.”

“Good night.”

Masuto sat at his desk, his chin in his hands, staring into space. Wainwright stopped by on his way out. “Why don’t you go home and go to bed,” he said to Masuto.

“I will. All in good time.”

“For Christ’s sake, Masao, it’s almost nine o’clock. You been up since four in the morning.”

“I know.”

"I was pretty nasty before. It's not you, Masao. It's my goddamn ulcers."

"I know."

"Don't think I don't know what you been through today. Don't think I don't respect it."

"Thank you."

"I meant that."

"I know."

"Well, good night."

"Good night, Captain."

After Wainwright had left, Masuto took out his notebook, found a number, and dialed it. "Mrs. Briggs?" he said.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is Sergeant Masuto. I'm calling to tell you that the danger is over. Permanently. Your son can come and go as he pleases."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure."

"You've been very kind," she said. "I don't know how to thank you."

"There's no need to thank me. But you could help me."

"How?"

"I'd like to talk to you tonight."

"Of course. Why don't you come right over."

"I can't right now. It would be later, perhaps at eleven o'clock. Would that be too late?"

"Not at all. Please come whenever you are free. I never go to bed before midnight."

"Your husband won't object? I would want to talk to you privately."

"Sergeant Masuto, my husband is not here. He has left me."

"Left you?"

"We have separated. There will be a divorce. He packed his things this afternoon and moved into the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. So you see, he cannot object to our talking privately."

"I'm so sorry."

"There is nothing for you to feel sorry about. It was a mutual decision. We both had reached a point of hatred that was unendurable. You must not think of me as a bereaved woman,

except in terms of my grief over my mother's death. If it were not for that, I could say that I am a happier person than I have ever been during the past dozen years. I do not want to bore you with my past, but my marriage was not precisely made in heaven."

"I think I understand," Masuto said. "If you don't want me to come tonight ..."

"But I do. I will wait for you. You can make it as late as you please."

LUCILLE BETTNER

Still Masuto sat at his desk and stared into space. He had gone a whole day without meditation, without being quiet and trying to know who he was and where he was; and his weariness was due more to that than to lack of sleep. Then he opened a drawer of his desk and took out the two account books he had taken from Gaycheck's desk. He went through the small book, half hoping he would not find it. More than anything, he wanted to abandon it now, forget, go home and soak in a hot tub and listen to Kati's quiet talk, as she told him, detail for detail, what their children had done that day.

But it was there — Lucille Bettner — the same name that Holmbey had given him, with the address and the telephone number. He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello? Who is this?" The voice was soft, almost quavering, with just the faintest trace of an English accent.

"My name is Detective Sergeant Masao Masuto. I am chief of homicide at the Beverly Hills Police Department. I would very much appreciate it if you could spare me a few minutes of your time."

"But what on earth have I to do with homicide or the Beverly Hills Police Department? Are you sure you have the right person?"

"Your name is Lucille Bettner?"

"Yes."

"I am investigating the death of Ivan Gaycheck."

"Oh. I see."

"Could I come over now?"

"It's quite late."

"I realize that. But this is very important."

“Very well. Do you know how to find my house?”

“I think so.”

“You will press the button at the gate. We have a television identification camera there, so you will have to provide some kind of identification. I am sorry to inconvenience you so, but that’s the world we live in, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” Masuto agreed. “I’ll be there shortly.”

He went downstairs, got into the patrol car that Beckman had reserved for him, and drove north toward Sunset Boulevard. The night was cold and he felt chilled. He fumbled for the unfamiliar heating mechanism of the patrol car, failed to find it, and gave up. Vaguely, he remembered the Bettner estate, which could just be glimpsed from Sunset Boulevard. It was a great, half-timbered castle, built in the twenties, when Sunset Boulevard was a quiet carriage road and not the major traffic artery it is today. Then Sunset Boulevard was the treasured goal of the new rich, the film stars and directors and producers, and there they built their giant monuments to an era that is gone forever.

The Bettner house was set back from the road on a rise of ground, sheltered by a high hedge. Masuto turned off Sunset into the driveway and found his way barred by an enormous iron gate. He got out of his car, pressed the button on the gatepost, then located the camera device. It was dark now, which meant that there was some kind of infrared device on the camera, and as Masuto displayed his badge to the camera eye, he reflected on this strange technological culture that had turned an entire nation into something that had never existed before.

“Okay,” a man’s voice said, coming from some hidden loudspeaker. “Get back in the car and drive up to the house.”

Masuto followed the instructions obediently. The iron gate opened noiselessly, and he drove up the driveway to where a stone-pillared breezeway marked the entrance to the house. A dour gentleman dressed in black greeted him as he got out of the car.

“You can leave your car where it is, Officer. I’ll take you to Mrs. Bettner.”

The man in black led the way into the house, a huge, high-ceilinged foyer with straight-backed oak chairs set around it,

purchased no doubt from some ancient British manor house, and then through an immense baronial living room, up a wide flight of stairs, down a hallway. The man in black knocked at a door.

“Mrs. Bettner?” He was almost shouting. “The policeman is here!”

“Well, bring him in, Alfred. Don’t keep him standing in the hallway.”

Alfred opened the door and Masuto entered.

“You can leave him here, Alfred. It’s quite all right.”

Alfred closed the door and Masuto looked around him. The combination bedroom and sitting room was cheerful and charming, done in pale pastel colors, very different from the room below. Mrs. Lucille Bettner sat in an armchair. She was a frail little woman, very old, certainly past eighty, Masuto decided, but her eyes were bright and alert, and her voice, though quavery, was aggressive and youthful.

“Oh, you are Japanese,” she said. “How interesting! I didn’t know that we had a Japanese on our police force. Los Angeles policemen are so young and handsome and unimaginative — it’s quite discouraging, don’t you think?”

“I am a Nisei, Mrs. Bettner.”

“Still Japanese. Do you know, I spent seven months in Japan — but that was long, long ago, before that hideous war. I adore them. I have a Japanese acquaintance. A lovely gentleman whose name is Ishido. We have interests in common. Do you know him?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Good. Now please sit down. Would you like something to drink?”

“No, ma’am,” Masuto said as he seated himself. “But thank you.”

“And you want to see me about that frightful Ivan Gaycheck affair. Actually, I knew him only slightly. We had a few business dealings — which I did not enjoy. I know that one doesn’t speak ill of the dead, but I was not fond of Mr. Gaycheck. But I certainly didn’t wish him dead — and one doesn’t expect that sort of thing in Beverly Hills.”

“No, ma’am, one doesn’t.”

“What is the world coming to!” She leaned toward him and smiled. “Do I have your name correctly — Sergeant Masuto?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I suppose you want to ask me questions about my dealings with Mr. Gaycheck. Go right ahead.”

“Thank you. You are a stamp collector, Mrs. Bettner?”

“My dear Sergeant Masuto, I am not simply a stamp collector. I have one of the best collections in the United States. Possibly Clevedon’s is better than mine, and I suppose that President Roosevelt’s was rather unique, but it doesn’t take much skill and effort to build a stamp collection when you have been president of the United States for more terms than one can count, and you must forgive me if I sound nasty, but I am a Republican and I was never an admirer of President Roosevelt. You see, my husband — I’m sure you have heard of him — well, he was an extraordinary man and he built an extraordinary studio and he left me more millions of dollars than you can shake a stick at; and in return I gave him my youth. I’m not sure it was a very good bargain. But there I was after he died, sixty-five years old, my family dead and gone back in England — and what does an old woman do? I was past my time of acting, and there are no parts for old women worth looking at, and my children are grown and gone. I was fit for nothing in particular, and through some whim I took up stamp collecting. Well, believe me, I found some purpose. You might sneer at this ...”

“No, no,” Masuto said hastily. “I would not dream of sneering at it.”

“Be that as it may, Sergeant, it is something to be one of a very few. I love stamps and I know the field. I know more about stamps than anyone in Los Angeles, more than Ivan Gaycheck ever knew and more than that young wiseacre downtown, Mr. Jason Holmbey.”

“I am sure you do.” She had spoken in the loud tones of a person hard of hearing; Masuto now raised his voice. “Could you tell me when Gaycheck first spoke to you about the One-Penny Orange?”

She smiled and shook a finger at Masuto. “You are a sly one, aren’t you? And you don’t have to shout at me. My hearing is not of the best, but I can hear you quite well when you speak in a normal voice. So you know about the One-Penny Orange.”

“Yes, I do.”

“And when did he first mention it? I believe it was about a week ago. Yes, just a week ago.”

“Did he have it then?”

“No. No, he did not. You see, he telephoned me and told me he was on the track of a One-Penny Orange on the original cover. I don’t know how well versed you are in this, Sergeant Masuto, but a One-Penny Orange on the original cover is not unlike the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci — in one manner. We know how many there are and where they are. I have been trying to buy one for years, and Gaycheck knew this. He said he had a line on one and that he had every hope of obtaining it during the next few days. As a matter of fact, I made a good guess at which one it was — the cover that was sold in the 1930s and then disappeared from sight.”

“You amaze me, Mrs. Bettner.”

“Do I? Well, that’s very nice. Thank you.”

“That was a week ago?”

“Yes. He had the gall to ask me whether I was interested. He knew that I was. The gall of him!”

“And then?”

“He called me — let me see, was it three days ago? Yes.”

“And he had the stamp.”

“Yes. He called and told me that he had the stamp and was ready to do business. I told him that I wanted the provenance, that I would have no part of stolen goods. I am not one of those demented collectors who will buy stolen property and lock it away somewhere and gloat over it. My collection is public. I do articles for the *Collectors’ Quarterly*.”

“What did he say to that?” Masuto asked eagerly.

“He swore up and down that he had come by the cover honestly and that he had full legal title to it. But that means nothing with a man like Gaycheck. I told him that I wanted to see a bill of sale, and he said that was no problem, that he would have it for me.”

“Did he mention the name of the seller?”

“No, he did not. Of course, he wouldn’t — not until he made a deal with me.”

“Did he set a price?”

“Well, first he insisted that I come down to his store and look at it. I suffer from arthritis, Sergeant Masuto, and it is very difficult for me to get around. I am not a recluse, but I leave my house only when I

have to. I told Mr. Gaycheck that I would not dream of coming to his store until we had discussed the price.”

“Then he did set a price?”

“A ridiculous price — three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Is that really so ridiculous?”

“Not perhaps at auction. You see, Sergeant, at auction the owner would probably set a base price of one hundred thousand dollars. That is, the bidding would start only if there were an opening bid of one hundred thousand. From there, the bidding might go to one hundred fifty thousand, two hundred, even four hundred thousand. Strange things happen at auctions. But in a straight deal between buyer and seller, three hundred thousand dollars is utterly exorbitant. I told him that, and he began to threaten me with sales to other collectors. I informed him that I was not impressed, and that he could call me again when he was ready to discuss reasonable terms.”

“Why wouldn’t he hold on to it and put it up at auction?” Masuto wanted to know.

“Ah. That is interesting, is it not, Sergeant. Why wouldn’t he? I asked myself that. There could be only two reasons. One — that his provenance lacked substance and the stamp had been stolen.”

“And you think that was the reason?”

“No. I think Gaycheck was convinced that he had legal title to the stamp.”

“Are you sure?” Masuto pressed her. “This is very important for me to know. Are you sure that Gaycheck was convinced that he had legal title to the stamp?”

“Yes, I am. And I’ll tell you why, Sergeant. You do not call a collector and anticipate the possession of a stamp to be stolen, and if you do have a stolen stamp, you don’t try to deal with Lucille Bettner. You take it to Europe or the Middle East, where those oil kings will buy anything, stolen or not. And Gaycheck was ready to give me a bill of sale. There could be no deal without that.”

“And does this thing you call provenance — I suppose it’s a sort of pedigree — does this go with the bill of sale?”

“I certainly does. I would not touch such a stamp unless I knew who the previous owners were. If it turned out to be Skeffington’s stamp, then I would want to know who had owned it between

Skeffington and Gaycheck, and I would want proof that it had changed hands legally each time.”

“And Gaycheck was willing to supply such proof?”

“So he said.”

“I see. You said there were two reasons Gaycheck would be unwilling to put it up at auction. What is the other?”

“There is a great deal of publicity attendant to such an auction, Sergeant Masuto, especially if a One-Penny Orange is to go on the block. A man like Gaycheck is rather unsavory. His past might not bear scrutiny.”

“And he never called back a third time?”

“No. He died yesterday.”

Masuto rose. “You have been very kind and very patient.”

“Not at all. This has been so pleasant.”

“Only, there is one thing I don’t understand.”

“Yes, Sergeant?”

“You wanted the stamp so badly. Why did you take no steps to see whether it is still among Gaycheck’s effects?”

“Because, Sergeant,” she replied, smiling, “I am quite certain that Gaycheck was murdered for the stamp. So now it is a stolen stamp, and I have simply dismissed it from my mind.”

“I see.”

“Do you find my explanation adequate?”

“Quite adequate,” Masuto said.

He was at the door when Mrs. Bettner said, “Sergeant?”

“Yes, Mrs. Bettner?”

“You know, the stamp will surface again. Such things always do. You have only to keep your eyes open, and then you will have your murderer.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Why?”

“Because the murderer will probably do precisely as you suggest — take the stamp to Europe or the Middle East and sell it there.”

“I suppose so. What a pity!”

“Thank you again, Mrs. Bettner.” Then he left, closing the door behind him.

ELLEN BRIGGS AGAIN

It was quarter to eleven when Ellen Briggs opened the door for Masuto, and then she gave a startled exclamation at the sight of his face. "You poor man! What have they done to you?"

"It's nothing. I'll tell you about it. May I come in?"

"Please." She closed the door behind him and stared at his face again. She had made no attempt to dress for his coming. She still wore blue jeans and a work shirt, her brown hair pulled back and tied behind her neck, her slender figure almost boylike, her dark eyes filled with compassion. "How awful! What happened to you?"

"You remember the three men on motorcycles outside of the school?"

"Yes."

"I met up with them in Topanga Canyon."

"Oh, no."

"Now they'll never trouble you again."

"They robbed my house?"

"Yes."

"And you arrested them."

"Yes ..."

"You don't want to talk about it, do you? I know that whatever happened must have been dreadful. I don't know how a man like you can be a policeman."

"How do you know what kind of man I am, Mrs. Briggs?"

"I know. Do you think you could call me Ellen? I feel I have known you such a long time. What is your first name?"

"Masao."

“Masao. That’s a nice name. May I call you that?”

“If you wish.”

“That’s silly of me, isn’t it? But I can’t think of you as a policeman, only as a friend, and heaven knows, I have few enough friends. Please come inside. I’m in the kitchen again. Do you mind?”

“I don’t mind, no.”

He followed her into the kitchen and stood there rather awkwardly. “Do sit down, please,” she said, “and don’t pay any attention to me. You can’t leap up every time I do.” He nodded and sat down at the kitchen table. “You look so tired. Will you have some coffee? Or something to eat?”

“Do you know,” he said smiling for the first time, “I think I would. That is, if you don’t mind. Suddenly I’m very hungry. I forgot my dinner entirely.” Then he shook his head. “But no. That would be an imposition.”

“It would not be an imposition. Do you know you have a very nice smile, but you ration it. Please. I’m a good cook.”

“I don’t want you to cook anything for me.”

“What would you say to scrambled eggs, ham, brown rice, applesauce, butter, and toast? The rice is cooked. I only have to warm it. The whole thing won’t take ten minutes.”

“Right now it sounds like a banquet.”

“Good. Do you want to smoke? Shall I bring you an ashtray?”

“I don’t smoke, thank you.” He watched her as she beat the eggs, sliced the ham, warmed the rice, and put the bread into the toaster. He felt that one can tell a great deal about a woman simply by watching her prepare a meal. Ellen Briggs was coordinated, alert, efficient. Her competence would flow over into anything she did, and whatever she did she would do well. Yet she had married Jack Briggs. Why? he wondered.

“What are you thinking, Detective?” she asked him.

“It would be impolite for me to reveal it.”

“That’s very Japanese.” She grinned at him. “Tell me.”

“All right. I was wondering how a woman like you came to marry Jack Briggs.”

“You like women a great deal, Masao, but you don’t know much about them.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because if you did, you would know that women like myself very often marry a Jack Briggs, and there’s no way in the world they can explain why. It’s called masochism.”

“I know what it’s called. That doesn’t explain it.”

“No, it doesn’t.” She piled his plate with eggs, ham, and brown rice. “Eat and don’t think about such things. You know the story of the little boy who kept hitting his head against the wall. When they asked him why he did it, he explained that it felt so good when he stopped.”

“Ah so.” The food was delicious. Between mouthfuls, he asked her how her son was.

“He’s asleep. I’m afraid I frightened him, keeping him locked up in the house all day. I haven’t yet told him about his father.”

She sat down opposite him at the kitchen table, putting her chin on her clasped hands and watching him, smiling slightly.

“You’re very happy.”

“Not very happy, no, Masao. I still have a knot of grief inside me for my mother. But without that — well, I am happier than I have been for a long, long time. I am free. Do you know what that means?”

“I think so.”

“I have stopped hating Jack Briggs — well, almost. Hate is very corrosive. Doesn’t it strike you as odd that I am talking to a detective whom I met only yesterday? But I refuse to think of you as a policeman. Are you married, Masao?”

“Yes.”

“Happily?”

“As such things go, yes. My wife is a very simple and rather old-fashioned Japanese woman. She is very much in love with me.”

“I can understand that. I think I am a little in love with you myself — just a very little, and nothing to trouble you or upset you.”

Masuto put down his knife and fork and stared at her. She was wearing no makeup. Her fine deep brown eyes met his directly, and to his taste she was as beautiful a woman as he had ever known. Her nose was fine and straight, a slight flare at the nostrils, and her mouth was wide and expressive.

“It does trouble you. I’m sorry I said that.”

“No, no, Ellen Briggs. It makes me feel warm and good — for the first time today. I thank you.”

“Finish your food.”

He ate the last scrap of food on his plate.

“Do you want more?” she asked him. “It’s no trouble.”

“No. This is fine. Thank you.”

She took away his dish and refilled his coffee cup, and then again seated herself opposite him. “Please begin, Detective Masuto.”

“Begin?”

“Your coming here tonight. You are my friend, I think, but you didn’t come as a friend. You came as a policeman.”

“I don’t know.”

“But you do know.”

“Ah so.” He nodded.

“When you say ‘Ah so,’ Masao, is it to remind people that you are Japanese?”

“It’s a foolish habit.” he sipped his coffee. “Ellen” he said, “when did you discover that your husband had sold the stamp?”

She was not surprised or perturbed at his question, and answered him directly or plainly. “The day after my mother died. The evening before the funeral.”

“He told you?”

“Yes.”

“How did he tell you? I mean, how much did he tell you or explain to you about the transaction?”

“Well, he told me that there was a stamp dealer in town who had been tracing this particular stamp, the One-Penny Orange, for years. Apparently a rare stamp is something like a famous painting. The dealers keep track of it as it is sold and resold, and I suppose they found some indication of my father buying it and then found out what had happened to our family. Anyway, this dealer finally traced it to my mother. He called Jack at the office, and they had lunch or something and discussed it. Of course, I’m telling you Jack’s story. Jack said he would have to take the matter up with my mother, because if she had the stamp, even if she didn’t know she had it, it

belonged to her. Then Mother died, and since she was dead Jack felt that it was all right to take the stamp and sell it.”

“To Ivan Gaycheck?”

“Yes, to Ivan Gaycheck.”

“And how much did he say Gaycheck paid him for it?”

She rose and went to the counter where her purse lay. She brought it back to the table and opened it, saying as she did so, “He told me that Gaycheck paid him a thousand dollars in cash. Tax-free cash. He made a great point of that. He gave me half. He was cutting me in, as he put it.” She took out of her purse five one-hundred-dollar bills and laid them on the table. “There it is — five hundred dollars for my mother’s life.”

“Why do you say that?”

She was silent for a while. Then she sighed and shook her head.

“But you don’t believe your husband’s story?” Masuto said.

“No, I don’t.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I think he went into my mother’s room the day before — the day she died. I think he found the packet of letters and cut the ribbon, as you noticed. I think my mother found him going through the letters. They were very precious to her — the only thing of my father’s that remained to her. I think she struggled with him, and in that struggle her heart gave way. Then Jack placed her body on the bed. She was dead. Who was to know how she died?”

“But all this is only conjecture, Ellen.”

“I know.”

“Why did you lie to me? Why didn’t you tell me this when I saw you this morning?”

“To what end? As you say, it’s only conjecture.”

“Did you face your husband with your conjecture?”

“Yes, last night.” She unbuttoned her cuff and pushed up her sleeve. Half of her arm was black and blue. “He uses his hands when he gets angry.”

“Yet he agreed to the separation.”

“Why shouldn’t he have agreed, Masao?”

“Because he’s a bastard and because we have community property in this state.”

"I waived that. My mother had an insurance policy of five thousand dollars and I was the beneficiary. It's all I need and all I want. I signed a property waiver for my husband this afternoon. He will have the house and his money, and in return I get Bernie and his agreement not to contest the divorce."

"He'll give up his son?"

"Jack never loved anything. He couldn't. He's very happy to have the child out of his life."

"And what will you do, Ellen?"

"I'll go to England and get a divorce there or on the Continent. They still have theater in London, and where there's theater, I can work. I'm a good actress."

"I know that."

"And I won't be unhappy to leave, Beverly Hills is not for me. There's only one thing here that I regret leaving, and that's not for me in any case."

"And what's that, if I may ask?"

"Masao Masuto."

"You might find him a lot different than you imagine."

"No, I don't think so."

"But, Ellen, Gaycheck is dead. If your husband obtained and sold the stamp without legal right, it might still be recovered. It would belong to you."

She met his eyes directly and said, "But, Masao, you know and I know that the stamp will never be recovered. It is gone. Let that be the end of it."

"I told you that it was a stamp of great value. Do you remember? I said three hundred thousand dollars."

"I remember. I didn't believe you."

"I have been told that at auction it might well bring more."

"Truly? Or are you simply saying that?"

"I've never lied to you. I wouldn't."

"Then what do you suppose Gaycheck actually paid Jack for the stamp?"

"I could only guess. But since, given time, your husband would eventually discover its true value, I would guess that Gaycheck paid

him at least fifty thousand dollars. Now, as I said, if you prove the transaction illegal, you can recover that money.”

“You know that I can’t, Masao.” She smiled and reached across the table and placed her hand on his. Just a touch. Then she withdrew it. “Anyway, I am sure Jack made a mental inclusion of that in the settlement. Let him have it. Bernie is worth it.” She looked at him — as tenderly, he thought, as any woman had ever looked at him.

“Poor Masao,” she said gently. “What a quandary for an honorable man!”

“Perhaps less than you imagine. Did I tell you that I am a Zen Buddhist?”

“No. I don’t know what that means.”

“It’s a very ancient thing in Japan, a way of life, a religion, a way of being — a way of watching and listening. But it precludes judgment. We don’t judge.”

“Ever?”

“Yes.”

“Then how can you be a policeman?”

“With some agony, I suppose. It’s my thing, as the kids say, my karma, my fate. It’s the way I experience mankind. Others do it differently. But a policeman is not called upon to judge. He is given a set of rules and disciplines, and he obeys them.”

“I see.”

“Shall I tell you a story, Ellen?”

“If you wish. If it will keep you here. I dread your going away, because I know that when you do, I will never see you again.”

“It’s the story of a little girl, a child of great beauty and great sensitivity. A child who had to face the horrors of this life before any child should be called upon to do so.”

“Has the child a name, Masao?”

“We’ll call her Ellen.”

“Yes, I imagined you would.”

“When Ellen was very young, her father was taken away. Perhaps she remembered the incident, the brutality and savagery of it. Perhaps she knew it only from her mother telling her, and possibly she did not remember her father at all. But wisely or unwisely, her

mother kept nothing from her. Her mother told her that her father had been taken to a place called Buchenwald, and that there he had been executed by a firing squad under the command of a man called Gaylord Schwartzman. Possibly Ellen's mother learned somehow that this Captain Schwartzman delivered the final killing shot himself. It was something he enjoyed doing."

Masato paused, watching her. "You want me to continue?"

"Yes, Masao."

"I think it was less what happened to her father than what happened to her mother."

"Yes, Masao, you are probably right."

"The poverty, the indignity, the shame that her mother endured. When I look at the child, it seems to me that the mother must have been very beautiful once."

"But not when she died, Masao."

"I don't know when the child decided to become an actress, but the decision was inevitable."

"Why, Masao?" she asked him softly. "Why was the decision inevitable?"

"Because very early in life she prepared a role for herself."

"What role?"

"The role of one who brings justice, as she saw it, to an unjust world. The role of a debt collector — a debt owed to her mother and father. A very strange role for such a child."

"But a time must have come when the child became a woman. You know, Masao, you really don't understand women at all. You think you do, and I imagine you have loved many women in your own time and you respect them, but you don't understand them. I imagine that's the Japanese part of you."

"Perhaps you are right."

"Because when the child became a woman, she put aside childish things."

"If you say so."

"I don't say so. You are telling me a story. I simply adjust one of your characters."

"If you wish to," he said slowly, "you can continue the story."

“But that’s impossible. It’s your story. How could I possibly continue it?”

“Very well. Then I will go on. The child became a woman and the woman became an actress. She played many roles, but never abandoned the single, central role she had chosen for herself.”

“She was very consistent.”

“Oh, yes. I grant that. But she had a problem. While she had chosen her role, a part of the script was missing.”

“What part, Masao?”

“Gaylord Schwartzman. You see, not only did she have no idea where he was or even whether he was alive or dead, but she had no notion of what he looked like.”

“But, Masao, if this woman was as consistent as you say, she must have had a kind of faith.”

“Yes, I suppose so. A kind of faith.”

“And this faith would have assured her that Gaylord Schwartzman was alive. You see, Masao, if you make her a consistent character, then your story must be equally consistent.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I see that I must make her an even more remarkable person than I had considered her to be.”

“And what happened then?”

“Of course, it’s not so strange.”

“What is not so strange?”

“Each one has his karma. I must give her hers. She waited patiently, and then some years ago her patience was rewarded.”

“How, Masao?”

“I’m not too sure of this part of the story, so I must guess. Her mother must have taught her to read German. Perhaps her mother was a subscriber to *Der Spiegel* ...”

“*Der Spiegel*?”

“The German news magazine. Their *Time* magazine, so to speak.”

“I see. Yes, go on.”

“Or possibly she read the magazine herself. And then, one day, she was going through the September 1972 issue of *Der Spiegel* and there on page twenty-two she found a picture of Captain Gaylord Schwartzman.”

“Bravo!” Ellen smiled and clapped her hands. “How precise you are, Masao, the date, the page — well, that is how a story should be told, precisely with all the facts. And what did your character do then?”

“She tore out the page and kept it with her. Oh, I imagine she looked at it until it fell to pieces, but the face of Captain Schwartzman was engraved on her memory. It no longer mattered whether she had the picture or not.”

“But why? To what end?”

“Can’t you guess?”

“I don’t want to guess, Masao. I want to hear it from you. I want to hear your story.”

“The answer is simple enough. Her faith told her that someday she would find Captain Schwartzman, and she had decided that when she did find him, she would kill him.”

“But she couldn’t have known she would find him.”

“You yourself brought up the question of faith.”

“I think your story would be more reasonable if you made it less than an obsession with her.”

“If you wish.”

“I keep reminding you that it is your story. What happened after she discovered the picture in ...” She groped for the name.

“*Der Spiegel.*”

“*Der Spiegel, yes.*”

“A great deal must have happened, but that is not directly pertinent to my story. The important fact — in terms of my story — is that five years later she moved to Beverly Hills, and then one day, possibly on the street, possibly through the window of his store, she saw Ivan Gaycheck — and she knew that she had found Captain Gaylord Schwartzman.”

“And she recognized him, after so many years? That’s not very plausible, is it, Masao?”

“I think it is. At least, I will make it that way for the sake of my story.”

“Of course. It’s your prerogative. I keep forgetting that it’s your story.”

“From that moment on she began to plan his death.”

“His death? But, Masao, simply in terms of your story, and to be consistent, would you say that this character of yours began to plan an execution? Rather than a murder?”

“I didn’t use the term *murder*.”

“Sorry.”

“She was a very clever woman, very cool, very determined. Did I say that she had brown eyes?”

“No, Masao, I don’t think you did.”

“But once, perhaps years ago, she played a role in the theater that called for blue eyes and blond hair. I said that her hair was brown, didn’t I?”

“No, Masao.”

“Well, theatrically, it is no problem. Blue contact lenses changed her eyes to blue, and a wig gave her blond hair. She had saved the wig and the lenses, so now they were available. Since she was very slender and had a boyish figure, she decided to give herself a large bust. A size-thirty-six brassiere, well padded, took care of that. She put on a long skirt and a sweater, and that way, carefully made up — no problem for an actress — she became a very young and attractive woman with an English accent.

“But why, Masao? Why did your character go to all this trouble?”

“Because she was sensitive and bright and thoughtful — as very few killers are. For the most part, they are pathological. She was the exception.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Quite sure. You see, she realized that the great danger existed in the possibility that the purchase of a gun could be traced to her. She was determined that this would never happen.”

“Yes. That would be very clever.”

“Dressed in her disguise, she drove downtown to a store on San Pedro Avenue and bought a small twenty-two-caliber Webley-Fosbery automatic pistol. It was what they call —”

“Stop it, Masao!” she said suddenly. “Stop it! It’s a silly game.”

“You don’t want to hear any more?”

“I do. Every bit of it. But not with this sophistry of your contriving a story.”

“I think you’re right.”

“You are telling me how you think I killed Ivan Gaycheck. Go on.”

“Very well. After you bought the gun, something happened that you didn’t plan. Your husband found the stamp and sold it to Gaycheck. The day of the funeral, you dropped him off at his office. That was twelve o’clock. You had something to eat with your son, and then you dropped him at school. You drove to North Canon, parked, and walked over to Gaycheck’s store. You knew that Haber left at twelve-thirty. Either he was gone, or you waited until he left. Then you went into the store. Possibly, you invented some story to make Gaycheck think you might be interested in the purchase of the One-Penny Orange. He would have had it in his safe. He opened the safe and took it out. He closed the safe and rose to face you. By then the gun was in your hand, and you shot him. You are a very strong woman, in spite of your slenderness — and very controlled. You straightened his body, to make it appear that someone of great strength had caught his body and lowered it to the ground. Then you put the One-Penny Orange in your purse, left the store, and drove home. That’s it — all of it.”

He was very tired now, tired and used up. He leaned back in his chair and watched her, wondering why, after he had spelled it out so carefully, he should still feel that to know this woman, to love her and receive her love in return, would be all that any man should ask of life.

Minute after minute passed, and she sat there and said nothing, only watching him. She had the slightest smile on her face.

“Masao ...”

“Yes?”

“I am not shocked or frightened or bewildered. I knew what you were going to say when you telephoned me earlier. I knew why you were coming here.”

“You did know?”

“Yes. Are you going to ask me whether what you spelled out is true?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to lie to me.”

“And you think I would?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because in your mind, you are totally justified. You have no guilt, no remorse. You have been carrying a burden since you were a child, and now you have cast it off.”

“You are so sure of yourself.”

“I am a policeman. I know my job and I do it well.”

“You are a brilliant and remarkable human being. Do you think there are many men like you? Yet you are willing to spend your life as a cop in this wretched town.”

“I have my karma, you have yours.”

“And what does that say and what does that signify? Oh, you make me so furious!”

“What else would you suggest?” he asked tiredly.

“What should I suggest, Masao? Oh, it’s not that we have known each other twenty-four hours or so. Not that. I think I know you better than I have ever known a man before, and I want you desperately. To what end? We both know how utterly impossible it is.”

“Yes we both know that.”

“So it’s up to you. What will you do?”

“What can I do?” he asked her, suddenly terribly weary. “You have gotten rid of the pistol, the contact lenses, the wig — all the rest of it, and you are clever enough to have done it in such a way that they will never be found again. There were no witnesses. There is not one shred of evidence, and if I were to arrest you, the district attorney would throw me out of his office.”

“You forget the One-Penny Orange.”

“No, I don’t forget the One-Penny Orange.”

“You could have the house searched, if you are so sure of all your conjectures. If it’s here, you would find it. And then you would have the evidence you need to arrest me.”

“My dear Ellen, did I ever at any time since I first saw you, yesterday afternoon — did I ever underestimate you?”

“No, my dear, I don’t think you did. But then, neither did I ever underestimate you.”

“Your house has been disturbed enough. The One-Penny Orange isn’t here.”

“Then where is it?”

“In the mail, on its way to London, to some friend who will hold the letter until you arrive, or to general delivery — it doesn’t matter. It’s gone. Anyway, it’s yours. It belongs to you.”

“Thank you, Masao.”

He almost lost his balance as he rose. “It’s past midnight, and I’m very tired.”

“Poor Masao.”

“Ellen ...” He cut off his words and shook his head. “No, I think we have both said enough.”

“Masao?”

“Yes?”

“I must ask you something.”

“All right.”

“And you must tell me the truth. You must not lie to me. It’s very important.”

“I’ll tell you the truth, if I can.”

“If you had the evidence to support what you said here tonight — if you had it, Masao, would you arrest me?”

He didn’t answer immediately. He stood there, his dark eyes half closed, his face a brooding mask. Then he said slowly, “Yes, I would.”

“You would, yes. Somehow I’m glad you answered it that way.”

“I must go now.”

She walked with him to the front door, and there she said to him, “I won’t see you again, ever, will I?”

“No.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“For Europe?”

“Yes. Bernie and I — we’ll catch the noon plane for New York. From there to London. I suppose there are ways you can stop us.”

“I won’t stop you.”

“Thank you, Masao.”

She stood in front of him, looking up at him. She put her hands on his shoulders, tenderly, and then he took her in his arms and kissed her. He held her like that, fighting the feeling that he wanted never to let go, and then released her.

“Dear Masao,” she whispered.

He opened the door, walked out, closed it behind him, got into the patrol car, and drove home to Culver City.

13

KATI

Kati must have been watching through a window for the arrival of his car, and when she saw the patrol car pull into the driveway she ran out, terror-stricken that this was news of what she had always feared. Her relief when she saw Masuto step out of the car was so great that she burst into sobs. He cradled her in his arms, calming her.

“It’s all right, little Kati, it’s all right.” And then he said in Japanese, very softly, “My destiny is with you, beloved. You know that. I will always return when you wait for me.”

She did not see his face until he had come through the kitchen door, and then she gasped in horror. “Oh, Masao, what did they do to you?”

“It is nothing. Only small flesh cuts. They don’t even pain me.”

“But how did it happen?”

“My car was smashed. I was cut by flying glass.”

“How?”

“Dear Kati, I can’t talk about it now. I am all right. There is only one thing I want, and I want it desperately.”

“What is it, Masao?”

“A hot bath. As hot as you can draw it.”

“But I have food waiting for you.”

“I have eaten.” He looked at her, her small, anxiety-filled face, her worried brown eyes, and then he gathered her in his arms and held her tightly. “Dear Kati,” he whispered, “I am not much of a husband for you, am I? I fill your days with fear and doubting, and I give you so much pain.”

“You are the best husband in the world. If I were to be reborn a thousand times, I would want no other husband than you.”

“And I didn’t even call you. I am a stupid and insensitive man. I don’t deserve your love.”

“You were occupied with your work, and that is as it should be. When I had worried sufficiently, I called Captain Wainwright. He told me that you were all right.”

“Oh?”

“He said he will see you at eight o’clock in the morning.”

“Ah so. Well, I will meditate a little, while you draw the bath.”

He sat cross-legged, his body erect, his eyes half closed, trying to be without thought, to listen to the silence and to the darkness of the night. But it was no use, because on his mind’s eye was printed the face of a woman who had murdered a man and who would go unpunished — and he himself, Masao Masuto, had concurred.

And then he asked himself, “Unpunished?” No one went unpunished, each made his own atonement, his own karma; and for two people, Masao Masuto and Ellen Briggs, the pain was established and it would never go away. He knew that.

Then he was able to meditate for a little while.

Barefoot, wrapped in a saffron-colored kimono, he went into the bathroom. The full tub was steaming. He let himself into it, wincing at first with the pain of the very hot water, and then relaxing as the heat seeped into his bones.

Kati came in, bearing a large, folded white towel, smiling with pleasure at the sight of him alive and well and relaxed in a steaming tub of hot water, such a fine, lean, long-legged, handsome man who did not realize that she was the luckiest woman on the face of the earth.

“I had the towel in the oven, Masao. It will stay hot. And I put a heating pad in the bed.”

“You are very good to me.”

“Little things. You must not thank me for little things.”

“There are no little things in a gift of love,” he said in Japanese.

She bowed formally, and in her flowered kimono, she was not of today but something out of an old Japanese print.

“I will sleep well,” he said. “Don’t wake me tomorrow. Unplug the phone. I intend to sleep for the next twelve hours.”

“But if you are not there at eight o’clock, Captain Wainwright will call and be very angry.”

“Tell him to go to hell,” Masuto said.

“Masao! I would not dare say such a thing.”

“Ah so. Then tell him that I am asleep and that you are afraid to awaken me.”

“It would be untrue. I am never afraid of you.”

“Then don’t answer the phone, dear one,” Masuto said, closing his eyes and relaxing into the heat of the bath.

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*—BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SPARTACUS*

HOWARD FAST

Writing as E. V. Cunningham

THE CASE OF THE RUSSIAN DIPLOMAT

A Masao Masuto Mystery

The Case of the Russian Diplomat

1

THE DROWNED MAN

At precisely twenty minutes after three on a Monday morning in November, Detective Sergeant Masao Masuto's telephone rang shrilly, awakening him from an otherwise untroubled sleep. Still half asleep, he pulled the telephone to him and heard Captain Alex Wainwright's rasping voice.

"Masao?"

"I'm here, Captain."

"What in hell are you whispering for? I can't hear you."

"I'm whispering because it's the middle of the night and Kati is asleep."

"I'm not asleep," Kati said.

"I know what time it is," Wainwright snapped. "I'm at the Beverly Glen Hotel, and I want you to get your ass over here. Now."

"Thank you," Masuto said. "You are always considerate of your employees."

"You don't work for me, you work for the city."

Masuto put down the phone, turned on the light, and looked at his wife; he reflected that even awakened rudely from her sleep, Kati managed to give the impression that she had just stepped out of a

Japanese print, her black hair held neatly with a ribbon, her face like a lovely, worried ivory cameo.

“Wainwright,” Masuto explained.

“I know. I will make hot tea.”

“No, no, please. Go back to sleep. He’s out of his mind, so there’s no time for tea.”

But Kati was already out of bed and in her kimono, and before Masuto left the house he had to have the cup of tea and a sweet cake—to raise his blood sugar, as Kati put it. Kati read every article on nutrition that the Los Angeles *Times* printed, and it was her constant grief that away from her, Masuto subsisted on tacos, frankfurters, pizza, and other strange and barbaric concoctions.

In his car, driving north on Motor Road from Culver City, where he lived, to Beverly Hills, Masuto reflected on the fact that he derived so much happiness from a marriage to a very simple and very old-fashioned Japanese woman. Being a Zen Buddhist as well as a member of the Beverly Hills police force, he never confused simplicity with a lack of wisdom; just as being a member of the Beverly Hills police, he never confused wealth with either intelligence or morality. And now as so often before, he congratulated himself on his choice of a mate. He had heard the children whispering as he left the house, awakened by the phone call, and right now Kati would be sitting in their room, singing softly. He smiled at the thought.

During the past ten years, the Beverly Glen Hotel had achieved an international reputation as a symbol of wealth, opulence, and the entertainment industry. Situated somewhat to the east of Beverly Glen and within the city limits of Beverly Hills, it sat on a knoll overlooking the city, a huge, haphazard, sprawling pile of pink stucco and palms and Moroccan ivy. It was the only place to stay if you were a particular kind of person, and the place not to stay if you were another kind of person; and while Detective Sergeant Masao Masuto had never tasted its hospitality as a guest, he was nevertheless a not infrequent visitor in his professional capacity. In that capacity, he always kept in mind the difference between those who live in Beverly Hills—a small and unique city in Los Angeles County—and those who were guests at the Beverly Glen Hotel. The residents of Beverly Hills, particularly those who lived north of the railroad tracks—in this

case, the Southern Pacific, which bisected the city from east to west—had a common bond: money. Given the restricted area of their residence, they were probably as rich as or richer than any group on similar acreage anywhere in the United States, or in the world for that matter.

The guests at the Beverly Glen Hotel—most of them from New York City and its environs—might be equally rich or as poor as church mice. They might pay the going rate of one hundred dollars a room per night without pain, or they might skip, leaving their luggage behind them; in either case, they were an interesting selection, consisting of film stars, their agents, businessmen, diplomats, Mafia chiefs, producers, writers, congressmen, con men, cheap crooks, tourists—and anyone else who could put down a hundred dollars a day, mostly on an expense account, to stay in the Shangri-La of the film and television industry.

It was 4 A.M. when Masuto turned off Sunset Boulevard and drove up to the entrance of the Beverly Glen Hotel. A weary parking attendant took his car, and then Fred Comstock, a lumbering six-foot-two retired Los Angeles cop and now a hotel detective—or security chief, as they preferred to call him—came out to shake hands and say, “Glad you’re here, Masao. This one is a beauty.”

In the lobby of the hotel, at the registration desk, Detective Sy Beckman was arguing in loud tones with a man in a bathrobe, whom Masuto recognized as Al Gellman, the manager. He was a skinny, nervous man, and the fact that this was the first time Masuto had seen him without his toupee attested to his condition.

“Goddamn it,” Beckman was saying, “I know what your problems are. We got problems too. We can’t just put a lid—” He saw Masuto and broke off. “Don’t go away,” he said to Gellman. And to Masuto, “The captain’s down at the pool. Will you take him there, Fred?”

It made a man irritable to be awakened in the middle of the night, and Masuto said softly to Beckman, “Just take it easy with Gellman.”

“All he can think about is his goddamn hotel.”

“That’s all he has to think about.”

“I’ll go with you,” Gellman said, joining Masuto and Comstock. Beckman remained in the lobby while the three of them went down the stairs, through the arcade of shops to the pool area. “You know,”

Gellman said to Masuto, “you’re the only man on the force with an ounce of brains. We’re a part of the city, its mystique, its reputation. A drowning in our pool stinks. I can’t tell you how much it stinks. There’s no reason why it has to be advertised.”

“Well, Beckman’s no one to talk to about that. Let’s see what we got.”

It was a clear, cold, moonlit California night, and the pool, lit by its underwater floods, lay in an unreal conglomeration of silver palms, silver awnings, and silver lounge chairs. Seeing was a part of Masuto’s religion as well as his way of life. The ugly becomes beautiful, the beautiful ugly and mundane. Someone had once named the pool area of the Beverly Glen Hotel “the naked hooker”; and one day, a few months ago, Masuto had listened to Gellman bemoaning the fact that there was no way in the world to rid the hotel of the high-priced call girls who made it their place of business. “The truth is,” Gellman had complained, “that there’s no way in the world to tell the difference between a guest, a guest’s girl, and a hooker. Things have changed.” But now the pool area was empty, cold, almost enchanting in the moonlight.

Gellman led the way into the men’s locker room. The place was ablaze with light. Stretched out on a bench was the naked body of a man. Dr. Sam Baxter, skinny, normally bad humored, was as annoyed as everyone else at a thing like this taking place in the middle of the night. That made his disposition even worse. He was chief pathologist at All Saints Hospital, doubling as medical examiner in a place where, as he put it, one expects a minimum of violence. He was closing his bag as they entered, and he greeted Masuto with a scowl.

“I’m delighted to see you in good spirits,” Masuto said.

Captain Wainwright turned from staring at the body to stare at Masuto. “Hello, Masao,” he said, his voice surprisingly mild.

Masuto walked forward and looked at the body. His age, Masuto surmised, was somewhere between fifty and fifty-five. A guess would make him five feet eight inches in height, and he was fat, perhaps two hundred and ten pounds. Thin hair, pasty white skin. Masuto leaned over and lifted one of the corpse’s eyelids. The eyes were

blue. He touched the eyeball lightly with his thumb and forefinger, and then he peered closely at the small snub nose.

"Maybe I shouldn't have dragged you out of bed," Wainwright said. "No marks on the body. No sign of violence. Sam thinks he drowned."

"I know he drowned," Baxter said sourly.

"You won't know until you do an autopsy," Wainwright said.

"He drowned," Gellman said. "My God, Captain, can't you let it go at that? That's bad enough. We never had a drowning in the pool before."

"Who is he?" Masuto asked.

Wainwright looked at Gellman, who spread his hands and shook his head. "That's it."

"What do you mean, that's it?"

"We don't know who he is," Gellman replied.

"Isn't he a guest?"

"No. At least, we don't think so."

"The daytime room clerk ain't here yet," Comstock explained. "He lives in Pasadena, and he's on his way. But Sal Monti, who runs the parking and who's got a damn good memory, says he's never seen him before. Now that don't mean that he couldn't have got out of a car and come into the hotel when Sal's back was turned. You know how heavy the traffic at the front gets around five o'clock. But if he came in as a guest with luggage, Sal would have remembered him."

"Do you suppose you can finish these speculations without me?" Dr. Baxter asked. "I'd like to get a little sleep."

"Did you call for the wagon?" Wainwright asked him.

"I'll do it on the way out."

"And what time will you have the autopsy report?"

"When I'm finished!" Baxter snapped, then picked up his bag and strode out.

"Where are his clothes?" Masuto asked.

Again Wainwright looked at Gellman, who shook his head. "We don't know. No sign of them."

Masuto pointed to the dead man's nose. "He wore glasses. There are the marks. Eyeballs enlarged. He was nearsighted, I'd guess.

And there's the mark of a watchband on his left wrist. Any sign of the glasses and the wristwatch?"

"No."

Watching Masuto thoughtfully, Wainwright asked, "Anything else, Masao?"

"He wasn't Jewish."

"How the hell—?" Comstock began.

"He's not circumcised, Fred," Gellman explained.

"Go on, Masao."

"Just a few observations that may not mean a thing. He's soft, no sign of physical labor." He picked up one of the dead man's hands. "The nails are cut but not manicured. That's unusual for a guest of his age here in this hotel." He pushed up the man's lip to reveal, among his other teeth, a bridge with a molar of dull gray metal. "I'd guess that isn't American dental work. He may be a foreigner."

"For God's sake," Gellman said, "I don't want you to try to make something of this, Captain. A man drowned. Let's get the body out of here before the guests wake up, and leave it at that."

"Al, you know better," Wainwright said. "Who is he? Where did he come from? How did he drown—if he did? My word, for a man with his fat to drown in a swimming pool—that's not easy."

"Who discovered the body?" Masuto asked.

Detective Beckman came in at that moment with the day desk clerk, whom Gellman introduced as Ira Jessam. Jessam was forty or so, thin, dark, intense, and very much disturbed by the sight of the dead body.

"Take a good look at him, Mr. Jessam," Wainwright told him, "and tell us whether you ever saw him before."

It was obviously painful for Mr. Jessam to stare at the corpse, more, Masuto suspected, because the man was naked than because he was dead.

Jessam shook his head.

"You never saw him before?"

"He didn't register. That's all I can say. I can't possibly keep track of who goes in and out of the hotel, and anyway there's more than one entrance. But he didn't register while I was on duty."

“All right, Jessam,” Gellman said. “Go home and get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow, or today.”

“Not much use in going home now. I think I’ll just lie down in the office—if I may.”

“Be my guest.”

“I’d still like to know who discovered the body,” Masuto said.

“Tell him, Beckman,” said Wainwright.

“It’s the goddamndest thing. According to the night operator, the call came from room three-twenty-two. The room is registered to a guy by the name of Jack Stillman, out of Vegas. He’s a booking agent. The call came at exactly two forty-nine, and the operator switched it to the front desk. Now that room overlooks the pool, and the caller tells Frome—he’s the night clerk—that there’s a body floating in the pool. Frome calls Freddie here”—indicating the security chief—“whose room is on the ground floor off the pool area, and Freddie goes in in his pajamas and drags the fat man out—”

“Which is by no means easy,” Comstock observed.

“For God’s sake, Freddie,” Gellman said, “find a sheet or some towels or something and cover him up.” And to Wainwright, “Where the devil’s that ambulance? I want him out of here before any of the guests wake up.”

“It’s coming.”

“But now,” Beckman said, “we come to the cute part. Both the night operator and the night clerk swear that the call was made by a woman.”

“Oh?” Masuto was intrigued.

“Not hysterical. Very cool, very calm. Speaking softly. She talks to the operator first. Then to the front desk.”

“What did she say?”

Beckman got out his notebook. “Says to the operator, There’s a body floating in the pool. Where, asks the operator? In the swimming pool. The operator says, My God, I’ll give you the front desk.”

“The operator’s a good girl,” Gellman said. “Very steady.”

“This woman. What did she say to the night clerk?”

“Same thing. Exactly.”

“Did he ask who she was?”

“She hung up.”

“And room three-twenty-two?”

“I just got down from there when you arrived, Masao. This Stillman guy claims he was asleep. Alone. That’s what makes it cute.”

“Now look,” said Gellman, “this isn’t as crazy as it sounds. I know Stillman. He always stays here when he’s in L.A. Last month he married Binnie Vance, the dancer. It’s his third marriage. All she has to do is find out that he’s shackled up with a dame and the shit hits the fan.”

“Did you look through his room, bathroom, closets?” Masuto asked.

“What am I, an amateur?”

“Could she slip out of the hotel without being seen?” Masuto asked Gellman.

“I suppose so. Service entrance in the basement. It’s bolted on the inside.”

He looked at Beckman. “Did you check the bolt?”

“I just got down from the room when you arrived.”

“Do it now.”

Beckman left. “If she came in her own car,” Masuto said, “she wouldn’t know where the jockey parked it. If she came with Stillman, she’s on foot.”

“Where’s the phone?” Wainwright demanded.

Gellman pointed to the pool office. A moment later, they heard Wainwright telling the central office to put out a call for any woman on foot. “Give it to L.A.P.D. too,” he told them. “She may be a fast walker.” He came back as Beckman reappeared.

“The bolt was open,” Beckman said.

“I’m going home and get some sleep,” said Wainwright. “You take it from here, Masao. And for Christ’s sake, if he drowned, he drowned.”

“Of course, Captain.” Masuto was opening the lockers. “Take that row, Sy,” he said to Beckman.

“What the hell are you doing, Masao?”

“He hid his clothes, his glasses and his wristwatch, and then he decided to drown.”

“You know what he’s after,” Gellman sputtered. “He’s determined to make something of this. God almighty, a man drowns, he drowns.”

“Maybe. Every locker, Sy,” Masao said to Beckman.

Gellman turned desperately to Wainwright. “Masao’s the boss. It’s his case now. I’m going to sleep. Anyway, we won’t know how he died until Doc Baxter does the autopsy. Why don’t you get some sleep yourself, Al? Good night, gentlemen.”

Gellman followed Wainwright out of the dressing room. Masuto and Beckman went through the lockers. The lockers were there for the convenience of the hotel guests, and none of them were locked. The search turned up a number of bathing suits, male, some sunglasses and a wristwatch, all of which Fred Comstock took into his custody. They tried the ladies’ dressing room next, and the results were equally uninspiring.

“It’s five A.M.,” Comstock announced. “I lost a night’s sleep, and I don’t get overtime, and I’m on duty at eight. How about I sack down for a few hours? You guys don’t need me.”

“I’ll want to talk with Stillman,” Masuto said.

“Go ahead. But be gentle. At a hundred dollars a day, they’re entitled.”

“I’m always gentle.”

“The way I figure it,” Beckman said, once they were in the elevator, “she made the call while he was sleeping and then skipped.”

“You’re sure he was asleep?”

“Either that or he was a good actor.”

They rang the bell at room 322, and then waited. A second time. Then a third time. Then Jack Stillman opened the door, in his pajamas.

This time he had not been sleeping. The pajamas were heavy black silk, and they had not been slept in. His hair was combed. Stillman was a large, fleshy man, over six feet, with a lot of muscle gone to fat. He had the heavy neck of a football player, cold blue eyes, and brown hair. Behind him, past the small foyer, Masuto saw the unmade bed, an open notebook next to the telephone, and then a window, probably the one that overlooked the pool. The room was overdecorated in the gold and ivory that was a signature for the Beverly Glen Hotel.

“What the hell is this?” Stillman asked unpleasantly.

“I’m Detective Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills police. This is Detective Beckman. Are you Stillman?”

“Yes, but it’s five o’clock in the morning.”

“I’m sorry,” Masuto said. “Things happen at inconvenient hours. May we come in?”

“What for?”

“Simply to ask you a few questions.”

“He asked questions,” indicating Beckman. “I answered them.”

“I have some questions of my own.”

“Look,” said Stillman, “whatever happened here happened when I was asleep. I know nothing, and I don’t intend to be pushed around by a couple of small-town cops—not at this hour of the morning.”

He started to close the door. Masuto put his shoulder in the way and replied mildly, “Beverly Hills is hardly a small town. We have a population of over thirty thousand, and if you will not talk to us here, Mr. Stillman, we will be happy to wait until you are dressed and then take you downtown, where you can talk to us at the police station.”

The cold blue eyes stared at Masuto, and then, unexpectedly, he said, “What are you, Chinese?”

“I am a Nisei, which means that my parents were born in Japan. Now may we come in?”

Beckman recognized the slight hardening in Masuto’s voice, very subtle, an indication of closely controlled but increasing anger. Masuto was almost as tall as Stillman, but narrower, leaner, no extra flesh.

Stillman nodded, closing the door behind them. The bedroom was large, with a couch and two brocade armchairs facing the bed, and two windows. The drapes were drawn. Before he sat down, Masuto parted the drapes and looked down at the pool. The first glimmerings of dawn now.

“Sit down,” he said to Stillman. Beckman remained standing. Masuto took one chair, Stillman the other.

“The call that informed us that there was the body of a man in the pool came from your room, as Detective Beckman told you earlier,” Masuto said.

“It was a mistake. I was asleep from about midnight until he woke me.”

“It was not a mistake. A woman made the call. Mr. Stillman, a woman used the telephone in this room. I want to know who she was.”

“I told you—”

“Would it be easier,” Masuto interrupted, “if I gave the story to the *Los Angeles Times*, specifying that a nameless woman who shared this room with you discovered a body in the swimming pool in the middle of the night?”

“Who the hell-”

Again Masuto interrupted. “Suppose you just tell us what happened and stop the indignation.”

“What then? Do you still give it to the papers?”

“Only if I must. Possibly not. I’m not a reporter, I’m a policeman.”

“All right. Look, understand me. I don’t give a damn about my reputation. I live in Vegas, and nobody’s going to fault me for wanting my bed warm. But I was just married to Binnie Vance, and she’ll cut my heart out if she hears about this. I picked up this dame in the Rugby Room, and I bought her a drink, and then I bought her dinner. She was a pro. I paid fifty bucks for last night, but like I said, she was a pro, and she didn’t rip off my wallet when she left. I respect that. I respect integrity in any line of work. That’s the whole story. If she made the call, she made it without waking me. I was asleep. I didn’t lie about that.”

“I’m glad you have principles,” Masuto said.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“What was her name?”

“Judy.”

“Judy what?”

“I don’t know.”

“You went to bed with a woman and you don’t know her last name?”

“Jesus Christ, I didn’t marry the broad. She tells me her name was Judy. I didn’t ask for her birth certificate.”

“What does she look like?”

“Not like a hooker.” Stillman was trying to be helpful. “You get a classy kind of broad in the Rugby Room, five seven, stacked, blond hair, blue eyes—a good-looking kid.”

Beckman was taking it down in his pad. "What was she wearing?"

"Let's see—silk shirt, tan suede pants, same color, or almost, boots—"

"Boots?"

"Boots."

"What kind of jacket?"

"Same thing as the pants, suede. Four gold chains around her neck."

Out in the hall, Beckman said to Masuto, "Where does it get us? So she saw fatso in the pool and reported it. Another dame would have kept her mouth shut."

"That makes Judy a little special, doesn't it?"

"For a hooker."

"For a person."

"What now?"

"Take a look around the basement before you leave, Sy—laundry bins, that kind of thing. See if you can dig up his clothes."

"And you?"

"I'll phone in the description, and then I'm going home for a hot bath."

"And what about me?"

"What about you?"

"Do I get to sleep?"

"Tonight."

"It is tonight," Beckman said.

"Not anymore. It's tomorrow."

2

THE SHOT MAN

Masuto lay steaming luxuriously in water as hot as he could bear. Kati, having just seen the children into their school bus, entered the bathroom with an enormous white towel and settled herself on the stool to await her husband's completion of his bath. To Masuto, a hot bath was not simply a hot bath; it was the continuation of an ancient ritual without which life would have been considerably less tolerable.

He had already told her about the incidents of the night, and now she said, rather plaintively, "You know that I have never been to the Beverly Glen Hotel. Wouldn't it be pleasant if we could have dinner there some night and I could see that famous Rugby Room? My mother would be happy to stay with the children."

"No."

"But she would."

"I was not referring to your excellent mother, but to the Beverly Glen Hotel."

"But why?"

"Kati, darling, I dislike being judgmental about the City of Beverly Hills, since they pay me my wages. The hotel is another matter. It makes my skin crawl."

"But why?"

Masuto sighed and shook his head. "How can I explain why? Perhaps another time. Hand me the towel, please."

He meditated for half an hour before he left the house, sitting cross-legged, wrapped in a saffron-colored robe, silent and motionless until his mind was clear and alert. When he had finished he felt renewed and refreshed, and on his way to Rexford Drive, where police headquarters was, he thought a good deal about the drowned man. It promised to be a quiet day—so far, at nine-thirty, no robberies, no assaults, nothing of importance on his desk except an inquiry from the city manager concerning the drowned man.

"What about the media?" Masuto asked Beckman.

"I'm sitting on it until I hear from Wainwright. He's not in yet."

"How does Joe Haley know about it?" Haley was the city manager.

"I told him."

"What?"

"Just that there was a drowning."

"That's no good. Go up there and give him the whole story, the missing clothes, everything. I don't want him to scream about us covering up anything. Let him decide whether he wants to keep a lid on it. Did you hear from Doc Baxter?"

"I called his home just before you came in. He's on his way to the hospital."

"You didn't find his clothes?" Masuto asked, almost as an afterthought.

"No."

"Okay. If Wainwright wants me, tell him I'm at the hospital—down in the pathology room."

Beckman looked at him curiously. "Are you on to something, Masao?"

"I don't like a drowned man who undresses himself and then hides his own clothes. Do you?"

Driving to the hospital, Masuto wondered whether he was unduly harsh with Beckman. Sy Beckman was a large, lumbering, slow-moving man, not stupid, but slow in his conclusions, and totally dependable. Given his choice, Masuto would rather have Beckman than any other man on the force. Yet there were times when

Beckman irritated him, and reflecting on that now, he determined to go out of his way to be pleasant, even grateful. He felt better then. It was a lovely morning, and his car radio told him that there would be a minimum of smog. Well, that at least was something, not great but better than those hideous days when the Los Angeles basin filled up with the noxious yellow stuff. Masuto had been born in the San Fernando Valley, in the long, long ago when his father owned a four-acre produce farm outside of what was then the little village of San Fernando—a farm that he lost when he was interned during the madness of World War II. Then the Valley had been like a garden, and no one ever thought about a thing called smog. Ah well, that was long ago and over now. Los Angeles was still for him the best of all possible places.

At the hospital, he showed his badge to the clerk at the pathology room and then went inside—trying not to breathe too deeply of the smell of formaldehyde, which he disliked intensely—past three young, bearded men who were bent over microscopes, to the autopsy room, where Dr. Baxter was leaning over the corpse of the drowned man.

Baxter straightened up, saw Masuto, and said graciously, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Just curious.”

“You’re not a policeman, you’re a damn ghoul. You just can’t stand a natural death.”

“I don’t enjoy any kind of death,” Masuto replied gently. “Was his death natural?”

“He drowned. That’s natural enough for someone who can’t swim and takes a few too many.”

“Mostly, people who can’t swim don’t go swimming.”

“I’m tired, Masuto. I’m in no mood for Oriental philosophy.”

“If that’s philosophy, heaven help us. Are you sure he died of drowning?”

“You’re damn right I’m sure. Water in the lungs—all of it. He drowned. No marks, no sign of violence.”

“How many drinks? Was he drunk?”

“No, he was not drunk—unless two or three drinks wiped him out.”

“Then why did he drown?”

“Because he couldn’t swim. Why don’t you leave it alone?”

“I suppose because both Gellman and you want me to. That brings out the nastiness in my nature. Have you spoken to Gellman today?”

“That’s none of your damn business, Masuto.”

“You’re the attending physician up there at the hotel. You’re also the medical examiner for the city.”

“What are you insinuating?”

“Nothing so awful. Gellman wants it to be an accident. I refuse to accept the fact that a fat man who would float like a cork makes his clothes, his watch, and his spectacles disappear and then proceeds to drown himself in a swimming pool. The pool is only sixty feet long. From the shallow end there’s twenty-five feet before it deepens to five feet. Did he suffer a coronary? Did he have angina?”

Baxter hesitated. “No.”

“Then he was poisoned, which means he was murdered.”

“There’s no sign of poisoning.”

“What about the contents of his stomach?”

“I haven’t gotten to that.”

“And if you find nothing,” Masuto insisted, “I still say he was poisoned.”

“By what? By the smog?” Baxter asked sarcastically.

“I suggest chloral hydrate, more commonly known as a Mickey Finn. You’d find no trace of that, no matter how you tested. And how do you know he had only two or three drinks? Did you test for alcohol in his blood?”

“Damn you, Masuto, don’t tell me how to do my job.”

“Then don’t tell me how to do mine,” Masuto said, smiling slightly. “By the way, when you’re finished, put him in the icebox. I want him to stay fresh for identification.”

“Your photographer was here and he took pictures.”

“I know. Please forgive my insistence. I think whoever comes looking for him will want to see him in the flesh.”

“He won’t keep forever.”

“A few days will do.”

Masuto pulled back the man’s upper lip and stared thoughtfully.

“You are a ghoul,” Baxter said.

“And I would deeply appreciate a telephone call, concerning whatever you find in his stomach or in his blood.”

Baxter grunted. Masuto thanked him and got out of the pathology room and breathed deeply outside. Back in his office, he still had the illusion of smelling the formaldehyde. He hated the smell.

“That’s one place I do not like,” Detective Beckman said, after Masuto told him what had taken place. “Anyway, Masao, what makes you think that you can’t detect chloral hydrate in an autopsy?”

“Something I read somewhere.”

“You talk about the stink of formaldehyde. The same thing for chloral hydrate. It stinks.”

“In a drink?”

“Well, maybe a few drops in a drink couldn’t be smelled. You think the fat man got a Mickey and drowned?”

“Something of the sort.”

Masuto picked up the telephone and dialed Dr. Rosenberg, his dentist. Beckman drifted away, yawning. Dr. Rosenberg came on the phone.

“You’re due for a cleaning, Masao. We sent you two notices. None of you turkeys understand the necessity for prophylactic dentistry. It’s like shouting in the wilderness.”

“Next week,” Masuto promised.

“So you say. I’m putting my nurse on. Make a date with her.”

“Hold on. I have a question.”

“Oh?”

“Did you ever see a false tooth or a cap or a bridge or something like that made out of some grayish metal?”

“Silver?”

“I don’t think silver. Maybe an aluminum alloy, maybe steel.”

“I’ve seen it,” Dr. Rosenberg said, his tone indicating severe disapproval.

“Where? When?”

“Russian dentistry, if you call it dentistry. They wouldn’t use gold. Too expensive or bourgeois, and they just weren’t any good with ceramics. Back during the war, we liberated a batch of Russian prisoners and I saw a lot of it, aluminum alloy and even steel—lousy dentistry. I don’t know if they still do it.”

“Thanks, Dave—”

“Hold on. I’ll put on the nurse.”

Masuto made his appointment for a prophylactic treatment, and Beckman, still yawning, drifted back and sat down opposite him.

“Don’t you want to know what Joe Haley had to say?”

“I do.”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Not exactly nothing. He said that keeping the reputation of Beverly Hills clean is like trying to canonize Marie Duplessis. Who is Marie Duplessis?”

“The most notorious hooker of nineteenth-century Paris. Sy, let me ask you a few questions. First. Stillman says he picked up this girl, Judy, in the Rugby Room. How did she get there?”

“How does anyone get there?”

“Exactly. By car. No one walks to the Beverly Glen Hotel. It’s not on the street. It’s on a hill and there’s not even a sidewalk.”

“So she drove.”

“But nobody saw her. And if she cut out of there by the basement door, what happened to her car?”

“That’s an interesting question,” Beckman admitted.

“Next. Why the missing clothes?”

“That one’s easy, Masao. They don’t want the body identified.”

“But sooner or later, it will be, so we can conclude that they’re playing for time. Next question.”

Wainwright walked into the office in time to hear that, and asked whether they were playing guessing games or just killing time.

“That’s right. Next question. A woman sees a body in a swimming pool. She doesn’t get excited or hysterical, just calls the operator and tells her. Why?”

“You tell us,” said Wainwright.

“Because she knows he’s dead; because she killed him.”

“Goddamn it, Masao, you can’t operate like that. You don’t know if the man was murdered, and already you got a killer.”

The telephone rang, and Beckman answered it. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. Okay. Yeah.”

“That was Baxter, Captain.”

“Oh?”

“He said he thinks he found traces of chloral hydrate in the fat man’s stomach. He can’t be sure, but he thinks so. He doesn’t like you,” he said to Masuto.

“So sorry. So we have a murder. What about the alcohol?”

“The man was drunk—maybe,” Beckman said.

“A little drunk, perhaps. High. He strips and goes into the pool, falls asleep and drowns.”

“The trouble is,” Wainwright said, “that when you come down to it, we’re a small town with a small-town police force, and still we got a collection of some of the most important characters in the country, and if they don’t live here, then they come here. This one bothers me.”

Masuto nodded. “That’s understandable. I think he’s a Russian.”

“Why?”

“Just a guess. My dentist, Dr. Rosenberg, suggests that his bridgework comes from there.”

“Gellman’s going to love that. A dead Russian in the Beverly Glen pool.” Wainwright turned to Beckman. “Put his picture on the wire to Washington. We’ll see if the F.B.I. can come up with something.”

Masuto picked up the telephone, dialed Information, and asked for the telephone number of the Soviet consul general. He listened for a moment, thanked the operator and put down the phone.

“What are you after, Masuto?” Wainwright wanted to know.

“Just fishing. Did you know the Russians don’t have a consulate here? The operator thinks they have one in San Francisco.” Beckman was coming back. Masuto called, “Sy, find a San Francisco phone book, and give me the L.A. *Times*—today, yesterday, the day before.”

“And goddamn it, stop yawning!” Wainwright snapped.

Wainwright watched with interest as Masuto dialed the San Francisco number and asked for the consul general. Then Masuto said, “No, I insist on speaking to him. This is an official call from the Beverly Hills police on a matter of the utmost importance.” Pause. “Yes, Detective Sergeant Masuto.” Pause. “Yes, I’ll wait.”

Masuto looked at Wainwright, who nodded, apparently intrigued. Then Masuto covered the phone and told Beckman, “Start going

through the papers. Anything that concerns Russia and Los Angeles, any connection.”

Beckman spread out the papers. Masuto spoke into the phone: “How do you do, sir. I am Detective Sergeant Masuto in Beverly Hills. We have an unexplained death, a drowning—” Pause. “No, sir. This is your business and it does concern you. I have some reason to believe that the dead man is a Russian national.” Pause. “About fifty-five years old, thin blond hair, five feet eight inches, blue eyes—” Pause. “No, sir. I did not say that he is thin. His hair is thin. He’s a fat man, quite fat.” Pause. “No, sir, there is no way we can identify him. He was found naked, drowned in the pool.” Pause. “Yes, sir, I understand. We will do our best, but I cannot promise.” Pause. “Yes, the police station is on Rexford Drive in Beverly Hills. Any cab driver.”

Masuto put down the phone and looked at Wainwright.

“Well?”

“The Soviet consul general will be on the first shuttle flight he can catch. He will be here today, early afternoon.”

The telephone rang, and Masuto picked it up. “Yes,” he said. “This is Detective Sergeant Masuto.” Pause. “Yes, I just spoke to the consul general. I understand.”

“Checking,” Wainwright said.

“They’re thorough.”

“What can’t you promise?”

“Like Mr. Gellman,” Masuto said, “he wants it kept out of the press.”

“Masao?” Beckman said.

“Find something?”

“Just this, and I don’t know if it means a goddamn thing.”

Wainwright took the paper from Beckman and read aloud, “Mayor Bradley was on hand to extend an official welcome to five Soviet agronomists, here on a three-day visit to observe orange growing in Los Angeles and Orange counties. From here, they will fly to Florida, for an extended seven-day tour of the Florida orange groves—” Wainwright paused and stared at Masuto. “What do we have, a dead agronomist?”

“What the hell is an agronomist?” Beckman wanted to know.

“An educated farmer,” Masuto said. “No—” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “No, I don’t think we have a dead agronomist.”

“Why not?”

Masuto shrugged. “Nearsighted, fat, soft hands—it just doesn’t fit. Anyway—” He picked up the paper and scanned the story. “You see, they move in a group. If one were missing—no.” He stood up suddenly and said, “I’m going to the hotel. Sy, see if you can catch up with the agronomists.”

“And do what?”

“I don’t know. Nose around.”

“Nose around,” Wainwright said sourly. “I’m not running a police force. I’m running a goddamn curiosity shop. Masao, I want you back here when that Russian comes.” He started away, then turned back. “I’ll talk to L.A.P.D. and see what they’re doing with these Russian farmers. Now I got your disease.”

Sal Monti, doorman at the Beverly Glen Hotel, was reputed to have a very large income, even in a city of noticeably large incomes, even after his split with the hotel management. He ran a service with four assistant carhops, and having seen the way traffic poured into the hotel driveway around lunchtime and cocktail hour, Masuto felt that Monti was understaffed. He was skilled in what he did, had a remarkable memory, and had held down his post for the past dozen years, a long history in the life of Beverly Hills—measured, as Monti put it, from the time of the T-Bird, through the Lincoln Continental period, through the era of the large Cadillac, through the era of the Porsche, into the time of the Mercedes, which shared the present reign with the Seville. It was Monti who coined the phrase “Beverly Hills Volkswagen” for the Mercedes. The present era, just burgeoning, was that of the Rolls-Royce Corniche; and at every opportunity, Monti told the story of the film producer who bought a solid silver funeral casket for sixty thousand dollars and whose partner remarked, as Monti put it, “Shmuck, for the same money you could have been buried in a Corniche.” Now he eyed Masuto’s Toyota with tolerant disgust.

“Sergeant,” he said, “there is going to be a house rule against economy cars. It cuts the ambiance, if you know what I mean.”

“I’ll look it up in the dictionary,” Masuto said. “Meanwhile, I want a few minutes of your time.”

“About the excitement last night? By all means. You can fill me in.”

“No, Sal. You fill me in.”

“It’s eleven-fifteen,” Monti observed. “We got forty-five minutes before the rush starts. Billy,” he called to one of the carhops, “take over.” They sat down on an iron bench under the striped canopy that led into the hotel.

“Tell me about Jack Stillman,” Masuto began.

“This fat guy—what is it? Was he knocked over or what?”

“I’ll ask the questions. Tell me about Stillman.”

“What’s to tell? He’s a booking agent out of Vegas—so it goes. He stayed here maybe half a dozen times.”

“What does he book?”

“I’d give it a guess. The high-priced acts in the casinos. He just married Binnie Vance, the exotic dancer. She’s very hot right now. Or maybe he don’t book at all. Who knows with them characters from Vegas?”

“And when he’s here, do you see him with girls?”

“I guess he was a swinger, as much as the next guy. Not on this trip.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m only sure about what goes in and out of this place. What happens inside is another department. Are you going to give me some flak about the fat man?”

“What are they saying?”

“Nothing. Gellman’s put the fear of God into them. I got it from Freddie Comstock, and he don’t say one word more than that they had a drowning.”

“Sal,” Masuto said, “how many hookers work the Rugby Room?”

“Are you kidding! Sarge, this is a high-class hotel. We got an international reputation. We got presidents and senators going in and out of here. That’s no question to ask. You know that.”

“Cut out the bullshit, Sal. How many? It’s important.”

“Well, look. You don’t get floozies or streetwalkers in a place like this. It’s a different kind of a hustle. A girl works in the Rugby Room, she don’t look no different from the classy broads you see on the

street in Beverly Hills. Maybe she ain't no different. They got class, good clothes, rocks, and they got the looks. They make out for fifty to two notes for a quick throw, and that don't include dinner and drinks. We don't have no pimps here, Sarge, you know that. It's a whole other thing. They come in by twos, two girls, because Fritz won't seat one broad alone in the Rugby Room—"

"They buy the ticket from you, Sal," Masuto said coldly. "Either you talk sense to me, or I'll bust your whole operation wide open."

"Sarge, you got to be kidding. All right, a man works the door, he depends on tips."

"I asked you how many?"

"Okay, okay. Maybe a dozen. Then there are floaters. They drive up in a two-seater Mercedes, in a twenty-five-thousand-dollar car—what am I supposed to do? Be a vice squad?"

"Begin with the dozen regulars. I'm looking for a woman named Judy, about five seven, good figure, blond hair, blue eyes."

"That ain't no description, Sarge. That's like a uniform. Anyway, in what you call the regulars there ain't nobody called Judy."

"She was wearing a pants suit, light brown suede, silk shirt, gold chains, those boots they wear now."

Monti shook his head. "It don't register."

"Did anyone fitting that description drive up to the hotel last night?"

"Blue eyes, blond hair, stacked—you just got to be kidding. I can name you twenty."

"And the costume?"

Sal frowned and shook his head. "Jesus, Sarge, when the rush comes, I see them, I write the tickets, but the clothes. Maybe yes, maybe no."

"How about this morning? Forget about the clothes. Did anyone fitting the description come out of the hotel?"

Monti pointed to the door of the hotel. "Sarge, just watch that door, and if five minutes goes by without a blue-eyed blond broad going in or out, I'll cut you into my take. It all comes out of the same bottle. It's the Beverly Hills color. If they want blue eyes, they buy tinted contact lenses. If they want to be stacked, they buy that too. You know that as well as I do."

Masuto sighed and nodded. "All right, Sal. Thank you." He rose. "One more thing—did you see Stillman this morning?"

"Not yet, Sarge."

"You'd know if he called for his car?"

"You bet."

"What does he drive?"

"He picks up a rental at the airport, usually a caddy. A yellow one this time."

"Look in your box for the keys."

Monti went to the key box, opened it, and stared at the rows of hooks. Then he looked at Masuto. Then he yelled, "Billy, run down the hill and see if Stillman's yellow caddy is still there!"

Billy took off down the hill. Monti went through the motions with the people entering and leaving the hotel, and Masuto waited in silence. Then Billy came pounding back up the hill.

"The caddy's gone."

"You made a note of the license?" Masuto asked Monti.

Monti went through his cards. "Here it is." Masuto jotted it down, Monti telling him meanwhile that there was no way—just no way the keys could have gotten out of his box.

"Except the way they did. Do you lock the box?"

"Hell, no. It's right here."

Masuto went into the hotel and walked over to the registration desk. Ira Jessam, the day clerk, looked at him sadly and said, "That was a terrible thing last night, Sergeant, just terrible."

Masuto agreed and asked him to ring Stillman's room. The desk clerk picked up his phone, gave his instructions to the operator and waited.

"Mr. Stillman doesn't answer," he said.

"Does he drop his keys at the desk when he leaves the hotel?"

"Always."

"Are they there now?"

The clerk looked. "No, sir. But he could be in the restaurant."

"Call them."

The clerk did so, and then put down his phone and shook his head.

"I'd like a duplicate key to his room," Masuto said.

Jessam hesitated, then sighed and handed the key to Masuto, who asked him where Gellman was.

“In his office, I believe. Probably taking a nap. He was utterly exhausted.”

“Wake him up and tell him I’m going up to Stillman’s room. I’d like him to join me there.”

Masuto took the elevator up to the third floor. The chambermaid’s cart was in the hallway, and several room doors were open. On the door of Stillman’s room there was a “Do not disturb” sign. Masuto put his key in the lock and opened the door.

The bed was unmade. In one corner, Stillman’s underwear, shirt and socks, lying in a little pile. Masuto had noticed them the day before. The bathroom door was closed, and from behind it came the sound of running water. The windows were closed and the air in the room smelled stale. On the chest of drawers, a bottle of brandy and two glasses. The ashtrays were filled with half-smoked cigarettes, most of them impatiently crushed out.

Closing the door behind him, Masuto called out, “Stillman!” No response from the bathroom. He tapped on the bathroom door and repeated Stillman’s name. Then he opened the door.

The water in the sink was running. On the floor in front of the sink was Stillman, in his black pajamas. Masuto bent over him and felt for his pulse. His wrist was cold; as for his pulse, he had none. Then Masuto noticed a small spot of blood in Stillman’s hair on the back of his head. He moved the hair aside, and there was a bullet hole where his spine joined the back of his skull. He lay with his face against the floor, and Masuto did not touch him again or try to move him. Using his handkerchief, Masuto turned off the faucet. It was the hot water faucet. Stillman evidently had been shaving. The razor lay on the floor beside him. A tube of shaving cream was on the sink shelf, and by bending over the body, Masuto could see that much of his face was still lathered.

Masuto went back into the bedroom, picked up the telephone, and dialed his headquarters. “Joyce,” he said to the operator, “this is Masuto. Give me Captain Wainwright.”

“Masao,” Wainwright said, “where the hell are you? It’s almost twelve, and I want you here when that Russian shows up. And by the

way, the F.B.I, knows who our drowned man is. I didn't think those jokers knew which side was up, but they pegged him right off. And it's got class, Masao. They asked me not to pass it on to the local clowns. They're flying some special character in from Washington—his name is Arvin Clinton, but that's between you and me. Nothing to anyone else, nothing to the papers. This is a doozy. Nobody wants publicity. So just get your ass over here."

"That's all very interesting," Masuto agreed.

"Thank you. Did you hear me? Where the devil are you?"

"At the hotel."

"Good. Nothing to Gellman. Just tell him that we'll cooperate to keep a lid on this if he'll just bottle up the loudmouths at the hotel."

"I'm in Jack Stillman's room."

"Christ, he couldn't listen in?"

"No, Captain. He's dead."

"What!"

"Someone shot him through the back of the head while he was shaving."

"You're putting me on."

"I'm afraid not."

"Dead?"

"Dead."

"Murdered?"

"It would seem so. The back of his head and no gun in sight."

"Anyone else there?"

"Just me. I thought I'd talk to him again. I waited too long."

"Gellman will truly have a fit when he hears about this."

"I think I hear him knocking at the door," Masuto said. "I told him to meet me here."

"All right. Keep him there until I get there. I'll call Baxter and have him meet us there. Christ, Masao, what about the Russian?"

"He can't get to L.A. before another hour. No way. I have to answer the door."

Masuto hung up the telephone and went to the door.

3

THE SOVIET MAN

Masuto opened the door, and Gellman slipped into the room, closing the door behind him.

“Are you alone?” he whispered.

Masuto nodded.

His voice rose. “Masao, you are putting me in one hell of a position. It’s not enough that I got a drowning on my hands and the owners are threatening me and my wife thinks I’m shacking up here and I haven’t slept in two days, but on top of all that you got to search a guest’s room. Jessam ought to be fired for giving you the key. You can’t do it. Do you have a warrant?” he asked as an afterthought.

Masuto shook his head.

“Then you’re out of your mind. It’s a violation. You know that. If Stillman finds out, he could sue us to hell.”

“He won’t find out.”

“How do you know? He could walk in right now.”

“I wish he could, but he can’t,” Masuto said gently. “He’s dead.”

“He is what?”

“Dead. He’s lying in the bathroom with a bullet in his head.”

“No. No. Look,” Gellman said, his hand trembling, “I got ulcers and before this is over I’m going to have a coronary to go with it. So cut out the gags.”

“Sit down,” Masuto said, pointing to a chair. “Sit down and pull yourself together.”

Gellman collapsed into a chair. “Do you know what this is going to do to the hotel?”

“It’s even worse for Stillman. It happened. Now take it easy. I’m going to call Fred Comstock. Is he in his office?”

Gellman nodded, got to his feet and started to reach for the brandy bottle on top of the chest of drawers.

“Don’t touch anything!” Masuto snapped at him. “Just sit down and pull yourself together.” He picked up the phone, dialed the operator, and asked for Comstock.

“I got to see what’s in that bathroom,” Gellman said weakly.

“First pull yourself together.” Into the phone, “Fred, this is Masuto. I’m in room three-twenty-two with Gellman. Get up here. It’s important.”

“He had to kill himself,” Gellman moaned. “That inconsiderate son of a bitch! Masao, suicide is the goddamned most inconsiderate thing a person can do. They never think of anyone but themselves.”

“He didn’t kill himself, Al. He was murdered.”

“Murdered?”

“That’s right. Someone shot him in the back of the head.”

“Oh, God. I thought it was bad, but this-”

“You might as well know, Al, the fat man was also murdered.”

“They said he was drowned.”

“Drugged and then drowned.”

“Oh, brother, this is one stinking nightmare. Masao, for God’s sake, can we keep a lid on this?”

“Maybe on the fat man, Al. There’s a whole committee that wants to keep a lid on that one. But this? No. There’s no way.”

The doorbell rang. Masuto went to the door and Comstock came in.

“If it takes money,” Gellman was saying, “we can pay. I’ll talk to the city manager. I know the Chandlers—”

“What in hell is going on in here?” Comstock wanted to know. “This is Stillman’s room. Where is he?”

“He’s lying in the bathroom, dead, bullet in the back of his head. Mr. Gellman’s disturbed, naturally.” Comstock’s mouth fell. He looked from Gellman to Masuto, who went on, “Captain Wainwright’s on his way over, and he’ll have Sy Beckman with him and Sweeney, the fingerprint man, and the photographer and maybe a uniformed cop or two. Then Doc Baxter will be coming, and he’s got a loud mouth. Then the ambulance will be here to take the body away. Now what we don’t want, Fred, is to make this any worse for Al than it already is, so go down to the front and talk to Sal Monti, and tell him to ease everyone in with no questions. If a black-and-white comes, have it pull down the row and park with no commotion. Just try to keep it going very quiet and easy, and tell the people downstairs to keep their peace and not to talk.”

“Where is he? The stiff?”

“Quiet and easy,” Gellman said. “Right in the lunch hour. There’ll be fifty cars into the hotel in the next half hour.”

“In the bathroom, I told you,” Masuto said to Comstock, who started for the bathroom door. “Leave it alone, Fred. I don’t want anything touched. Now please, go down and do what I told you to.”

He hesitated, and Gellman said weakly, “Go ahead, Fred. Do what Masao told you to. He knows what he’s doing.”

Comstock grunted and left the room.

“I wish I did,” Masuto said. He closed his eyes and stood silently in the center of the room.

“What the devil are you doing?”

“Trying to think some sense into this.”

“Can we open a window? I’m choking.”

Masuto went over to the manager and patted him softly on the shoulder. “Not yet. I want to leave everything just as it is until Sweeney gets here. I don’t believe you solve anything with fingerprints, but that’s his stock in trade, and he’s touchy about it. Try to relax. Tell me, Al, when do you open the pool in the morning for the guests?”

“At nine o’clock.”

“Did you open it this morning?”

He nodded.

“Who does it?”

“Joe Finnuchi, the pool man. He has a kid who assists him, a college kid who works as pool boy during the summer. His name is Bobby Carlton.”

“When they open in the morning, is anyone there waiting to use the pool?”

“Yeah, there’s always three or four health nuts down for their morning swim. Sometimes more. I don’t know what you’re getting at, Masao. What difference does it make?”

“Maybe none. I’m just trying to understand that public-spirited prostitute who called in the information about the drowned man in the middle of the night. The point is, Al, that if she’d left it alone and this Joe Finnuchi and the pool boy and the guests had walked into the pool area, the news of the drowned man would be all over the hotel and the city and the country too.”

“So we lucked out—until this.”

“No. She was just buying time. But why? That’s why he was naked. Eight hours, and we still don’t know who he is. Why did she need the eight hours?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Al, listen to me. The fat man’s clothes are somewhere in the hotel. I want them. Will you give it a try?”

“How do you know?”

“Just accept the fact that I know. Will you tell Comstock to really shake down the place—every place someone in a hurry might hide clothes, shoes, and the rest of it?”

“Two murders, and you tell me to shake down the place and find the clothes of a man who wasn’t even a guest here, and he has to go and pick this place to get himself murdered.”

The doorbell rang, and Masuto opened it for Wainwright, Sweeney, Beckman, Haskins, the police photographer, and trailing them, Doc Baxter, whose sour glance at Masuto indicated that the detective was solely responsible for dragging him over here.

“I do hope to hell you haven’t loused everything up,” Sweeney said by way of introduction.

“We haven’t touched a thing.”

“Where is he?” Baxter demanded.

Masuto led them to the bathroom. “Use your handkerchief!” Sweeney yelled as he reached for the door. Masuto nodded, did as he was told, and opened the door. Baxter bent over Stillman’s body.

“He’s dead,” he told them.

“I thought so,” Masuto said.

“Don’t give me your smartass talk. He’s dead when I say so. One shot at the base of the skull, very effective and quick. Close range—see where the hair is singed.”

“Small gun, small caliber,” Masuto said, almost apologetically. “Small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. She just reached up and fired the bullet into the back of his head.”

“She? She? What the hell do you mean, Masao?”

“He was shaving, Captain. He was looking into the mirror. So he saw whoever came into the bathroom, and apparently he didn’t even turn around. Someone he knew. If it were a man, he would have seen the movement of his hands in the mirror. The movements of a small woman would be entirely concealed behind his back. She could snuggle up to him, and then just slide the gun up and kill him.”

“You’re telling me that some dame could be cold-blooded enough —”

“It’s happened. We underestimate women.”

“How long ago?” Wainwright asked Baxter.

“Maybe three or four hours,” flexing Stillman’s fingers. “Maybe eight o’clock this morning, maybe nine.” He straightened up and picked up his bag. “Well, that’s that. You don’t need me here anymore. Never needed me in the first place. I’ll poke around at the hospital and have the reports filled in. I want a card with his name tied to his hand. I’m rotten with names.” And with that he bustled out through the door, sending a last nasty glance at Masuto.

“He’s a sweetheart,” Beckman said.

“Stay with Sweeney,” Wainwright said to Beckman. “Once he’s lifted his prints, I want every corner of this place turned inside out.” And to Sweeney, “I want a full set of Stillman’s prints before they take him away, and when you get back to the office, put them on the wire to Washington and give them to L.A.P.D. as well. Nobody just gets himself shot. There’s got to be some sanity in this.”

“In murder?” Masuto said. “There never is, you know.”

Gellman said, “Look, Captain—I’m destroyed, so I’m not asking for pity. But if you have that body carried through the hotel—how do you do it?”

“The ambulance is on its way.”

“You mean the morgue wagon?”

“Al, get hold of yourself. We don’t have a morgue wagon. We got an arrangement with All Saints Hospital, and we use their pathology room and morgue. So it will just be an ambulance and some interns in white coats or whatever. It’s done, and life goes on.”

“Fool, fool!” Masuto exclaimed, and reached for the phone.

“Handkerchief!” Sweeney yelled.

Masuto dialed headquarters while the others watched curiously. He told Joyce, the operator, “I want an All Points Bulletin on a yellow Cadillac. First check all the car rentals at the airport and find out what kind of car Jack Stillman of Las Vegas rented. No. No, forget that. I have the license number.” He fumbled through his pockets, found the slip. “Here it is, seven-six-nine-two VVN, give it to everyone, our own cars, L.A.P.D., the sheriff, the Highway Patrol. High priority. Possibly driven by a woman. Even if it is a woman, she is armed and dangerous. I want the car located and anyone in it held for questioning.”

He put down the phone and turned to face Wainwright. “I should have thought of it immediately.” He shrugged. “Well, it’s three or four hours since Stillman died, so I don’t suppose it matters, They’ll probably find the car parked somewhere.”

“What the devil is this all about?” Wainwright demanded.

Masuto looked at his watch. “Twelve-thirty,” he said to Wainwright. “We ought to get back before the Russian comes.”

Wainwright started to say something, swallowed, and said to Beckman, “Sit on this, Sy.” And to Gellman, “When Sweeney’s finished, Al, we’ll have to close up the room. At least for twenty-four hours.”

“With a cop outside?” Gellman asked plaintively.

“Okay, I’ll tell the cop to go.”

“And what do I do now?”

“You’ll have the press all over you. They’ll keep you busy.”

“What do I tell them?”

“About the drowned man—if they ask, just tell them that he drowned. If they don’t ask, tell them nothing. About Stillman, he’s a guy from Vegas and he got shot. It happens.”

“He’s not just a guy from Vegas. He’s Binnie Vance’s husband and manager.”

“Who the hell is Binnie Vance?”

“You don’t live right, Captain,” Sweeney said, pausing in his dusting. “Binnie Vance is only the hottest thing that hit Vegas this season. She’s an exotic dancer who makes Gypsy Rose Lee look like a Girl Scout entertainer.”

“Gypsy Rose Lee—you got to be kidding. That goes back thirty years.”

“So do I,” said Sweeney.

“Well, whoever she is, she’s got to be told that Stillman is dead. Where do you suppose she is?”

“Probably in Las Vegas,” Beckman said.

“Oh, great, great,” Gellman said. “Do you know what the goddamn media is going to do? They’re going to make it a mob execution.”

“I told you a woman killed him,” Masuto said. “The mob doesn’t have women executioners, not yet.”

In the hallway, Wainwright told the uniformed policeman that he could go back to his car, and then he said to Masuto, “You seem damned sure that a woman did it.”

“Not positive. I think so.”

“And you also know who she is,” Wainwright observed sarcastically.

“I think so. But that doesn’t mean one damn thing, Captain. It’s just a wild guess, and I don’t know why or how it adds up or comes together or what it all means.”

“And you also know who killed the fat man?”

“Sort of.”

They were in the elevator now, along with the uniformed cop and two hotel guests, so Wainwright held his peace. But when they got out into the lobby, Wainwright snapped, “What the hell do you mean, sort of? Even from you, that’s a new one.”

“Captain, look at that,” the uniformed officer said, pointing to Sal Monti, talking to half a dozen reporters and cameramen.

“That little son of a bitch,” Wainwright snorted. “Where’s your car, Masao? You got the keys or did you give them to Monti?”

“I’m down the hill and I have the keys.”

“Good. I came with Beckman, so you drive. We go right through. Not one word.”

They were past the entrance before someone recognized Wainwright, and then the reporters raced after the captain and Masuto. “Nothing!” Wainwright snapped at them. “Not one word! Not one comment! Go back and talk to Gellman.”

When they were in the car, Masuto said gently, “You could have given them something.”

“No, sir. Not one word out of either of us. This is tangled up with Washington, and nobody says that you or me shot our mouths off. Now what the hell is all this about knowing who did it?”

“I don’t know, I make guesses. What is a guess worth when you don’t have motive or a shred of evidence?”

“You wouldn’t like to tell me?”

“To what end? Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Like hell it is. I don’t know why I put up with you, Masao. You are the most peculiar Oriental son of a bitch I ever encountered. Now what the devil is all this about a yellow caddy and the All Points?”

“Stillman rented the yellow Cadillac at the airport. Someone took the keys out of Monti’s box this morning and drove it away.”

“You said a woman.”

“That was a guess. I think a woman killed Stillman. I think the same woman drove off in his car. Nothing’s going to come of that, believe me, Captain. You said the F.B.I. knows who the dead man is. Who is he?”

“I never liked that little bastard.”

“What little bastard?”

“Sal Monti. Someone just takes the keys out of his box. Horseshit.”

“It can happen. What about the fat man?”

“This is what I got from the F.B.I. I told you they’re sending a special man out here. I hate those bastards. I guess every cop in America hates them. Anyway, according to the Feds, the dead man’s

name is Peter Litovsky. He's attached to the Soviet embassy in Washington as cultural attaché, whatever that means."

"It's a very minor post. I imagine his job would be to effect cultural exchanges, keep us posted on what is happening in the Russian theater, concert stage, and so on. And the same thing in the other direction."

"That may be, except that this Litovsky is not what he seems to be. The Feds say that he's one of the top men in Soviet Intelligence, whatever their equivalent of the C.I.A. is, and that he uses the cultural attaché job as a cover, and what I can't understand is that if they know all this, why in hell do they let him operate?"

"I suppose because we do the same thing."

"And instead of being pleased that he's dead, they're in a lather over it. Goddamn it, Masao, they talked to me like I'm their errand boy. Hell, I don't work for them. We're not to mess it up. We're not to louse up any evidence. We're not to give out anything to the press. They will take over the inquiry. They are conferring with the Soviets. This is classified."

"Who did you talk to there?"

"The top man. A half hour after we sent them the picture, they telephoned me."

"And?"

Wainwright looked at Masuto and grinned. "I told them that a murder had taken place in Beverly Hills, and as chief of the plainclothes division of the Beverly Hills police force, I was following routine procedure."

"He must have loved that." Masuto permitted himself a slight smile.

"He loved it."

They were at the police station now. Masuto stopped to talk to Joyce. She looked pleased with herself.

"The yellow Cadillac," she told Masuto, "is a Carway rental. It's a two-door 1976 convertible, the only one they have, and they had a fit when I told them it was a police inquiry. I told them not to worry about their car."

"You told them that?"

"Indeed I did. Because just before I called them, the L.A.P.D. phoned in that they had found the car."

“Where?”

“Parked downtown at a meter in front of the public library. Not a scratch on it, but it was ticketed for overtime.”

“But you didn’t tell them to do a fingerprint search?”

“Sergeant Masuto, it just happens that I did. Now what do you think of that?”

“I think you’re wonderful, and you also have blond hair and blue eyes. And I’d guess you’re about five feet eight inches?”

“I am, but what has that got to do with anything?”

“That is what I’d like to know,” Masuto said.

In his office, the phone was ringing. It was his wife, Kati, and he was suddenly worried. It was rarely that she called him at police headquarters.

“Masao,” Kati said unhappily, “they sent Ana home from school with a sore throat.”

“Is that all?”

Illness in one of the children terrified Kati. “All?” she cried. “She has a hundred and one degrees of fever.”

“Then perhaps you should call the doctor.”

“I want to, but it’s so expensive. Twenty dollars for a house call.”

“Don’t worry about the money. Call the doctor.”

“Trouble?” Wainwright asked, coming over to Masuto’s desk.

“Ana’s sick. When I was a kid, a doctor made a house call for three dollars. Now it’s twenty.”

“A different world, Masao.”

“L.A.P.D. found the yellow Cadillac.”

“Where?”

“Downtown L.A. They’re dusting it.”

“Why don’t we talk about this, Masao?” Wainwright demanded. “I get nervous as hell when you’re holding back.”

“I’m not holding back. I just have a package of wild guesses that don’t fit. As soon as something fits, I’ll let you know. I asked Gellman to have them shake down the hotel until he finds the fat man’s clothes.”

“He won’t. He’s so damn nervous already that he’s not going to do anything to shake the place. Anyway, we know who he is. What’s so important about his clothes?”

“Where they are.”

“Well, we don’t know that. What about Stillman’s wife?”

Masuto picked up the phone and asked Joyce to put him through to police headquarters in Las Vegas. “Who do you know there?” he asked Wainwright.

“I know Brady, the chief. I’ll talk to him.” He took the phone from Masuto, and a moment later he was asking for Chief Brady. Masuto watched him thoughtfully as he said, “Tom, this is Wainwright in Beverly Hills. One of your citizens, feller by the name of Jack Stillman, was shot to death at the Beverly Glen Hotel this morning.” Pause. “No, we got nothing, no motive, no suspects, absolutely nothing. He’s married to Binnie Vance, the exotic dancer.” Pause. “Yeah, at the Sands, you say. Good. Get someone to break it to her, will you? We’ll hold the body until we get her instructions. Thanks.”

As he put down the phone, Officer Bailey came in and informed them that a man called Boris Gritchov was outside in the waiting room. He handed Wainwright a card, which stated that Boris Gritchov was consul general in San Francisco of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

“Bring him in here,” Wainwright said. “And be damned nice to him, and then keep your mouth shut about his being here.”

Gritchov was a tall man, well-dressed, in his early forties, with iron-gray hair and pale gray eyes. He did not offer to shake hands with either of the policemen, and when Wainwright offered him a chair near Masuto’s desk, he appeared to accept it reluctantly. His eyes traveled around the room with its bare walls, its pale green paint, and its painted steel furniture. When he spoke, it was with barely a trace of an accent, and he wasted no time with formalities.

“I would like to see a picture of this man who you say drowned.”

Masuto opened his desk drawer, took out a picture of the drowned man, and handed it to the Russian. He stared at it thoughtfully, but with no change of expression that Masuto could detect. Masuto gave him points for that. If the Russian had anything to give, it would not come by accident or through an emotional lapse.

“I would like to see the body,” he said slowly. “Is it in your morgue?”

“We don’t have a morgue,” Wainwright said. “We have an arrangement with All Saints Hospital, and we use their pathology room and morgue.”

“Isn’t that strange for Los Angeles?” the Russian asked. “I always understood that Los Angeles had a large and efficient police force and sufficient violent death to warrant a morgue.” He underlined his question with a thinly concealed tone of contempt.

“We are not Los Angeles. This is the City of Beverly Hills.”

“But this is Los Angeles,” the Russian insisted.

“Los Angeles County, yes,” Masuto explained. “The county contains a number of cities, including Los Angeles. It’s true that most of Beverly Hills is surrounded by the City of Los Angeles, but we are nevertheless an independent city with its own police force.” He felt almost like a character in *Alice in Wonderland*, explaining local geography to a man who has just discovered that a colleague and countryman of his was dead. “May I ask you whether you can identify the man in the photograph?”

“You are Japanese?” Gritchov asked.

“Nisei, which means an American born of Japanese parents.”

“And a policeman.”

Masuto directed a warning glance at Wainwright, who appeared ready to explode, and then said softly, “So very sorry, Consul General, but America is a place of ethnic diversity which, unlike your country, makes no claims to ethnic purity.”

Gritchov’s face tightened slightly, but he kept his tone as polite as Masuto’s. “You know very little of the Soviet Union.”

“Ah, so, I am sure. But I was not thinking of the Soviet Union but of Russia. But I may be mistaken. If so, you have my profound apologies. Nevertheless, would you be kind enough to tell us whether you know the man in the photograph?”

“I would prefer, if you will, to have this whole matter taken under the auspices of the Los Angeles Police Department.”

“That’s impossible,” Wainwright said shortly.

“Then I would like to see the body immediately. I also believe, Captain, that no formal request of the Soviet Union in a matter like this should be dismissed as impossible by a petty bureaucrat.”

“If you will wait outside for a moment or two, Mr. Gritchov,” Wainwright said slowly, as if each word choked him, “I will have Detective Sergeant Masuto take you to All Saints Hospital.”

Gritchov nodded and left the office, closing the door behind him, and Wainwright burst out, “That lousy son of a bitch! Petty bureaucrat!”

“I think we both behaved with admirable control, Captain.”

“And we continue to. And for Christ’s sake, cut out that Charlie Chan stuff. He’s no fool, and I don’t want any backwash. Take him over to the hospital. I’m going up to talk with the city manager.”

“Right.”

“And don’t push it. If the goddamn F.B.I. wants it, let them have it.” At the door he paused. “You still think that hooker in the hotel killed him?”

Masuto shrugged and nodded.

“Screw the F.B.I! Petty bureaucrat! That bastard!”

4

THE F.B.I. MAN

Riding the mile that separated the police station and All Saints Hospital, the Soviet consul general was rigidly silent, and Masuto made no effort to engage him in conversation. As they entered the pathology room, Dr. Baxter unbent from over the corpse of Jack Stillman, and grinned malevolently at Masuto.

“Back again with a live one,” he said.

“Got the bullet?”

“All wrapped up nice and neat. Thirty-caliber short. Pop, pop! Sounds like a stick breaking, so I guess you won’t find anyone who heard it. Do you want it?”

“Please,” said Masuto.

Baxter handed him a little packet, the bullet wrapped in tissue, which Masuto placed in his jacket pocket. “This is Mr. Gritchov.”

Gritchov was observing the action with interest. He showed no signs of being disturbed by the contents of the pathology room.

“Oh?” Baxter raised a brow.

“I would like to take him into the morgue for identification.”

“You already know his name. You just told me.” Baxter grinned again.

“Very funny. Where’s the body?”

Baxter led the way to the morgue door, but as he started to enter, Masuto barred his way. “We’d like to be alone, Doctor—if you don’t mind.”

“Alone with the dead. How touching!”

“If you don’t mind.”

“I have no objection, and I’m sure the corpse has none.”

Inside the morgue room, Gritchov said, “You’re an interesting man, Detective Sergeant Masuto.”

“All people are interesting, Consul General, if you regard them without judgment.”

“And do you?”

“I try to.” He pointed. “There is the body.”

Gritchov went to the table and drew back the sheet that covered the fat man. Masuto watched as he stood there, studying the face of the dead man. Then Gritchov replaced the sheet.

“You know him?” Masuto asked.

“Yes. His name is Peter Litovsky. He had a small post in the embassy in Washington. He was what we call a cultural attaché, one who maintains—”

“I understand the function of a cultural attaché.”

“Shocking,” said Gritchov, with nothing in his manner or tone to indicate that it actually was shocking. “I shall have to inform his family, and that will not be pleasant.”

“Then you know him personally?”

“Of course. I had dinner with him two nights ago.”

“Then he was in San Francisco? I thought he was attached to the embassy in Washington.”

“He is. Of course. He came to San Francisco with the Zlatov Dancers. That was entirely within his proper function as cultural attaché.”

Puzzled, wondering what had changed an angry, taciturn Russian official, who opened his mouth only to deliver thinly veiled insults, into this almost affable conversationalist, Masuto decided to press his advantage and confessed to being somewhat confused by the fact that Mr. Gritchov had refused to comment on the photograph.

“One wishes to make certain in a serious matter like this.”

“Naturally. Do you know what Mr. Litovsky was doing in Los Angeles?”

“In Beverly Hills, as you pointed out to me, Detective Sergeant. Beverly Hills is very much spoken of, even in our country. I suppose he seized this opportunity to see how the very rich live in a capitalist country. We have no equivalent of Beverly Hills in our country, so it is quite natural for a visitor from the Soviet Union to be curious about it. What an unhappy thing that he had to pay such a price for his curiosity.”

“Do you know whether Mr. Litovsky could swim?”

Gritchov shrugged. “Evidently not.”

“Perhaps you do not remember, but when we spoke on the telephone, I told you that Mr. Litovsky was found naked and drowned in the swimming pool.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“I see. Is it the custom in your country for men to swim naked in a public pool?”

“You mean he had no bathing suit?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Furthermore, his clothes, his eyeglasses, his wristwatch, his wallet—all of these things have disappeared. Furthermore, his drowning was not an accident. He was murdered.”

Masuto saw the small muscles around Gritchov’s jaw tighten, but his voice was even as he said, “Can’t we leave this place, Detective Sergeant? It’s cold and the air is fetid.”

Masuto led the way out. Baxter had left, and the two bearded young men working in the pathology room gave them only a passing glance. In that place, death was more interesting than life.

“Where can I take you?” Masuto asked when they were in his car.

“I have a reservation at the Beverly Wilshire.”

“Then you’re staying in Beverly Hills?”

“For the time being.”

“Permit me to say that I am somewhat bewildered. I inform you that a colleague of yours was murdered under very unusual circumstances, that he was left to drown naked in a swimming pool, and you have not even the curiosity to ask me how he was murdered.”

“How was he murdered, Detective Sergeant Masuto?”

“He was given chloral hydrate, probably in a drink, and then when he went into the pool area, probably because he was choking for air, a person or persons unknown pushed him into the pool and saw to it that he drowned. Then they undressed him and left his naked body floating in the pool, a shameful and ignominious end to any life.”

“Detective Sergeant Masuto,” Gritchov said quietly, “you are a small and unimportant public official, the equivalent of what we in our country would call a militiaman. You neither function in nor understand a larger scheme of things. I am a diplomat, with diplomatic immunity. I am not called upon to answer any of your questions. There are men in your country who have both the experience with and the responsibility for what happened to Mr. Litovsky last night, and I am sure that they will take the appropriate measures. I think that closes the subject.”

For once, Masuto envied Wainwright’s choice of language and response. “So sorry, Consul General,” he said. “Most humble apologies.”

Gritchov said no more. Masuto dropped him at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Beverly Hills and then drove back to police headquarters. Sy Beckman was in the office, and he said to Masuto, “Wainwright’s in a lather. What got him so pissed off?”

“The Soviet Union. We had a visit from the consul general.”

“Oh?”

“He charmed us all. What did you come up with in Stillman’s room?”

“Zero. He smokes dollar-fifty H. Upmann cigars. Had half a box there, and I only accepted one of them. It is hell to be an honest cop. Nothing else worth mentioning—not one damn thing. You’d think that if he had a hooker in the room last night, she’d drop a bobby pin or something. Nothing.”

“Prints?”

“You know Sweeney. He got enough prints to keep him busy for a week.”

“How about Stillman’s prints?”

“L.A.P.D. is working on them. Look, Masao, I am starved. Suppose we knock off and go out and eat.”

“Order sandwiches and coffee,” Masuto said with some irritation.

“What’s bugging you?”

“This whole thing. No motive, no reason, no clue, no sanity, and the fat man’s clothes.”

“Masao, you know Freddie Comstock’s a bonehead. Let’s you and me shake down that place ourselves.”

“Maybe later.” He took the tissue-wrapped packet out of his jacket. “Here’s the bullet that killed Stillman. Send it down to ballistics and see what they make out of it. I’ll order the sandwiches. And then come back with the past ten days of the L.A. *Times*. What kind of a sandwich do you want?”

“Anything that chews.”

Masuto ordered the sandwiches, and Beckman returned with a foot-high pile of the Los Angeles *Times*. He had learned from experience not to question Masuto’s methods, however far out in left field they happened to be.

“We go through them,” Masuto said, dividing the pile in two. “Page by page.”

“That will take a month.”

“No. Skip the classified and the ads.” He thought about it for a moment. “Skip the sports, theater and financial. Stick to the news. Never mind the columns and the editorials, just the news.”

“What are we looking for? The Russians again?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Then what?”

“I’m not sure. Something that connects.”

“Goddamn it, Masao, I go along with you, but this is crazy. What connects?”

“I don’t know, but there has to be something. An important Russian secret agent is murdered. The call comes from Stillman’s room. Stillman is murdered. They both knew something, and whatever they knew is going to happen very soon.”

“So we look for something that connects. Great.”

“Let’s say something as meaningless as all the rest of it. Odd. Different. Then we’ll try to fit it together.”

“You’re the boss.” He grinned suddenly. “Masao, suppose it happened already? That lets us off the hook.”

“That’s a thought,” Masuto agreed. He picked up the phone and asked Joyce to get him Mike Hennesy in the city room at the Los Angeles *Times*.

“Mike,” he said, “this is Masuto over in Beverly Hills.”

“Great!” Hennesy exclaimed. “Masao, what in hell goes on up there at the Beverly Glen Hotel? We got a drowning and a murder—”

“Hold on!”

“Masao,” came Hennesy’s pleading voice, “it’s the big story today. Come on—”

Masuto put down the phone, and shook his head. “Start on the papers.” The phone rang again. It was Hennesy. “You know I can’t peddle information, Mike. Talk to the captain.”

“Four fires in a single day in West Covina,” Beckman said. “The police suspect arson. Nothing else even shows signs of anything. Here’s another one about the agronomists. The leader of the group is Ilya Moskvich. Leading agronomist in the Soviet Union. Nobel Prize four years ago.”

“Interesting.”

Wainwright walked in and stared at the pile of newspapers. “Never mind, I won’t ask,” he said. “This is what the city pays you for.”

Masuto nodded without replying.

“I heard from Vegas,” Wainwright said.

“Oh?”

“They can’t locate his wife. Stillman’s wife.”

“I thought she was performing at the Sands.”

Beckman looked up and said, “Binnie Vance?”

“That’s right. Stillman’s wife.”

“They got a great police force there in Vegas. Almost as good as ours. They can’t locate Binnie Vance, who’s only opening tomorrow night here in L.A.”

“How do you know that?” Wainwright demanded.

“I’m reading the papers. She opens tomorrow night at the Ventura, that new hotel downtown with the round glass towers.” He turned to Masuto. “Does that connect? It’s true it’s in the theater section, but what the hell, you notice things—”

He paused. Masuto was there and yet not there. He was sitting rigidly, his eyes half closed, and Beckman and Wainwright

exchanged glances. Then Masuto said quietly, smiling slightly, "Captain, how do you feel about murders in Beverly Hills?"

"You know damn well how I feel about murders anywhere."

"Yes. The Russian was unpleasant. They apparently have a very centralized system, and they have a low opinion of underpaid policemen like myself. However, if you insist that this is our case, I think that Sy and I can clear it up in the next twenty-four hours."

"You got it."

"And what about Stillman's prints?"

"He was clean as a whistle," Wainwright said, "which don't mean a thing except that he's never been caught."

"And the prints on the yellow Cadillac?"

"They're working on it." At the door, he paused and said forlornly, "The F.B.I. character should be at the airport about now. It's been one beautiful day, and it's not over."

"It's not over," Masuto agreed.

"Did it connect?" Beckman asked.

"What?"

"Binnie Vance."

"Keep looking."

"Two German shepherd attack dogs found dead, poisoned, in the Altra Kennels at Azuza?"

"No."

"Masao, give me a clue."

"I haven't any."

"How about this: 'Jewish Defense League denies theft of four ounces of lead azide, stolen from the Felcher Company in San Fernando.'"

Masuto was suddenly alert. "What date?"

"Four days ago. What's lead azide?"

"Read the rest of it."

"Yeah, here it is. Lead azide, a volatile form of detonator explosive. They reported the theft to the San Fernando police. Whoever took it scratched the letters J.D.L. on the metal container."

"Convenient."

"Well, it made ten lines on page eight. What the hell—four ounces of explosive."

Masuto pushed the papers aside. "Come on, Sy, let's go for a ride."

"Where?"

"San Fernando."

"What makes you think this is a connection? I don't see it."

"Neither do I, but I am sick and tired of sitting here. Anyway, it is time I saw my uncle, Toda."

"Who the hell is your Uncle Toda?"

"My father's younger brother. He has ten acres of oranges outside of San Fernando. Do you know, the land's worth about forty thousand dollars an acre now. That would make my uncle a rich man, but he says that until he dies, the orchard will not be disturbed."

"You grew up around there, didn't you?"

"Before the war. The Valley was like a garden then, no subdivisions, no tract houses, just miles of pecan groves and avocado groves and orange groves. My father used to compare it to Japan. He would say that a place like the San Fernando Valley could feed half the population of Japan. Of course, that was an exaggeration, but that's the way the people from the old country felt about the Valley."

They were on their way out when Masuto caught Wainwright's eye. The captain was talking to a neatly dressed man, gray suit, blue tie, pink cheeks, blue eyes, sandy hair, a man in his forties whose face retained the bland shapelessness of a teenager's. Wainwright motioned to Masuto.

"This is Mr. Clinton, Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Since Clinton did not extend his hand, Masuto made no offer of his. As he examined Masuto, the old gray flannels, the shapeless tweed jacket, the tieless shirt, his cold blue eyes belied the blandness of his face.

"This is Masuto?" he asked Wainwright.

"Detective Sergeant Masuto."

"I hear you grilled Mr. Gritchov?"

"Grilled? No, sir, that's hardly the word. I asked him a few questions."

"Where in hell do you get your nerve? Gritchov is a diplomatic representative of a foreign country, with which at the moment we are

in process of most delicate negotiations. He has immunity. How dare you question him.”

“So sorry,” said Masuto. “It simply happens that another representative of the Soviet Union was murdered in a city which employs me as the chief of its homicide division.”

“Peter Litovsky drowned. The kind of loose talk and thoughtless statements you just indulged in could have the most serious consequences.”

“Yes, he *was* drowned,” Masuto admitted. “He did not drown, he was drowned. There is a specific semantic difference. I would like you to note that, Mr. Clinton. I am not accustomed to loose or thoughtless statements.”

“Who the devil do you think you’re talking to, Masuto?”

“A federal agent. I’m quite aware of that. But you are in Beverly Hills in the State of California. The fact that Peter Litovsky was a Soviet intelligence agent makes him your problem. The fact that he was murdered in Beverly Hills makes him mine.”

“How do you know he was an intelligence agent?” Clinton demanded.

“I told him,” Wainwright said.

“Who gave you the right to? The information given to you was classified.”

“Masuto’s the head of Homicide. Beckman works with him. I felt they ought to know.”

“You felt?”

“That’s right. I felt. And what are you going to do about it, mister?”

“All right. I know the kind of people I’m dealing with. But let me tell you this, and these instructions come from the top. Litovsky drowned—an accidental death. That’s what the newspapers will print, and that’s what you will back up. And Mr. Gritchov will stand on the same ground.”

“All right,” Wainwright agreed. “We cooperate with the federal authorities. Frankly, I don’t give a damn what the newspapers print or what you tell them. But I do give a damn when people come into my city and murder, and as far as I am concerned, Litovsky was murdered and I intend to find out who did it.”

“We are taking over the investigation. I’ll expect your cooperation.”

"I'm honored," said Wainwright.

"We can do without the sarcasm. I'll see you later, Captain Wainwright."

He stalked out of the room, and Wainwright muttered, "That shithead. That miserable shithead." When Masuto and Beckman started to follow, he snapped, "Where are you two going?"

"To San Fernando."

"What for? The country air?"

"You don't need us, Captain. You have the whole F.B.I. working for you. In fact, you don't even have a crime. You have an accidental drowning."

"Don't get cute with me, Masao. I've had just about all I can take today."

"I think we're on to something—maybe."

"You don't want to tell me. I might know what's happening in this department if you did."

"I don't know myself. Something about some explosive that was ripped off in San Fernando a few days ago. I don't even know how it connects. I just have a feeling that it does."

"Why don't you call the San Fernando cops and talk to them?"

"I need the fresh air."

"The cutes. Everyone has them today. What about this Binnie Vance? Do you want us to find her and tell her?"

"I'd rather you didn't. I'd rather tell her myself. I'll do that tonight."

"For Christ's sake, Masao, her husband's dead."

"I imagine she knows that by now."

"Where do you think she is, in that new hotel downtown?"

"Probably."

"Well, we got to inform her. It's procedure. You know that."

"Right."

"When can I expect you back?"

"Two hours. No more than that."

As they walked out to Masuto's car, Beckman said to him, "I sure as hell admire your control, Masao. Maybe it's Oriental or something. That second-rate putz!"

"I try not to respond to fools."

“You know, Masao, these shmucks who work for the F.B.I., they get maybe double what we do.”

“I suppose I have heard that word a hundred times. Sy, just what is a shmuck?”

“It’s Yiddish for a flaccid penis.”

“And a putz?”

“Yiddish for an erect penis.”

“A remarkable language,” Masuto said thoughtfully.

5

THE RELIGIOUS MAN

People who have spent half their lives in Los Angeles are still unable to solve the jigsawlike relationship between the City of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles, and the dozens of independent communities that exist both within the city and within the county. Like Beverly Hills, the City of San Fernando is an independent community, but it lies in the San Fernando Valley, entirely surrounded by the City of Los Angeles, an arrangement that succumbs to reason only because it is factual. By freeway, it is some fourteen miles north of Beverly Hills, and all the way there, Masuto remained silent, lost in his own thoughts, grappling with a puzzle that was no more susceptible to reason than the civic arrangements that existed in Los Angeles County. Intermittently, he remembered that he had not called Kati to inquire about Ana's sore throat, and that caused him small twinges of guilt.

They were almost in San Fernando when Beckman, who knew Masuto well enough to respect his silences, asked where they were going, to the Felcher Company or to the cops?

"I imagine the company's closed for the day. We'll talk to the cops."

"Masao, this clown from the F.B.I., he never asked one word about Stillman."

“Perhaps no one told him.”

“That’s not very patriotic.”

“No, I guess it isn’t.”

“Masao, do you know any of the San Fernando cops?”

“I don’t think so.”

“There’s a fellow called Gonzales who used to be with the Hollywood Division. He switched to a better job with the San Fernando cops. I think he’s the chief of detectives or something like that.”

They turned off the freeway at San Fernando Road, and a few minutes later they parked at the police station, an old, battered building in the Spanish style. It was almost six o’clock now, but the summer sun was still high, and the shimmering valley heat was only now beginning to break. The cop at the desk told them that Lieutenant Gonzales was down the hall, second door to the right.

They knocked and entered. Gonzales, a heavy-set, dark-skinned man, had his feet up on the desk. He was smoking a cigar and reading a copy of *Playboy*. He grinned at Beckman and shook hands with Masuto.

“Still working for the rich?”

“The pay is regular,” Beckman said.

“What brings you up this way? I hear you run a busy little hotel down there, with a drowning and a murder.”

“Already?”

“The news gets around. What can I do for you?”

“Four days ago, someone broke into the Felcher Company and stole four ounces of lead azide. We’re curious.”

“Why?”

“The truth is, I don’t really know,” Masuto confessed. “We’re groping in the dark. We have a situation where nothing connects, and I’m trying to connect it. Maybe it’s a gut feeling more than anything else. What about this Felcher Company?”

“They’re a small outfit on the edge of town, a chemical company that specializes in detonator explosives.”

“Are they clean?”

“As clean as mother’s wash. If you’re gonna fault them on anything, it’s their security system. That stinks. They never had any

trouble, so they just coasted along on the proposition that they never would. Not even a night watchman.”

“How did it happen?”

“Someone snipped the padlock on the wire fence around the building and forced a window. No alarm system, would you believe that?”

“I’d believe it.”

“All that was taken were the four ounces of lead azide.”

“Just what is lead azide?” Masuto asked him. “I know it’s some kind of explosive, but what exactly? You don’t hear about it.”

“It’s a son of a bitch. The way it was explained to me, a detonator explosive is sensitive. It goes off easily. And this lead azide is nasty. According to the manager, even a contamination by dust could set it off. Just take a stone and let it drop on this lead azide—bang, off it goes.”

“And what could four ounces do?”

“Blow us out of this room. They tell me that they use a single grain for a detonator.”

“How much is a grain?” Beckman asked.

“Seven thousand in a pound, I think,” Masuto said.

“God almighty.”

“You know, they keep it in a sort of refrigerator, a temperature control room they call it. That’s locked too, and the door was jimmied. And down in the right-hand corner of the door, they scratched the same three letters, J.D.L. The kind of thing you might not even notice if you didn’t look. I couldn’t make head or tail of it, but one of the men at the plant had been reading about this Jewish Defense League, and so that’s how it got into the papers. Me, I just don’t believe in crooks that leave calling cards, and anyway we don’t have no Jewish Defense League here, and when the cops put out some inquiries in L.A., the people in that outfit were as indignant as hell. Funny thing, this stuff is never used as an explosive. The bomb squad in L.A., they don’t come up with anything either.”

“Any leads?”

“Absolutely nothing. Felcher’s a small outfit with only fourteen people working there, and they all come out clean.”

“Yet it had to be someone local.”

“We got only one thing in that direction, and it leads absolutely nowhere. They got nice landscaping in front of the plant and they use a Chicano gardener, name of Garcia. He’s an old guy, and lived here for years and clean, plain, quiet life, never been busted for anything. Every now and then he picks up a kid to help him, mostly Chicano kids. Two weeks ago, this guy asked for a few days’ work. Said he was broke and he’d work for ten dollars a day. He works out a day and then never shows again.”

“Any name?”

“He says his name is Frank. No last name, and Garcia didn’t push. About twenty years old, five seven or so, dark hair, dark skin, dark eyes, maybe a hundred and thirty pounds, and that’s it. No leads, no trace, nobody else seems to remember him. Yeah, he had an accent.”

“Spanish?”

“No. Not Oriental either. Garcia’s sure he wasn’t Spanish. Garcia heard him muttering to himself, and it wasn’t Spanish. You want to talk to Garcia?”

“No,” Masuto said after a moment. “I think you got everything there was to get. Anyway, I have an uncle who grows oranges near here, and I want to see him before it gets dark.”

“Toda Masuto? Is he your uncle?”

“You know him?”

“The real estate guys would like to put out a contract on him. He has some of the best land around. Say hello for me.”

The road to Toda Masuto’s neat white cottage was lined with orange and lemon trees, and when Masuto parked in front of the house, the little old man and his wife came out to greet Masuto and Beckman with a delight that their formality hardly concealed. When the bowing and the exchange of courtesies and the family inquiries were completed, Toda said, “Well, sonny, what brings you here?” He had been born in Japan, but he had only the faintest trace of an accent. Masuto had told Beckman that Toda was past seventy, but he was skinny and vigorous and worked in his groves every day. They sat at a small lawn table in front of the house. Mrs. Masuto had gone into the house and now emerged with a tray containing a teapot, cups

and cakes. Toda poured the tea, his eyes twinkling as he looked at the two men.

“Two detectives. Either you’ve come to arrest me, or the real estate trust hired you to beguile me off my land. May I say, with sincere apologies, such is not possible. So very sorry. The land remains in groves until we die. Then my unworthy son, who teaches physics at Stanford, may do with it as he pleases. However, I shall leave the house and two acres of land to your mother, who has always been my favorite sister-in-law.”

“That’s very generous of you, Uncle,” Masuto replied. “But I come merely to talk about oranges.”

“So?” Now he smiled. “You will stay a week perhaps?”

“All my apologies. A half hour at the most. Is the subject so complicated?”

“More than you might imagine. The history of the orange alone could consume hours of pleasant instruction.”

“I recognize the value of such instruction, and I have no desire to be disrespectful, and at another time I shall be honored to listen. For the moment, I seek only to know why the Soviet Union should send five agronomists to Southern California and to Florida to seek instruction in the art of growing oranges. Incidentally, the leader of the group is a Nobel Prize winner, by the name of Ilya Moskvich.”

“The answer is simple.”

“Oh?”

“The Russians do not know how to grow oranges.”

“They have sent spaceships to the moon.”

“Ah, so. Truly. They still do not know how to grow oranges.”

“I find that difficult to believe,” Masuto said respectfully.

“Naturally. You consider the growing of oranges to be a simple matter. You go into the supermarket, you select your fruit, and you buy it. Simple, no? No. In fact, there are only four places in the world where they understand oranges. Actually three. I include Spain, because they are very good at the Seville orange, which goes by the technical name of *aurentium*. That is the sour orange, which the English are so fond of for their marmalade. But we must also credit the Spanish for rootstock, excellent rootstock, and that is important. Because you see, nephew, all of the finest oranges are budded. This

is a process which you might think of as grafting. We select the most excellent strains and bud them onto proper rootstock. But actually the art of growing fine table oranges is confined to three countries—Japan, the United States, and Israel. In Japan they favor the mandarin orange, which they can for export. That, of course, is a generic name. There are many varieties. In Israel, they grow a fine large fruit, which is a variation of sorts on our navel orange, the unique table orange which is distinguished by the small fruit within the fruit. In Israel, as in America, they specialize in the sweet orange, Valencia, navel, pineapple, Washington, Hamlin, juice oranges in Florida, table oranges here in Southern California—those are our favorite varieties, excluding of course the native mandarins—”

Masuto and Beckman exchanged glances hopelessly, and now Masuto seized his opportunity, “Of course, Uncle.”

“Ah, so. A new note of respect?”

“Yes. Oh, yes,” Masuto admitted.

“If I were to hold forth on rootstock alone, we could be here until midnight—for instance, the miracle whereby the rootstock of the sour orange increases the sugar content of the sweet orange that is budded upon it.”

“I am certain.”

“Or the means by which the Japanese raise oranges in a climate hardly suited to them.”

“I look forward to that, but not today. I am interested in the Russians.”

“Ah, so, I forget that you are a policeman. Well, what I said to you is a fact. I have spoken to growers who have been to the Soviet Union, invited there, as a matter of fact. The Russians are desperately eager to grow good oranges in the Crimea. They used to import oranges from Israel, but now they are very angry at each other. Why the Russians do not have a talent for this, I don’t know. I have met few Russians. I know that it is difficult to say anything kind about the Russians, but in one way they are superior to us.”

“And what is that way, Uncle?”

“They treasure their agronomists. They are among their most honored citizens. So if they sent five agronomists here, headed by this Nobel Prize man, then they are very serious about oranges.”

Mrs. Masuto, who had sat quietly, replenishing teacups throughout the recitation, now smiled with pleasure and informed them that they must stay for dinner.

"I am so sorry," Masuto said. "I am devastated. Accept my most humble apologies. But it would be impossible. We must return to Beverly Hills."

In the car, driving south, Beckman complained about Masuto's refusal of the dinner offer. "I'm starved, Masao, and anyway I'm crazy about Japanese food."

"It might have been roast ham, and if we had not stayed for an hour after the meal, it would have been a breach of courtesy."

"Well, the old man certainly knows his oranges. Why were we there, Masao?"

"Just a notion."

"Goddamn, I'd like to have an acre of that land waiting for me when I retire. It's pure gold. Well, your mother gets two acres, but you're out in the cold."

"Oh, not at all. There are two acres for me in his will."

"Then why didn't he mention it?"

"It would have been most discourteous and thoughtless. It would have placed me in the position of a greedy nephew who desired his death. No, he couldn't possibly mention it."

"That's one way to look at it," Beckman admitted.

Masuto drove on in silence for a while, and then he asked, apropos of nothing, "Are you a religious man, Sy?"

"What?"

"I mean, since you're Jewish, you might belong to a synagogue."

"That's another matter entirely. You got kids, they got to have a bar mitzvah. It's a matter of teaching. Religious? Well, we go on the High Holy Days. I ought to go more often, but you know the way it is."

"Then you belong to a synagogue?"

"I belong. Why?"

"I'd like to talk to a rabbi. How about the rabbi at your place? Would he talk to me?"

"He'll talk to anyone. You ever see a rabbi who didn't like to talk?"

"Where's the synagogue?"

"On La Cienega, south of Wilshire."

“Would he be there now, or at home?”

“Let’s see—today’s Thursday, and if I remember that’s the sisterhood night. They meet at eight, so he should be back at the synagogue by seven-thirty. It’s just seven now. What do you want to talk to him about?”

“Jews.”

“Why don’t you talk to me?”

“I thought I’d get an expert opinion.”

“I figured maybe you wanted to be converted. You know, its a thing in Japan now. I was reading how a whole group of Japanese went and settled in Israel. You know, they tell the story about the Jewish tourist. Wherever he went, he’d look up the local synagogue. So he comes to Tokyo and he looks up the local synagogue and goes to the Friday night service. When the service is over, he goes up to the rabbi, tells him he’s a Jew from New York. The rabbi looks at him and says, ‘That’s funny. You don’t look Jewish.’”

He waited. “You’re not laughing,” he said to Masuto.

“I appreciate it.”

“Maybe you didn’t get the point. You see, the rabbi was Japanese, and when he looks at this guy—”

“I got the point.”

“But you’re not laughing.”

“I told you, Sy, I appreciate it.”

“Maybe it’s a question of a Jewish sense of humor—” Beckman began, and Masuto burst out laughing. “Now what’s funny about that?”

It was just a few minutes after seven-thirty when they reached the synagogue. “You know, my wife’s going to be here,” Beckman said, “and the kids are at home raising hell by themselves, and she hasn’t seen me since three o’clock in the morning when the captain woke me up, and she’s going to burn my ass, so let’s get out of here before eight by a side door or something, and anyway I am half asleep, and God almighty if I get woken up tonight, I quit this lousy job.”

They were told that the rabbi was in his study. They walked through the foyer of the synagogue and down a hallway, and Beckman opened the door for Masuto. It was a pleasant room, walls

lined with books, a desk, and behind the desk a round-faced man with glasses. He rose as they entered. "Seymour," he said to Beckman, "this is a nice surprise."

"Seymour?" Masuto whispered.

"This is Detective Sergeant Masuto," Beckman said hastily. "Rabbi Schineberg."

"Sit down," the rabbi said, indicating two chairs on either side of his desk. "Masuto. Nisei, yes?"

Masuto nodded.

"Beverly Hills police. Interesting. We're becoming civilized. What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"He wants an expert opinion about Jews," Beckman said sourly.

"Then you shouldn't come to me. I'm totally biased. I like Jews. That's how I earn my living."

"The fact is," Masuto said, "that I want to talk to you about the Jewish Defense League."

"I understand them but I don't approve of them," the rabbi said unhappily. "They're the result of history, and in my opinion, they're most often misguided."

"You can take the rabbi's word for that," Beckman said.

"You know members of the organization personally?"

"Some of them."

"What do they stand for, Rabbi? What is their purpose?"

"You know that they believe in militant action—for the most part in favor of easing Soviet emigration standards for the Jews who wish to leave. They hold on to the memory of the holocaust of World War Two, the slaughter of six million Jews, as their central focus, and they believe that only by their militant and sometimes, unfortunately, irresponsible protests can they be effective."

"How militant?"

"Well, I'm sure you've read reports in the newspapers."

"Tell me this—do you believe that members of this organization could take part in a cold-blooded, premeditated murder?"

"No! Absolutely not!"

"Why not?"

"It's unthinkable. I know so many of them. They're hotheaded, excitable, but premeditated murder—no."

“What about you, Sy?” he asked Beckman.

“You wanted an expert opinion.”

“I got it. Give me your nonexpert opinion.”

“I agree with the rabbi.”

“Rabbi,” said Masuto, “do you have a colleague in Las Vegas who is a personal friend of yours?”

“That’s an odd question. It happens that I do. Rabbi Bealson at the Conservative Temple in Las Vegas is an old friend.”

“Well, I have a request as odd as the question, and I would not make it except that I am very tired and trying to prevent something from happening that could be very terrible, and without knowing what I am trying to prevent or what will happen.”

The rabbi thought about it for a long moment, and then asked, “How do you know it will be very terrible?”

“Because I have been a policeman for many years, and because I learned to sense things. That’s not a very good answer, is it?”

“Tell me something, Sergeant Masuto, are you a Christian or a Buddhist, or perhaps simply a person without any particular faith, as so many are these days?”

“I am a Zen Buddhist.”

“Interesting. What is your request?”

“I would like you to call your friend in Las Vegas and ask him whether he knows a man, a booking agent, named Jack Stillman.”

“Why should he know him?”

“Stillman lives in Las Vegas. I think he’s Jewish.”

“Still, Las Vegas is a large place. It seems a most peculiar request.”

“If you feel it’s out of line—” Masuto spread his hands.

Both Beckman and the rabbi stared at Masuto for a few moments. Then the rabbi consulted his desk directory, found the number he wanted, and dialed it.

“Rabbi Bealson, please,” he said. And a moment later, “Larry, this is Hy Schineberg in Los Angeles.” Pause. “Yes, too long. But you’ll have to make it here. My congregation watches me too carefully for me to get away to Vegas.” Pause. “No, I’m calling at the request of an interesting policeman. Do you happen to know a Jack Stillman? He lives in Vegas and he’s a booking agent.” Now the rabbi listened.

“Now that is odd, very odd indeed. Thank you, Larry.” Pause. “Soon, I trust.”

He put down the telephone and stared at Masuto, smiling slightly. “Well, Sergeant Masuto, the world is full of interesting coincidences.”

“I don’t think that what you are going to tell me is a coincidence.”

“Do you know what I am going to tell you?”

“I can guess. I would probably be wrong.”

“All right, let’s see. First of all, Jack Stillman is Jewish. He is not a member of Rabbi Bealson’s congregation, although he was, very briefly, when he married his first wife, whom he recently divorced. Shall I continue, or would you like to guess?”

“Would one of you please tell me what this is all about?” Beckman demanded.

Masuto liked the rabbi. A part of Masuto’s life was a game, and he had the feeling that the rabbi understood this particular game.

“Let me guess. Stillman was connected with the Jewish Defense League.”

“A theatrical booking agent? Wouldn’t that be a strange connection?”

“Perhaps.”

“You’re an interesting man, yes indeed. The fact is that about a year ago, some J.D.L. youngsters came to Stillman, and he gave them five hundred dollars. It was not a secret. I mean, it was nothing that Stillman attempted to hide, so I violate no confidence. Rabbi Bealson happened to hear about it. He also told me that recently Stillman married an exotic dancer—I think that’s the term—whose name is Binnie Vance. She was one of his clients, and she was apparently well known in certain circles.”

Beckman was staring at Masuto, his mouth open.

“Is something wrong, Seymour?” the rabbi asked.

“I’ll be damned,” Beckman said slowly.

“Did he say anything in particular about this Binnie Vance?” Masuto asked.

“No, except that she is an exotic dancer. He did say that Stillman was the last man you would expect to support the J.D.L., but you can never tell about Jews. Could I ask you why you are so interested in Jack Stillman, Sergeant, or is it none of my business?”

Beckman looked at Masuto, who nodded slightly. “He was shot to death this morning,” Beckman said. “In his room at the Beverly Glen Hotel.”

“Oh, I didn’t know. I’m so sorry. What an awful thing—and how terrible for his new wife.”

“I should have told you before,” Masuto said. “I didn’t mean to make light of it.”

6

THE EXOTIC WOMAN

It was a quarter after eight when they reached the station house in Beverly Hills. Beckman checked in and then went home to sleep. Wainwright had left for the night. Masuto telephoned his wife.

“How’s Ana?” he asked.

“She’s fine. Her throat seems to be better. Should I send her to school tomorrow, Masao?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“I’m glad you said that. There’s only a few days of school left before the summer vacation, and she loves to go to school. Will you be coming home now?”

“Not now, I’m afraid. Later.”

“How much later? Masao, you hardly slept. Have you had dinner?”

“Yes,” he lied.

“I watched the television news about that awful thing that happened at the Beverly Glen Hotel. Please be careful.”

“I’m always careful. You know that, Kati.”

Frank Cooper was in charge of the plainclothes night shift, and Masuto asked him whether Wainwright had found Binnie Vance.

“She’s staying at the Ventura. She opens there tomorrow.”

“I know that. Did he reach her?”

“She’s opening the Arabian Room, first show on the opening night, and this got to happen. You know what I hear, I hear there’s big Arab money in the Ventura, but that could be a crock. You don’t hear of nothing these days except that there’s big Arab money in it. I don’t care how much loot these Saudis got, they can’t own everything.”

“What I want to know,” Masuto said patiently, “is whether she was informed of her husband’s death.”

“Yeah, according to the captain.”

“What was her reaction?”

“Damned if I know. I didn’t talk to her.”

“What about the Stillman case? Anything new?”

“Nope. But that F.B.I. guy, Clinton, he was here about an hour ago and sore as hell because he couldn’t reach you. According to him, you should have been sitting here waiting for him. They’re cute, those cookies. He wants you at the Feds’ office downtown at eleven tomorrow. He was pissed off because you never mentioned Stillman to him. He wanted to know what kind of idiots we were not to think of a connection between the drowned man and Stillman, especially when the call came from Stillman’s room in the hotel.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him I was a stranger here myself, and that I don’t get to work until six o’clock. Anyway, he wants you to bring everything you got on the case with you tomorrow. I guess he don’t have a high opinion of the Beverly Hills police.”

Masuto left the station house and drove downtown. He took Santa Monica Boulevard to Melrose Avenue, and from there he turned south on the Hollywood Freeway. The Ventura Hotel was clearly visible as he approached the downtown area, and Masuto reflected that it was indeed an incredible building. It consisted of four round towers, like four turrets of some ancient castle, with the body of the hotel seemingly suspended in the center; but the towers were of glass, shining in the night, with outside elevators crawling up and down the glass surface like black beetles. Improbable anyplace, the building was even more improbable here in this earthquake country, and Masuto wondered, as he had so often in the past, at the insistence of engineers and architects that the new Los Angeles be built mostly of glass. The hotel was part of a complex of new

skyscrapers that had risen out of the clearance of some of the worst slums in the city, sitting on a hill that had once been climbed by a cable car known as Angel's Flight.

The hotel, still minus the finishing touches of construction, was open to the public, the Arabian Room being the first of its large dining and entertainment rooms to open. The lobby of the new hotel was crowded. It was the end of June, and already the tourist flow into Los Angeles had begun.

Masuto went to the desk and asked for the number of Binnie Vance's room.

"She's not there," the desk clerk said. "Miss Vance is rehearsing in the Arabian Room."

"Where is the Arabian Room?"

The clerk looked at Masuto, a tall, long-limbed, tired Japanese man, hatless, tieless—and shook his head firmly.

"No, sir. It's not open to the public."

Masuto showed his badge.

"That's Beverly Hills—"

"You want the Los Angeles cops?" Masuto snapped. "I'll have them here in the lobby in five minutes, if that's what you want. I want to talk to Miss Vance about her husband. Now use your head."

"About her husband. Yes, sir. Terrible thing. You go up the escalator at the left. You'll see the sign."

"Thank you."

He had almost lost his temper. The day was too long, and he was tiring, and it was no good for a policeman to tire. It was only eighteen hours since Wainwright had awakened him, but it seemed to Masuto that days had been compressed into that time. He had not tasted food since the lunchtime sandwich in his office, and he desperately desired a hot bath, steaming hot, and after that thirty or forty minutes of quiet meditation where he could look into himself and turn away from a world that was at best half mad. Well, very soon now.

There was the Arabian Room, and Masuto wondered why in this day and age in America a hotel would establish a nightclub so named, unless, indeed, there was Arab money invested in the hotel. Certainly it would not surprise him, but then, he reflected, very little surprised him these days.

He pushed open one of the double doors and entered. The room was shaped like a slice of pie, three tiers of tables sloping downward, with the stage where the point of the slice would be. The dominant colors in the decor were red, black, and silver, with tassels, crescent moon, and paired scimitars as a motif. In a pit between the tables and the stage, a four-piece orchestra played. Three men sat at one of the tables, and on the stage a woman in a body stocking undulated to the rhythm of the music. She moved slowly and sensuously, every movement controlled, calculated, exaggerated for the utmost sensual effect.

One of the three men at the table saw Masuto, rose, and walked back to the entrance where the detective stood watching.

“We’re closed, mister,” he said to Masuto. “We don’t open until tomorrow. And tomorrow we’re sold out.” He was a large, fat man with an unlit cigar clamped in his teeth.

“Who are you?”

“I’m the manager. Who are you?”

Masuto took out his badge. “Detective Sergeant Masuto. I have to talk to Miss Vance about what happened at the Beverly Glen Hotel this morning.”

The man’s tone changed. “Look, Officer, Miss Vance knows all about what happened in Beverly Hills this morning. It knocked the crap out of her, but she took it. Don’t make her take any more of it. Not tonight.”

“The show must go on and all that?”

“You’re damn right, and thank God she’s a trouper. We put out twenty thousand dollars’ worth of advertising on this opening—TV spots, radio spots, and the press. We’re sold out for three shows, and believe me, they ain’t coming to see no Arabian Room. They’re coming to see Binnie do her belly dance.”

As if taking the cue, one of the two men at the table down front stood up and called out, “Okay, Binnie, that does it for the opening. We’ll take a few bars of the belly dance and then we’ll wrap it up.”

She had come down to the edge of the stage, and both Masuto and the manager turned to watch her. She was not a tall woman, but she had a full, voluptuous figure—without being fat or even plump.

She had brown hair that fell to her shoulders. Masuto thought her eyes might be green; at this distance, he was not certain.

“Stillman didn’t hurt it none. Just more publicity. It adds up, like a snowball rolling downhill.”

“I’m sure Stillman is grateful for that.”

“What is it, Officer? You got a bone to pick? The kid’s trying to turn a buck. She pays her own way. So lay off her.”

“What’s your name, manager?” Masuto asked coldly.

“Peterson.”

Binnie Vance was doing the belly dance now. Watching her, Masuto said, “Well, Mr. Peterson, I’m here to talk to Mrs. Stillman. I intend to. So when she’s finished, you will go over and tell her that.”

“Who the hell do you think you are, mister? In the first place, you’re a Beverly Hills cop—”

“Just knock that off, Mr. Peterson. If you knew the law, you would know that I can go anywhere in this county in the investigation of a crime. Now I am provoked and I am tired, so if you interfere with me in any way, I’ll pull you in for impeding the investigation of a crime.”

“You wouldn’t—”

“I would.”

The music finished. Binnie Vance came down from the stage, and Masuto saw her talking to the two men who had remained at the table. Peterson walked down the aisle and joined them. He pointed to Masuto. They talked softly, too softly for Masuto to hear what they were saying, and then one of the two men who had remained at the table raised his voice.

“Bullshit! You don’t have to say one goddamn word to him!”

Binnie Vance tossed her head, the hair flowing around her shoulders; she picked up a light coat from a chair, and walked up the aisle toward Masuto. The three men watched her but didn’t move.

“You’re the Beverly Hills cop?” she said to Masuto, a faint, almost undefinable accent in her voice.

“That’s right, Mrs. Stillman. Detective Sergeant Masuto. I’m the chief of homicide in Beverly Hills.”

“Call me Miss Vance. I was Miss Vance a few weeks ago. Now I’m Miss Vance again. I didn’t have time to get used to the other one.” There was a bitter edge in her voice. It was not a sweet voice. It

rasped, and Masuto decided that she had been wise to choose dancing.

“Very well. Miss Vance.”

“How about a drink? I need one.”

“That would be fine.”

“Can a cop drink on duty?”

“I’ll go off duty when we start drinking. I’ve had a long day.” She noticed small things, Masuto decided. She was an alert woman. He also realized that her eyes were green, an unusually vivid green.

“There’s a bar on the main floor,” she said, and when they were on the escalator, she said to him, “Help me on with my coat. You don’t walk around here in a body stocking.”

He held the coat for her.

“What do you think of this place?”

“Interesting.”

“L.A. is the pits for me, but this place gets to me. I like it. It’s wild.”

Masuto nodded.

“You don’t agree?”

“Well, as I said, it’s interesting.”

“That’s a pissy word. They want to knock an act, they say it’s interesting. Here’s the bar. You want a table?”

“If you don’t mind,” Masuto said.

He led her to a table in a corner. It was not a very active bar at this hour. “What will you have?” he asked her.

“A cognac.”

He motioned to a waiter, and ordered two cognacs. She was studying him curiously, a slight smile on her lips. Her lips were rather thin, and she wore no makeup, no lip rouge. The dark skin was sunburned, the underside of her chin much lighter. She was pretty, he admitted to himself, and then revised the thought. Handsome was a better word. Her face was square rather than round, with sloping, flat cheeks and a square chin.

“What are you?” she asked. “Chinese? Japanese? Korean? I hear L.A. is lousy with Koreans.”

“Nisei,” he replied.

“Nisei?”

“That means my parents were born in Japan.”

“Then you’re a Jap,” she said, making the remark deliberately and provocatively.

“If you wish to think of me that way,” Masuto agreed, unperturbed. The waiter returned and set down the two brandies. Masuto raised his glass.

“To you, Mr. Japanese detective,” she said.

“And since we are being ethnic, what are you, Miss Vance?”

“What do you mean, what am I?”

“You weren’t born in this country.”

“How do you know that?”

“By your accent.”

“I don’t have an accent.”

“Ah, but you do,” Masuto said gently. “Ever so slight.”

“All right. I was born in Germany. I left at the age of fourteen, but I thought my English was near perfect.”

“It is,” Masuto agreed approvingly.

“Why don’t you stop being such a hotshot superior Oriental and say what you’re thinking?”

“And what am I thinking?”

“That I must be a completely heartless bitch to be sitting here and talking like this and not shedding one damn tear a few hours after my husband was killed.”

“No.”

“No what?”

“That’s not what I was thinking. I was thinking what an extraordinarily beautiful set of movements you went through up there on the stage. You’re a remarkable dancer.”

She paused, swallowed the retort that was on her lips, and stared at him. “Thanks.”

“I meant it.”

“Okay, but let’s get one thing straight. I wasn’t in love with Jack Stillman. All right, I didn’t hate him, but I didn’t love him. Now he’s dead and I’m alive. What should I do? Wrap myself in mourning? I don’t have to lie to anyone.”

“Not even to me,” Masuto agreed. “Why did you marry him?”

“Can I have another brandy?”

Masuto motioned to the waiter. She sat in silence, playing with her half-empty glass until the waiter put down the second brandy. Then she finished the first, dipped her finger in the second one and licked it off.

“You wouldn’t understand,” she said.

“Try me.”

“You know what I got for dancing last week at the Sands?”

“I can’t imagine.”

“Fifteen grand. For five performances. Fifteen thousand dollars. Before I met Jack Stillman in Vegas, I did club dates and lousy stag affairs for peanuts.”

“And he was responsible—for your success?”

“He booked me, and he gave me an image. I can’t deny that.”

“Then you owed him a good deal?”

“So he owed me. It works both ways. He took fifteen percent off the top and expenses.”

“And that’s why you married him, because he was responsible for your success?”

“I was responsible for my success, Buster, make damn sure of that. Anyway, I don’t have to explain to you why I married Jack Stillman. I had my reasons. I married him.”

“No, you don’t have to explain. By the way, Miss Vance, when did you leave Las Vegas?”

“This morning. On the eight o’clock plane.”

“One day of rehearsal here? Is that enough? I don’t know much about such things.”

“With that combo in there, it’s enough. They’re good.”

“Do you have your ticket?”

“What do you mean, my ticket?”

“Your airplane ticket.”

“No, I threw it away.”

“You know, Miss Vance, we can check the passenger list.”

“I’m afraid not. I came in on Vegas West. It’s a shuttle service. Anyway, what the hell is this? You said when you drink that you’re off duty. When you come right down to it, I don’t have to answer any questions.”

"I only thought it might be easier if you did, here. It's a convenient place for you. It would be tiring to go up to Beverly Hills. By the way, did you know that your husband was staying at the Beverly Glen Hotel?"

"Of course I did. He always stays there."

"But I should think that with you opening here, he would stay at the Ventura. As you are."

"He hated downtown L.A. Anyway, I like to be alone when I'm dancing."

"Do you have any notion who might have shot him?"

"No. None."

"Did he have enemies?"

"A man like Jack, well, what do you think? But not to kill him." She stood up suddenly. "Excuse me for a moment." And she walked off, pausing only to exchange a few words with the waiter.

The moment her back was turned, Masuto took out his handkerchief, folded it carefully around the brandy glass, and slipped the glass into his jacket pocket. The waiter came to the table and said, "The lady won't be back. She's tired. And by the way, we don't give away our glasses."

"It's a memento," Masuto said. He gave the waiter ten dollars. "Keep the change."

"Keep the memento," the waiter said.

Masuto walked into the lobby of the hotel, dropped into a chair, and looked at his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. A long, long day. He turned it over in his mind, trying to remember the events of the day and put them into proper sequence. It was Beckman who caught the piece in the paper about the Russian agronomists. No one else had mentioned them. Was it a three-day visit or a four-day visit that they were making to Southern California? According to Toda Masuto, three days were hardly enough to scratch the surface of the art of orange growing. The Russians could build spaceships, but they couldn't grow oranges. Americans could grow oranges better than anyone in the world, but they couldn't keep their cities from disintegrating. It occurred to him that he had told Beckman to find the agronomists, but then the thing happened to Jack Stillman and they were all there, Beckman and the others, and both he and Beckman

forgot about the agronomists. It was a crowded, disorganized day, and that was his fault. He had gone off on a wild goose chase to San Fernando, because someone had stolen some lead azide. Why? What sense did it make? The whole country, no, the whole world was bomb crazy. It had been in his mind all the time. Why hadn't he simply told Beckman to look in the papers for the makings of a bomb? Was it true, he asked himself, that he liked to be mysterious, or was there an undercurrent in his thoughts that he himself was hardly aware of?

He looked up, and there, standing in front of him, was Binnie Vance. She had changed into a yellow pants suit.

"Hello, cop," she said to him.

"I thought you were tired."

"You were the tired one." She dropped into a chair next to him. "I was kind of pissy with you, wasn't I?"

Masuto shrugged.

"I gave you the impression that I didn't give one damn about Jack. That isn't true."

"Oh?"

"You know anything about Vegas?"

"A little."

"Jack lived in Vegas fourteen years. He was an operator, and he spent a lot of time in the casinos. That's why he never had a nickel. When you got a crush on the crap tables, you got an expensive habit."

"I suppose so."

"You don't spend all those years like that and not get mixed up with the Mob."

"And was Stillman mixed up with the Mob?" Masuto asked indifferently.

"He was."

"And you think the Mob put out a contract on him and had him shot?"

"It's happened."

"If that's the case, that's pretty much the end of it."

"What do you mean?"

“Those kind of killings—well, for the most part, they’re never solved.”

“You mean you don’t care about solving them.”

“No, we care.” He stood up. “Why? Had he run up a score at the tables? Was he a big loser?”

She shrugged. “That’s the last thing he’d talk to me about.”

“But you’d know. He was your husband.”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you ever hear of the Jewish Defense League?”

“What?”

“The J.D.L., they’re called.”

“Should I?”

“Your husband was Jewish. You knew that.”

She stared at him without speaking.

“You’re not Jewish, are you?”

“If it’s any of your damn business, no!”

“Well, good night,” Masuto said.

7

THE QUIET WOMAN

“In one day,” Kati said, “you are everywhere. You see the whole world.”

“Not really the whole world, dear Kati.” Masuto was steaming in the hot bath he had looked forward to all day, and Kati sat by the tub with two thick white towels in her lap. She was glad that her husband, who was so very American in so many ways, was at least old-fashioned enough to make a sort of ritual out of his bath.

“Only San Fernando and downtown Los Angeles.”

“Only San Fernando. That’s well enough for you to say. Do you know how long it is since I have been to San Fernando? What can your Uncle Toda think of me?”

“That you are an excellent wife and a devoted mother. What else should he think?”

“That I am an uncaring niece.”

“What nonsense!”

“Anyway, I can’t understand what took you there. What has Uncle Toda to do with these terrible things that happened at the Beverly Glen Hotel?”

“I had to know why the Russians would send five agronomists to Southern California to study orange growing.”

"I could have told you that."

"You could have?"

"Of course. They don't know how to grow oranges. That's all."

"Kati," Masuto said, "you are a remarkable woman."

"I see nothing remarkable about that. It's only common sense."

"When you're a policeman long enough, you tend to forget about common sense."

"Yes."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You never took me to the Ventura Hotel. It's a place that tourists come to see from all over the country, but you never took me there. You're very fine about such things when you're out doing your work, but as far as I am concerned all you desire is an old-fashioned Japanese wife."

"You're not Japanese. You're American."

He stood up, and she opened the towel for him, admiring his strong, long-limbed body. "That's well enough for you to say, but you don't want an American wife."

"That's true. I want you."

"And of course you are too tired to do anything but say that." She covered her mouth, to show a proper exhibition of embarrassment. Then she giggled.

"Too tired!"

"What was she like?"

"What was who like?"

"Turn around, and I will dry your back. That woman you took to the Ventura Hotel."

"For heaven's sake, I didn't take her there. She was there. She's living there. She's performing there."

"Ah, so?"

"You never hear anything I tell you. You just don't listen."

"That's because you only tell me what you want me to know. Did you go to her room?"

"No. What on earth would I do that for?"

"She's a dancer," Kati said smugly. "You see, I do listen to you."

"She's not a woman I would want to have anything to do with."

“Ah, so. And what kind of women do you desire to have something to do with?”

“Kati, this is not like you.”

“You see, I have changed. And you still haven’t answered me. I asked you what she was like.”

“She’s well masked.”

“You mean when she dances?”

“No, I mean in the Zen sense.”

“You know I don’t understand the Zen sense, whatever that means.”

“I would not like to have this woman as my enemy.”

“Perhaps you already do,” Kati said lightly. “I think, Masao, that you know women less well than you imagine. You think all women are good.”

“Only compared to men. Anyway, I do not like to judge, and good is really a meaningless word. Tell me about Ana. Is her throat better?”

“It’s still scratchy. I think I’ll keep her home tomorrow. She can play in the sunshine in the garden, and one more day out of school won’t hurt. It’s better than medicine. Can you imagine paying a doctor twenty dollars for a house call?”

Masuto considered telling Kati that he had just spent ten dollars for three brandies, and then he thought better of it.

“I’ll meditate a little now—only for ten or fifteen minutes.”

“Oh—will you? Then I am sure I’ll be asleep.”

“Then I’ll meditate in the morning,” he replied, smiling. “You see who is the master here.”

“I see that you spent the evening with an exotic dancer, whatever that may be—something nasty, I’m sure.” She began to giggle, covering her mouth with both hands.

Masuto was awake at six o’clock, refreshed and rested. He put on his saffron robe, leaving Kati still asleep, and went into the living room to meditate. He had often thought of how pleasant it would be to have a small room, walls painted ivory, with no furniture other than a grass mat and a single black meditation pillow, but for a police sergeant with two small children that was impossible. He had a fleeting thought of the two acres that his Uncle Toda would certainly

leave him, but he cast that aside. It was an unworthy thought, and in any case, Uncle Toda would probably live for ninety-five useful years.

The meditation took hold. He was alive without moving, listening without hearing, focused entirely on the even rise and fall of his breath. Somewhere, Kati's alarm clock sounded, and then there was the laughter and the muted sounds of the children. As the meditation ended, the room had begun to fill with the delicious smell of crisp, fried bacon.

He ate an enormous breakfast, three eggs, bacon, and two of the fish cakes which Kati had saved from the night before, washed down with two cups of coffee. With Ana protesting against being kept out of school and with the boy dashing through the door to meet the school bus and with Kati glowing in a lovely pink and green kimono, it appeared to be the most normal of days in the most normal of worlds, and Masuto reflected that although his work now and then took Turn into the depths of a nightmare, he was nevertheless the most fortunate of men.

With that kind of glowing thought, he could not resist the temptation to spend at least fifteen minutes in his rose garden. There he found chafers, which must be removed, one by one by hand. Chafers—and he was already late. Groaning, he abandoned the roses and went out to his car. It took him awhile to get his mind off the subject of chafers and onto the curious jigsaw puzzle of the previous day.

Beckman was already in the office when Masuto arrived, his feet on his desk, drinking coffee from a container and eating a piece of Danish pastry.

"Sy, you remember yesterday I told you to catch up with the agronomists?"

"Yeah, but then Stillman got himself scragged, and we never caught up with anything. Anyway, it says here in the *Times* that they're pulling out on the five o'clock flight for Miami."

"And what about the clothes?"

"What clothes? You want some of this Danish?" Beckman asked him.

"No, it's poison. The Russian's clothes. The drowned man."

“Yeah, that. I called Fred Comstock this morning as soon as I got in. He hasn’t turned anything up.”

“He wouldn’t.”

“Right. He’s a living proof that the body can survive after the brain dies. What difference do the clothes make now, Masao? We know who he is.”

“I don’t give a damn about the clothes. It’s where they were hidden and why they were hidden.”

“They’ll turn up.”

“Perhaps. Sy, get Sweeney in here, will you, and tell him to bring whatever he has.”

Small, skinny, truculent, Sweeney watched Masuto carefully remove the brandy glass from his handkerchief.

“Going to offer me a drink, Sergeant?”

Masuto grinned at Sweeney. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“Why the hell are you being polite to me?”

“I am always polite to you,” Masuto said.

“You,” said Sweeney, “are why I don’t miss a confession, so I can tell the priest that I dream of cutting your throat. You would abolish me. You are the clown who is always telling the press that fingerprints are a crock. Now you want favors.”

“I have seen the light,” Masuto said humbly.

“That’ll be the day.”

“Sweeney,” Masuto said, “I admire you. You are the most professional part of this department. Even the L.A. cops downtown say that you’re better than anyone they have.”

“Bullshit.”

“Ask Beckman.”

“That’s right,” said Beckman. “That’s what they say.”

“Well, goddamn it, I know my business.”

“I know you do. Now tell me, did you find anything in Stillman’s room that matches up with what the L.A. cops took off the yellow Cadillac?”

Sweeney grinned.

“You did?”

“Kind of surprised, aren’t you?”

“What did you get?”

“One print. Second finger, I think. But both of them are good, clear prints and they match.”

“Good. Good. Maybe the right hand?”

“I think so.”

“Great. Now take this glass, and see if you can come up with another print that matches the two you have. It’s a possibility.”

Sweeney nodded. “You think you’re on to something?”

“If I am, I’m going to credit you big, Sweeney. I mean that.”

“Just show respect, Masao. That’s all I ask.”

“You have it. Now listen, Sweeney, do the L.A. cops have a machine that can transmit prints to Interpol?”

“If it’s a machine, they got it.”

“They can send pictures,” Beckman said, “so they can send prints.”

“What else did you pick up in the room that isn’t Stillman’s or the chambermaid’s?”

“I got three good ones,” Sweeney said.

“Put them through to Interpol, and all of them to Washington. The matching set, the car and the room—put them through to the New York cops and to Chicago. But all of them to Interpol, and all of them to Washington.”

“That’s going to cost a bundle, Masao, and you know how the L.A. cops are. They want a guarantee that they’re going to get paid.”

“Get an authorization from Wainwright.”

“He’s not here,” said Beckman. “He went downtown this morning to meet with the Feds. He said to remind you that the G-man wants you to bring all the records on the case down there at eleven o’clock.”

“Get the authorization. I’ll sign it myself.”

When Sweeney had left to get the authorization, Beckman said to Masuto, “What’s this all about, Masao?”

“A lot of wild guesses. I could put them together, but what would it mean? I still have nothing.”

“Whose hand was around that brandy glass?”

“Binnie Vance’s.”

“You don’t say.” He looked at Masuto with new respect. “When did you see her?”

“Last night at the Ventura Hotel. Would you believe it, ten dollars for three brandies?”

“Is she all they say?”

“She is.”

“And you think she killed Stillman?”

“If she did, I’d like to know why.”

“She only just married him. That’s a quick turnoff.”

Sweeney came back with the authorization. Masuto signed it and then said to Sweeney, “Would you do me a favor?”

“Now that you seen the light, yes.”

“Stop off at the Ventura Hotel on your way downtown. There’s a man called Peterson who runs the Arabian Room, or if you don’t find him, there must be a P.R. office for the hotel. Tell them you want a picture of Binnie Vance, and then have the L.A. cops put it through with the fingerprints.”

“To all them places?”

“We might as well.”

“Wainwright’s going to yell like hell.”

“If he’s going to have murders, it’s got to cost,” said Beckman.

“Put it through to the cops in Bonn in Germany too. We might as well go the whole hog.”

“You’re the boss, Masao.”

“You got him eating out of your hand,” said Beckman, after Sweeney had gone. “Did the L.A. cops really say that about Sweeney?”

“I stretched it.”

“Well, they won’t tell him. It’s nine-thirty, Masao. What do you want me to do while you’re down there with the Feds?”

“Find Litovsky’s clothes.”

“I’ll give it a try. You think this Binnie Vance, being an exotic dancer and hotheaded and full of piss and vinegar, comes into Stillman’s room and finds him with that big blond hooker and loses all her cool and kills him?”

“Stillman was shaving. That doesn’t sound very passionate.”

“You think maybe Stillman invented the hooker?”

“Maybe.”

“Funny, in a place like the Beverly Glen Hotel, you don’t have to invent. You just reach out and take. So no hooker. Who was in the room and made the call, Binnie Vance?”

“Maybe. She claims she flew in from Las Vegas yesterday morning.”

The telephone rang. Beckman picked it up, listened for a moment, and then passed it to Masato.

“Masao?” It was Kati’s voice, high-pitched, uncontrolled.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Ana’s gone!”

“Kati, get hold of yourself! What do you mean, Ana’s gone?”

“She isn’t here. She’s gone.”

“Where was she?”

“In the garden. She was there playing with her doll, Masao. Then I turned away for a few minutes. I went into the kitchen—” Her voice broke, and she began to sob.

“Kati! Kati, get hold of yourself!”

“I shouldn’t have left her alone. I looked out of the kitchen window, and she was gone.”

“Did you look for her? She may have wandered off.”

“Masao, it was only a minute or two.” She was sobbing uncontrollably now.

“Please, Kati, please. You must talk to me. Get hold of yourself.”

“Yes. Yes.”

“Now just what happened?”

“I tried—I tried to see her from the kitchen window. Then I went out into the garden. I thought she was hiding. I thought she was playing a game. I didn’t know—”

“Kati!”

“So I looked everywhere. Then I began to call her. Then I went out on the street. I ran up and down the street. I looked everywhere. But she’s gone.”

“She didn’t go back into the house?”

“How could she, except through the kitchen?”

“All right. Now look, Kati dear, this is not your fault. I’m sure Ana is all right. I want you to stay in the house. Don’t go out looking for her again. Just stay in the house, and I’ll be there in ten minutes. Don’t

talk to anyone about this. Just stay there and be calm, do you understand?"

"You'll find her, Masao, please."

"I'll find her."

Then he turned to Beckman. "Come on, Sy."

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you in the car. Let's get moving."

8

THE EDUCATED MAN

Driving through the streets of Beverly Hills, his car siren howling, Masuto knew only that his lovely, pleasant world of the morning had shattered, leaving an empty hole of sheer terror. He had always lived with a simple acceptance of the fact that fear was not a problem he had to face. An old Zen story told of the student who came to the Zen master and asked the question: “Why should I study Zen, Rashi?” to which the master replied, “Because then you will not be afraid to die.” Masuto was not afraid to die, but the world was full of many other things that were more terrible than death.

“If we pile up and end up in a hospital, Masao,” Beckman said quietly, “you won’t be helping the kid any.” They had just made a two-wheel braking turn into Motor Avenue off Pico Boulevard and were roaring south toward Culver City. “Anyway, we ought to think, and I can’t think at this speed.”

Masuto slowed down. “You’re right, Sy,” he muttered. “You’re right.”

“You’re sure it’s connected?”

“I have a gut feeling.”

“A kid could wander out of a back yard and drift away and just get disoriented, and then the kid is lost. It’s happened before. It happens

every day.”

“Not a Japanese child. She wouldn’t leave the garden. I know Ana. Kati knows her. She just wouldn’t leave the garden.”

“Then if she was snatched, you face it and try to think it through. I can’t do your thinking for you,” Beckman told him, almost harshly. “All day yesterday you ran us in circles, with the damn oranges and the lead azide and all the rest of it. What does it add up to?”

Masuto made no reply, and Beckman said more softly, “I got kids, so don’t think I’m not feeling this. But you’re a cop, Masao. Now why would anyone snatch your kid? It’s not money; you don’t have any.”

“It’s a club.”

“Best damn club there is. But if they’re going to clobber you, they got to tell you why.”

“They will,” Masuto whispered. “They will.”

The quiet, cottage-lined, neat and sun-drenched street where Masuto lived belied the thought of violence. The houses were owned, for the most part, by Nisei and Chicano families. They were plain, hard-working people who had put their life effort into owning a home on a small plot of land and the houses and the flower-lined lawns underlined the care and pride that went into that ownership.

Beckman remained in the car when they reached Mas-uto’s house. “I’ll drift around and see if I can turn up anything,” Beckman said. “Just the streets around here. You go in to Kati.”

Masuto nodded and ran into the house. Beckman drove off. Kati had been watching for them, and after she let her husband in, she burst into tears. Masuto took her in his arms and rocked her gently.

“Easy, easy, Kati. Ana will be all right. I promise you that.”

“Who took her, Masao?”

“Stop crying. You must stop crying. We are going to be very calm, both of us.”

“I’ll try.”

“No, you must. Now go into the kitchen and make tea.”

“Tea? Now?”

“Yes, now,” he said firmly. “I will go with you, but I want you to make the tea. Mr. Beckman will be here in a moment, and we will give him tea and cake. Have you cake in the house?”

“Masao!”

“The tea now, please.”

She bowed her head and dried her tears on her apron and went into the kitchen. Masuto followed her. She filled the tea kettle.

“Now tell me again what happened.”

“But I told you.”

“Again, very carefully.”

“She was playing in the garden with her doll, sitting under the acacia tree. I went into the kitchen to do the breakfast dishes. I cleared the table and put the dishes in the sink. Then I looked out of the window—” She choked up.

“Go on, Kati. Think. Exactly as it happened.”

“She wasn’t there. First I tried to see through the window. Then I ran outside.”

“How long was she out of your sight?”

“Maybe three minutes, no more. I had cleared the table before. Then, after you left, I had a cup of tea while Ana had her cereal and hot milk. Oh, Masao—”

The telephone rang.

“Stay here and finish the tea,” Masuto said. He went into the living room then and picked up the phone. It was a singsong voice with a curious accent, a man’s voice.

“This is Detective Sergeant Masuto?” the voice asked.

“Yes. Speaking.”

“Then you will listen to me very carefully, Detective Sergeant Masuto. She has not been harmed. She will not be harmed—so long as you obey our instructions.”

“How do I know you have her? How do I know she’s all right?”

As he said this, the doorbell rang. Kati ran through the living room to the door. It was Beckman. He took Kati’s hand, and the two of them stood there, watching Masuto.

“I will let you talk to her. But quickly.”

“Daddy, Daddy,” came Ana’s voice, “they broke my doll.”

“Are you all right?”

“They broke my doll.”

“You mustn’t cry, baby, you’ll be home soon.”

Kati began to sob. Beckman put his arm around her and whispered, “She’s all right, Kati.”

“That’s enough,” said the voice of the man. “Listen. About the case of the drowned man, you will do nothing. You will leave it alone. Completely alone. You will do nothing. You will make yourself unavailable to the police, and then if you leave it alone, completely alone, your child will be released at seven o’clock this evening. Otherwise, you will never see your child again.” Then a click. It was over.

“Who was it?” Beckman asked.

“The kidnapper.”

“What did he say?”

“What did Ana say?” Kati cried. “Is she all right? Why didn’t you tell him my child is sick?”

“I think she’s all right. She sounded all right.”

“Was she crying? Did they hurt her?”

“I don’t think they hurt her. She said they broke her doll. No, don’t cry anymore, Kati. I told you I will take care of this. I want to talk to Sy now. Would you bring us tea in here, please?”

Kati nodded and went into the kitchen. Masuto dropped into a chair and motioned for Beckman to sit down.

“What do they want?” Beckman asked him.

“As he put it, the case of the drowned man. I imagine that includes Stillman. I am to leave it alone and make myself unavailable to the police. I use his words. If I follow their instructions, Ana will be released at seven o’clock. If I don’t, I will never see her again.”

“You’re sure he said you? You, Masao? One person? He didn’t say both of you?”

“What are you getting at, Sy?”

“If he had someone watching the house or watching the station, he would have said both of you. You and your partner.”

“Yes. Of course. I’m not thinking.” Masuto took a deep breath. “I have to think. I have to think clearly. It’s not a game anymore.”

“Why do you say game? That’s not like you, Masao.”

“Game. Yes.”

Kati came in with a tray, which she put down on the coffee table. “What do they want, Masao?” she asked pleadingly. “Why did they take my child? We don’t have money. Children are kidnapped for money.”

“They want me to stop what I’m doing.”

“But what are you doing?”

“Kati, do you trust me? I love Ana as much as I can love. But you must trust me. Will you, please? And I will bring Ana back to you today. I promise that.”

“And will you stop what you are doing? Will you listen to them?”

“I will find Ana.”

“How can you find her?”

“I will find her. I promise you. Now I want you to leave us alone. We must talk.”

“What shall I do?” she asked woefully.

“I think you should lie down for a little while. You’ve had a bad shock. Lie down and rest. There’s nothing else you can do for Ana.”

She nodded and left the room. Beckman looked at Masato thoughtfully, and said, “There’s been a kidnapping, Masao. You know what the procedure is. We notify the Culver City police, and then we bring in the F.B.I.”

Masato didn’t answer. He poured two cups of tea, and Beckman noticed that his hand did not shake.

“Do you want anything in your tea?”

“No.”

Masato lifted the cup to his lips in what was almost a formal gesture and sipped at the tea. Then he put the cup down.

“You heard me, Masao.”

“I heard you, Sy. Here is the way it’s going to be. We do not notify the Culver City police and we do not call in the F.B.I. This is for me. If you want to help me, I’ll be grateful. Otherwise, you can have out of it.”

“That’s a lousy thing to say.”

“I apologize. I’m sorry. We’re in this together.”

“And you’re making that same stupid mistake that the parents of every kidnapped child make. Ana’s seven years old. If she saw them, she can identify them. Do you think there’s a chance in the world that they’d let her go alive?”

“Not much chance, no.”

“Then what?”

“We have to find her.”

“How? Where? If you think this Binnie Vance was involved with the drowned man, then she had help. Is that it? Does she know where the kid is?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. We can’t even place her at the Beverly Glen Hotel. She only fits with a lot of guesswork—and there’s no reason, no motive, no sense in the whole thing.”

“We could pick her up and sweat it out of her.”

“Pick her up for what?”

“We could try to sweat it out of her.”

“She’s not the kind of a woman you could sweat anything out of. You know,” said Masuto, “there was something damned strange about that voice on the phone.”

“What?”

“Adverbs.”

“You just lost me.”

“Adverbs. They’re part of what makes English an impossible language. An uneducated man faults his adverbs. So do foreigners. The man on the phone said, ‘you will listen to me very carefully.’ Why didn’t he say, listen careful? Then he used the word *unavailable*. That’s a fancy word. He could have said, get lost. Stay away. Forget it. Drop it. But he said unavailable. Then the adverb again. Leave it completely alone or something like that. But he said completely.”

“What does it add up to?”

“It was a young voice, high pitched. I’ll tell you what it adds up to. It adds up to a student.”

“And there’s got to be maybe ten thousand foreign students just in L.A. alone.”

“It’s a game!” Masuto blurted out. “It’s a crazy, sick, monstrous game. The games children play—the bloody, stupid games! Sy, there’s only one way to go. We have to find the drowned man’s clothes.”

“Why? For Christ’s sake, why?”

“For the same reason that they were hidden. Because they make a connection, and right now we have no connection. None. I could make guesses. I could put the whole thing together—or at least I think I could—but now they’ve pulled Ana into their insane game, and I want my child. I want her alive.”

“All right, Masao. It’s a quarter to eleven. We have eight hours.”

“No. We have five hours.”

“Why only five?”

“Four, five, six—somewhere in there, believe me.”

“All right, five hours. We got the second largest metropolitan district in the United States. Where do we look?”

“In the hotel. Those clothes never left the Beverly Glen Hotel.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m not sure of anything, but that’s where we look.”

“And right now Mr. Arvin Clinton, the pride of the F.B.I., is sitting in his office downtown waiting for you to show up and kiss his ass.”

“We’ll just let him wait.”

Masuto went into the bedroom, where Kati lay huddled on the bed. He sat down beside her and touched her cheek gently.

“Kati.”

“Masao, if anything should happen to her—”

“Nothing will happen to her.”

“Or to you. Then I would surely die.”

“Nothing will happen to me. I will find Ana and bring her home. I promised that. I want you to stay here. I still have a son, and he will look for his mother when he comes back from school. He is not to know anything about this. No one is. Even if Captain Wainwright calls, you must tell him nothing, except that you do not know where I am. And you must say that to whoever calls.”

“Then you will do what they ask?”

“I will do what has to be done.” He bent over and kissed her. “Lock the doors. Remain in the house. If the man who took Ana calls again, you must tell him that I am carrying out his wishes.”

“And Uraga?” she asked. “What can I tell my son? He will see my face.”

“Then you must compose your face. Ura is nine years old. He is old enough to behave like a man and accept the fact that his mother is not always smiling and laughing.”

“He will ask about Ana.”

“I took her to the doctor. Tell him that, and also tell him that he must remain in the house.”

“How do I know he’s all right?”

“He’s all right. If you wish, call the school, but don’t let them know that anything is wrong. I’m sure he’s all right. I’ll call you later. From here on, Kati dear, every minute is precious to me. Let me depend on you.”

She sat up and nodded, her face tear-stained. “Yes, I will do as you say.”

9

THE DARK MAN

Masuto was himself again as they got into his car. He said to Beckman, "You drive, Sy. I want to put it together."

"The hotel?"

"Yes, the hotel."

"You know, Masao, when I spoke to Freddie Comstock, he said that he cased every empty room in the hotel, and those that were vacated too."

"Yes."

"Does that mean anything?"

"I don't want to think about it that way," Masuto said. "I want to start from the beginning and put it together. I have all the pieces, or at least I think I have. So just let me put it together, and then we'll see where we are—" thinking to himself that now he must put everything else out of his mind, all his terror about his daughter, Kati's misery, what might be happening to Ana right at this moment, all of it out of his mind and only the puzzle, only the game that sick men played all over the world in this time of his life.

"Go ahead, Masao."

"We begin with a man who calls himself cultural attaché but who works for Soviet Intelligence. He uses the Zlatov Dancers as an

excuse to go to San Francisco, I don't think the Soviets give two damns about the Zlatov Dancers, but the only other Russian event on the West Coast that we know about is the fact of the agronomists. That the Soviets care about. They used to buy oranges from Israel. Now they have to learn how to grow their own. So we make our first guess: Peter Litovsky is sent to California to keep an eye on the agronomists."

"Maybe," Beckman said.

"Why maybe?"

"Because the fat man is no bodyguard. He's in his fifties, fat and soft. One punch in his gut would put him out of the running."

"That makes sense. All right, the fat man's an intelligence agent. He comes out here because someone wants a meeting to discuss something concerning the agronomists. That's better, of course. The meeting is set up at the Beverly Glen Hotel."

"Who with?"

"The next guess. Binnie Vance."

"Why?"

"It makes some sense. At least we know that whoever killed Stillman was someone he knew and trusted. You don't walk up behind a man who's shaving and put a bullet into the base of his skull while he's looking into a mirror unless he knows you and trusts you. So from there we make the presumption that she was in his room the night before and that she was the woman who phoned in the news about the fat man."

"And the hooker?"

"She never existed. I never believed she did."

"Okay. We got Binnie Vance as a Russian agent of some sort." Beckman shook his head. "It don't figure. It's that Mata Hari crap. She's just a belly dancer."

"She's German. She doesn't have to be an agent. She could have some connection in East Germany that would bring Litovsky out here to see her."

"All right. I go along, Masao. Now we come to the stopper. How did they get into the hotel? How did the fat man get in? No one saw him. No one remembers him. He never registered."

Masuto smiled slightly, the first time since his wife had phoned him that morning. “Kati was talking about common sense last night. Do you remember, yesterday morning, I told you to go down to the basement and check the bolt on the door?”

“I did. It was open. That’s how she got out.”

“She never got out,” Masuto said. “She was in the hotel all the time. If she killed Stillman, she had to be there. If she drove away in the yellow Cadillac, then she had to be in the hotel.”

“And the bolt?”

“Sy, it was opened from the inside, not to let anyone out but to let Litovsky and Binnie Vance in.”

“You’re guessing, Masao.”

“Of course I’m guessing. I haven’t got one shred of evidence to put Binnie Vance in the hotel or even in Los Angeles that night. But Sweeney lifted a fingerprint in the room that matches a fingerprint in the yellow car. So I know that someone who was in that room was also in the Cadillac.”

“That makes three of them,” Beckman said. “Binnie Vance, someone to drive her and Litovsky to the hotel, and one inside the hotel to let them in.”

“Three. It would have to be at least three. Sure, a drugged Litovsky could go staggering out to the pool and even a woman could push him in. Then if she were cool enough, conceivably she could get into the pool with him and undress him while his body floated there. It’s possible, but it doesn’t make much sense.”

“Then what happened?”

“I can make a better guess. Whoever opened the service door for the woman and Litovsky had managed to get a housekeeper’s key. That wouldn’t be too difficult for someone working in the hotel. He opens an empty room and lets Litovsky and the woman in. They have drinks there, and Litovsky passes out.”

“A smartass intelligence agent?”

“You never met Binnie Vance,” Masuto said. “I don’t know what went on in that room. And what makes you think that intelligence agents are so bright? That F.B.I. man is no shining example of brilliance, and maybe the Russian agents are just as stupid as the Feds.”

“Just as horny, you can count on that,” Beckman agreed.

“All right. Now they got Litovsky, who’s out cold. The man and Vance come back in the room. They have a fat man who weighs well over two hundred pounds. Maybe they walk him down the hallway. Maybe they use a laundry bin or something of that sort to get him to the service elevator. It’s probably two o’clock in the morning now, and the hallway is empty. They take him down to the dressing room and undress him. They carry him to the pool and dump him in. They know that Litovsky will be identified, but they decide that undressing him will buy them a few hours, and that’s important to them. Then they go out through the service door.”

“And why don’t they take the fat man’s clothes with them?”

“Because they’re in Beverly Hills. Because if any one of our patrol cars spots two suspicious-looking people in a car at two in the morning, they might well pull them over. And after midnight, a Beverly Hills cop is very careful. At least, that’s the way the myth works, and those two probably know it. And if they have the fat man’s clothes, his wallet, his watch and his glasses in the car, then they’re finished.”

“One loose end, Masao, and that knocks the whole thing apart. If they’re that smart—”

“It’s not smart!” Masuto snorted. “That kind of sick conniving isn’t smart.”

“Whatever they are, why didn’t Binnie Vance bolt the service door behind them?”

“Two reasons. First, they wanted us to think that the killer had left the hotel.” Masuto sighed and shook his head. “It’s easy, when you look back.”

“And the second reason?”

“Because Binnie Vance wasn’t there.”

“Where was she?”

“In Stillman’s room, watching through the window, waiting for the body to be in the pool long enough for Litovsky to drown. Either she let herself in with the housekeeper’s key, or if the door was bolted, she awakened Stillman and he let her in.”

“Then he was awake when she made the phone call?”

“That’s right. Probably.”

“And when we went to his room yesterday morning?”

“She was there, Sy—maybe in the bathroom, maybe in a closet, but sure as God she was there. I don’t suppose we’ll ever know what happened during the next few hours. Possibly Stillman decided that he had to tell the truth. Maybe she pretended to go along with him. He went into the bathroom to shave, and she shot him.”

They were turning off Sunset Boulevard now, entering the long driveway of the Beverly Glen Hotel. It was twelve minutes after eleven o’clock in the morning.

“No evidence and no motive,” Masuto said. “But it’s all we have.”

Sal Monti opened the door. His grin vanished when he saw Masuto’s face.

“Just keep it in front where we can get it quickly,” Masuto told him. “Don’t park it down the hill.”

“A Toyota in front? It makes a lousy—”

“You just damn well do as I tell you!” Masuto snapped.

“All right, all right. Don’t burn my ass off.”

They went into the hotel. Comstock was sitting in the lobby, reading the *Los Angeles Times*. In an attempt to blend with the surroundings, he wore wide-bottom slacks and a golfing sweater. His shirt was open two buttons on the top. It went oddly with his square face and bristly gray hair. When he saw Masuto and Beckman enter, he jumped up to greet them.

“Anything I can do for you boys?”

“You didn’t find the clothes?” Masuto asked.

“No, sir, Masao. I turned this place inside out. You know, you’re the second party asked me that today. The Fed was here, bright and early this morning.”

“Arvin Clinton, the F.B.I, man?”

“Him and a buddy.”

“What did they want?”

“They asked me a few questions, same stuff about yesterday, and then they wanted to see the pool. So I took them down to the pool, and they stood there looking at it for about five minutes. Then they wanted to know what part of the pool the fat man was in. So I showed them. Then you know what they tell me, Masao?”

Masuto and Beckman exchanged glances.

“Tell us.”

“They tell me the fat man drowned. I know he drowned, I say to them. So they say to me, no, Mr. Comstock. The word’s around that he was murdered. That’s dangerous talk. That’s the kind of talk that makes a lot of trouble. You’re a decent patriotic American, and you don’t want to get involved in that kind of trouble. So you just remember that this is an accidental drowning. The fat man falls in the pool and he drowns.”

“And then?”

“And then they take off. The funny thing is, I been reading the *L.A. Times* and that’s the story they been running, that the fat man drowned by accident.”

Masuto nodded. “I guess that’s the way it is, Fred. Tell me something, do you know of any hotel employee who didn’t show up for work yesterday or today?”

“Jesus Christ, Masao, there got to be maybe a hundred people work in the hotel, with the gardeners and the restaurants and the chambermaids. There ain’t no day when one of them don’t show up.”

“Who runs the bellhops?”

“Artie. That’s the big black guy over there.”

They walked over to the tall black man, who nodded and said, “I know you, Sergeant. What can I do for you?”

“How many men work for you?”

“I got four good boys.”

“Any of them call in sick yesterday or today?”

“No, sir. They are all on the job.”

“I’ll try the Rugby Room,” Masuto said to Beckman. “You go downstairs and do the laundry.”

The Rugby Room and the open lanai that was the outdoor connecting part of it was sparsely populated by the last of the late breakfasters. It was still too early for lunch. It was a warm, lovely June day, and the doors to the lanai were wide open, revealing the wrought-iron tables and the pink tablecloths. As Masuto stood there, studying the place, he was approached by Fritz, the maitre d’hôtel.

“Sergeant Masuto, is it breakfast? As our guest, please.”

“I had breakfast. How many people work in your room, Fritz?”

“Bartenders, waiters, waitresses, busboys, the kitchen help—all of them?”

“Yes.”

“Forty-two, I think. We overlap because we are open sixteen hours a day.”

“Fritz, I’m interested in someone who didn’t turn up for work yesterday and today.”

“That’s every day, Sergeant. If not for goldbricking, I could get by with five people less.”

“I’m interested in yesterday and today.”

“There’s Johnny at the bar. He was out yesterday, but he came in today. Ah—let’s see. There is a kid we take on for busboy, maybe a week ago. Look, Sergeant, I don’t want no trouble about this. It’s hard as hell to find busboys—especially busboys who got more brains than a cow. So we don’t ask too many questions when we get one we can use.”

“Fritz, I’m not going to make any trouble for you. But this is life and death.”

“As serious as that? Sure. Anyway, this kid, he got too many smarts for a busboy. He’s not in yesterday. Today, he’s on the late shift, starts at noon. Hey, Max,” he called to one of the waiters, “is Frank in yet, that new busboy?”

“No sign of him yet.”

“His name is Frank—Frank what?”

Fritz shook his head. “I can get it for you.”

“Wait. What does he look like?”

“Very dark, black hair. Maybe twenty, twenty-one. Skinny.”

“Chicano?”

“No, not Chicano. Some of the boys try to talk to him in Spanish, but he doesn’t know Spanish. Some kind of accent, not German or French, because I can spot that. I figure he’s some kind of student maybe.”

“Fritz,” Masuto said, trying to control his eagerness, “the people who work here, they have to come off the street and change into their work clothes. Where?”

“We got a dressing room behind the kitchen.”

“Take me there.”

“Sure, sure. You think there’s something funny about that kid?” He led the way through the cocktail lounge into the kitchen and through it. “You know what kind of trouble we got already? You need a busboy, everyone says there are five million unemployed, but go try to find a busboy. So we can’t pick and choose.”

“I know, I know,” Masuto said.

They were in a narrow room now, a room about twelve feet long, a wooden bench running down the middle and rows of metal lockers on either side. Most of the lockers had padlocks on them. A waiter sat on the bench, lacing his shoes.

“Which is his locker, Fritz?”

“We look. The names are on them.”

The waiter stopped dressing to watch them. Fritz was farsighted, fumbling for his glasses as Masuto traced through the names.

“Here!” Masuto cried. “Frank Franco!”

The locker was padlocked.

“I want this opened, Fritz. Now!”

Fritz nodded.

“Now, damn you! Now!”

“Sure, sure.” He turned to the waiter. “Steve, go get the handyman.”

“What did the kid do? You can’t just—”

“Get the handyman,” Masuto said, his voice like ice. “I’m a policeman. You have him here in five minutes, or I swear I’ll take you in.”

“Sure. Okay. I’ll get him.” He got up, stared at Masuto a moment, then left.

“Fritz, does anyone know anything about this kid? Do you have an address for him?”

Fritz shook his head hopelessly. “All right, you don’t hire people this way. He said he was looking for a place to live. He had just come into town. So I let it go, and a couple of days ago, I ask him again. He says he thinks he got a place—”

“Goddamn it, are you telling me you hire like that? Where was he sleeping?”

“Sergeant, I swear, I’m telling the truth. It happens.”

“All right, it happens,” Masuto said more softly. “Who did he talk to? Did he make any friends?”

Fritz creased his brows. He was a large, soft man, and he knew he was in trouble. The whole thing frightened him. He had never been at ease with the complex of laws that surrounded hiring, Social Security, withheld taxes, and compensation, and in this particular case he had short-circuited everything. He took out his handkerchief, wiped his brow, and said, “I try to help, yes? I do my best. A few times, I see him talking to Maria.”

“Who’s Maria?”

“Maria Constanza—she’s a good girl, a Chicano. I don’t want no trouble for her. She’s a waitress. She works in the lanai. In the lanai we have waitresses. She works three years here.”

“Is she here?”

“Yes.”

“Get her in here.”

“All right, I bring her.”

As he left, the handyman entered carrying his tool box—a middle-aged man whose blue eyes peered inquiringly at Masuto from behind gold-rimmed spectacles.

“Are you the cop?” he wanted to know.

“Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills police. Open this locker for me.”

“You sure you got the right?”

“I’m damn sure. Now open it.”

He took out his hammer and gave the padlock a couple of sharp blows. It was a combination lock. Nothing happened. “Sometimes you can spring them, sometimes you can’t.” Then he took out a hacksaw and went to work. He was sawing away at the lock when Fritz returned with Maria Constanza.

She was a slender, pretty girl, with wide brown eyes and a look of fear on her face.

“Maria Constanza?” Masuto asked.

She nodded.

“Sit down please,” he said, indicating the bench. “Don’t be afraid.”

She sat down tentatively, staring at him.

“Would it be better if we talked in Spanish? Would it be easier for you?”

“*Por favor*” she whispered.

Then he spoke in Spanish. “Don’t be afraid. Nothing will happen to you. But if you can help me, a little girl’s life might be saved.”

“I will try to help you.”

“That locker,” he said, pointing to where the handyman was sawing away, “belonged to a man called Frank Franco. Fritz tells me that you were friendly with him.”

She nodded again. “Yes.”

“How friendly?”

“What did he do?” she whispered.

“I don’t know-yet.”

While they were speaking, Beckman came into the room. He exchanged glances with Masuto, shook his head, and then noticed the handyman sawing away. He stood silently.

“We talked to each other,” Maria said. “We had one date. He took me to the movies. We saw the picture called *King Kong*.”

“Did he ever tell you anything about himself?”

“A little. He was lonely. He lived with his brother.”

“His name was not Frank Franco.”

“You know that?”

“What was his real name?” Masuto asked gently.

“Issa.”

“Issa what?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “He never told me. But he said I might call him Issa, not in the restaurant, but when we were alone. He made me promise that I would never reveal his name. Now I’ve broken my promise.”

“You’re an illegal immigrant?”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“Don’t be afraid, please. The fact that you’re an illegal immigrant is no business of mine. Nothing will happen to you. I promise you.”

“Please. I must work. I have a little boy who will starve if I don’t work. My husband is in Mexico. This is the first man—I can’t lose my job, please.”

“You will not lose your job.” He turned to Fritz. “She’s done nothing, Fritz. I don’t want her to lose her job.”

“She’s a good girl. Maria,” Fritz said to her, “tell him whatever he wants to know. You won’t lose your job.”

“This man, Issa,” Masuto said in Spanish, “is he an Arab?”

“I don’t know. When I asked him where he was from, he just shrugged and said it was far away. He and his brother were students at the University of Nevada. Then they came here.”

“Do you know where he lives?”

She nodded. “We stopped by his house that night. He wanted to put on a clean shirt. I sat in the car.”

“Where? What address?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I didn’t see the address. It was on Fountain Avenue, a few blocks east of Western.”

“Would you recognize the house?”

“I think so.”

“What kind of car did he drive?”

“The locker’s open,” the handyman said.

“Can I go?” Maria asked tremulously.

“No. Please. Stay here.”

“I must go back to the room,” Fritz said.

“Yes. Fritz, find someone to take over for her. I want her with us for a few hours.”

Beckman was at the locker. “What did she say, Masao? My Spanish is lousy. You asked her if she knew where he lives.”

“She thinks she could recognize the house.” He opened the locker. There, neatly folded, were a suit of blue worsted, shoes, socks, underwear, shirt and tie, and on top of them a wallet, a notebook, a wristwatch, and a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles.

“You can go now,” Masuto said to the handyman. “And just keep your mouth shut about this.”

“I got to tell Mr. Gellman that I opened the locker.”

“All right. Tell him to talk to Sergeant Masuto about it. And you tell no one else.”

He left, and they were alone in the room with the girl, who sat forlornly on the bench.

“Put it all together, Sy,” he said to Beckman. “We’ll take it with us. Handle the glasses and the watch with your handkerchief. Sweeney may be able to take some prints from them.”

Then he turned to the girl. "I want you to help us, Maria. I want you to come with us—just for a half hour or so, and then you can come back here to work."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to show us the house where Issa lives."

"What will happen to him?"

"Whatever he makes happen."

"Will you hurt him?"

"I hope not."

"Should I change my clothes?"

"No, we have no time for that. Just as you are is fine. Come on, Sy."

Beckman, carrying the bundle of clothes, followed them out of the room.

10

THE ANGRY MAN

Beckman drove, while Masuto sat in the back seat of the car and talked to Maria. As they swung up Sunset Boulevard toward West Hollywood, he said to Beckman, “Easy, Sy. I don’t want to attract any attention, and I don’t want any sheriff’s cars or L.A. police pulling us over to find out what we’re up to. Just stay on it nice and easy.”

The girl was crying again. “I gave you my promise, Maria,” Masuto said to her. “I told you no harm would come to you and that I am not an immigration agent.” He repeated it in Spanish. “So no more crying. We have only a little time, and you must answer my questions.”

“I will try.”

He gave her his handkerchief. “Dry your tears. You are not betraying anyone. Do you think that people who murder, who will kill a small child—do you think such people can be betrayed?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then believe me. Now tell me, before, when you spoke of the car, was that the car he drove you in, this man, Frank?”

“Yes.”

“Where was it parked when you left the hotel that night?”

“Down the hill from the service entrance.”

“What kind of a car was it? A fine car?”

“A splendid car. A Mercedes. I asked him how a busboy could drive such a car.”

“Yes? What did he say?”

“It was not his car. A friend’s.”

“Did you ask him what friend?”

“He said a dear friend. It made me think it was a woman,” Maria said. “I don’t know why. I just thought so. And I asked him. He became very angry.”

“Did he tell you?”

“No.”

“What color was the car?”

“Dark red.”

“Did you notice the license plates?”

She nodded. “Yes, the state of Nevada.”

“You said he lived with his brother?”

“He said that.”

“You didn’t see the brother?”

“No. Only Frank—Issa.”

They had turned south on La Cienega now, and then left into Fountain Avenue. Beckman said over his shoulder, “I caught that about the red Mercedes. We could find out if Binnie Vance owns a red Mercedes.”

“It will all be over by that time, one way or another.”

“I could put it on the horn.”

“No!” Masuto snapped. “I don’t want anything on the radio. I don’t want any questions or answers.”

“Okay, Masao. It’s your shtick.”

“Did he say anything about seeing you again—or when?” Masuto asked the girl.

“I did,” she replied plaintively. “He was nice.”

“Did he say he would see you again?”

“He said maybe. He said he didn’t know if he would stay with the job or not. He didn’t like being a busboy.”

“Him and the brother makes three,” Beckman said.

“Yes.” Then Masuto asked the girl, “Did he speak of any other friends? Any other brothers?”

“No. No, I don’t think so.”

“It don’t mean they were actually brothers,” Beckman said.

“I know. It doesn’t matter.”

They drove on in silence for a while, and then Beckman said, “We’ll be coming up on Western in a few minutes. Maria should start looking. What do you want me to do, Masao?”

“Just easy. About twenty-five miles an hour. When she spots the house, don’t stop or slow down.”

They passed Western. “It’s on this side,” said the girl, pointing.

“Don’t point. Just watch. On the right, Sy.”

“There,” said Maria. “That place with the car in the driveway.”

“Red Mercedes with Nevada plates,” Beckman said.

Masuto leaned in front of her as they passed the house, a rundown frame cottage on a street of rundown frame cottages.

“Turn left up to Sunset on the next corner,” Masuto said to Beckman; and then he said to the girl, “We’re going to drop you off on Sunset Boulevard, and you can get a bus there back to the hotel.” He pressed a five-dollar bill into her palm. “This is for bus fare and your trouble. You helped a little girl to live, and you helped other people too, and I thank you. But I don’t want you to say anything about this to anyone. Do you understand?”

She didn’t want to take the money, but he insisted, and when they had dropped her off and turned back toward Fountain, Beckman said, “I don’t know, Masao, the way you let her go. She could have been tied into it.”

“That kid?”

“It happens.”

“Not with a kid like that. No. She gave me what she had.”

They had turned back into Fountain. “How close?” Beckman asked.

“Find a place to park about a block away. Don’t pass it again. I don’t want to press our luck.”

When he had parked the car, Beckman twisted around to face Masuto. “You know, Masao, we’re in L.A. now.”

“We have the legal right to go anywhere in the county in pursuit.”

“We’re not in pursuit.”

“I say we are.”

“Okay. You say we are. I say we should call the Los Angeles cops.”

“Sure. We call in the Los Angeles cops, and they bring the SWAT team and we have fifty guns around that house with its paper walls and tear gas and the rest of it, and inside you have two half-insane, desperate men who have already been a part of two killings and they’re planning maybe a hundred or two hundred more before the day is out, and they’re holding my kid as a hostage. Suppose it was your kid they had in there, Sy? Would you call in the SWAT team? Think about it.”

Beckman thought about it for a moment or two, and then he said, “What do you mean, two hundred killings?”

“Just answer my question.”

Beckman drew a deep breath and sighed. “All right, Masao. Your way. What is your way?”

“First thing, Sy, take off your gun.” He removed his own pistol from the holster under his armpit, and handed it to Beckman. “Lock them both up with the fat man’s clothes in the trunk.”

Beckman just stared at him, holding the gun that Masato had given him. “You’re out of your mind.”

“No, Sy, I’m very sane. That wretched little house is made of matchwood. A bullet would go through the door or even both walls. They could be armed with forty-fives, and a forty-five is like a cannon in that place. If we come in there armed, they’re going to start shooting. I can face getting shot; so can you. I don’t want my daughter to face it.”

“And what in hell do you think is going to happen when we go in there unarmed? Either they kill us or they take us. Then where are we? And how in hell do we get in there? You say the door’s made of matchwood—right? We kick it in and get them before they get us.”

“And suppose one of them’s with Ana?”

“Goddamn it, Masao, we can’t go in there unarmed. How?”

“We knock at the door. They open it. They let us in.” He was peeling off his jacket as he spoke.

“What’s that for?”

“No jacket. No guns. I want them to see.”

“They open the door. Then what?”

“We take their guns away.”

“What?”

“Now listen to me, Sy. There’s no time. Just listen and don’t argue. I had a dozen years with the martial arts. I was trained by one of the best in Los Angeles. I can take the gun from the man who’s holding it on me. Don’t question that. It’s you I’m worried about, and I need you because there’s two of them. But if you’re afraid to try it, I’ll try it alone.”

“You’re damn right I’m afraid. Shit. What the hell. You got any pointers?”

“Yes. These are terrorists. Amateurs. They kill with their demented ideology. They plan and they think in their own demented way. But they’re not trained, and when they kill they have to think first. That takes two seconds, one second—even half a second is enough. Hit at the wrist, like this.” He made a chopping motion, his palm held flat. “Don’t try to grab the gun—just hit at the wrist, and when you make that chop, make it with every ounce of strength in your body. If you hit right, you’ll break his wrist. But don’t go for the gun. If the gun remains in his hand, kick him in the testicles with all your strength. Watch his eyes. Wait for the moment when his eyes flicker toward me.”

“What will you be doing?”

“Don’t watch me. There’ll be two of them, probably each with a handgun. If your man has a rifle or a shotgun—that’s an outside chance—the same thing, the wrist. I’m hoping that when we’re in, they’ll tell us to turn around. If they do, you hesitate. I’ll turn immediately and use my foot. But don’t watch me. Watch the eyes of the man who has a gun on you. Do you think you can do it?”

“No, but what the hell.” Beckman peeled off his coat.

“We go in with our hands up. Don’t put down your hands. With your hands up, you have a fraction of a second more.”

They put their jackets, their guns, and the fat man’s clothes in the luggage compartment. The street was empty, as are most streets in Los Angeles in midday. Then they walked down the block to the shabby little house with the red Mercedes in the driveway. Two wooden steps led up to a tiny porch. Both men in their shirtsleeves mounted the steps.

Masuto knocked. No response. He knocked again. Wood creaked. Masuto felt the hot summer sun. He was sweating. Then, a voice.

“Who is it?”

Masuto recognized the voice. It was the voice he had heard on the telephone.

“Masuto. My partner’s with me. We’re unarmed. I’m playing it your way. We’ll stay with my daughter. We’re out of it.”

“If this is a trick, Masuto, if you have a SWAT squad outside, the kid will die. First. I swear it.”

“No tricks. Just the two of us, unarmed. Alone.”

Words in another language. Words replying. He was right. There were two of them—hopefully no others.

“I’m going to open the door, Masuto. You come in with your hands up. Then your partner, with his hands up. Believe it, mister. Any tricks, your daughter dies.”

“I believe you,” Masuto said.

The door opened, and Masuto entered, followed by Beckman, both with their hands raised. The man who had opened the door was on Masuto’s left. He kicked the door shut and stepped back. He was a slender, dark-faced, dark-haired young man, and he was covering Masuto with a heavy automatic pistol. The room itself was empty, except for some boxes and pillows on the floor. The other man, shorter, heavier, was on the right, pointing a revolver at Beckman. He was about three feet from Beckman as they entered.

“Keep your hands up and turn around, both of you,” the thin man said. Masuto turned immediately. Beckman hesitated, watching the eyes of the man facing him, and then the eyes flickered. Beckman never saw Masuto’s motion; he was fixed on the eyes of the man covering him. As Masuto turned his back to the thin man, his body unleashed like a spring, and he drove his shoe into the thin man’s testicles with a force that threw him across the room. It was more than a karate kick; it was an explosion of all his pent-up, controlled fear and anger and frustration, so violent that he slammed off his feet onto the floor. Beckman, in the same instant, forgot all that Masuto had spelled out for him and hit the man on the right with all his strength. Beckman had been a professional boxer before he became a policeman. He hit the shorter man squarely in the center of his

face, feeling the nasal bones crunch under the blow. The man staggered and then collapsed like a sack. Masuto rolled over and grasped the automatic, which had fallen out of the thin man's hand.

The thin man lay huddled across the room, his knees drawn up, whimpering with pain. The other man lay motionless on the floor, blood pouring from his nose. Beckman was clutching his right hand with his left hand.

"God almighty, I broke my hand!"

Masuto handed him the automatic pistol. Beckman took it in his left hand. There were two doors on the right side of the room they had entered. The first opened into a filthy kitchen, with two chairs and a table of dirty dishes and sandwich bags and soda pop bottles. Masuto threw open the other door. It was a bedroom. Two mattresses on the floor, some blankets and a single chair. Ana lay on one of the mattresses, her hands and feet tied, her mouth gagged with a handkerchief. Masuto took off the handkerchief, and Ana began to scream hysterically. Masuto went to work on the cords that tied her hands and her feet.

Beckman rushed into the room.

"It's all right, Sy. Stay with those two bastards."

The cords were off. Masuto took the child in his arms. He was on his knees, rocking her back and forth, clutching her tightly. "It's all right, baby, it's all right now. Everything's all right now. We're going home."

Bit by bit, her screams turned into whimpers. She buried her face in Masuto's shirt, and holding her tightly, he rose and went into the next room. The thin man still lay curled up, clutching his groin and moaning in pain. The other man was unconscious on the floor, his face in a growing pool of blood. Beckman had both the automatic pistol and the revolver stuck into his belt, and he was massaging his right hand and grimacing with pain.

"Sure as God, I broke my hand, Masao. How is she?"

Still holding the child with her face in his shirt, Masuto took his handcuffs from his back pocket and threw them to Beckman. "Cuff them both," he said shortly, "and stay with them. I'll be back with the car in an hour. She's all right. I'm taking her home."

“This one needs an ambulance,” pointing to the unconscious man.
“I broke his nose.”

“He’ll live.”

When he put Ana down on the seat next to him in his car, thinking how much she looked like one of those Japanese dolls they sold in Little Tokyo in downtown Los Angeles, with her jet black hair, her straight bangs and her round face, she had stopped sobbing and was able to smile at him and say, “You look funny, daddy.”

“Why?”

“Your face is so dirty.”

“We’ll go home, and we’ll both wash, and everything that happened is only a bad dream.”

“It was real,” she whispered.

“Yes, it was real,” he said to himself. “Only too real.”

He drove onto the freeway. There was no traffic to speak of at this time of the day, and in exactly twenty minutes he was in front of his house in Culver City. Kati must have been at the window, because Ana was hardly out of the car when Kati had her in her arms.

11

THE EXOTIC WOMAN AGAIN

It was half past two in the afternoon when Masuto returned to the cottage on Fountain Avenue. The two dark men still lay on the floor, their wrists handcuffed behind them, the shorter man with a smashed face that was a bloody mask, blood all over his clothes. Beckman was leaning against the wall with the two guns stuck in his belt.

As Masuto entered, the skinny man started to shout at him in a language that Masuto guessed was Arabic, and then switched to English. "My brother needs a doctor. He is dying."

Ignoring him, Masuto asked Beckman about his hand.

"I don't know, Masao. It hurts like hell. I never hit anyone that hard before."

"Are you animals? My brother is dying!"

In response to this, the man with the broken nose moaned with pain.

"This place stinks," Beckman said. "Can we get them out of here?"

Masuto did not reply. He stood there silent, staring at Issa.

"How did Kati take it?"

Masuto ignored him, staring at Issa.

“If they both died here,” Masuto said thoughtfully, “no one would know the difference.”

“Masao!” Beckman was shocked. Masuto met his eyes, and Beckman sighed and shrugged. “If you want it that way.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Issa screamed.

“What’s your name?” Masuto demanded. “Your real name?”

The thin man pressed his lips together.

“Give me the revolver,” Masuto said to Beckman.

“It’s just a cheap Saturday night special,” Beckman observed, handing it to him.

“It works.” Masuto spun the cylinder. “It’s a rotten gun but it works. I guess that’s what one asks of a gun.” He pointed the gun at Issa, who cringed and closed his eyes.

“Open your eyes and look at me when I speak to you,” Masuto said quietly. “I asked you your name. I am not asking for evidence or anything that may be used against you. I simply asked your name.”

“Issa Mahoud.”

“And his name?” pointing to the other.

“Sahlah Beeden.”

“Then you are not brothers?”

“We are brothers in the struggle for justice.”

“And what struggle is that?” Masuto asked.

“The struggle to liberate my homeland from the Zionist pigs.”

Masuto turned to Beckman and said, “Read them their rights, Sy.”

“This is an admonition of rights,” Beckman said tonelessly. “You have the right to remain silent. If you give up the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak with an attorney and to have the attorney present during questioning—”

“Stand up, both of you,” Masuto said when Beckman had finished.

Issa struggled to his feet. “My brother can’t stand up. He needs an ambulance.”

“Get him on his feet, Sy.”

Beckman dragged Sahlah to his feet, and they marched the two of them outside to Masuto’s car. “They’ll make a mess of the seat,” Beckman said. “Maybe we ought to call an ambulance.”

“The hell with the seat,” Masuto said coldly. “We deliver these two ourselves.”

With Beckman’s help, the two men got into the back seat of the car. A few people came out of houses along the street to stand by their doors and watch in silence. The traffic moving by slowed. Masuto opened the luggage compartment, and they put the two guns in there and took back their jackets and their own guns.

At the station in Beverly Hills, Beckman marched the two men inside, Masuto following with the pile of the Russian’s clothes and possessions and the two guns. Sergeant Connoley was at the desk. He said, “By God, Masao, we been looking for you and Beckman all day. Where the hell have you been? And what have you got there?”

“Where’s Wainwright?”

“He went back to the Beverly Glen Hotel with the G-man. He’s screaming bloody murder about the way you and Beckman took off and never called in or one word about where you are. What do you want me to do with these two beauties?”

“Book them and then lock them up.”

“For what?”

“Start with this. Murder, accessory to murder, conspiracy to murder, kidnapping, armed robbery, and resisting arrest.”

“That’s all?”

“Armed robbery?” Beckman whispered.

“We’ll get to that.”

“Better give it to me again,” Connoley said. “It’s a long list.”

Masuto repeated the charges, and then told Connoley, “We’ll be with Sweeney if the captain calls in.”

“That one,” Connoley said, “ought to go to a hospital. He don’t have much face left.”

“He can walk,” Masuto said coldly. “Get Sam Baxter over to patch him up. I want him here.”

“Baxter will love that.”

“I don’t give a damn what Baxter would love.”

Climbing the stairs to Sweeney’s office, Beckman said to Masuto, “I never seen you like this before, Masao. It’s no good. It’s not your way.”

“I’m all right.”

“You’re involved, which is no good for a cop. Ana’s with her mother. It’s over.”

“Not yet. It’s not over yet.”

Sweeney looked up from his light table as they entered his office and grinned. “Ah, the two missing hawkeyes. It’s only three-fifteen. Do you still work here or are you on pension?”

“We have ten minutes, and this is damned real and close, Sweeney. So tell me what you’ve got.”

“Goodies. So many goodies I don’t know where to begin. Start with the glass. You consort with belly dancers, Masao, a side of you I never suspected.”

“Will you get on with it!”

“This belly dancer, she was in Stillman’s room and she was also in the yellow Cadillac. They all match.”

“How do you know it was the belly dancer? I never told you that.”

“But I have my ways. I got her photograph and I spent the taxpayers’ hard-earned money. Washington, nothing. Chicago, New York, nothing. But Bonn in Germany—I hit pay dirt. They sent a Telex back that she was wanted by the cops there under the name of Bertha Hellschmidt, that she was suspected of being an agent of the East German intelligence, and they sent me a set of her prints for confirmation. And, sonny, they matched.”

“That’s good,” Masuto said. “That’s wonderful, Sweeney. I’m grateful. Did they say what she was wanted for in Bonn?”

“Something to do with the murder of the Israeli athletes at the seventy-two Olympics. They didn’t go into details, except to mention that her father was an SS officer back in the Nazi days.”

“Good. One more favor, Sweeney—only because we have no time. We booked two men downstairs. One of them, the skinny one, is called Issa. Get his photograph and send it to the San Fernando cops, care of Lieutenant Gonzales. Get him on the phone and tell him I want him to show the picture for identification to a man called Garcia, who is the gardener at the Felcher Company. Remind him about our conversation yesterday.”

“That’s all? Don’t I get to know what this is all about?”

“I’ll buy you lunch tomorrow and tell you the whole story. Oh, yes, one more thing.”

"I thought so."

"Call Bob Phillips. He's the chief of security at the airport. Tell him to meet me at the departure gate of National in twenty minutes and to have two of his men with him."

"You can't get to the airport in twenty minutes," Beckman said.

"We're going to give it a damn good try. Come on, Sy."

"What shall I tell Wainwright?" Sweeney called after them.

"Tell him the whole story."

"Whatever that may be," Beckman muttered.

In the car, Masuto driving, siren going, and identification lights flashing, Beckman said plaintively, "It makes no sense, no damn sense at all. An East German spy who is Binnie Vance murders a Russian agent. The daughter of an SS officer who is also Binnie Vance marries a Jew and then kills him. And if I read you, this Issa steals the lead azide and lays it on the Jewish Defense League."

"It wasn't programmed that way. They didn't mean to kill Stillman. He was set up for the Russian's death, and when he didn't follow the script, she killed him. He had the J.D.L. connection. It made sense. It was just a question of time. A few hours more, and every piece would have fallen into place."

"All right. I go along with you. Just tell me why they killed the fat man."

"For one thing, it led to Stillman and the Jewish Defense League. Or maybe he read her too well and told her all bets were off. Or maybe he was a double agent. Or maybe she was. Or maybe he balked at the notion that it was worth blowing up an airplane with over two hundred people on board just to kill five agronomists and lay the blame on the Jewish Defense League and the Zionists. Or maybe he got on to the notion and decided that it was senseless. Or maybe he didn't know one damn thing, and for reasons of their own the Russians decided to get rid of him and sent her to do the job. You can take your choice, Sy."

"Do you think we'll ever know?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

They were on the San Diego Freeway now, screaming south at eighty miles an hour.

"Better all around if we stay alive," Beckman said casually.

“We’ll stay alive.”

“I should have called the L.A. bomb squad.”

“I don’t want them there with that damn truck of theirs. I don’t want anything to alarm Miss Binnie Vance.”

“It still don’t make sense, a woman cold enough to marry a man just to set him up like that.”

“She’s pretty cold, but maybe when she married him she didn’t have that in mind. She could have found out about his big contribution to the J.D.L. and decided that he was a proper candidate. Who knows? I would guess that she planned the whole thing, but why not give her the benefit of the doubt? It’s the last benefit she’ll have.”

“I read a book about that Munich massacre of the Israeli athletes by the Palestinians at the seventy-two Olympics. The East Germans could have saved a couple of them,” Beckman said. “Their quarters were right across the street. They didn’t. They just watched the whole thing, cold as ice.”

They were close to the airport now. Masuto turned off the freeway onto Century Boulevard, and a few minutes later they came to a stop in front of the National Airlines gate. Phillips was already there, waiting with two uniformed airport police. He was a slow-moving, ruddy-faced man, whom Masuto had encountered half a dozen times through the years, and he unhurriedly shook hands with both of them.

“Sy Beckman, my partner.”

“What have you got, Masuto?” Phillips asked him.

“You know about the Russian agronomists?”

“Right. We got extra security from here right into the plane.” He looked at his watch. “They should be here in about half an hour. Six seats first class on the regular flight to Miami.”

“Six seats?”

“They got an interpreter who travels with them. We’re trying to keep it very low key. We don’t expect any trouble.” He looked at Masuto keenly. “Are you bringing me trouble?”

“Some. Any minute now, a belly dancer called Binnie Vance will get out of a taxi or some other car. She’ll be carrying a suitcase which will contain four ounces of lead azide and maybe another ten

pounds of dynamite or some other explosive. It's probably rigged with an altitude detonator or a time device. She has almost certainly bought a ticket on the plane to Miami, but she has no intention of going there. She'll check the bag through on her ticket, and then go back to the Ventura Hotel where she's the opening act tonight."

"You're putting me on."

"No. I'm giving it to you straight. It's a long, twisted story that we have no time to go into. Just take my word for it."

"You're not talking about a hijack. You're spelling out a plan to blow up the plane and kill everyone on board."

"Right."

"But why?"

"How the devil do I know? A new terror tactic, an excuse to start a war, a tactic for a new wave of anti-Semitism."

"Who's behind it?"

"There too. She's East German. The others are Arabs. Maybe the Palestinians, maybe the Germans, maybe the Russians. They got it set up to lay it on the Jewish Defense League."

"What does she look like?"

"Medium, good-looking, green eyes, dark hair, good figure. I suggest you put your two men over at the baggage entrance, just in case. We'll cover the main entrance."

"She'll be carrying the bag?"

"I think so. That lead azide is volatile. Tell your men to handle with care."

He walked off with the two uniformed police. When he returned, he looked at his watch and said, "Four-ten. The Russians will be arriving in the next ten minutes or so. The plane boards at four thirty-five. Suppose she doesn't show?"

"Then we'll put them on another plane and go through every piece of baggage."

"That won't be easy."

"It's easier than dying, isn't it?"

"All I got is your say-so, Masuto."

"You got mine," Beckman whispered. "Over there."

A taxi had pulled up to the curb, about thirty feet short of where they were standing. A smartly dressed woman in a black pants suit

got out and reached into the cab. The cab driver came around the cab to help.

She gave him a bill. "I'll do it. Keep the change."

She reached into the cab again and drew out a medium-sized Gucci suitcase.

"Is that her, Masao?" Beckman asked softly.

"That's our girl. Let her check the suitcase through. Then we'll take it." Masuto turned his back to her. "She knows me," he explained.

"She's giving it to the luggage porter," Beckman said.

Masuto heard her say, "The five o'clock flight to Miami. Will it be leaving on time?"

"Usually does, ma'am. Could I see your ticket?"

She gave him the ticket, and he wrote her baggage check and handed it to her. Then he took the suitcase and put it on his cart.

"Get the suitcase," Masuto said to Phillips. "We'll take care of her."

"Okay."

"And then have one of your men call the bomb squad."

As Masuto turned around, she was entering the airline terminal. Masuto and Beckman followed her. "Now?" Beckman wanted to know.

Masuto shook his head. "Let's see what she does."

Keeping their distance, they followed and saw her enter the ladies' room. They stood at the ticket counter, waiting; a few minutes later she emerged and walked to the exit and out to the sidewalk. She went to the curb and waved to a cab. Then they closed in.

"You don't need a cab, Miss Vance," Masuto said. "We'll give you transportation."

Two airport policemen, about forty feet away, stood on either side of the Gucci bag. Phillips strolled toward them.

"Detective Masuto," she said. "How odd—" She noticed the bag and broke off. Beckman cuffed her wrists.

"Damn you, what are you doing?"

"I'm sorry. You're dangerous, lady."

Masuto said, "Mrs. Stillman, I am arresting you for the murder of your husband, Jack Stillman, for the murder of Peter Litovsky, for conspiracy to destroy an interstate airliner, and for the transportation of dangerous explosives. Sy, read her her rights."

“You’re crazy!” she cried shrilly. “You’re all insane. I’m opening at the Ventura tonight.”

“Not tonight. Not any night.”

“This is an admonition of rights,” Beckman was droning. “You have the right to remain silent—”

“Oh, shut up!” she screamed at him.

Beckman droned on.

“She’s a tough cookie,” Phillips said. “I bet she’s something on the stage. I never saw her dance. Now I guess I never will.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Where you taking her, Masuto?”

“Back to our place. When the bomb squad finds out what’s in the bag, give me a call and tell me.”

“Okay. Sure. I got to take off.”

“Why?”

“The agronomists. I got to stay with them.”

Masuto, Beckman, and Binnie Vance turned to watch Phillips. Two enormous black Cadillac limousines had drawn up at the curb, and from them emerged the agronomists, their interpreter, several county officials, and Boris Gritchov, the consul general.

“Well, we finally caught up with the agronomists,” Beckman said.

“Let’s get out of here,” Masuto told him.

Beckman took Binnie Vance’s arm. She turned on him suddenly and screamed, “Let go of me! Keep your hands off me, you lousy Jew bastard!”

Her shrill cry attracted the attention of the arriving delegation, and they turned to watch Beckman, who, ignoring his injured hand, practically lifted Binnie Vance into the car. Gritchov met Masuto’s eyes, and Masuto smiled, bowed ever so slightly, and said, “So very sorry, Consul General.”

They were in the car, driving north on the San Diego Freeway toward Beverly Hills, with Binnie Vance huddled in the back seat next to Beckman. Beckman leaned forward and whispered to Masuto, “Do I look that Jewish, Masao?”

“Do I look Japanese?” Masuto said.

12

THE QUIET WOMAN AGAIN

It was five-thirty and Masuto sat at his desk, staring at his typewriter. Beckman sat facing him and rubbing his hand.

"I can't write this," Masuto said. "I don't know where to start. There was too much yesterday and too much today."

"Can you move your fingers if your hand is broken?" Beckman asked.

"Suppose you write the report, Sy."

"How can I type with this hand? Do you think I ought to have it X-rayed?"

"The hell with it," Masuto said. "I'll do it tomorrow. I'm going home. I need a bath. You know, we don't eat anymore. Did you have lunch today?"

"When?" Beckman asked sourly.

Wainwright came into the room then and stood there, staring at them bleakly.

"Something wrong?" Beckman asked.

"You two give me a pain."

"That's understandable," Masuto agreed.

"You got a kidnapping, and you treat it like a personal affair. You bust into a house in Los Angeles and maim two suspects, and you

operate like this wasn't a police department and like you studied to be a pair of lunatics. This Clinton from the F.B.I. says you are arrogant and unreliable, and I'm inclined to agree with him."

"We couldn't reach you," Masuto said lamely.

"That's one lousy excuse. Suddenly you don't have a radio in your car. You knew goddamn well that I was over in the hotel with this Clinton guy, but you couldn't take five minutes to phone me. Oh, no. Now what the hell am I supposed to tell this guy? You got us involved in an international incident with these creeps from Washington crawling all over the place, and it don't help one bit for me to tell them that you kept their five lousy agronomists and a lot of plain citizens from being blown out of the sky. Oh, no. All they want to know is why they weren't informed of what was absolutely an F.B.I. matter, and what kind of a lousy, insubordinate police department do I run, and how come one of my cops nearly beats a suspect to death out of his own personal animosity?"

"I swear I only hit him once," Beckman protested. "Look at my hand!"

"Well, he's outside," Wainwright said.

"Who?"

"The F.B.I. guy, Clinton. And he wants to talk to you, Masao, and I don't want you giving him any lip or any of your goddamn Charlie Chan routine. You just listen to what he has to say, because we got trouble enough."

Masuto nodded, rose, and walked outside. Clinton was sitting at a table, his attaché case open in front of him, writing. When he saw Masuto, he closed his notebook and rose to face the detective.

"So you finally condescend to speak to me, Sergeant Masuto. You had an appointment with me at eleven o'clock this morning, but you chose to ignore that—"

Now Wainwright and Beckman joined them, standing a few feet behind Masuto. Clinton went on talking.

"—and take matters into your own hand. You were involved in a kidnapping, but you saw no reason to report that to the F.B.I., and then you undertook an illegal search and seizure without a warrant or a court order, and then you and your partner gave a classic demonstration of police brutality. Well, just let me tell you this. That

kind of thing is over. This matter is out of your hands. The man found dead in the pool at the Beverly Glen Hotel died of drowning accidentally. Both my government and the government of the Soviet Union concur in that decision, and you are to do nothing and say nothing to contradict this. Furthermore, Mrs. Stillman's murder of her husband will be treated and tried as an act of jealousy and revenge, and nothing will be said of her connection with the two Arabs. They will be deported, turned over to the German authorities, who have a prior claim and indictment against them. Nothing will be released on the attempt to destroy the airliner, and I have suggested to Captain Wainwright that he take measures concerning the insubordination of you and Detective Beckman. Now, do you understand this?"

Masuto nodded.

"Have you any comment?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Most humble apologies. So very sorry for long and painful list of my ineptitudes. But must make one comment. It seems to me that you are one of the most incompetent and stupid men I have ever encountered, and you can stuff that right up your bureaucratic federal asshole."

And with that, Masuto turned on his heel and walked out. There was a long moment of silence, and then Beckman began to sputter.

"Get out of here!" Wainwright yelled.

Beckman fled. Clinton took a deep breath and said to Wainwright, "I want you to get rid of that man."

"Oh?"

"How can you run a police force, even a force like yours, with men like that?"

"I manage," Wainwright said.

"That insolent bastard! That damn Jap!"

"Hold on," Wainwright said coldly. "You turn my stomach, mister."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he's an American, He's not Japanese. This is California, Mr. Clinton. We don't talk that way."

Clinton stared and Wainwright stared back.

"He's also a damn good cop," Wainwright said. "Maybe the best I got. I cooperated with you right down the line, and if you want to twist this filthy mess to your own ends, I got nothing to say about that. But

right here you're on my turf. I don't come to Washington and tell you how to run your organization, and I'll thank you not to tell me how to run my police department. So let's finish up what we got and put this case away."

Masuto drove home to Culver City. He was tired. His mind had stopped functioning. Rage had wiped out any sense of achievement, and he felt lifeless.

He came into the house, and his son and daughter ran to greet him. They were in their pajamas, ready for bed, and Ana appeared to be none the worse for her experience. She had evidently informed Uraga of all the details of her kidnapping, and they both chattered away, excitedly. Masuto embraced them mechanically and listened without hearing. He was also very conscious of the fact that Kati had not come to greet him as he entered. Usually she was so anxious about his coming home that she would look for him through the window or listen for the sound of his car.

"Where is your mother?" he asked Uraga.

"In the kitchen."

"Go and play," he said to them. "I must talk to her."

He went into the kitchen. Kati stood at the sink, her back to him, cleaning shrimp and vegetables for tempura. She did not turn as he entered, and after a moment he went to her and kissed the bare spot on her shoulder.

"That will not help," she said coldly, without turning around.

"What have I done?"

"It's not what you have done. It's what you haven't done. Do you know what I went through today?"

He took her shoulders and turned her around to face him. "Don't you think I went through the same thing?"

"Did you? Did you have to sit here and wait? And wait? Do you know what that is? Days go by and I don't see you and the children don't see you. Do you know what that is? I'm not Japanese. I'm Nisei, as you are, but you treat me the way the Japanese men treat their wives."

"I don't. That's not fair."

"It is true, and you know it."

He shook his head helplessly. "I don't know what to say. I'm going to take a bath."

He was lying in the hot tub, the water as hot as his skin could bear, half asleep, relaxed for the first time in hours, when the door opened and Kati entered, carrying two huge fluffly white towels. She sat down beside the tub, the towels in her lap.

"Do you know, you are right," he said to her.

"I know I am."

"I saw you preparing tempura, so you can't be too angry at me."

"Ah, so. It's not because I am not angry, it's because I decided what to do."

"And what is that?"

"It concerns tomorrow, Saturday. Tomorrow, I will prepare a picnic lunch, and we will take the children and our bathing suits and we will drive up to Malibu and have a picnic on the beach, and the children will play all day in the sand and the water, and you and I will have an opportunity to resume our acquaintance."

"That would be wonderful." Masuto sighed. "But I have to go into the office and prepare my report."

"No," Kati said calmly. "You will call Captain Wainwright and tell him you cannot come in tomorrow. You can even lie to him, if you wish, and tell him that you are sick. You never use any of your sick time."

"I don't think Wainwright would appreciate that."

"But I would. So when you are out of the tub, you will call Captain Wainwright."

Masuto thought about it. "It's too sudden to get sick. I would have to tell him the truth."

"Then you will tell him the truth. Then you can meditate if you wish, and then we will have your supper. I also have sushi."

"Why did you prepare my favorite food if you were so angry at me?" Masuto wondered.

"What has one thing got to do with the other?"

"Yes. I see. You are a remarkable woman, Kati."

After he had dried himself and put on his saffron-colored robe, he called the station and spoke to Wainwright.

“I just don’t believe you,” Wainwright said. “After the way you loused things up with the whole goddamn federal government?”

“It’s either that or get a divorce.”

“You give me one pain in the ass, Masao.”

“Do I get the day off?”

“Take it, take it. It’ll be a relief not to see you around for a whole weekend.”

He put down the phone and turned to Kati, who stood there smiling.

“You see,” she said, “it was very simple, wasn’t it?”

He shook his head hopelessly.

“The children are in bed. Shall we eat?”

He nodded.

Later, heaping tempura onto his plate, she asked innocently, “What happened to the dancer?”

“She’s in jail.”

Kati smiled again. “Tomorrow will be a nice day,” she said. “A married man should enjoy his wife and children.”

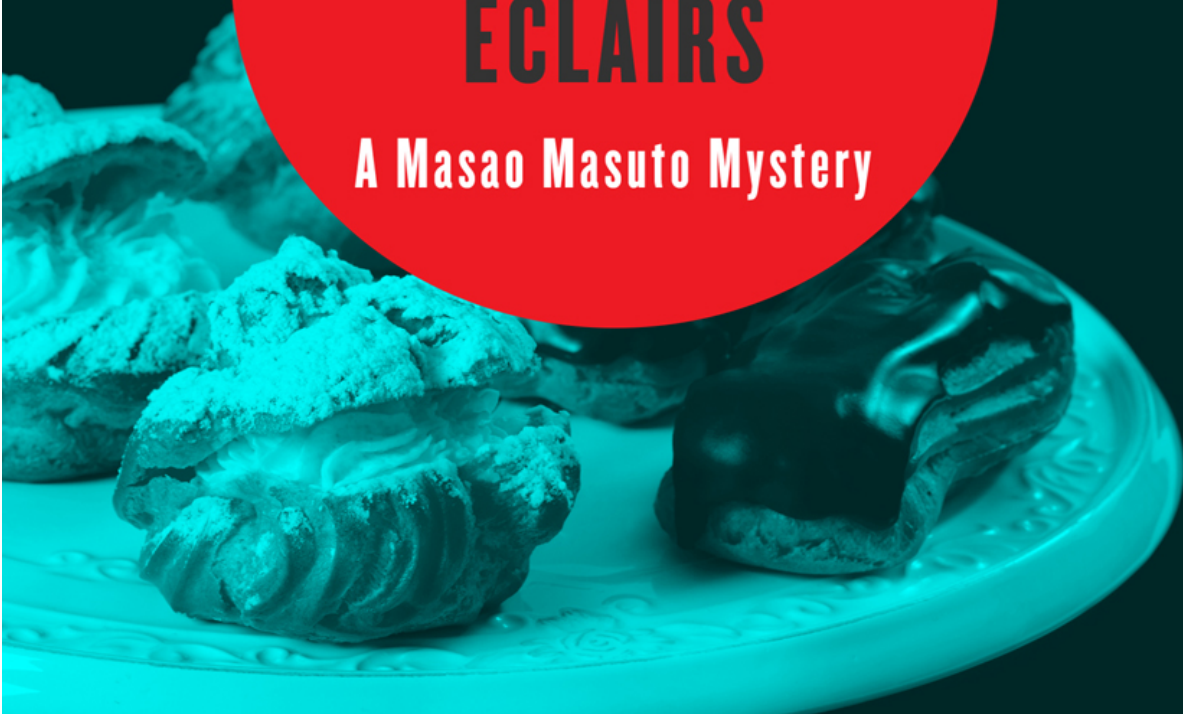
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*—BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SPARTACUS*

HOWARD FAST

Writing as E. V. Cunningham

THE CASE OF THE POISONED ECLAIRS

A Masao Masuto Mystery



The Case of the Poisoned Eclairs

To the memory of Louis Untermeyer



Sam Baxter

Masao Masuto was late at his morning meditation. Here it was already a few minutes past eight o'clock in the morning and still he sat cross-legged, like a saffron-robed Buddha, in the little sunparlor which he was pleased to call his meditation room. Kati, his wife, sent the two children off to school in a flurry of whispers, and then she stood staring at the figure of her husband. Had he fallen asleep? That, she knew, would be the ultimate sin in meditation—provided there was such a thing as a sin in meditation. She herself did not meditate; it was quite enough, she once told her husband, to run the house and take care of the children—aside from which she felt no need. She was not a policeman, thank heavens; her husband was.

She was in the kitchen, putting his breakfast together, when she heard him rise and go into the bedroom to dress. A few minutes later he leaned over her and kissed the spot where her neck joined her shoulder.

“That does not make everything all right,” she said.

“Is everything not all right?”

“I have been reading an article by Betty Friedan. About women. Do you know what she says about Japanese women?”

“Ah so. Will I get my breakfast or must I eat at the hash joint?”

“Your breakfast is already on the table.”

“You are really the most wonderful of wives,” Masuto told her.

“Only because I never stand up for my rights. Sono Asie is starting a consciousness-raising group for Nisei women. She asked me to

join.”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“I’m not sure.”

“It’s an excellent idea,” Masuto said.

“You agree?”

“Why not? Higher consciousness is excellent in any situation, and if you neglect my home and my children, I can always divorce you and find a truly submissive woman.”

“Why must you always tease me?”

“Tease you? Never.” He finished eating, rose, and put his arms around her. “I love you very much. Join any group you wish. Now I must go.”

“To violence and death and murder. And now I have another day of worry.”

“Absolutely not,” Masuto said cheerfully. “There has been no death by violence in Beverly Hills for five weeks. In fact, I should not be surprised if they closed down the homicide department. Then I should be an ordinary policeman admonishing children of the rich who sniff cocaine and lecturing housewives on how to keep their oversized houses from being burgled.”

“That would not make me unhappy,” Kati told him.

Would it make him unhappy? As he drove north on Motor Avenue from Culver City, where he lived, into Beverly Hills, Masuto wondered about that. He had been in charge of Beverly Hills’ tiny homicide squad for five years now. Could it be that he had become fascinated with murder? It was the ultimate crime, the single hideous mark of the beast that had scarred man since Cain first raised his hand against his brother Abel. Of course, that was a Western myth; yet Masuto, like most Nisei, was a man whose consciousness was split between East and West.

“Why do men murder?” Kati had once asked him.

“Because they lose themselves somewhere,” he had replied, “and in that way they lose the rest of mankind.”

“That is a Zen answer,” Kati said with irritation. “You only confuse me with your Zen answers.”

He reached the police station on Rexford Drive, parked, and went upstairs. Well, he confused Kati, and very often he confused himself;

there was no easy answer when he asked himself why he was a policeman—any more than an easy answer to the question of why murder was done. Yet he was content to remain where he was, to accept the fact that promotion was unlikely, that Beverly Hills was not yet ready for a Nisei chief of police. He had all that he desired, a good wife, two children, his meditation, and his rose garden.

In his office, Sy Beckman, the other half of the homicide division, was at his desk, feet up, reading the *Los Angeles Times*. “Quiet day,” he said to Masuto. “In L.A., on the other hand, they got five homicides.”

“I don’t envy them.”

“Wainwright says to find him as soon as you come in.”

Wainwright—Captain Wainwright of the Beverly Hills Police Department—sat behind his desk and stared sourly at Masuto. His expression indicated nothing; it had become fixed many years before, and Masuto could remember and count the times he had smiled. “Over at All Saints,” he said to Masuto, “Doc Baxter has a cadaver that he wants you to look at. Anyway, it’s time you and Beckman stirred your asses and justified my having a homicide division.”

“We haven’t been sitting still,” Masuto said gently. “We’ve been on robbery. However, if the city fathers require murder, we can hire a contract man—”

“Oh, get the hell out of here,” Wainwright said tiredly. “Your humor stinks.”

“Do you want me?” Beckman asked Masuto.

“Finish the paper. It’s just possible I can handle Baxter alone.”

“Funny.”

Beverly Hills, in spite of the astonishing growth of the small, affluent city that was entirely surrounded by the city of Los Angeles, was still too small to have its own morgue and department of forensic medicine. Instead, it used the morgue and pathology room at All Saints Hospital, which was located just at the edge of Beverly Hills, one small wing extending into the domain of Los Angeles. Dr. Sam Baxter was part-time medical examiner for Beverly Hills, a tired, professionally nasty internist in his late sixties. He regarded each summons to work as a deliberate intrusion on his time and privacy,

whereby he specified the members of the Beverly Hills police force as his nominal enemies.

He greeted Masuto with a cold stare. "Do you know how long I been waiting here? It's almost ten."

"I was informed and I came immediately," Masuto said gently.

"What the hell, I'm not a cop. Or am I? Tell me?"

"No, doc. You're not a cop."

"But I got to turn up murder. God knows how many killers are walking the streets because you lamebrains over there on Rexford Drive can't see what's in front of your noses."

"We do our best."

"I just bet you do."

"What have you got?" Masuto asked him. "Mostly we're told about murder. It's still sort of a novelty in Beverly Hills."

"Don't get snotty with me, Masao. You're the chief of what they please to call their homicide squad, heaven help us." As he talked, he walked across the hospital morgue to the refrigerated holding cabinet and pulled out one of the drawers. "Take a look at this."

Masuto walked over to the cabinet and looked down at the pale, lifeless face of a young woman. Her hair was black, her features good. In death, she was wistful, as if pleading for all the years of life that had been taken from her.

"Ana Fortez," Baxter said. "Twenty-one years old. Admitted to All Saints the night before last with a severe case of food poisoning. Died yesterday afternoon. Botulism."

Masuto nodded. "We had a report."

"I don't doubt it. Did the report tell you that in the eight hours before she had been taken ill she had eaten three chocolate éclairs and nothing else?"

"I think that was mentioned."

"You think so," Baxter said sarcastically. "You really think so. And then she died. But you defenders of law and order saw nothing unusual in that—nothing unusual in botulism from eating a chocolate éclair?"

"Look, Doc, I appreciate your wit and irony. We were waiting for your autopsy report, out of due respect for our medical examiner. People do die from food poisoning."

“Not from éclairs.”

“Why not from éclairs? The scouts have a picnic. Someone brings cream puffs, and thirty scouts end up in the hospital. It’s happened time and again.”

“But they don’t die, mister—not from a botulism.”

“Why not? I seem to remember fatalities.”

“No, sir. Not from botulism. There are a dozen other kinds of food poisoning, but botulism is the rattlesnake of the lot and it does not grow in éclairs. It grows in putrefying meat and in badly canned vegetables. Did you ever pick up a can and find both ends bloated? Throw it away. It could contain a botulin. The bacillus botulinus will grow only in the absence of air, and there’s no such thing as an airtight éclair, and this poor kid had enough botulin in her stomach to kill a horse. From eating éclairs? Now you tell me how the botulin got into the éclairs?”

“She’s a Chicano?”

“I suppose so.”

“Maybe she ate a bad taco. The meat some of those places use
—”

“Shrewd, shrewd,” Baxter agreed. “The cops are getting wiser. Why didn’t I find it in her stomach?” He pushed the drawer back into the holding cabinet. “Tell you something, Masuto, if I had to choose between being bitten by a rattlesnake and swallowing botulin, I’d take the rattlesnake hands down.”

“Is it always fatal?”

“Just about. The toxin does it—intoxication, we call it—” he grinned. “That’s the medical term.”

“All right,” Masuto said, “you’ve been very clever and I salute you. Now what are you telling me? Are you telling me that this poor kid was murdered deliberately by someone injecting a batch of eclairs with botulin and then feeding them to her?”

“That’s right. That’s just what I’m telling you.”

“It’s the most far-fetched thing I ever heard of.”

“I don’t perpetrate the murders, Sergeant, I just analyze them.”

“Are you sure?”

“You’re damn right I’m sure.”

“Was the kid married? Does she have a husband, family, friends?”

“That’s upstairs business. I just open them up.”

The hospital records listed her husband, Pedro Fortez, as next of kin. Masuto copied down the address—an East Los Angeles street—and the phone number, informed the hospital that the death had become a police matter, and then returned to headquarters.

“Pretty damn unlikely,” Captain Wainwright said after Masuto had filled him in. “Who is the kid?”

“A Chicano, occupation housemaid.”

“And someone puts together this crazy murder device? Balls! You know what I think? I think Doc Baxter has flipped out.”

“He only does the autopsy. It’s the pathologist at the hospital who came up with the botulism.”

“Then we’ll find the goddamn bakery and close it down. I don’t buy that crap that an éclair can’t kill you. My wife ate a rotten éclair once and she was in the hospital three days. Meanwhile, get through to L.A.P.D. and see if they got any cases of food poisoning. Check the County Health Service too.”

Masuto nodded slowly.

“You don’t agree with me,” Wainwright said. “You got one of those Chinese hunches of yours.”

“I don’t know. Anyway, I have to talk to her husband. He’s my only lead to the bakery.”

“Talk to him. Only don’t go looking for trouble, Masao. It finds us soon enough.”

In Masuto’s office, Beckman had finished the Los Angeles *Times* and was reading the *Herald-Examiner*.

“Perhaps I should wait until you finish the paper,” Masuto suggested.

“Just trying to catch up. You don’t read the papers, you’re not in the world.”

“I’m returning you to the world. Go downtown and talk to Omi Saiku. He runs the poison lab for the Los Angeles cops. He’s a fourth or fifth cousin of mine, so you can tell him that you’re asking for me.”

“What am I asking him?”

“You’re asking what he has on recent food poisoning in general, and specifically whether a bad éclair can produce botulism.”

“How do you spell botulism?”

Masuto spelled it out. “And get a background. If he tells you no botulism in an éclair, find out if someone could put it there. Find out if a person eating it could taste it. Get all the background you can, and then go to the County Health Service and see what they have on recent food poisoning.”

“You don’t think you ought to fill me in?”

“I don’t know what’s to fill in yet. Baxter has a Chicano girl over at All Saints who he claims was murdered by éclairs doped with botulin. It sounds crazy.”

“You can say that again,” Beckman agreed.

After Beckman had left, Masuto called the telephone number the hospital had given him. A voice answered in Spanish. Speaking careful, well-enunciated Spanish, Masuto asked for Pedro Fortez and was told that he was at All Saints Hospital.

Masuto drove back to All Saints, and as he entered the lobby, he noticed sitting on one of the benches a young man whose face reflected all the grief a face could hold, a dark, good-looking young man of about thirty. Masuto walked over to him and asked, speaking Spanish, “Are you Pedro Fortez?”

The eyes, wet with tears, looked at Masuto. The head nodded.

“I am Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills police. I hesitate to intrude on your grief, but I must talk to you. I must ask you some questions.”

Fortez nodded mutely.

“We can speak in Spanish or English, whichever is easier for you. Spanish?”

“Si,” the young man whispered.

“Your wife was employed as a domestic?”

“She worked for Mrs. Crombie.”

“You know the address?”

He gave an address on Beverly Drive, and Masuto jotted it down. “Can you tell me,” Masuto asked gently, “what happened the day your wife took sick?”

There was a long silence. Then Fortez drew a long breath and said, “Nothing happened. That’s what is so terrible. We have one car, my old Ford. I work in a plastics plant in Santa Monica. When I go to

work in the morning, I drop Ana off at the Crombie place. In the evening, I pick her up—only—”

The tears began again. The nurse at the reception desk came over and whispered to Masuto. Was there something she could do? “Poor kid,” she said. “Are you a friend?”

“I’m a policeman,” Masuto said. “Perhaps a little water.”

Fortez drank the water and apologized for his tears. “We were only married a year,” he explained.

“And you picked Ana up the night before last?”

“Yes. We drove home. She had a dish in the refrigerator that she had prepared for me the night before. It is called *carne de res con nopalitos* and it is made with much garlic and green cactus. Ana could not bear the taste of garlic. She made the dish just for me. I asked her what she would eat, and she showed me the three éclairs that Mrs. Crombie let her take home. My Ana was like a little child about sweets. She decided that the pastry would be her whole supper.”

“She didn’t offer you any?”

He shook his head. “I don’t like such things.”

“And after she ate the pastry, she became sick?”

“That night she became sick. In the morning I called the ambulance. It was too late. Then when she died—when she died—they brought her body here.”

“Do you know why they brought her body here, Mr. Fortez?”

“They said she was poisoned, that the food poisoned her.”

“Yes. Your wife died of a kind of food poisoning called botulism. That’s what makes it a police matter. You see, we must try to find out where the éclairs came from. I don’t know whether there is any reason why you must stay here now. Could you leave and return?”

He nodded.

“We would be very grateful to you if you could come to the Beverly Hills police headquarters and give us a statement. I only mean to let a stenographer take down what you have just told me. Then you could sign it, and we have it for the records.”

“Must I? Ana is here. I arranged for the hearse to come here for her body.”

“When?”

“At three o’clock.”

“Then you have plenty of time. This won’t take more than an hour, with the driving. I’ll be happy to drive you both ways.”

He thought about it for awhile, then nodded. “I’ll take my own car.”

“The police station is on Rexford, just south of Santa Monica. Do you know where that is?”

“I know. Yes.”

After Fortez had made his statement, and after it was typed up and Wainwright had read it, the captain said to Masuto, “Did you tell him about Doc Baxter’s theory?”

“No. What for? He has enough grief.”

“Still, if there’s anything to it, he could have fed her the stuff in a mug of coffee.”

“Come on,” Masuto said. “A Mexican murder is an act of violence, an act of rage. If this is what Baxter says it is, it’s a thousand years removed from those poor kids. It’s diabolical.”

“If it’s what Baxter says it is. I still don’t buy it.”

Beckman walked in as Masuto entered his office, and stood in silence for a long moment, watching Masuto.

“What is it, Sy? What did you learn?”

“You give me a creepy feeling at times.”

“That’s because I’m a wily Oriental. What did Omi have to say?”

“He says you can’t get botulism from an éclair. He also says you can’t get botulism from Lubie’s chocolates, which in case you never heard of Lubie’s chocolates are maybe the most expensive candy in the world, and they’re sold on North Cañon Drive over here in Beverly Hills for eight and a half dollars a pound.”

“I know the place where they sell Lubie’s chocolate.”

“On your pay?”

“I don’t buy them. I just know where they’re sold. So maybe you’ll be good enough to tell me what the devil you’re talking about.”

“All right. All right.” Beckman spread his hands. “Other cops, they got muggers and rapists. We got the cutes, only not so cute. I go downtown and ask all the questions. Absolutely quiet on the food poisoning front, not even a troop of boy scouts who let their sandwiches sit in the sun too long, not even a restaurant closed down for a dirty kitchen, except—”

“Except what?”

“This cousin Omi Saiku of yours, strange duck, knows more about poison than an encyclopedia, shows me some sweet pea seeds—deadly. You ever know that? You can die from eating sweet pea seeds or morning glory seeds or potato leaves—”

“Will you please get to the point? What about Lubie’s chocolates?”

“I’m getting there. I’m just saying I’m glad he’s on our side. So he says to me, ‘Masao’s found a botulin in an éclair.’ Then he grins, like it’s some special earth-shaking discovery in the poison field. ‘Then tell Masao we found a botulin in a chocolate bonbon. He will enjoy that. I am sure that police work in Beverly Hills is very dull.’ Then he tells me that this dame—” He took out his notebook to consult it. “Name of Alice Greene, lives over here on Roxbury Drive. Well, he tells me that she feeds a couple of pieces of this Lubie candy to her dog, a Pekinese, and the dog freaks out. She takes the dog to her vet over on Western, a Dr. Carver, but he can’t save the dog. However this Dr. Carver is no fool and he gets this Greene lady to go back and bring him the candy. Then he sends the candy along to Cousin Omi, and what do you think?”

“The candy is loaded with botulin.”

“Right. The whole top layer, nine of these oversized chocolate creams. This cousin Omi of yours, he says that if the candy produced the botulin, it’s the first time in either the history of candy or botulism that it happened. Only it didn’t happen. Omi shows me exactly how the stuff was shot into the candy pieces, as crazy as that sounds. Can you imagine feeding eight-and-a-half-dollar candy to a mutt?”

“It wasn’t meant for a dog. What the devil do we have here? Omi gave you the candy, didn’t he?”

“No. He wants to run some more tests. He knows we don’t have a poison lab, and anyway he wants to talk to you. He says you should come down there first chance you get.”

“What about prints?”

“They took care of that and Dr. Carver was careful. The only prints on the box are Mrs. Greene’s. That’s as far as they’re taking it down at the Los Angeles cops. They say it’s our turf and our case.”

“I hope you thanked them,” Masuto said bleakly.



Laura Crombie

“I swear to God,” Captain Wainwright said, “I’ve lost my taste for this lunatic world we live in. Snipers sit up on the hillsides and shoot motorists they’ve never met, terrorists execute heads of state, and lunatics poison Pekinese dogs.”

“All killers are lunatics, to one degree or another,” Masuto said. “This one is sick, very sick.”

“Well, at least you got something to work with. Someone bought the éclairs and someone bought the candy. Run that down and we have our man,” Wainwright said.

“Perhaps.”

“And keep it quiet, Masao. If there’s one thing this city doesn’t need, it’s a bizarre murder case.”

“I’ll keep it as quiet as I can, but nothing’s going to wash out the fact that it’s bizarre. That’s exactly what it is,” Masuto responded.

Beckman agreed with Masuto. “When I was with the L.A. cops, Masao,” he said, “a killing was done with a knife or a gun. But this botulism—”

“All right, but it’s our baby now, so you get over to the people at Lubie’s Sweet Shop and try to jog their memories. They’re going to put you off and tell you that they sell a hundred boxes of that stuff every day, but I don’t think they do, even in Beverly Hills. Was it a one-pound box?” Wainwright asked Beckman.

“It was,” Beckman answered.

“Did you note the arrangement of the candy, the color, the shapes?” Masuto asked.

“Was I born yesterday, Masao?”

“Then give them the information as precisely as possible and just keep working at them until they remember something,” Masuto said.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Then meet me at the Crombie place. It’s on Beverly Drive. Better jot down the address.”

The Crombie house wasn’t large, considering its location on Beverly Drive in the very center of Beverly Hills. The tourist buses, which can be seen at almost any time of any day twisting up and down the streets of Beverly Hills, never failed to include Beverly Drive between Santa Monica Boulevard and Sunset Boulevard. This stretch of about a mile of glamorous homes had once housed some of the most glittering film stars of another age. The stars had died or moved away, but the houses remained, and the Crombie house was by no means the grandest among them. Architecturally, it would have been called a modified French château, and since it was large enough for six or seven bedrooms, Masuto was somewhat surprised that the woman who opened the door for him stated that she was Mrs. Laura Crombie.

She was a tall, handsome woman in her mid-forties, with a lean body, a well-defined face, light-brown hair swept back from her brow, and little makeup. She wore slacks and a blouse, and regarded Masuto curiously from behind the chain which held the door half open.

“I’m Detective Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills police,” he said, showing her his badge. “I’d like to talk to you, if you don’t mind.”

“Yes—yes, of course. Is it about Ana, poor child? I called the hospital, and they told me.” She unhooked the chain. “Forgive me, but I’m alone in the house. I’ve had no one to replace Ana.” She stood aside for him to enter, closing the door behind him. “You’re Japanese. Forgive me. I don’t usually make personal remarks. I think it’s fine that we have a Japanese policeman here.”

“I’m a Nisei, Mrs. Crombie, which means that I was born here. However, you may think of me as Japanese if you wish. I am not entirely Westernized.”

“You’re very nice, and that’s a very nice way to forgive my rudeness. Come in and sit down. Can I offer you anything, a cold drink, perhaps?”

“No thank you, nothing.”

She led the way through a living room furnished with overstuffed pieces covered in bright printed linen into a library, bookshelves and brown leather chairs and couch. All in good taste, Masuto reflected, a huge and enormously expensive Kirman rug on the floor of the living room and three lovely Degas pastels on the wall of the library. She sat down in one of the leather chairs, and he sat facing her.

“I will have to ask you a good many questions,” he told her. “I hope you will not mind and I hope you can give me the time.”

“No—I don’t mind and I do have the time. But why?” she wondered, frowning. “I think Ana’s death is a terrible thing—she was so young and alive and bright. But food poisoning happens, and I’ve begged her not to eat those wretched tacos.”

“She didn’t die from eating tacos or any other Mexican food, Mrs. Crombie. She was poisoned by the éclairs you gave her to take home.”

There was a long silence. Then Mrs. Crombie whispered, “Oh, my God, no. No!”

“I’m afraid so.”

The woman sitting across from Masuto shook her head woefully. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault. I know how you must feel,” he said gently.

“Of course it was my fault. I gave her the pastry.”

“There was no way you could have known what you were giving her. Did you eat any of the pastry or did you give her all of it?”

Laura Crombie shook her head, tried to speak, then closed her eyes.

“Can I get you something?” Masuto asked her.

“No—give me a minute. I’ll be all right.” A moment later, she appeared to have recovered. “Go on, Sergeant.”

“The important thing is to know where you bought the pastry.”

“I didn’t buy it.”

“You didn’t buy it? Was it a gift? Did someone bring it?”

“It was delivered.”

“But who sent it? Who bought it?”

She shook her head. “You must think me a totally empty-headed fool. I’ll try to explain. I am divorced, and I live alone in this huge, ridiculous barn of a place. I don’t know why. Inertia, and also some good memories as well as some bad ones. Ana took care of the place. I don’t entertain very much. I don’t go out much and I dislike travel intensely. I have all the money I could possibly need and I find myself bored to distraction. Years ago, I used to play bridge. Last month, I decided to try to put a bridge game together, which would take care of at least one afternoon a week. I had two friends who were interested, and then we found a third. The day before yesterday was the third afternoon we met. I always serve something—tea, sandwiches, fruit, sometimes salad. But all four of us watch our weight fanatically. That’s the Beverly Hills syndrome, you know. Well, just before my friends arrived—that was about noon—the pastry was delivered. I was sure it was from one of them, but they all denied it. You know—big joke, conversation piece, let’s forget about calories for once in our lives and take the plunge—how much can you gain from one éclair? Then it turned into a sort of contest of will power, and in the end, not one of us touched the stuff. Then when Ana, poor child, was ready to leave, she saw me start to throw the pastry into the garbage pail. She said, I think, ‘Oh, no, please, not those beautiful éclairs!’ So I gave her the éclairs. How could I refuse her?”

“No, you couldn’t,” Masuto agreed. “That was all—three éclairs?”

“Oh, no. There were eight pieces, if I remember right. Three éclairs, three strawberry tarts, and two feuilletés à la crème.”

Masuto had his notebook out. “Feuilletés à la crème? What are those?”

“Pastry horns with a cream or custard filling.”

“And the strawberry tarts would also have some sort of custard base?”

“Yes.”

“And what did you do with the rest of the pastry?”

“As I said, I threw it away—into the garbage. I adore such pastry. I put it beyond temptation.”

“And the garbage? Is it still here?”

“It was picked up yesterday.”

“What about the box in which the pastry came? Did Ana take the box with her?”

“No. We wrapped her three éclairs in aluminum foil.”

“Then you have the box?” Masuto said eagerly.

“I’m afraid not. When I threw the pastry away, it was box and all. If I had only known. You don’t think that whatever bakery it was is just spreading this food poisoning all over the place?”

“No, I doubt that. But about the box—tell me about it. Was there any printing on it, the name of the bakery perhaps?”

“No, it was just one of those plain cardboard boxes that bakeries put their pastry in.”

“This feuilleté stuff—is it common? Could you find it in many bakeries?”

“I wouldn’t think so. There are really only four good pastry shops in this whole area. I should think it would have to come from one of those four.”

“Could you give me the names?”

At that moment, the doorbell sounded.

“That may be Detective Beckman,” Masuto told her. “I asked him to meet me here.” He followed her to the front door. Beckman, oversized, slope-shouldered, stood there shaking his head.

“Nothing, Masao.”

“Wait here a moment, Sy.”

She was standing behind him, watching intently. Not a foolish woman by any means. The tendency to regard any wealthy divorced woman as an empty-headed fool was something Masuto did not share. “I want to write down the names of those four bakeries,” he said to her. “Could I have a few minutes alone with Detective Beckman? Then if I can impose on you a little more?”

“Yes, of course.”

She opened the door wider and asked Beckman to step in. Then she gave Masuto the names of the bakeries. “I’ll be in the study,” she said to him.

“Thank you.”

They stood inside the door, Beckman looking around the place curiously. “Eight-and-a-half bucks for a pound of candy,” he said

reflectively.

“And you got nothing?”

“Would you believe, Masao, that they sold twenty-four boxes of the stuff already today, and it ain’t two o’clock yet? What is it with money? Has it gone out of style?”

“You pushed them?”

“Sure I pushed them, but there is no way in the world they could give me anything worth a damn. We don’t know when the candy was bought—maybe last week, maybe a month ago. It’s a standard box, each one the same as the next.”

“I figured that’s the way it would be.”

“Great. I got nothing eke to do with my time.”

“Now you have. Here are the names of four bakeries. That’s just a beginning, but hit these four first. Two days ago, a pastry carton was delivered to this address—three chocolate éclairs, three strawberry tarts, and two things called feuilletés. I have it written down here. These feuilletés are pastry horns with a cream filling. That narrows it. I’ll see you back at headquarters.”

Masuto closed the door behind Beckman and went into the study. Laura Crombie stood in one corner of the room, and she stared at Masuto unhappily as he entered.

“There’s more to this than just a case of food poisoning, isn’t there?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Have you had lunch, Mr. Masuto?” she asked unexpectedly.

“It’s not important.”

“I think it is. I can give you scrambled eggs and coffee.”

“Thank you, but I can’t impose on you.”

“You certainly can. I’m hungry too. And I’m frightened. Do you know how often a woman who lives alone in this strange society of ours is frightened? I’m frightened right now at the thought of what you are going to tell me. And you must tell me, I suppose?”

“I must—yes.”

Masuto sat at the big wooden table in her kitchen, watching her prepare eggs and coffee and toast. She moved deftly. She was a competent woman.

“You have no family?”

“None. I’m alone in the world. I had a daughter.”

“Oh?”

“She died.” Shortly and thrust aside. She had no desire to talk about the daughter who had died. “Do you like your eggs soft or well done?”

“Either way. Tell me about these women who are your bridge friends.”

“Don’t you think you should first tell me what this is all about?” When Masuto hesitated, she added, “You probably pride yourself on being inscrutable. Well, Nisei or not, you’ve given me a feeling of disaster ever since you entered this house.”

“You’re very sensitive, Mrs. Crombie.”

“Or frightened. I overheard you talking to the other detective. I wasn’t eavesdropping. His voice carries.”

“I know.”

“Alice called me this morning.”

“Alice Greene?” It was Masuto’s turn to be surprised. “Was she one of your bridge partners?”

“Yes. And her dog ate some candy and died. Lubie candy. You don’t get food poisoning from candy. Not from Lubie’s candy.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Then I think it’s time you let me in on what is happening to us.”

“All right. Ana Fortez died of a type of food poisoning called botulism. Do you know what that is?”

“Only that it’s very deadly.”

“Very deadly. It begins with a bacillus that produces a poisonous toxin. Now there are various types of stomach disorders that can result from eating a bad éclair, but botulism is not one of them. Botulism can only be produced when the bacillus is in an airtight area, and it is almost always the result of putrified meat or badly canned vegetables, not éclairs.”

She shook her head in bewilderment. “I don’t understand you, Sergeant. You told me that Ana had died from eating the éclairs that I gave her.”

“So she did. And she died of botulism. I would guess that the éclairs were intended for you or your guests. I would also guess that the rest of the pastry was equally deadly.”

“But you said—”

“That you can’t have a natural botulin in an éclair. That’s right. I would still be guessing, but I would suppose that someone grew the botulism toxin and injected the pastry with it.”

“Oh, my God! But why? Why?”

“We’ll get to that. Right now, I would like you to telephone Mrs. Greene and the other two women you played bridge with and suggest to them that they refrain from eating anything sent to them or delivered to them, regardless of its origin—at least until I can arrange to speak to them.”

There was a telephone on the kitchen wall. Laura Crombie started to say something, then swallowed her words, stared at Masuto, hesitated, and then went to the telephone. Masuto watched her and listened.

“Just do as I say.... Please.... No, I can’t explain over the phone.... I’m sitting here with a policeman and he says he will see you and explain everything.... Yes, it has something to do with Ana’s death.... Yes, I’m frightened too.”

The other calls followed more or less the same pattern, and when Laura Crombie returned to the kitchen table, Masuto pushed his pad and pen toward her. “Please give me their names and addresses.” Her hand was shaking as she attempted to write. “I’ll write them,” Masuto said gently. “Suppose we start with Alice Greene.”

He put down name, address, and telephone number. Next, Nancy Legett, and then Mitzie Fuller.

“Tell me about them,” Masuto said. “How you met them, how long you know them.”

She didn’t respond. As if she had only this moment realized it, she whispered, “Someone is trying to kill us. All of us. Isn’t that what you’re telling me?”

“No!” he said sharply. “That’s not what I’m telling you. At this moment, I have no idea what is going on, whether this is some stupid joke, some monstrous prank, or whatever.”

“No, no, no.” She took a deep breath and got hold of herself. “I am not going to be hysterical, Sergeant Masuto, but if you want me to be frank and open with you, then you must be quite frank with me. For all I know, you may be convinced that I am behind all this, that I

poisoned Ana and that I sent the candy to Alice. After all, you have only my word about the pastry being delivered here.”

“Did you poison Ana Fortez?” Masuto asked matter-of-factly.

“No! Of course not!” Masuto looked at her with a slight smile. “Don’t you believe me?” she demanded.

“It’s of no consequence whether I believe you or not. If it makes you feel better, I will say I believe you. That doesn’t help us. I must find out who is doing this, whether it is you or someone else.”

“That’s very comforting.”

“I think Ana’s death was an accident. That lets you out, doesn’t it? If you had known that the pastry was poisoned, you would not have given it to her.”

“Yes, that makes sense—thank God. Why didn’t you say that before?”

“I was making a point. I want you to help me, and you can help me better if you have no predetermined notions. Now tell me about your bridge partners.”

“You know their names, Alice Greene, Nancy Legett, and Mitzie Fuller. Alice is a tall, beautiful blonde—”

“Please, forgive me,” Masuto interrupted. “Let me ask direct questions. Then it will not take so long. I will see them,” he explained, “so I will know what they look like.”

“Yes, of course you will.”

“First—age?”

“Yes. Alice is thirty-six. Nancy goes on being thirty-nine. She’s forty-two. And Mitzie—well, I really don’t know. I would guess twenty-seven or twenty-eight.”

“Why the uncertainty about Mitzie? You’re so sure of the others.”

“The others are old friends. I hardly know Mitzie.”

“Oh? Then how did she come into the bridge game?”

“I got to talking with her at the hairdresser. She was in the next chair, and she appeared to be a nice kid, and we needed a fourth—as a matter of fact she’s a very good player, and she’s played a lot of duplicate.”

“What hairdresser?”

“Tony Cooper’s on Camden.”

Masuto jotted it down. "You said you were divorced. May I ask when?"

"Two years—well, only a year since I filed. Before that it was a separation. You didn't ask my age. I'm forty-five."

"I would have thought younger," Masuto said. "Your first marriage?"

"My second. My first husband died of a heart attack twelve years ago. I married Arthur Crombie three years ago."

"The real estate man?"

"Yes, do you know him?"

"I know about him—just the things one hears and reads. I have to be indelicate. How much alimony does he pay you?"

"None. Anything Arthur Crombie touches comes up gold. Six months after we were married, my father died. I was the only heir, and the estate was worth millions. I gave Arthur half of it. It was a stiff price to pay to get him out of my life, but well worth it."

"You're not fond of him?"

"He's a bastard, period. But if you're thinking that he'd want to kill me, well, no way. He has the money and he knows he's not in my will. He couldn't care less whether I'm alive or dead."

"Where is your will?"

"You mean, where do I keep it? Somewhere in the study. Does it matter?"

"Perhaps. Tell me about the others. Are they all married?"

"All divorced. Does that surprise you?" She had reacted to the expression on Masuto's face. "You see, we're all in the same boat—shock, boredom, frustration. Certainly four divorced women in Beverly Hills are not that unusual."

"Could you give me the names of the husbands—the ex-husbands?"

"Yes—"

He had his notebook ready.

"You think—one of them?" she asked slowly.

"I don't know what to think—yet."

"But why all of us? If we had eaten the pastry, it would have been all of us. Why? What sense does it make?"

"I don't know. Suppose we start with Mrs. Greene."

“She was married to Alan Greene. He operates a chain of clothing stores. The big one is down on Wilshire.”

Masuto nodded.

“Nancy,” Laura Crombie went on, “was married to Fulton Legett, the film producer. That’s a rotten story. They were married in New York about twenty-two years ago. He was a gofer at ABC television. Nancy worked as a secretary at the same company. Then he quit to try TV production. For years she supported him and took his garbage. He’s one of those angry, aggressive, ambitious little bastards. Then Nancy’s mother died and left her sixty thousand dollars, and she gave it to Fulton and he used it as seed money to produce *Flames*—”

“Seed money?”

“Start-up money—to option the property and pay a writer to do a screenplay. The film was a hit, and suddenly Fulton was a millionaire. They moved out here and bought a house on Lexington Road. Then two more big hits, and Fulton was a millionaire and Nancy was forty and not very attractive anymore. At that point, you trade the forty for the two twenties. Fulton dumped her. The wages of virtue.”

Masuto nodded and scribbled in his notebook.

“And then there’s Mitzie. She’s a beauty and a doll. You can’t feel too sorry for her. She was married to Bill Fuller, the director. It lasted six months. She doesn’t talk about it or him, but from what I’ve heard he’s a louse.”

She was hardly reticent in her judgments, Masuto decided, and said thoughtfully, “You don’t like men very much, do you?”

“Don’t misjudge me. We’re not talking about the genus. We’re talking about four men. I don’t like any of them.”

“Do you know where Fuller is working now?”

“I think Mitzie mentioned he’s doing a film at Metro.”

“I see.”

Masuto closed his notebook and stared at Laura Crombie thoughtfully. “Suppose I said that all four of you are in very great danger.”

“I’d believe you.”

“Would the others?”

“I could convince them.”

“Could you be convincing enough to have them all here tonight?”

“If they haven’t made other plans.”

“Even if they have, I want them here. It’s very important.”

“At what time?”

“Say ten o’clock—and if I’m late, please wait for me. And until then, I’d like them to stay indoors and not to let any strangers into their homes. I’d like you to do the same. And again remind them about the food. Will you do that for me?”

“All right. But this is crazy—absolutely crazy.”

“I know,” Masuto said gently. “Much of the world is crazy, but this is where we are.”



Omi Saiku

When Masuto walked into police headquarters on Rexford Drive, the city manager was there talking to Wainwright, and Wainwright nodded for Masuto to join them.

“What I want to know,” Wainwright was saying, “is how the hell this stuff gets out. There are no blabbermouths here. Masuto and Beckman are on it, and they don’t talk.”

“Frank Lubie called me. He smelled something in Beckman’s questions. He was sore as hell at even the implication that something could be wrong with his candy. You know, he has a point. If what you tell me gets out, it could ruin him. He’s not only a sizable taxpayer, but his factory’s here in town.”

“Can we put a lid on it?” Wainwright asked Masuto. “What do you think?”

Masuto shrugged. “The vet knows. Mrs. Greene knows. They know down at L.A.P.D. It’s not just a question of the candy. It’s a lot more than that.”

“What’s a lot more?” the city manager asked.

“We have a poor Mexican kid murdered by some lunatic who seems determined to kill four other women. Ana Fortez was a mistake. If any of the others die, I don’t think it will be a mistake.”

“Four women!” Wainwright exclaimed. “What the devil are you talking about?”

Briefly, Masuto summed up his conversation with Laura Crombie.

“I know Mrs. Crombie,” the city manager said. “You’re making an inference, Masuto. It could all be some kind of accident. What’s the point in scaring these women to death?”

“They won’t die of fright. Other things are more deadly,” Masuto replied.

“I think you’re out of line—way out of line.”

“Hold on,” Wainwright said. “I’ll agree that Masao is guessing. But I’ve had experience with his guesses. Usually they come off pretty good.”

“You mean you agree with this notion that some lunatic is trying to kill these four women? Why? Because they play bridge together? For Christ’s sake, Wainwright, this is Beverly Hills!”

“That doesn’t give us any exemption from crazies,” Wainwright said.

“All right. If you buy it, what do you intend to do about it?” the city manager asked.

“I don’t know. We could put cops at their houses. What do you think, Masao?”

Masuto shrugged. “For how long? A week, a month? You get something like this with no reason and no motive and no direction—well, I don’t know. I think those women are in danger, terrible danger. But I don’t know why or how.”

“If we don’t and something happens,” the city manager said, “I get the backlash.”

“And if they go out of their homes, if they go shopping or on a date, does the cop follow them?” Masuto asked. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with, and until we know something more, it’s not going to help to put cops outside their houses. Anyone who is crazy-smart enough to get hold of botulism toxin is smart enough to get around a cop standing outside a house.”

“All right, get on it,” the captain said to Masuto. “You’ll be talking to those women?”

“Tonight.”

Beckman was waiting in Masuto’s office. His broad, heavy face had what Masuto thought of as his “mission accomplished” look.

“You found the bakery?” Masuto asked.

“Right. La Consoler on Third Street,” Beckman answered.

Masuto couldn't help smiling.

"The owners of the bakery don't think it's funny. They're sore as hell. They're going to sue the city," Beckman said.

"I was smiling at the name. It means to console, to comfort."

"Well, that's what they do. You could eat yourself into an early grave at the place. They're the only outfit in this part of the city that makes those feul—what do you call them?"

"Feuilletés."

"Right. First they couldn't be bothered, and then I had to lean a little and tell them about the Fortez kid."

"I wish you hadn't."

"Masao, there was no other way. They just brushed it off until I got serious. There were maybe twenty customers in the place. My God, don't they eat nothing but cake in this town? Then the manager took me behind the store, and we called the clerks in one by one. One of them was an old lady of about seventy, and, believe it or not, she remembered. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because it was a Mexican kid and he just handed her a slip of paper which specified the pastry. It came to seven dollars and seventy-five cents for eight pieces of pastry, would you believe it? He gave her a ten-dollar bill."

"A Chicano kid. Just that. What did he look like?"

"Maybe fourteen, fifteen years old. What does a Chicano kid of that age look like? Blue jeans, tee shirt, dark skin, dark eyes, black hair—"

"There are at least a thousand like that within five miles of here," Masuto said with annoyance.

"Can I help that, Masao? At least the old lady remembered."

"I'm sore at myself, not at you."

"They'll be calling the city manager," Beckman said.

"He'll have a busy day. Did the saleswoman keep the slip of paper on which the order was written?"

"I thought of that. No. The kid asked to have it back. It's open and shut, Masao. X drives up in his car, sees the kid, gives him the paper and a ten-dollar bill. Buy the cake and keep the change."

“It could be. And that might just mean that the kid hangs out in the neighborhood. So get over there, Sy, and ask around. One Chicano kid knows another. Take a couple of bills from expenses, and buy a little information. It’s the only thread we have, and a damn thin one.”

“I’ll try,” Beckman agreed. “Where will you be?”

“Downtown with Omi. I’m curious about botulism.”

Beverly Hills, like many other small cities in Los Angeles County, has limited police resources. The country tends to regard Los Angeles County as a single metropolitan area, but in reality it encloses more than seventy towns and cities, as well as a considerable unincorporated area. Most of the small cities in the county have their own police forces; some depend on the sheriff’s office, which polices the unincorporated areas of the county; and then to one degree or another, many of the small towns depend for additional resources on the police force of the city of Los Angeles, the largest metropolitan area in the county. Omi Saiku ran the poison laboratory for the Los Angeles Police Department. He was a small, cheerful man whose dark eyes peered out of heavy glasses. He welcomed Masuto into his tiny room, a single table, a single chair, and shelves of mysterious bottles.

As Masuto entered, Omi rose from the microscope into which he had been peering and said, “Ah, estimable cousin, you deign at last to visit my house of horrors.”

“Wainwright calls that kind of talk my Charlie Chan routine,” Masuto replied sourly.

“Ah so. He does not distinguish between the Chinese and the Japanese. A Western failing. Did you know that Roshi Azuki is in Los Angeles? Tomorrow he will attend za-zen at the Zen Center. Can you join us?”

“Tomorrow I’ll be looking for a homicidal maniac.”

“Yes. Of course. Your botulism man.”

“Man?” Masuto demanded. “Why man? Why not woman?”

“Because no woman would kill in such a manner.”

“Why not?”

“I have been in this room for twelve years,” Omi said. “The poison homicides and suicides of the whole state reach me eventually. There are patterns. Strychnine is the most common and the most

frequently used by women. Now what is a poison, Masao? Strictly but generally speaking, it is any substance that causes change in the molecular structure of an organ. That's not difficult. It's less a question of substance than of quantity. Alcohol, morphine, cocaine, nicotine are all deadly in sufficient quantity. But according to my records, ninety-five percent of women murderers do not plot bizarre poisonings. Driven to desperation, they take whatever is at hand, arsenic, found in Paris green, phosphorus in rat poison, and of course strychnine, easily come by. The fancy poisoning is done by men, and by golly this botulism of yours is the fanciest I've seen in a long while. Now take this bacillus botulinus. Why do we see so little of it? Why are whole populations not ravaged by its poisonous toxin? Thank mother nature, who always gives with one hand and takes away with the other. In other words, bacillus botulinus is anaerobic."

"Which means what?"

"Simply that it will not grow in the presence of air. It requires low temperature and airlessness. Now don't think that you can take a piece of meat, let it putrefy, exclude the air, and grow a botulin. Maybe yes, maybe no—most likely no. To grow a botulin, you require the botulism bacillus, and since it cannot live in the presence of air, the likelihood is that you won't get it. The only place it seems to turn up these days is in canned goods, and even there it's only one out of a thousand bad cans that produces a botulinus. But here, honored cousin, here we have something unique—not the putrefaction which produces the botulinus, which in turn produces the deadly toxin, no indeed—here we have the toxin itself, no putrefaction, no source, simply the deadly poison. And that, my dear Masao, is the work of a chemist. Find the chemist and you find your murderer."

"Thank you," Masuto said without delight.

"Or conceivably a pharmacologist."

"I am most grateful."

Masuto bade his cousin good-bye and descended to the floor below, moving through the vast machinery of the Los Angeles Police Department, wondering how it might be to work for an organization like this rather than for the police force of a small town of thirty thousand population. He found Lieutenant Pete Bones at his desk, painfully pecking out a report on his typewriter. Bones, a heavy-set,

thick-necked man in his forties, turned his pale blue, suspicion-clouded eyes on Masuto and then grinned.

“Ah, my favorite Oriental sleuth. How goes it in the pastures of the rich?”

“Too much time on their hands. The result is murder most foul.”

“That’s a quote from somewhere. I retire in two years. The wife and I have a cabin, if you can call it that, up at Mammoth. I’m going to read all the books I never read being a cop. You’ll come and visit us, Masao.”

“With pleasure.”

“And what can I do for you now?”

“Can you set the machinery to work? I’m looking for a chemist or a pharmacologist with a criminal record, probably in this area, but maybe upstate.”

“Masao, you can make a San Francisco request as easy as we can. I can put it into work here. I’ll tell you this. We got to come up with at least ten names, maybe more.”

“I can narrow it,” Masuto said. “The one I’m looking for—well, I think he’ll be killed, either today or tomorrow or the next day.”

“What!”

“Possibly yesterday, but more likely today or tomorrow.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute! You’re asking me to look for a chemist with a criminal record who’s going to be murdered? Come on, Masao, come on! Who’s going to kill him?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know who this chemist is, or maybe he’s a pharmacist, but you don’t know who he is or where he is or which he is, but you know he’s going to be killed, but you don’t know who’s going to kill him. Do you know how crazy that sounds?”

“Pretty crazy, yes.”

“Then how in hell do you know he’s going to be killed?”

“I don’t know. I said I think so. I’m dealing with a killer, and I try to put myself into his mind and think the way he thinks. It’s not easy. You get a crime of passion or violence, and you can understand it. They are crimes done by human beings who have momentarily lapsed. But this is something coldly plotted by a man who has stopped being human. So I try to approximate that kind of mind. I

have to. It's all we have, not one damn thing more. If I can find this chemist while he's alive, it will help, maybe wind the thing up. Even dead, it will help."

"Okay," Bones agreed. "I'll set things moving in the county. You can line up the San Francisco cops from Beverly Hills."

"I don't think it's up there. I think it's right here in L.A."

At that moment, a uniformed policeman approached them, looked at Masuto curiously, and then asked, "Are you Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills P.D.?"

Masuto nodded.

"We got a call for you."

Bones picked up his telephone and told them to put through Sergeant Masuto's call. He handed the phone to Masuto, and Beckman's voice said, "Masao, is that you?"

"What's up, Sy?"

"Can you get away now?"

"If it's important."

"It's important. I'm up on Mulholland Drive, half a mile west of Laurel Canyon. You'll see my car and a sheriff's car and an L.A.P.D. car. I'm trying to get them not to touch anything or move anything until you get here, and they're giving me a hard time because it's their turf, not ours. But I think I can hold them if you get here in half an hour."

"What have you got?"

"I got a body. But get up here and we'll talk about it."



The Chicano Kid

Mulholland Drive is a narrow, twisting, badly-paved two-lane road that runs across the ridge of the Santa Monica Mountains and the Hollywood Hills, from Cahuenga Canyon in the east to Topanga Canyon in the west. Although it is almost entirely contained within the city limits of Los Angeles, it presents a vista of wild brush and mesquite-covered hills as well as breathtaking views of both the city of Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley—providing one drives it on a day when the smog is light enough to see anything at all. Nevertheless, its illusion of wilderness, combined with the fact that it bisects one of the most heavily populated cities in the United States, makes it a favorite scenic drive for tourists and a weekend outing place for the local residents.

At least twice a year, preferably during the winter months when there was little or no smog, Masuto's wife Kati would pack a picnic lunch, and he would drive her and the two children to one of the lookout points on Mulholland. There they would eat their lunch and marvel at the great vista of valley and mountains spread out before them. He thought of this now as he raced along the Hollywood Freeway, his siren screaming—a sound he disliked intensely—his old Datsun shivering in protest against eighty miles an hour. He had to cut his speed as he turned off for Mulholland. Not quite half an hour, but forty-one minutes from the time he had received Beckman's phone call in downtown Los Angeles to the cluster of cars on Mulholland was not bad time at all.

From a group of uniformed officers—there was a sheriff's deputy and three L.A.P.D. cops, while a fourth uniformed officer waved the traffic on—Masuto heard Beckman's booming voice: "There's Masuto now. So you let the body lay there for an extra half hour. The kid's dead. He's not going to be any more dead."

A white-coated ambulance man said, "You kept us sitting here like this was the only stiff in Los Angeles."

"You got a radio. Stop yapping," Beckman said.

"Are you Sergeant Masuto?" one of the Los Angeles cops asked him.

"Yes."

"Well, this ain't Beverly Hills. You can't interfere like this. I damn near arrested that guy Beckman," the cop said.

"It connects with our trouble. He wouldn't let you move the body, is that it?" Masuto asked.

"That's it. So will you go down there and see whatever he wants you to see and let us get out of here?"

"Down here, Masao," Beckman said.

Beckman clambered down the mesquite-covered hillside, Masuto picking his way after him. Another ambulance man, holding a stretcher, stood in a tiny hollow where the body was wedged. It was a young Chicano boy, dressed in tee shirt, jeans, and sneakers.

"Shot once in the head, behind the ear—small caliber, maybe a twenty-two," Beckman said.

"How long has he been dead?" Masuto asked the ambulance man. "Can you make a guess?"

"At least two days."

"Some kids climbed down here and they spotted the body," Beckman told him. "It doesn't have to be our kid. This city's filled with kids who do violence on each other, and maybe ten thousand of them wear blue jeans and tee shirts. But look up there at the broken branches, Masao."

Masuto nodded. "Dumped over the side, out of a car."

"That's right. He gets into the car after he buys the pastry. Maybe he delivers it."

"No. It had to be injected with the botulin. He didn't deliver the pastry." Masuto stared at the body again. "Chicano kids are killed,

but not this way. Gang wars, bursts of violence. But not this way.”

“Can we get him out of here now?” the ambulance man asked.

Masuto nodded, and he and Beckman climbed back up to the road.

“Well, thank God that’s over,” the L.A. cop in charge said.

“What did he have in his pockets?” Masuto asked.

“We got to hold it for the investigators,” the cop replied.

“I know. Can we look at it?”

“Not much to look at. Just some money. Nothing else. No identification.”

“How much money?”

“Here,” he said, handing Masuto an envelope. “Count it yourself.”

Masuto counted it. “Twelve dollars and twenty-five cents,” he told Beckman. “It fits. He gave the kid another ten dollars. I suppose he invented another errand, and that’s how he got the kid into the car.”

“It could be. He’s one cold-blooded bastard, Masao.”

“Do you guys know something about this killing?” the L.A. cop asked. “If you do, one of you ought to hang around until the investigators show up.”

“When will that be?”

“Any time now. We run a busy city. It’s not Beverly Hills.”

“We’re getting there,” Beckman said. “Don’t put down Beverly Hills.”

“You stay with it,” Masuto said to Beckman. “Tail after the investigators. You can tell them what we’ve got, which is nothing. I don’t remember one like this. We have nothing—no lead, no motive, no direction.”

“We know one thing,” Beckman said.

“What’s that?”

“That this son of a bitch kills people the way we kill flies.”

“He’s insane. So are a thousand others walking around on the streets of this city. It doesn’t help now. Maybe later. See what you can find out about the kid. It’s possible that our killer just picked him up on the street; it’s also possible that they had a previous acquaintance. Maybe the kid had friends and one of them saw something. It’s just barely possible that the money is a coincidence—possible, but not likely. So if you have a chance, poke around the

bakery again. Get a death picture. I hate to use them, but someone around the bakery might recognize it.”

“I can get the bakery lady down to the L.A. morgue.”

“I wouldn’t put an old lady through that. Get the picture and show it to her. That ought to do it.”

“Where will you be?”

“Damned if I know,” Masuto said, shaking his head. “I’ll be at Laura Crombie’s house, but not until ten o’clock tonight.” Then he added, “I’ll call in. You’d better do the same.”

Masuto went back to his car, sat for a moment or two staring through the windshield, then took out his notebook and called headquarters on his radiophone.

“Polly,” he said to the lady who answered the phone, “this is Masao. Jot down this number.” He gave it to her. “Dial it and patch it through to me.”

“For you, Masao, it’s a pleasure.”

He always reacted in surprise at the fact that women liked him. He never thought of himself as likable or lovable, a tall, dour-faced second generation Japanese man, yet nothing pleased him more than this almost consistent response on the part of women. He pardoned himself; he argued to himself that he had a good wife whom he loved, that he was scrupulous in his behavior as a policeman, that he was content. Or was he?

This was no time to debate it. Laura Crombie’s voice came over the phone.

“This is Sergeant Masuto, Mrs. Crombie. There was a question I didn’t ask—at least I can’t remember asking it. Who received the pastry when it was delivered?”

“Didn’t I tell you? Ana did.”

“And of course she never mentioned who delivered it?”

“No. It wouldn’t be of any importance.”

“Yes. And since I left you, anything?”

“No, nothing out of the ordinary. I called the ladies. They’ll all be here.”

“I’d like to change that,” Masuto said.

“Oh, no!”

“Please. I’d like you to call them again and get them to your house right now. And then I’m going to have a policeman sitting in his car across the street from your house.”

“But why?”

“I’ll tell you why very bluntly and plainly—because I’m afraid.”

“Sergeant Masuto, we don’t live in a jungle. This is Beverly Hills.”

“I know it is. Will you please do as I say?”

“I suppose so. When will you be here?”

“About ten, as I said.”

“And we just sit here and wait for you? Come on, you can’t be serious!”

“I am very serious. I know what I ask is a nuisance, but I’m trying to keep you alive—all of you.”

“Aren’t you being dramatic?”

“I hope so. Enough to impress you.”

He finished with Laura Crombie and was talking to Polly again when Beckman came over to the car and stood by the open window. Masuto had just asked her to get a make from L.A.P.D. on Tony Cooper.

“Who’s Tony Cooper?” Beckman asked him.

“A hairdresser. You’ve seen his place on Camden Road.”

“How does he fit into all this?”

“I don’t know. I look where the light is, because everywhere else it’s dark.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Not very much. They tell the story of a man crawling around under a lamp post on his hands and knees. Another man stops and asks him why, and the man on his hands and knees says that he lost a gold cufflink. ‘Where did you lose it?’ the man asks, and the man on his hands and knees replies that he lost it a hundred feet down the street. ‘Then why are you looking here?’ the second man asks. And the man who lost the cufflink replies, ‘Because it’s light here.’”

“That don’t make much sense,” Beckman said.

“What does in this crazy case? There are your investigators,” Masuto said, pointing to where a car had pulled up. “Give it about an hour, Sy, and then I want you to drive over to Laura Crombie’s place. I asked her to get the other three women over there, and they should

be there by then. I don't want anyone else going into that house without your say-so."

"Come on, Masao, you can't do that. Wainwright would have my scalp if I tried anything like that."

"I'm not telling you to pull any rough stuff. We're putting the house under police protection. There's nothing illegal about that."

"What do you mean, we're putting it under police protection?"

"I'll fix it with Wainwright."

"So I see someone going in. Do I stop them?"

"No. Just find out why. Park near the door. If Mrs. Crombie says it's okay, let them in. But stay right on top of it, and don't take your eyes off that door for two minutes."

"That's great. When do you get there?"

"About ten. Maybe earlier—not later."

"And when do I eat?"

"Get a sandwich on the way. And grab those investigators. They've given it their five minutes."

"Masao," Beckman said, "why is L.A.P.D. the only police force in the country that calls its detectives investigators?"

"Ask them," Masuto said, and put his car in gear and drove off.

At Rexford Drive, Captain Wainwright listened bleakly to Masuto's account of the day's events.

"Assumptions," he said without enthusiasm. "All you got is a series of assumptions. We still don't know but maybe this Mexican girl died of the damn eclairs, and you link up the kid on Mulholland Drive with a group of wild guesses. You tell me we got a lunatic who's killed two people already, but all I see that I can put a finger on is a food poisoning and a killing that belongs to L.A.P.D."

"I beg to disagree. We have a murderer who is indifferent to human life. He's killed two people and a dog, and he'll kill anyone who stands in his way."

"What in hell do you mean, stands in his way? What is his way? What is he after?"

"I think he's after those four women. I think he's going to try to kill all four of them."

"Why?"

“I don’t know. If I knew, we wouldn’t be arguing. All I’m asking is that you give Beckman and me a free hand on this case.”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes—maybe another day, maybe a week. I don’t know.”

Wainwright sighed and nodded. “Okay, but don’t talk to the press. Not a word. You want to make a murder case out of this, you can have the time. But keep it quiet.” He stared intently at Masuto. “You keeping anything back?”

“Would I?”

“You damn well would. All right, it’s yours.”

Polly intercepted Masuto on his way out. She was small and blonde and blue-eyed. “What do I have to do,” she asked him, “to get a reaction from Detective Sergeant Masuto?”

“You get it all the time. I hide it behind Oriental inscrutability.”

“Which means?”

“That I adore you but don’t dare show it.”

“Bull. You are married. Every decent man is married. Try a singles bar some night and you’ll see what I mean. Don’t you want to know what downtown has to say about your Tony Cooper?”

“That’s what I asked.”

“Well, here it is.” She read from a slip of paper. “Three arrests, homosexual practice, no convictions, all of it ten years ago. You know, it should be the women who do the resenting, not the cops. We suffer when the men leave the market place, and as far as I’m concerned the cops have got better things to do than to pull people in for being gay. You know how they do it?”

“I have heard,” Masuto said.

“They entice them into porno movie houses and then arrest them. I think it stinks. Our boys wouldn’t do that, would they, Masao?”

“No, we’re too short on cops. Thanks, Polly.”

It was almost six o’clock when Masuto parked on Camden Drive across the street from the beauty parlor, but the shop was still open. Only a single customer remained, a brown head being trimmed by a slender, dark man in a white jacket with pink stripes. Masuto crossed the street and entered the shop.

“We don’t do men and we’re closed,” the man in the striped blazer told him.

“Tony Cooper?” Masuto stood just inside the door.

“That’s right.” He stared at Masuto thoughtfully, and then said to the woman in the chair, “Don’t move, baby. I’ll be with you in a minute.” Then he walked over to Masuto and whispered, “Fuzz?”

Masuto nodded.

“Oriental fuzz. I’ll be damned.” Still in a whisper, “Can you come back? She’s the end of the line.”

“I’ll wait.”

Masuto sat down and picked up a copy of *Architectural Digest* and leafed through the pages. You could gauge the prices at a hairdressing establishment by the kind of magazines they left around. *Architectural Digest* probably indicated a twenty-five or thirty dollar haircut. It was part of the trivia that went into Masuto’s store of facts. A policeman living very simply in a small house in Culver City—which is to Beverly Hills what Brooklyn is to Fifth Avenue—he did his daily work in one of the wealthiest communities on the face of the earth. It called for a certain kind of balance and a special kind of perspective, and he thought of this as he leafed through the magazine, looking at photographs of the homes of millionaires. He had never envied wealth, although often enough he pitied those who possessed it; but then, he was a Zen Buddhist, and that gave him his own unique handle on things. Sy Beckman handled it by ignoring it; it just happened to be the shop where he worked.

Cooper finished with the lady whose hair he had been cutting and saw her to the door. Then he turned to Masuto and shook his head. “You guys never give up, do you?”

“I try not to, but if you’re thinking about your record, I couldn’t care less.” He showed his badge. “Masuto, Beverly Hills police.”

“Okay, but what can I do for you? Is it a violation or tickets to the annual ball?”

“Neither. I want to pick your brains, and I want whatever I pick to stay with you, because if any of it gets out, I will come back and lean on you very heavily.”

“Now?” he demanded indignantly. “It’s a quarter after six. I’m closing. I’ve had a hard, lousy day. The help goes home at five, but if

some broad wants a haircut at six, I stay.”

“Now.”

“I got a date.”

“Call them and tell them you’ll be late.”

“I don’t have to answer any questions.”

“I don’t have to be nice,” Masuto said gently.

“All right. You win. You want coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Cooper regarded him curiously. “You’re a damn funny cop. I never knew they had a Jap on the police force here.”

“You live and you learn.”

“I shouldn’t have said that—Jap,” Cooper said. “I meant Japanese. What the hell, you pick it up. I’ll get the coffee. Maybe you want a drink?”

Masuto shook his head, and Cooper went to the back of the place and then emerged with two cups.

“Sugar and cream?”

“Just straight.”

He handed Masuto the coffee and sat down beside him. “Since that lousy film came out, everyone thinks this business has class and glamour. It doesn’t. You work your ass off and take crud all day. I been on my feet nine hours.”

“A man should enjoy his work,” Masuto said.

“Do you enjoy yours?”

“At times, yes. Right now, no.”

“Where do I fit in?”

“Here are four names: Laura Crombie, Alice Greene, Nancy Legett, and Mitzie Fuller. How many of these women do you know?”

“I know all of them.”

“Oh? And how is that?”

“They’re customers.”

“I’d like to know about them.”

“I don’t talk about my customers. I got maybe two or three principles. That’s one of them.”

Masuto smiled. “That’s admirable. But I’m a cop, and these four women are in great danger. So in this instance, I suggest you put your principles aside.”

“What kind of danger?”

“Someone is trying to kill them. I’m telling you this because I think it’s the only way I’ll get you to open up, but it stops with you.”

The hairdresser stared at Masuto. “Are you putting me on?”

“No. I’m telling you the truth.”

“Who? Who’s trying to kill them?”

“I don’t know. It could even be you.”

Cooper shook his head slowly. “Not likely. Oh, I hate some of these biddies enough to want to kill them, but it’s not my style. I couldn’t kill a mouse. Anyway, I’m a vegetarian.”

Masuto did not regard it as a non sequitur. “You’re not a likely suspect, but you do know all four of them.”

“Customers. I know maybe two or three hundred dames in this town. Mostly they don’t bother me. I take them for what they are. They take me for what I am. It doesn’t drive them out of their minds to have their hair cut by a guy who’s gay. It’s only the cops and Anita Bryant who climb walls at the thought that somebody maybe don’t have the same sexual preference.”

“How well do you know them?”

“The way a hairdresser knows his customers. Some more, some less.”

“Start with Laura Crombie.”

“She doesn’t talk much. I don’t know whether I like her or not but she’s straight on. She doesn’t dye her hair.”

“Who would want to kill her?”

“You’re asking me? She doesn’t even take alimony from the son of a bitch she was married to.”

“How do you know that?”

“The women talk.”

“Do you know her husband?”

“Just by reputation. Crombie and Hawkes, real estate.”. “Who is Hawkes?”

“Nobody. He’s been dead for years.”

“Alice Greene?”

“Tall willowy blonde. Not real, but a great head of hair. She’s the type I’d go for if I were straight. Real class, except that a buck is a buck. No other reason why she married that creep Alan Greene—

you can't turn on the tube without seeing his ads for his string of stores. Since I'm talking, I'll talk. Her alimony is five grand a month. I know some guys who'd murder their own mothers to save sixty thousand a year, and to add insult to injury she's been having an affair with Monte Sweet, the comic. But they'll never get married. They'd have to be crazy to kill the goose that laid the golden egg."

"Meaning her alimony."

"You bet your ass. The best investment there is. You put in a couple of years, and not only have you got the community property law going for you, but you got a fat check coming in every month."

"And is that the case with Nancy Legett?"

"Now there's something else. She's a quiet little mouse—the one in ten in Beverly Hills who just lets her hair go gray. I don't know what to make of her—quiet, polite, no gossip. She was married twenty-two years to Fulton Legett, the producer. He's a big swinger, and for a long time he was up on top. But the past few years, he's had one bomb on top of another, and today they say he's broke. That don't mean he's poor, but maybe he's tired of keeping her in that big house up on Lexington Road. She's got three kids. They're away at school, the way I hear it, two of them in swanky Eastern colleges and one in a prep school back east. That don't come cheap."

"And Mitzie Fuller?"

Tony Cooper leaned back and grinned. "Mitzie. She's a doll—she's an absolute doll. Red hair—real, not from the bottle—a great face and the best pair of boobs this side of the Grand Canyon. Never heard a bad word out of her. She is the sweetest, nicest bundle that ever walked into this tonsorial cathouse. Tell you something, Sarge, if I was straight I'd break my ass trying to get next to her. One thing about broads you can bet your last dollar on, the nicer they are, the worse bums they tie up with, and Mitzie's ex, Bill Fuller, is no exception to the rule."

"William Fuller, the director?"

"That's right. Now let me tell you something. I don't run the biggest hair shop in Beverly Hills, but I like to think it's the best, and I get the pick of the classy broads, and they talk and they talk and they talk. If I didn't have trouble writing my own name, I could write you a tome

on the habits of so-called straight men that would curl your hair, and I'd have a chapter on film directors. They are the meanest, most arrogant, egotistical set of bastards that ever lived, and Billy Fuller is one of the top runners. I'm still waiting to hear something nice about him. Now I don't know why they got divorced, because Mitzie don't talk. They were only married six months when it broke up, but Mitzie got the house on Palm Drive, which the real estate ladies tell me is worth three-quarters of a million on today's market, and the word is that she gets a fat check every month. Well, she earned it. Six months living with Billy Fuller has no price on it. But you want a candidate, you got him. He's a killer. He'd kill anything that got in his way."

Masuto was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "I wouldn't mention that to anyone else—for your sake, as well as mine."

"You asked me."

"I know. And you told me. And for the time being, it rests with us. Right?"

"Right."



The L. A. Cops

Masuto stopped off for a hamburger and a cup of coffee, and he had them wrap two and fill a container of coffee for Beckman. Knowing Beckman, he knew that it would make no appreciable difference to Beckman's appetite if he had brought a sandwich to the vigil. For Beckman to sit in the car, preserving a sandwich for some future dinner hour, was unthinkable. He turned out to have been right.

"I'm starved," was the first thing Beckman said to him.

"I brought you two hamburgers and coffee."

"With pickles?"

"With pickles."

"You know," Beckman said as he unwrapped the first hamburger, "under that cold, inscrutable shell of yours, you got heart."

"I'm relieved to know that. What happened?"

"You mean with the kid or here?"

"First the kid."

"Well, we rounded up a couple of kids near the bakery, and they identified him. Jesus Consolo, fourteen years old. A good kid. Never got into any trouble, no dope, tenth grade, good marks. The L.A. investigators matched it up with a missing report, and I let them break the news to his parents. I'm no good for that kind of thing. I got a fourteen-year-old kid of my own, Masao, and I swear if I ever find that lunatic bastard—"

"No, you won't. Now what about the kids who identified him? Did they see anything?"

“Nothing, nothing—nothing until it stinks. This bastard leaves no loose ends.”

“They all leave loose ends.”

“I sure as hell hope so.”

“And what about here?”

“Well, when I got here, I rang the bell and told Mrs. Crombie that I’d be here in the car. She wasn’t crazy about the idea, and I asked her about the three other women, just to make sure they were inside.”

“Were they?”

“Yeah, they’re there. I told her to bolt the back door and to call me in case anyone came to the back door. That’s it. All quiet as a graveyard.”

“Good. Patch in a call to your wife and tell her you won’t be home tonight.”

“What? She’ll skin me.”

“I want you to stay overnight in the Crombie house.”

“You’re putting me on.”

“Dead serious. I’m going to convince all four women to remain there overnight and I want you to stay with them.”

“And that’s what I tell my wife—that I’m sleeping in Beverly Hills with four dames?”

“If you want to be perfectly honest.”

“Masao,” Beckman said seriously, “I think you’re a little nutty with this one. They don’t need me there overnight. They lock the doors and the windows. Every one of these Beverly Hills houses has a burglar alarm system.”

“I need you there.”

“You’re a heartless bastard.”

“Am I? Locking you up with four lovely women—that’s what every red-blooded American boy dreams of, or so I’m told.”

“Okay, okay. When will you be back?”

“Before ten. Just hang in.”

“I still don’t know exactly what I’m supposed to do if someone comes to the door.”

“Just find out who he is and what he wants. You don’t keep him or her out. Let Mrs. Crombie decide about that.”

Masuto's radio phone was speaking to him as he drove off. Wainwright's voice was demanding, "Where the hell are you, Masao?"

"Turning a corner two blocks away."

"Well, get over here. Do you know what time it is? It's eight o'clock, and I'm sitting here on my butt when I should be home eating a decent dinner, and I'm sitting here because the Los Angeles cops are sore as hell. They want your scalp and they want me here when they take it."

"I'll be there in two minutes."

"What in hell have you been up to?"

"Two minutes."

Masuto pulled into his parking space on Rexford Drive and went inside. Wainwright was pacing in front of Masuto's office. "What's this all about?" he snapped.

"I don't know. I have to call my wife."

"So help me, Masao, if there's one thing a crummy little police force like ours can't afford, it's a ruckus with the L.A. cops. Not now. Not with the city refusing to shell out a nickel for new equipment. We depend on those miserable bastards. I don't want them to mark us lousy."

"Who did you talk to?"

"A lieutenant, Pete Bones. He's coming up here with a Captain Kennedy."

"Pete's an old friend."

"He didn't sound like a friend, old or new."

"Let's take it easy and wait until they get here. Meanwhile, I have to call Kati, or I'll have more trouble than the Los Angeles cops could ever give me."

Masuto went into his office and dialed his home number. The first thing Kati said was, "Your dinner has spoiled."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't think you are. I think it's something you're saying. There are other policemen in the world and they work from nine to five and they see their children and their wives."

"You haven't gone to that women's consciousness-raising session yet?"

“I’m going tonight. I thought you would be here. Then when I realized you would not be here, I telephoned Suzi Asata, and she will be my baby sitter. I will have to pay her five dollars. I don’t think it ought to come out of my household money. I think it ought to come out of your pocket.”

“I agree with you,” he said meekly.

“You do?”

“Yes. Why should that surprise you?”

“Oh, Masao, why do you make me so angry?”

“I don’t think you’re really angry.”

“Please tell me that you will not do anything dangerous tonight.”

“I promise you.”

“And what will you do?”

“Only talk to some ladies.”

“Stop teasing me. Why must you always tease me?”

“I’m not teasing. I promise to tell you the whole story when I see you. I am not talking to these ladies for pleasure. I am talking to them because they are part of this case I am on.”

“I sometimes think that it is always a pleasure for you to talk to American ladies.”

“Kati, I love you.”

“Well—”

“Believe me. And how are the children?”

“Someday you will see them and decide for yourself.”

He put down the phone as Polly entered. She was still small, blonde, and pretty. “I stayed an extra hour waiting for you, Masao.”

“Oh?”

“I’m not making a pass. I’m saving that until you get divorced.”

“I have no intention of getting divorced,” he said severely.

“Baloney. All cops get divorced. Their wives can’t put up with them. Anyway, we can save that discussion for another time. What I got for you now is a very funny phone call.”

“Tell me about it.”

“First place, foreign accent but phony.”

“How do you know it was phony?”

She shrugged. “You watch enough TV, you know. He says to me, Who’s on the poisoned candy case? Me, nobody tells me anything. I

just answer the phone, and everything else I do, which is practically everything around here, it's guess-work. So I ask for his name, and he says Horst Brandt, to go with the phony German accent."

"Address?"

"Just as phony, I'm sure." She took a slip of paper from her purse and read him the address. It had a familiar ring, and Masuto consulted his notebook. It was Alice Greene's address on Roxbury Drive.

"Does it mean something?" Polly asked him.

"Maybe. Maybe not. You're sure he said candy? Nothing about éclairs?"

"What éclairs? Candy, éclairs. Nobody tells me a thing around here."

"And you're sure it was a man's voice, not a woman's?"

She stared at him in disgust. "What am I, Masao, a jerk, a nut? A man's voice. I told you that."

"I'm sorry. Go on."

"So I tell him that if it's a homicide case, it's Sergeant Masuto's department. Then he says, 'Masuto? You mean that Jap plainclothes cop?' He sort of forgets his accent too, and believe me, I get plenty steamed with that kind of talk and I'm ready to tell him to buzz off and sell his apples somewhere else, but I got enough sense to know that it may be important, so I tell him, yes, but we don't talk about people that way, and then he wants to talk to you, and I tell him you're not in but expected."

"Very interesting," Masuto said.

"Okay, I'm going. But if you don't tell me what this is all about tomorrow, I won't talk to you again."

"Promise. And thank you, Polly. Thank you for waiting."

"You can say that again."

For a few minutes after she had left, Masuto sat at his desk and stared at the door facing him. He was still staring at it when Wainwright opened the door and said shortly, "They're here. In my office."

Masuto followed Wainwright into the captain's office. Bones and Kennedy were seated. They made no move to rise, nor did they smile or do any more than nod their heads coldly. Kennedy was the

very image of a proper Los Angeles cop, about forty-five, trim, handsome, sandy hair, cold blue eyes.

Bones opened the conversation by saying, "God damn you, Masuto, we dragged our asses up here for your cute tricks, Like we got nothing else to do with our time."

Watching Masuto, Wainwright saw his dark eyes harden, his mouth tighten. He had fought for Masuto before, and he often said that Masuto was the best cop he had on his force, but he also knew that Masuto was unpredictable. Whereby he stepped into the moment of silence and said, "Now, hold on, Bones. I don't know what you and Kennedy are so pissed off at, but you're in our town, and that calls for a little bit of restraint. So suppose you tell us what this is all about and we'll save the name-calling."

"I'll tell you what it's all about," Kennedy said coldly. "Today this joker—" nodding at Masuto—"comes downtown to get the advice of our poison lab, which we don't begrudge him, and then he goes to Pete here and tells Pete that a chemist whom he doesn't identify but who has a criminal record is going to be murdered. Then he walks out, and then two hours later the man is murdered. Now what in hell goes on? You don't want us to be pissed off? He's your cop. Why the hell aren't you pissed off?"

Masuto watched Wainwright, who was trying to repress a smile. "How does it stand?" Wainwright asked. "Do you think Masuto killed him?"

"It could be."

"All right," Wainwright said tiredly. "You drove all the way up here from downtown and I missed my dinner and my wife is sore as hell. As far as Sergeant Masuto is concerned, when he left headquarters downtown, he drove up to Mulholland Drive. He was there for almost an hour, and then he came here. So how the hell could he kill your goddamn chemist? Anyway, I got cause to be pissed off, the two of you coming up here sore as hell because I got a cop on my force smart enough to figure out that something is going to happen!"

Bones started to say something, and Wainwright cut him off. "Also, I don't like nobody coming here and accusing one of my men. I'll match my force against any."

“Just a minute, before we say a lot of things we’re going to regret. Nobody accused anyone. You asked us if we thought Masuto had killed him. You got to admit, it’s goddamn strange. Also, what about this killing up on Mulholland? Your man Beckman practically gets into a fight with our cops—they shouldn’t touch the body until Masuto gets there. Who the hell is Masuto? The body was in Los Angeles, not in Beverly Hills, and your men come bulling in there and pushing us around.”

Wainwright turned to Masuto. “What about it, Masao?”

Masuto spoke slowly and chose his words carefully. The last thing in the world he desired at this moment was a feud with the Los Angeles police. “Perhaps Beckman was assertive. It’s the way he works. But he doesn’t push people around, certainly not Los Angeles policemen. No one does. I think Captain Kennedy knows that. It’s quite true that the boy’s body was in Los Angeles, but he wasn’t killed there. His body was dumped out of a car. We think the boy was involved in a murder case, and the killer executed him to get rid of a witness.”

“What murder case?”

Masuto spelled out the events of the day, detail for detail. When he had finished, there was a long moment of silence, and then Kennedy said, “And what about the chemist?”

“We are dealing here,” Masuto said, “with a pure botulism toxin, not with decayed food, but with the toxin that the botulinus produces. Your man at the poison lab assured me that only a trained chemist could produce it. Well, what kind of a chemist would risk his freedom and career to produce a deadly poison—a poison which he would have to surmise would be used to kill people? What kind of a chemist would be vulnerable? Almost certainly a chemist mixed up in the dope rackets. The odds are that he would have a criminal record. My own guess is that we are dealing with a killer who is indifferent to human life and allows nothing to stand in his way. He gets rid of witnesses. That’s why he killed the Chicano kid, so my analysis was not entirely fortuitous. I guessed that sooner or later he would kill the chemist. He tried the botulism, and it failed. Now, something else. Was the chemist killed with a twenty-two pistol?”

“That’s right,” Bones said grudgingly.

“Shot behind the ear?”

“Yes.”

“No sound of the shot?”

“No, no sound of a shot,” Kennedy said.

“Have you got anything?”

“Not a damn thing. The chemist’s name is Leroy Kender. He served time for refining horse. Then he was picked up for angel dust, but that didn’t stick. He lived alone in a furnished room on Sixth Street. He had almost nine hundred dollars in his pocket, so it wasn’t robbery.”

“It wasn’t robbery,” Masuto said. “This one doesn’t touch the money in his victims’ pockets.”

“That’s rich blood,” Kennedy said.

“Very rich. Fingerprints?”

“We’ll have plenty of fingerprints. But what the hell good are fingerprints unless you got something to match them with?” Kennedy asked.

“This one doesn’t leave fingerprints. But you have something to match if you want it,” Masuto said.

“What’s that?”

“The bullet that killed the Chicano boy you found on Mulholland and the bullet that killed the chemist. I have a notion they’ll match up.”

“Okay,” Kennedy said. “I’m glad you leveled with us, Masuto. Maybe we had a reason to be sore, maybe not. If you catch up with this killer—well, we got our own case against him.”

“I’ll stay in touch,” Masuto said.

“And keep us informed,” Wainwright said. “We’re in this together.”

When the two Los Angeles cops had left, Wainwright shook his head and said, “One day, Masao, you’ll get us in deep, and I swear when you do I’ll let you fry in your own juice. Where’s Beckman?”

“Sitting in his car outside the Crombie place.”

“On overtime.”

“Yes.” Then he added, “I have the four women there.”

“Where?”

“In the Crombie house. I had Laura Crombie bring them over.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to talk to them. Because someone is trying to kill them, and if it happens it won’t do this city’s image one bit of good.”

“You really think someone’s trying to kill four dames whose only crime is that they live in Beverly Hills?”

“He’s killed three people already.”

“I got to call my wife,” Wainwright said.

Masuto went downstairs. He came out of the building and paused for a moment under the light at the entrance. He never heard the shot, only felt a hot pain at the side of his chin, as if a bee had stung him. As he put his hand up to his face, he heard the roar of a motor, and across the street a dark car shot away.

There was blood on his hand.

A prowler car had just parked, and the officer leaped out and ran over to him. “What happened, Sarge?”

“A bullet nicked me,” Masuto said.

“I didn’t hear a shot.”

“He uses a silencer. Look around a bit, Cowley. See if you can find the bullet. A little slug, a twenty-two. It might be embedded in the door.”

“I ought to get after him.”

“We don’t know who he is or where he went,” Masuto said gently. “Look for the bullet.” Then he went back into the building.

Wainwright was just putting down the phone. “What in hell happened to you?” he demanded.

“I have been shot.”

“Let me look at it. Yeah, it just nicked your cheek. Where do they keep the peroxide?”

“In the john.”

Wainwright swabbed out the cut and put a Band-Aid across it. “You say he was in his car across the street. That has got to be sixty feet, and with a twenty-two pistol, he is one hell of a shot, maybe an impossible shot.”

“He could have had a shoulder brace or it could have been a target gun this time, maybe a rifle. Or maybe just laying the pistol on the door of his car to steady it. Or he might have been aiming for my chest.”

“Which would still be pretty damn good shooting.”

“It would.”

“Why you?” Wainwright asked. “If it’s the same guy?”

“It is.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because he called and spoke to Polly, and she told him I was handling the case.”

“That’s stupid!”

“No—he might have had information. How was she to know? I’m the one who’s stupid. He knows a lot about us. Well, now I know something about him.”

“What, if I may ask?”

“He—it—the killer is a man. He’s an expert pistol shot. He drives a Mercedes.”

“So do half the people in Beverly Hills. But why a Mercedes? You said you couldn’t see the car, just that it was dark.”

“I know that sound. There’s a particular sound when you gun a Mercedes. Also, he’s rich.”

“Not uncommon in this town.”

“And he has an enormous ego and a complicated but childish mind. The botulism, for example. Not brilliant, not even clever, but complicated. Also—and this I think is where I’ll get him—he has killed before.”

“You mean the chemist and the Chicano kid?”

“No—no. There’s killing somewhere in his past that we don’t know about.”

As Masuto was leaving, Wainwright called after him, “Masao, be careful.”

“I am always careful,” Masuto said.



Alice Greene

A curved drive in a half-moon shape swept in from the sidewalk, past the front door of Laura Crombie's house, and then back to the sidewalk. A low hedge of variegated plantings stretched parallel to the sidewalk, from one end of the driveway to the other. The house was well lit inside, but the driveway was in darkness.

Masuto parked his car in the street, behind Beckman's car, and then walked slowly up the driveway where three other cars were parked. At one side, the driveway was intersected by a connection with the garage. The garage doors were closed. Masuto looked closely at the three parked cars. The first in line was a Mercedes two-seater 450 SL. "Twenty-seven thousand dollars," Masuto said to himself. Beverly Hills was not a place where people hid their wealth under a bushel. Next, a Cadillac Seville, sixteen thousand dollars. The third in line was a Porsche Turbo Carrera, the price of which, Masuto guessed, ranged between forty and forty-five thousand dollars, just about twice what he and Kati had paid for their little house when they first purchased it. Well, he thought, his two children were safe at home in their beds and Kati was at a consciousness-raising session, while the four women inside the house were in deadly danger. He made no moral judgment, nor did he place value on a piece of shiny machinery priced at forty thousand dollars. Himself, he was paid to protect these people, and this he would do to the best of his ability.

Masuto rang the bell. Beckman opened the door for him. "Thank God you're here, Masao. You're five minutes late."

"You're counting?"

"You're damn right I am. These dames are driving me nuts." He spoke in a whisper.

"How's that?"

"They been drinking. I tried to lean on them and make them hold back, but they just don't listen."

"Are they drunk?"

"Not so you can notice, but they put down the stuff like it was going out of style."

"Where are they?"

"In what she calls the library."

"Let's go in."

He followed Beckman into the room. The four women sat facing each other, two on easy chairs, two on the couch. Each had a glass in her hand.

"Welcome, Oriental sleuth," Mrs. Crombie said. "Has the stalwart Beckman been telling you we are drunk? We are not—only nicely, warmly lit. Do you want a drink?"

"No, I don't want a drink."

"He's very handsome but severe. So severe. So straight," a pretty red-headed woman said. She was the youngest of the four, and Masuto guessed that this was Mitzie Fuller.

"Fuzz," a slender blonde said, shrugging. Alice Greene, Masuto decided.

The fourth, Nancy Legett, just stared at him. Her eyes were full of fear. She was small and dark. She was in one of the big easy chairs, not just sitting in it but giving the impression of being trapped there, trapped and doomed and afraid.

Masuto reacted to her. Her fragile, empty world of wealth and possession had come tumbling down around her head. As for the others, they could put on masks. She had no masks. He scarcely heard Laura Crombie introducing the women. For one long moment, he was in a state reached sometimes in his meditation, when he knew things that he did not otherwise know.

“The whole thing,” said Alice Greene, “is a crock. A well-filled crock. I’m here because Laura pleaded with me to stay. Otherwise, I’d tell you to take your fantasy and stuff it. How dare you do this to us! This is Beverly Hills, not the South Bronx. As for this business of being in danger, another crock! That chocolate was not meant for me. It was delivered to the wrong house.”

“Alice, for Christ’s sake, shut up,” Laura Crombie said.

“Give me another drink.”

“No!”

“Then I’ll get it myself.”

“Like hell you will! This is my house!”

“Great. I’m glad you told me. Now I’m going to get the hell out of here!”

Both women were on their feet, and Laura said, “No—no, I’m sorry. Please. Please stay.”

“Not on your life.”

“Alice, I’m begging you.”

“Peddle it somewhere else.”

Laura turned to Masuto. “Stop her. Make her stay here.”

Facing him, Alice Greene said, “Just try it, buster. Just lay one hand on me.”

“I’m not going to lay a hand on you,” Masuto said gently. “You are in danger, great danger. Believe me.”

“I’ll handle it. I’ve handled it for thirty-six years, mister. I’m all grown up. You might not think so to look at me, but I’m all grown up. Now get out of my way.”

She pushed past him, and Laura pleaded, “Can’t you stop her?”

“I have no right to stop her.”

She ran after Alice Greene. Masuto and Beckman followed. Alice was fumbling with the locks on the door.

“How do you open this stupid thing?”

Laura Crombie stood back and whispered to Masuto, “She’s in no condition to drive. Can’t you arrest her for drunken driving?”

“Only if she commits a violation while driving,” Beckman said.

Alice Greene finally opened the door and walked to her car with long steps. She got into the Mercedes and with the light on from the

open car door, the two men and the woman in the doorway could see her fumbling in her purse for the car keys.

“Sy,” Masuto said to Beckman, “get into your car and follow her. Anything—even a rolling stop at a stop sign—anything. The moment she steps out of line, pull her in for drunk driving.”

At that moment, just as Beckman took off for his car, Alice slammed her car door, switched on her lights, and turned the ignition key. The explosion rocked the house and the burst of flame lit up the driveway. Laura screamed. Masuto and Beckman rushed toward the car and then were physically repelled by the curtain of heat.

“Call the fire department!” Masuto shouted at Laura Crombie.

He and Beckman circled the car, looking for some opening, and then Beckman pulled Masuto back. “Your eyebrows are singed, Masao. It’s no use. She’s dead.”

“Why didn’t I stop her? Why?”

“Because you didn’t know.”

People were beginning to come out of their houses, to stand watching. A prowl car pulled up, then a second one. In the distance the siren of a fire engine sounded.

“Get inside with the women,” Masuto told Beckman. “Keep them in the house and keep the door closed. They’ll be hysterical by now, so quiet them down.”

People were crowding onto the driveway, and one of the uniformed policemen was ordering them back. The fire truck screamed its way into the street, and a moment later a fire hose opened up on the burning car.

“Twenty-seven grand for that heap,” Masuto heard someone in the crowd say. Evidently no price was put on the human life. The uniformed officer who had come in the second prowl car said, “For Christ’s sake, Sarge, what in hell goes on here?”

“Get on your radio and patch it through to downtown. I want the L.A. bomb squad up here, and tell them to bring their truck.”

“Okay.”

“Are you in charge here?” a fireman asked Masuto. “We’d like to move those two cars,” pointing to the Seville and the Porsche. “You got the keys?”

“Don’t touch them. They may be wired. Can you get the woman out?”

The fire was out now, the car a blackened, smoking heap.

“We’ll try. The ambulance will be here any minute. But she’s dead. No question about that. That heat would kill her in ten seconds if the blast didn’t.”

Another police car with two more officers pulled up. “I want those people back in their houses,” Masuto said to them. “There’s nothing they can do and there’s nothing for them to see.”

“Who’s in the car, Sarge?”

“A woman,” Masuto said shortly. “Does the captain know about this?”

“They called him from the station. He’ll be here any minute.”

“Well, get those people back into their homes. If they ask, tell them it was an accident and that’s all you know.”

“That *is* all we know,” one of the cops said.

The firemen had pried open the door of the smoking car, and Masuto walked over and forced himself to look at the charred figure that a few moments ago had been a vital, living woman. The metal of the Mercedes was still hot and the firemen were wetting it down with a soft stream of water. At that moment, the rescue ambulance arrived, and a moment later, Wainwright in his shirtsleeves.

“My God,” one of the rescue men said, “that poor woman.”

“Where shall we take her, Sarge?”

“Take her to the morgue at All Saints,” Masuto said. “We don’t need an autopsy. Tell them to hold the body until we inform the family.”

Wainwright stood there in silence, his face glum and unhappy. From somewhere inside the house, Beckman remembered to switch on the driveway lights. The sudden blaze of illumination made the scene even more grotesque.

“It’s over now,” the fire captain told Masuto. “Do you want us to call the tow truck?”

“No, just leave it there. I’ve called the L.A. bomb squad.”

The rescue people wrapped Alice Greene’s body in a rubber sheet, put it on a stretcher and into the ambulance. The firemen climbed into their truck and drove off. By now, most of the curious

had been ushered back into their houses or on their way. The uniformed cops stood around uncertainly, and Beckman came out of the house.

Still, Wainwright had not said a word.

“How are they?” Masuto asked Beckman.

“They got it under control. They were pretty hysterical at first, and I don’t blame them. But we talked.”

“No more booze?”

“I was hard about that,” Beckman said.

“Go back and stay with them,” Masuto told him. “Until I come in. Tell them I must talk to them tonight.”

“How long?”

Masuto shrugged, and Beckman went back into the house.

“All right,” Wainwright finally said, “tell me about it.”

“I was talking to the women and she wouldn’t have any of it.”

“Who? I don’t even know who.”

“Alice Greene.”

“The one who got the poisoned candy? The dog?”

“That’s right. She had a few drinks and she said she was going home. I couldn’t stop her.”

“Did you try?” Wainwright asked.

“Short of using force. I didn’t want her on the street and I didn’t want her in her house. I told Beckman to follow her, and the moment she did anything that could be called a violation to pull her in for drunk driving. If I had dreamed that the car was wired—”

“We don’t dream those things. What then?”

“She turned the key in the ignition, and the car blew.”

“No chance to get her out?”

“In two seconds, the car was a ball of flame.”

“Yes.” Wainwright nodded at the Seville and the Porsche.

“Nancy Legett and Mitzie Fuller.”

“They could be wired too.”

“I thought of that. The men from the bomb squad can look at them. I don’t know what’s in her garage. That could be wired too. This murderous bastard we’re dealing with doesn’t do anything by halves. He’s thorough.”

“I want him, Masao,” Wainwright said, “and I want him quick. We’re a small town, and we can’t have this. If the media start putting two and two together, they’re going to tie this whole package in to Beverly Hills. We got four murders now. You say the other three women are inside?”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to them, Masao. If anything does, I am going to be one angry son of a bitch. I got enough to explain. They’re going to come down on me like a ton of bricks over what happened here tonight.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You talk those women into spending the night here. I’m going to leave two men here, one in front and one in back, and when the bomb squad people come, I want them to go through the basement of the house as well as the cars and the garage. God only knows what that lunatic is up to.”

A few minutes after Wainwright left, the bomb squad arrived, their big armored truck grinding into the driveway. Kelp, the head of the squad, looked at the remains of the Mercedes and shook his head. “You hate to see it with a car like that.” He had worked with Masuto before. “Anyone in it?” he asked.

“A lady.”

“God help her.”

“Those two cars might also be wired,” Masuto said, pointing to the Seville and the Porsche.

“They’re classy cars. Do you have the keys?”

“I’ll get them for you.”

“Do you want us to be careful of prints? Are you going to dust the cars?” Kelp asked.

Masuto shook his head. “Not with this one. He doesn’t leave prints. What do you think it is?” nodding at the burned Mercedes.

“Just a guess. Dynamite and a detonator. She turned the ignition key and it blew, is that it?”

“That’s it.”

His men were already working on the burned car. “Dynamite,” one of them called out.

“Does a job like that take skill?” Masuto asked.

“Nothing to it if you know something about cars. The explosive end of it is very primitive. Tie a few sticks of dynamite together and attach a detonator. Funny thing about dynamite. Blow a stick here on the driveway and it wouldn’t even put a hole in it. Go off like a big firecracker. But confine it properly and it’s a demon. The connection with the ignition is a little more complicated, but nothing I couldn’t teach you in fifteen minutes.”

“So it doesn’t require an expert?”

“Not at all. But don’t misunderstand me. There are experts in this business. Did she lock her car?”

“Not the doors.”

“That makes it easier, because the hood release is usually inside. We’ll go over the cars, Masao, but you’d better get me the keys.”

“I’ll do that. I also want you to look at the car in the garage and then check the basement.”

“What in hell have you got going here?”

“I wish I knew.”

“Well, it ain’t the Beverly Hills I read about. We’ll check out the place, Masao.”

Then Masuto went into the house for the keys.



The Women

It was eleven o'clock. The bomb squad had done its work and departed, discovering no other lethal contraptions. The car in Laura Crombie's garage and the two cars in the driveway were clean. The burned wreckage had been towed away, and a uniformed policeman was stationed in front of the house, with another at the back of the house. Masuto had left orders that the press and the television people, who were on the scene no more than twenty minutes after the incident occurred, should be told nothing, and they were barred from the house by the policeman on guard.

"Still," Beckman said to Masuto, "sooner or later you got to talk to them."

"I don't. Let Wainwright talk to them."

They were in the kitchen of the Crombie house, seated around the big kitchen table—Beckman, Masuto, Mitzie Fuller, Nancy Legett, and Laura Crombie. Laura Crombie had put up a large pot of coffee and sliced ham for sandwiches. Masuto and Beckman were both hungry. Mitzie Fuller, who said she couldn't even think of food, had two sandwiches. Only Nancy Legett did not eat. She was still struggling for composure, and every few minutes she would begin to weep silently. Laura was self-contained and practical. She had things to do. It was her house and these were her guests.

"Violence is new to you," Masuto said to them. "I hate violence as much as you do and I fear it too, but I live with it. My wife is made miserable by it, but she accepts it because it is my life. Tonight you

must accept it, because if we are ever to find out who is doing this, we must talk calmly. I must ask you questions, and you must answer them sensibly.”

“It’s crazy,” said Laura. “What kind of a person am I? Instead of weeping for Alice, I keep thinking of all that glass in my driveway.”

“That’s understandable. It’s less frightening, less awful. Your mind avoids the horror. Sy,” he said to Beckman, “get a broom and sweep up that glass.”

“Oh, no. No. I’ll do it tomorrow,” she protested.

“Glad to. Gives me something to do,” Beckman said, relieved to be released from this well of emotion.

“Now all of you listen to me,” Masuto said to the women. “We’re in this together. He tried to kill me too.” He touched the Band-Aid on his chin. “A long shot that missed.”

“Oh, no!” Nancy Legett exclaimed.

“This crazy monster—what does he want?” Mitzie Fuller asked.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out, and perhaps we can right here. Let me spell out the sequence of events, so they’ll be clear in your minds. Try to think clearly and objectively. I know how hard that is and I know what a disturbing day you’ve all had, but I want you to put that aside. You are thinking that it is impossible. It is not impossible. Mrs. Greene will not be helped by our indulgence, but she may be avenged by our objectivity.”

“I’ll try,” Nancy said. “I know you mean me. I’ll try.”

“I mean all of you. Now let me trace what happened. A package of poisoned pastry was sent here. The man who sent it—”

“How do you know it was a man?” Mitzie interrupted.

“I know. Leave it at that. The man who sent it was intent upon killing one of you—not all of you—but one of you. Yes, it was to his benefit if more than one of you died, even if all of you died.”

“I don’t understand,” said Laura.

“A very simple conclusion. Since all of you might have eaten the pastry, he was ready to accept all four murders. Or some of the four, since some of you might not have eaten. It was a scattershot thing. Even the death of one of you might have satisfied him.”

“But why?”

Beckman returned to the room. “Quiet?” Masuto asked him. Beckman nodded. “Go through the house,” Masuto said, “doors, windows—”

Beckman nodded and left the room.

“Why?” Masuto said. “Well, for one thing, he’s insane. But perhaps all murderers are. And for another—well, let me reserve that for the time being.”

“You don’t think there’s anyone—anyone hiding here?” Nancy asked.

“No, but it never hurts to be thorough. Let me go on. Ana Fortez ate the pastry and died. The Chicano boy who bought the pastry and who probably delivered it here was murdered on the same day. The chemist who prepared the poisonous toxin was murdered today.” The fear in the eyes of the three women increased. “I don’t like to tell you this,” Masuto said, “but I must. You must know what kind of a man we are dealing with.”

“Why must we know?” Nancy asked tremulously.

“Because I’m sure you know him. We’ll hold that for awhile. I want to ask you who killed Alice Greene.”

They shook their heads in bewilderment.

“Guess,” he urged them. “The most likely candidate. Who hated her enough to kill her?”

“No one.”

“She’s dead. Who hated her enough to kill her?”

“Her husband,” Laura Crombie said softly.

“Is that what you mean by ‘know him?’” Nancy Legett asked plaintively. “Do you mean that this monster is someone we know, someone we have spoken to?”

“Didn’t you hear him?” Mitzie Fuller said shrilly, a note of hysteria in her voice. “He thinks Alice’s husband is the killer.”

“Her ex. Not her husband, her ex,” Laura corrected her.

“No, I do not!” Masuto said sharply. “Will you all please pay attention to what I am saying? Including Mrs. Greene, you are four divorced women. You have that in common. You are friends. You are attacked as a group. I must find a reason, a motive. I must know who has the need to destroy you. Mrs. Greene was killed. This does not

mean her husband killed her. It also does not mean that he is innocent. We deal with him as a person under suspicion.”

At that moment, the telephone rang, an explosive sound that startled all three women. There was a wall extension in the kitchen, and Laura Crombie picked it up.

“Alan,” she said. Pause. “Yes, it’s true. It’s terrible—too terrible to believe.” Pause. “No, we don’t know why. The whole thing is like a nightmare.” Pause. “I tell you I don’t know any more than that. She turned the ignition key, and the whole car went up in flames. It was awful. She never had a chance.” Pause. “Yes, the police were here. I believe Sergeant Masuto is in charge of the case.” She looked at Masuto.

“I’ll talk to him,” Masuto said.

“He’s here, if you wish to talk with him.” She handed Masuto the telephone.

The voice was crisp and businesslike, yet Masuto felt he could detect an undercurrent of emotion and uncertainty. “This is Alan Greene. I was married to Mrs. Greene.”

“This is Sergeant Masuto. I’m in charge of the case.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“No more than Mrs. Crombie told you.”

“There’s a damn sight more than that.”

“All right. Suppose you come over to headquarters tomorrow at ten A.M.”

Hesitation, then, “Okay, I’ll be there. Meanwhile, where have they taken Alice’s body?”

“To the morgue at All Saints Hospital. Could you notify her next of kin?”

“The only kin I know about is a brother in New Orleans. They haven’t seen each other in years. I don’t think the son of a bitch would lift his ass unless he’s in her will. I’ll take care of the funeral arrangements.”

“Talk of the devil,” Mitzie said as Masuto sat down at the kitchen table again.

“He said he’ll take care of the funeral arrangements,” Masuto told them.

“Alan’s all heart,” Laura said.

“And you think he hated her enough to kill her?”

“You never think in those terms, do you?” Laura Crombie replied. “He was paying her five thousand a month, but he could afford it. Would he kill her? He knew she’d never marry Monte and let him off the hook.”

“Monte Sweet?”

“Yes. The comic.”

“Where is he now?”

“He was in Vegas.”

“Do you know when? Is he still there?”

“If you’re thinking of Monte as a suspect, forget it. He couldn’t kill a fly. Anyway, she showered him with gifts.”

“What about her will?” Mitzie said. “Who else would she leave it to? That house of hers has to be worth half a million.”

“Mrs. Fuller,” Masuto said to Mitzie, “who would want to kill you?”

Oddly enough, she began to giggle. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she apologized. Masuto found her enchanting, and silently called himself to order. He enjoyed beautiful women. They disturbed his objectivity, and Mitzie Fuller was very beautiful—orange-colored hair that did not come out of a bottle, large blue eyes, and a round figure that was five pounds short of being plump. “I don’t know why I’m doing this, but your question—”

“I asked it.”

“I never thought of myself that way. Who does? Who ever says to herself, I’m being set up for a murder? Well, sure, Billy Fuller would like to kill me. If he could get away with it. If it wouldn’t interfere with his career. If it could be written into his contract. In fact, he specified the act. But who doesn’t? I mean married, who doesn’t?”

“I’m not sure I know what you do mean,” Masuto said.

“Well, you know how it is. No, maybe you don’t. Maybe the Japanese don’t operate that way.”

“What way?”

“You know—you bitch, I’m going to kill you.”

“You’re telling me that’s what your husband said to you?”

“But it doesn’t mean anything. First of all, I made the number one mistake that any woman can make. I married a film director. That’s a very special kind of guy. You know, Sergeant, your sex is nothing to

write home about, even under the best of circumstances, but if you were to list types of men from A to Z, with A being the very rare nice guy, Z would have to be a film director. They are power-ridden little tin gods—”

“Oh, come on,” Nancy Legett interrupted her. “I’ve known decent directors. Some of them are pussycats.”

“But seriously, does your husband hate you enough to kill you?” Masuto asked.

“Yes,” she said, flatly and bleakly. The laughter was gone.

“Why?”

Her lips came together and tightened. Masuto waited.

“His hatred,” she said finally, “is a personal matter that I don’t intend to talk about. And it’s not the lousy alimony he pays. He took on a picture for seven hundred thousand dollars, and after a month of pre-production, the producers found him so obnoxious they paid him four hundred thousand to break his contract. So the money’s nothing.”

“Was he in the army?”

“The navy. He’s a lieutenant in the naval reserve.”

“And where is he working now?”

“They tell me he’s doing a film at Metro. I couldn’t care less.”

“And what about you, Mrs. Legett?” Masuto asked, turning to Nancy. “Who would want to kill you?”

“That’s a terrible thing to ask me.”

“But I must,” Masuto said softly.

“Why should anyone want to kill me? I’ve never hurt anyone. I never hurt my husband. Even when he told me he was leaving me, I didn’t make it hard for him. I knew he had stopped loving me long ago. Perhaps I had stopped loving him too. I don’t know. And I don’t have any lovers to make him jealous or angry. Look at me. Do I look like a woman who has lovers?”

She began to sob, and Laura Crombie put her arm around her and said to Masuto, “Must you, tonight? We’re all tired and frightened.”

“I’m afraid I must. Please, try to pull yourself together, Mrs. Legett. I promise you, there will be no more danger, no more hurt and fear—but only if you help me. You must help me.”

“I’ll try.”

“You don’t feel that your ex-husband hates you?”

“No.”

“That’s no good, Nancy,” Laura told her. “You have to tell him the truth. Otherwise we’ll never get to the bottom of this.”

“Why should he hate me? It’s four months since he made any support payments. I don’t dun him. I pay for the children’s support. I don’t ask anything of him.”

“Nancy!”

She sighed and nodded.

“Enough to kill you?” Masuto pressed her.

“No!” she snapped

“All right,” said Laura Crombie. “You won’t, I will. Fulton Legett is a cold-blooded bastard. He has ice in his veins. His children do not like him, and for that he blames Nancy—”

“Laura, stop,” Nancy pleaded.

“No, I will not stop. Someone has to tell Sergeant Masuto, and you won’t. Nancy wanted the divorce, because that bastard was destroying her. Cutting her to pieces, putting her down every time she opened her mouth, and do you know why? Because she has more brains in her little finger than he has in that stupid skull of his.”

“Please stop,” Nancy begged her.

“No, I will not stop. This isn’t gossip. We’ve just seen Alice murdered, and we’re sitting here fighting for our lives.” She faced Masuto. “He became a producer because Nancy made him one. That was twenty years ago. Nancy found a delightful story, emptied her own personal bank account to option it, and then talked Paramount Pictures into putting up the money to develop it and accepting Fulton Legett as the producer. That was a hit and his next three pictures were hits because Nancy chose them and supervised, even while she was pregnant. She still owns half of his company, and they have an agreement whereby if one dies, the other inherits.”

“Laura, how could you!” Nancy burst out. “You’re practically accusing Fulton of being behind this whole thing, of killing Alice and three other people. Why would he?”

“I don’t know why he would want to kill me,” Mitzie said. “He keeps calling and trying to take me out. I hate to say this, Nancy, but he does have the reputation of being bad news.”

“You never told me,” Nancy said.

“Why bug you? You’re out of it and I have no intention of getting into it.”

“How do you happen to know him?” Masuto asked Mitzie. “I understood that you and Mrs. Crombie met only a few weeks ago.”

“He knows Billy, my own ex. He’s been after Billy to do a film for him, but Billy follows the money and right now Fulton Legett is broke. I don’t know how much you know about the film business, Sergeant, but the game is played like a jigsaw puzzle. If you can get a top-flight director and put him together with an important star and an important property, which is what they call a book in this business, a property, you’re well on your way to getting a studio to finance a film. That’s why Fulton Legett has been nosing around my Billy.”

Masuto nodded, and asked Nancy Legett, “Was your husband in the army, Mrs. Legett?”

“Yes. He was in Korea.”

“In the infantry?”

“No, he was an airplane mechanic.”

“Why are you so certain,” Laura Crombie asked Masuto, “that one of our ex-husbands is the man you are looking for?”

“I’m not certain. But whoever the killer is, he links the four of you together. Apparently, he knows all of you, what your tastes are, what your habits are. Now tell me, do you know William Fuller, the director?”

She hesitated just a moment. “Yes, I do.”

“Do you know Monte Sweet?”

“No, not personally. I never met him.”

“Do you know Monte Sweet?” he asked Nancy Legett.

She shook her head.

He turned to Mitzie Fuller.

She smiled and shook her head. “No; not really.”

“What does that mean, not really?” Masuto asked.

“You’re worse than my analyst,” Mitzie said. “It means just that—not really.”

He turned back to Laura Crombie. “We have three women whose ex-husbands have motives, if not for murder at least for hatred. What about your ex-husband, Mrs. Crombie?”

She shrugged. "Since this is naked time, I'll let down my hair with the rest. When I married Arthur Crombie three years ago, he didn't have a red penny. I'm a very wealthy woman. Even then, I was not poor. I put Arthur into the real estate business. Oh, he isn't stupid. He's damn smart, but he just loused up everything he touched. This time, for some reason, it was different. He got into it just as property values out here began to skyrocket. He had been a real estate agent before, so he knew the ropes, and he specialized in very expensive homes. Today he has one of the hottest businesses in town. Then, six months after we were married, my father died. I was the only heir, and the estate came to something over seven million. Arthur got his share of that, since it was I who was pleading for the divorce, not him. In other words, today Arthur is a millionaire because the lady you are looking at is a damn fool. Murder me? He ought to erect a monument to me."

Masuto nodded and waited.

"That's it."

"Do you have any children, Mrs. Crombie?"

"No!" hard and short.

Nancy Legett was staring at her. Masuto watched her, then looked at Laura.

Beckman came back into the kitchen. Masuto guessed that he had searched every corner of the house. Beckman would do it that way. He looked at Beckman, and Beckman said softly, "Okay."

Masuto waited. Finally, she said, "Yes. I told you. But what difference does it make? How does it come into this?"

"I don't know. I don't know how anything comes into this. I'm trying to find out."

"I had a daughter," Laura said bleakly. "She's dead. I told you that this morning."

"Please tell me more about it."

"Why?"

"Because I'm trying to save lives."

"She's dead. It has nothing to do with this."

"I don't want to go elsewhere and pick up shreds of gossip. I want you to tell me."

“There’s nothing to tell. My daughter was killed in an automobile accident. Have you ever lost a child, Sergeant Masuto? Would you find it amusing to discuss?” With that, she leaped to her feet and strode out of the room.

“She can’t talk about it,” Nancy Legett said to him. “It was over three years ago, and it doesn’t get any better. Kelly was a beautiful, wonderful child.”

“Kelly?”

“They called her Kelly. Her real name was Catherine. Laura lived for the child—especially after Laura’s first husband died. We don’t all make rotten marriages. Laura’s first marriage was a good one,” Nancy said.

“Do you know whether Arthur Crombie was in the army?”

“Yes, he was a pilot in Korea. He still flies. He has his own plane now.”

“And did you know Arthur Crombie?” Masuto asked Mitzie.

“Yes—not too well. About a week ago, he called me and then came to my house.”

“Why?”

“You know what’s going on in the real estate market here in California. It’s even worse in Beverly Hills. The moment word gets around that you might want to sell your house, they descend on you like scavengers. Crombie heard that I wanted to sell my house, and he came by to look at it.”

“And do you want to sell it?”

“I think so. It’s a huge barn of a place on Palm Drive, and it makes no sense for me to go on living there. My life with Fuller was quick and merry. We were married only six months. Things still aren’t settled. As soon as they are, I’ll sell the house.”

“And when he was there, did anything out of the way happen? Anything he might have asked you?”

“About my house?”

“About anything.”

She shook her head. “No. Nothing unusual. Just the general questions—you know, how is the plumbing and does the roof leak and that sort of thing. It’s an old house, a big Spanish Colonial, so it’s far from perfect.”

“And that’s the only time you saw Arthur Crombie?”

Did she hesitate? Was there something in her large blue eyes? If it was there, it was gone instantly. She was an amazingly self-controlled young woman, Masuto decided.

“Yes. The only time.”

Laura Crombie returned to the room. “I’m sorry,” she said to Masuto. “I behaved like an emotional fool. But this has been a terrible day, Sergeant.”

“I know that.”

“There are pains that go away. The loss of a child is not one of them,” she said.

“I know that too.”

“How long are you going to keep us here in this house?”

“I’m not keeping you here. I have no authority to keep you here. I suggest very strongly that the three of you spend the night here, and that no one leave the house tomorrow until I see you.”

“And when will that be?”

“Some time tomorrow afternoon, I hope.”

“I have a luncheon date and a hairdresser appointment,” Mitzie Fuller said, “not to mention a date that I broke tonight and put off until tomorrow.”

“I hope you’ll be able to keep your date. I suggest you cancel the luncheon and the hairdresser appointment.”

“Who’s going to scragg me at Tony Cooper’s?”

“Stop it, Mitzie,” Nancy said. “He’s deadly serious.”

“Can you put up Detective Beckman? I want him to stay here tonight.”

“If I have to give him my own bed,” Laura said. “Right now, the only men in the world who interest me are oversized policemen. But must I have that uniformed policeman standing outside my door?”

“He’ll leave,” Masuto told her. “Detective Beckman can take care of anything that might come up.”

Beckman walked with him to the front door. “Well?” he asked.

“It takes shape. Not too clearly, but at least it begins to take on some shape,” Masuto said.

“You wouldn’t like to tell me about it? Because for me it don’t have any shape at all.”

“Not yet.”

“The house is wired with an alarm system,” Beckman said. “The downstairs windows are locked. For that matter, so are those upstairs. The place is air conditioned. You don’t mind if I get some sleep?”

“Not at all.”

“You’re all heart, Masao. When can I leave this place?”

“Some time tomorrow.”

“When?”

“When I’ve picked up that murderous bastard.”



The Zen Master

It was just past one o'clock in the morning when Masuto pulled his car into the driveway of his house in Culver City. He closed the car door softly and turned the key in the lock of the kitchen door just as softly. The light was on in the kitchen, and on the kitchen table a note that said, "If you are hungry, there are things in the refrigerator." It was neither a friendly nor an unfriendly note. There was no greeting and no word of affection.

As quietly as he had entered the house, Masuto undressed in the bathroom, and then he slid into bed next to Kati, who appeared to be asleep. One session had apparently changed her. On other nights, she would somehow have managed to remain awake and have a hot drink and hot food waiting for him. Tonight, nothing.

He stretched out in bed and was just beginning to drift off when the sleeping Kati said, "Were they pretty?"

"Who?"

"The four women you spent the evening with."

"There were only three," he told her unfeelingly. "One was killed."

"Oh, no!"

"I'm sorry, Kati. It happened." He regretted that he had flung this at her. There was no reason to tell her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. And I was so angry at you."

"Why?"

"Not really angry. Only because I'm aware of the inequality of things."

“Yes. The consciousness-raising session.”

“You told me to go.”

“Oh, yes. Yes. I wanted you to go.” He was very sleepy.

“I heard a lecture by Sono Akio.”

“Yes.”

“And Marta Suzuki. Not your Zen Suzuki. They are not even related. I asked.”

“Yes, I’m sure you did.”

“They both spoke about the condition of women in Japan. We think of Japan as a modern industrial country, but the women are still enslaved there. They have no rights and no equality.”

“We don’t live in Japan,” Masuto muttered. “We live in California.”

“You are not even interested. There is your basic, beginning point of it all. The man has no interest in what the woman thinks or does. But she, on the other hand, is supposed to exist in a condition of total interest in what he does.”

Masuto sat up and stared at his wife in the darkness. “Kati dear—in one evening?”

“There is another meeting on Thursday. If you forbid me to go, things will be very unpleasant for both of us.”

“I would not dream of forbidding you to go. What right have I to forbid you to do anything?”

“None,” Kati said smugly.

Nevertheless, although Masuto awakened at six-thirty, Kati was already up and in the kitchen, dressed in her white and yellow kimono, looking very lovely and preparing breakfast. Masuto kissed her on the back of the neck, just below the thick knot of her black hair.

“Will you have eggs?” she asked him.

“Nothing this morning. I must go to the zendo this morning and meditate with Roshi Hakuin. I have some questions, and possibly he will be kind enough to answer.”

“The children are still asleep. How can you leave without seeing the children? I am sure they’ve forgotten that they have a father.”

“Then you must remind them.”

“Masao, I’m so afraid. You walk with death always. If it reaches out and touches you—”

“Nothing will happen to me, Kati.”

“Then why is there a bandage on your chin? What happened?”

“Just a scratch. It’s nothing.” He kissed her again. “I must go.”

It was almost seven o’clock, yet he could not leave without looking at his roses, without walking once through the rose garden. Next to his wife, his children, and meditation, the roses were the most precious part of Masuto’s life. A month before, he had received a rooted cutting of an old-fashioned cabbage rose from a distant relative in New Jersey, with a promise that the blooms would be six inches across. The first buds had just appeared. He wanted to dust them, but they were still wet with the morning dew, and reluctantly he left them.

The zendo was in downtown Los Angeles. At this hour, the streets would be quicker than the freeway, and Masuto drove down Pico Boulevard to Normandie Avenue. The zendo was a cluster of old wooden buildings that the students of the roshi had purchased and reconditioned. About forty families lived in the cluster that comprised the zendo, husbands, wives, and children—a kind of communal development that existed only in Los Angeles.

Masuto parked his car and walked to the meditation room, a long room with a polished wooden floor and two rows of pillows and mats. The room was actually two rooms joined together, the windows replaced by Victorian stained glass, picked up at auctions and flea markets. Roshi Hakuin sat at the far end of the room, a small, elderly Japanese man in a saffron-colored robe, sitting cross-legged, his eyes on the floor, while on either side, stretching down both sides of the room, sitting cross-legged on the pillows, were about twenty men and women in their morning meditation. One was a Burmese, two were Korean; the rest were Caucasian.

The room was filled with a soft, gentle morning light that diffused through the stained glass windows.

Masuto removed his shoes. He was about to take off his jacket when he realized that if he did, his revolver would be revealed. A zendo was no place to enter with a visible revolver. It was bad enough to enter with a concealed weapon. So he kept his jacket on, walked in his stocking feet to the unoccupied pillow closest to the roshi, sat down cross-legged, and began his meditation.

On by one, the others completed their meditation and left. Presently, only Masuto and the old Japanese master remained in the zendo. The roshi had finished meditating and was watching Masuto. Masuto put his palms together reverently, bowed his head, and waited.

“Welcome,” Hakuin said, speaking in Japanese. He was never one to waste words.

“Thank you, Roshi, so grateful,” Masuto replied, also in Japanese.

“For what?”

“For the privilege of speaking to you, Roshi.”

“What nonsense! Since when is it a privilege to speak to a foolish old man? You would do better to tend your roses. That is what you tend, isn’t it? Roses?”

“Yes, Roshi. But I am deeply troubled. I am in pursuit of a killer who has killed many times.”

“Is that why you come into the zendo with a gun under your coat?”

“I’m sorry, so very sorry. But what was I to do once I was here?”

“And what have I to do with killers and killing, Masao?”

“What turns a man into a murderer?”

“Fear.”

“But we are all afraid.”

“And we are all murderers.”

“This man,” Masuto said, “is like a thousand other men. He has money and position and respect. But he kills again and again. I am trying desperately to understand before I act.”

“Do you know who he is?” the Roshi asked.

“Yes—if I know why.”

“A long time ago,” the little old man said, “a young man came to a worthy roshi, and he said to him, Master, my father begs that I study Zen, but why? Tell me why. And this roshi, Masao, having more patience than I have, said to the young man, ‘If you study Zen, you will not be afraid to die.’”

“I have heard the story many times. It puzzles me.”

“Because you are stupid, Masao.”

Masuto nodded.

“What else? You are part of a large police force, but you come to a foolish old Japanese man for an answer to your problem. This is

certainly a very stupid thing to do. Anyway, as you already told me, you know who this man is. And I have told you why he does what he does.”

The roshi rose and Masuto rose. They bowed to each other. The old man went to Masuto and put an arm around him.

“You are a good boy, Masao. Meditate more.”

“If I could only find the time.”

“Stand still and very quietly. The time will find you.”



Alan Greene

At headquarters, Masuto paused and listened. Fredericks, a uniformed cop, was leaving, and Masuto asked him, "Who's in there?"

"Wainwright, the city manager, and the mayor. They've been at it since eight-thirty."

The mayor was an unsalaried position. Like the president of the lodge who was the butt of everyone's anger, he did it for the "honor."

"There is no police force in the world," Wainwright was saying, his voice clear through the thin door, "that can prevent crime. I got a forty-page report from the F.B.I., if you want to read it. There's just no way we could have anticipated what happened to Mrs. Greene."

"As I understand, there were two policemen on the scene." That was the city manager.

"There could have been ten cops on the scene. How would they know that the car was wired? You don't look for a wired car in Beverly Hills."

"All right. That happened." The mayor's voice. "But the rumor's out that three other murders are tied into this."

A long silence.

"Well, for Christ's sake, yes or no?"

"Yes," Wainwright said shortly.

"What did you say? Yes?"

"Yes."

“Jesus God, four lousy murders! We’re not that big. Don’t you understand? We’re just not that big.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Wainwright said, “three of them took place outside the Beverly Hills city limits. So technically, those three belong to the Los Angeles cops.”

“Well, who tied them in?”

“Masuto.”

“Why?” the mayor cried. “For Christ’s sake, why? What’s the motive?”

“Because that’s the way it is. If it’s that way, that’s the way it is,” Wainwright said.

“What do you mean, that’s the way it is. You just told us the way it is. Los Angeles has these killings,” the mayor said.

“We got them too.”

Masuto stopped listening and went into his office. It was a quarter after nine in the morning now. The Los Angeles *Times* had cleared space on the front page for the death of Alice Greene. It was mostly a picture of the burned car with only a few words of background squeezed in at the last moment. They specified that the two-seater Mercedes was priced at twenty-seven thousand dollars. It was almost obligatory to include a price in any Beverly Hills story. The deaths of the Chicano boy and the chemist rated only a few lines on inside pages. Violent death was hardly a novelty, unless of course it occurred in Beverly Hills inside a Mercedes.

Masuto dialed the number of the Crombie house. Mrs. Crombie answered.

“Our handsome Oriental jailer,” she said. “When do we get sprung?”

“Soon, I hope. May I talk to Detective Beckman?”

“He’s at breakfast.”

“See if he can tear himself away.”

“Hold on. He’s finishing his second order of scrambled eggs and waffles and honey. I’ll let him take it in the library where he’ll have some privacy.”

A minute or so later, Beckman’s voice came over the phone, thickened by the fact that he was still chewing. “Do you know,

Masao," he said, "those Arabs got something. Living with three women has its points."

"I'm sure. Anything happen?"

"Not a thing."

"How are the ladies?"

"A lot calmer. I can't say the same for my wife. You got to talk to her, Masao. She's sore as hell at me. All she had to hear is that I'm spending the night in a house with three Beverly Hills divorcées and she let go at me like God knows what I was up to. Like I'm doing this for fun."

"Aren't you?"

"Come on. You know better than that."

"All right, Sy. Now listen to me. You've been in that house for quite a while. In and out of every room, right?"

"Right."

"Now think. Mrs. Crombie had a daughter. Did you see the girl's picture anywhere?"

After a long moment of silence, Beckman said, "I wasn't looking for it, Masao. Maybe I saw it and paid it no mind."

"Just think for a while, Sy."

He thought about it. "I just can't remember. Like I said, I wasn't looking for it."

"All right. I want you to look for it. No questions and don't give any hint of what you're looking for. Just let them know that your instructions are to keep checking out the house."

"And if I find it, what do you want me to do, pinch it?"

"No, no, no. Absolutely not. If you find a picture of the girl, just leave it alone. Don't touch it. Also, I want you to find out what the name of Mrs. Crombie's first husband was. Do it in a casual way. Nancy Legett would know. If you're alone with her, you might just ask as a matter of curiosity."

"Got it. You'll call back?"

"Within the hour."

Masuto put down the telephone and stared at the newspaper on his desk. He turned over in his mind what Roshi Hakuin had said to him. The trouble with putting questions to a Zen master was that the answers were always too simple. Complex answers to questions are

always easy to understand. Simple answers are impossible to understand. Many, many years ago, this same Roshi Hakuin had given Masuto the ten pictures of the cow, ten very simple pictures of a little boy and a cow. “Look at them and when you know what they mean, come to me and tell me.” It was five years before Masuto was able to answer correctly.

Now he did not have five years, or even five days. The madman he was dealing with would not be deterred by Detective Beckman and the locked doors of a house—given the supposition that he could keep the women in the house for even another day. An unwillingness to believe in impending danger is a very human quality. Otherwise, Masuto reflected, why would we all be so willing to live here in California on top of a whole network of earthquake faults?

Then he looked up and through the glass upper half of his office door, he saw the man. That would be Alan Greene, a tall, heavy-set, fleshy man of about fifty, gray hair set in a twenty-five-dollar hairdo, a fifty-dollar silk shirt, a thirty-dollar tie, and above it a wide, heavy chin, a tight mouth, and cold blue eyes. Masuto rose and opened the door for him.

“I’m Alan Greene,” he said, regarding Masuto curiously. They always regarded him curiously on the first meeting, and while they looked at him, the question in their minds was, What is a Jap doing on the police force here? But except occasionally, it remained unspoken.

“I’m Detective Sergeant Masuto.”

“Yeah. They told me outside you’re in charge of this case.”

“Why don’t you sit down, Mr. Greene?”

He seated himself reluctantly, as if he were giving up an advantage. “What the hell goes on here?” he demanded suddenly. “You know the whole damn thing has to be a mistake. Nobody had any reason to kill Alice—except me.”

“Except you?”

“Don’t look at me like that, Sergeant. What you’re thinking is pure bullshit.”

“How do you know what I’m thinking?”

“I just told you that I’m the only one who had any reason to kill my ex-wife.”

“Did you kill her?”

“If I had, you can be sure of one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I would have strangled her with my bare hands.”

“I see.” Masuto nodded. “So you feel that it’s the manner of her death that exonerates you.”

“Jesus Christ, what in hell gives with you? You don’t seriously think that I murdered my wife?”

“You just said—”

“Yeah, yeah,” he interrupted. “And if you were married to that broad, you’d say the same thing. Would I kill her? If I had a dollar for every time I thought of breaking her neck, it would add up to enough to buy this crummy police station of yours. Do you know what I paid her? Five thousand dollars a month, not to mention what she collected under that beautiful law of ours called the Community Property Act. She could have paid me five grand a month and never missed it. She’s been shackled up with Monte Sweet, not just for the year we’ve been divorced but for five years before that, and you are looking at the number one sucker in the world who was the last one to know. Everyone else knew it, everyone. Not me. So you ask me, would I kill her? In spades. But mister, I am not connected with the Mafia. I never have been. Monte Sweet is. Monte Seteloni. That, my friend, is his real name.”

“Why the Mafia?” Masuto asked him.

“Because what happened last night was a Mafia killing. Who else wires cars?”

“It’s not terribly complex. Could you, Mr. Greene?”

“Could I what?”

“Could you wire a car to explode when the ignition key is turned?”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree. You know, I don’t know why I’m sitting here at all, answering these stupid questions. I don’t have to. I don’t have to answer one goddamn question.”

“No,” Masuto said, smiling slightly, “you don’t. You can get up and walk out of here right now. But I want to bring in the man who

murdered your wife, and I will. If it's you, I'll bring you in. If it's someone else, I'll bring him in. Perhaps you want to help."

For almost a minute, Greene sat in silence, staring at Masuto. Finally, he said quietly, "Tell you something, Sergeant. If she had come to me, say yesterday, the day before, and she says to me, Al, let's give it another shot—if she did that, I don't know what I would have done. I was so goddamn crazy about that woman it drove me up the wall. I'm not saying I would have gone back into it. You got to be demented to keep putting your hand in a meat grinder. But that was the way I felt about her. Sure, I wanted to kill her. But I didn't."

"And the car?"

"Do you know what that little two-seater Mercedes cost? Twenty-seven big ones, and every nickel of it my money. Like I said, I would have strangled her. I wouldn't have smashed up the damn car."

"I asked whether you could have wired it."

"You're persistent, aren't you? You'd find out. I was in the engineers in Korea. You're damn right I could have wired it."

Masuto regarded him with new respect. This was a cool, calculating man, totally in command of himself. If he were the killer, the line he was taking was the best he could take. Admit motive. Admit desire. Admit ability. Leave no skeletons to fall out of closets when the doors were opened.

"Do you own a pistol, Mr. Greene?" Masuto asked him.

"I do. And I have a permit for it."

"What caliber?"

"Twenty-two."

"I see. A heavy gun, one that takes longs?"

"I don't know what you're getting at, Sergeant. Alice was not shot. She was killed in a car explosion. What the devil has that got to do with pistols?"

"There's a connection. I'd rather not go into it right now. But as you pointed out before, you don't have to answer any questions."

"I got nothing to hide."

"Then you're a fortunate man. I asked you about the pistol."

"It's a Browning automatic target gun. I use longs, that's right. I belong to the Beverly Hills Pistol Society, although I don't get to the range as often as I would like to."

“Are you a good shot?”

“I could put a bullet through your head at thirty yards,” he said, smiling—his mouth smiling while his eyes remained cold and fixed on Masuto.

“I hope the occasion will not arise.”

“I don’t shoot people, only targets, Sergeant. And now if you’re through investigating my own talents as a killer, I would like to get down to the subject at hand. Why was Alice murdered?”

“I was hoping you would tell me.”

“You got to be kidding.”

“You lived with her for ten years. Who would want to kill her?”

“We been through that.”

“What about Monte Sweet?”

“Now wouldn’t it make more sense to talk to him than to waste your time with me? He’s got Mafia connections, and Alice’s death was obviously a contract job. I’ll tell you something else. My ex-wife’s estate has to be worth better than a million. A lot better. Have you seen her house on Roxbury Drive?”

Masuto shook his head.

“I paid three hundred and twenty thousand for that house in nineteen seventy. She’s been offered a million for it.”

“How do you know? Did she tell you?”

“Arthur Crombie told me.”

“Ah so.” It escaped from him involuntarily. “Are you and Mr. Crombie friends?”

“We belong to the same golf club and—” He let that go.

“Were you going to say the same gun club?”

He stood up. “You know, Masuto, I don’t like what’s going on here. You want to talk to me about pistols, then I want to know why.”

Masuto sighed and shrugged. “I’m trying to get to the bottom of something, that’s all. You were saying that Mr. Crombie had a customer who was willing to pay a million dollars for your wife’s house.”

Standing there, Greene hesitated. Finally, he said, “I wish I knew what in hell you’re after.”

“A killer.”

“What the devil has her house got to do with that?”

“You brought up the question of the house.”

“Right. I did. Actually, the offer was one million two hundred thousand. That’s not as crazy as it sounds, not in Beverly Hills. The house has seven bedrooms, a tennis court, and a swimming pool. An Iranian or an Arab made the offer, according to Crombie. I loved that house, and now it’s gone. Do you wonder that I’d like to kill that broad?”

“Gone? Has it been sold?”

“What in hell’s the difference? You don’t think I’m in her will?”

“Who is in her will?”

“I’ll give you long odds that every nickel she had goes to Monte Sweet.”

“You never had children?”

“One miscarriage. She’d never take a chance again.”

“Who are her lawyers?”

“Kellog and Cohen. They’re in Westwood, I think.”

Masuto scribbled down the names.

“Whoever did it,” Greene said, “find the bastard.”

“Yes, I intend to,” Masuto said. “Meanwhile, I trust you won’t be leaving town for the next few days.”

Greene stared at Masuto for a long moment; then he nodded and left. Masuto dialed Information and got the telephone number for Kellog and Cohen. When he dialed that number, the woman’s voice at the other end asked who he would like to speak to.

“Mr. Kellog.”

She made the connection, and after a moment a man’s voice told him that it was Kellog.

“This is Detective Sergeant Masuto of the Beverly Hills Police Department. I’m calling you concerning the death of Alice Greene, who, I understand, was a client of yours.”

“Yes. What can I do for you?”

“I suggest you get our number from Information and call me back. In that way, you can be certain the call is valid.”

“Masuto?”

“That’s right.”

He put down the phone and waited. A minute or so later, it rang. “What’s all this about?” Kellog asked him.

“Your firm drew up Mrs. Greene’s will. I would like to know who the beneficiary is under that will.”

“Now you know I can’t do that, Sergeant Masuto. This is a confidential matter between my client and myself.”

“Your client is dead.”

“That changes nothing. When the will is read, the beneficiary will become public. Until then, I must protect my client’s confidentiality.”

Masuto’s voice hardened. “Your client, Mr. Kellog, is not only dead. She was savagely murdered. Her death was hideous and painful. I am engaged in an investigation of her death, in an effort to find the murderer. If you persist in your attitude, which constitutes interference with my investigation, I shall have to get a court order to examine that will. You know that I can get such an order. Wouldn’t it be much simpler for you to name the beneficiary? Time is important.”

There was a long silence, and then Kellog said, “Well—since you put it that way—I can’t see that it will do any great harm.”

“Thank you.”

“Actually, there are three beneficiaries—the Bowdow Home, the Happy Bark Cemetery, and the Wolf Society.”

Masuto was scribbling furiously. “Would you repeat the second one?”

Kellog went through the names again.

“And what exactly are these places?”

“The Bowdow Home is a hospital for dogs and cats, out in the Valley. The Happy Bark Cemetery is, as you might infer, a cemetery for well-loved pets. The Wolf Society—well, that’s a bit more complicated. Not only do they carry out a whole program of anti-vivisectionist propaganda, but they are also in the vanguard of the wolf-jackal investigation and controversy.”

“And what might that be?” Masuto asked.

“As I understand it, there is a theory that the husky, the chow, the Pekinese, and a few other breeds of dogs are descended from the wolf, while all other dogs are derived from the jackal. Mrs. Greene explained this to me at some length, but it remains rather fuzzy in my mind. In any case, the Wolf Society devotes itself to serious work on this theory.”

Masuto took a deep breath and asked, "Are there no other beneficiaries?"

"None."

"Can you tell me the size of the estate?"

"That will have to be determined in probate, but I should guess it will amount to at least a million and a half—that is, including the property."

Masuto thanked him and put down the phone. Wainwright came into his office, and Masuto said, "Has it ever occurred to you that only huskies, chows, and Pekinese dogs are descended from wolves? I would have said the Pekinese evolved from a hamster, but that shows how much I know."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"Alice Greene's will. A million and a half. It goes to dogs and cats."

"And where does that get us?"

"Nowhere. Precisely nowhere."

"I been with the city manager and the mayor, Masao. They want my scalp. Maybe they took it with them already. It's twelve hours since a murder took place in Beverly Hills, and we haven't tied up the case. It doesn't matter that the L.A.P.D. with seven thousand men on the force can't solve the Hillside Strangler killings, to which they have assigned more men than we got on our whole force. One murder in this town makes them insecure."

"It makes me insecure."

"I guess that's funny. They want crime prevented. There is no way to prevent a crime."

"There has to be," Masuto said.

"What does that mean?"

"Those three women are going to die unless we prevent it."

"Well, you got Beckman living in there, living the life of a goddamn gigolo, with three dames waiting on him hand and foot. What else can I do? I told you you could have cops outside, front and back, but you didn't want that. We could put another cop inside, and if they start screaming about sixteen hours overtime, let them scream. They're going to holler about everything else. And for Christ's sake, don't let it drop that we got three murders pending. That's all I need."

“It’s not a jail, Captain. Sooner or later, the women have to come out.”

“Then, goddamnit, Masao, get the bastard!”

“I know who he is,” Masuto said thoughtfully. “Getting him is another matter.”

Wainwright exploded. “What! Did I hear you right—you miserable slant-eyed pain in the ass? Did I actually hear you say you know who this murderous mother is, and you had the crust to sit here and hear me get my ass roasted by the mayor and the city manager?”

“I have always defended you as a non-racist,” Masuto said unhappily. “My eyes don’t actually slant, so it’s a kind of unhappy euphemism—”

“Goddamnit, I got excited! If you don’t know me by now—”

“Anyway, I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean, you’re not sure? A moment ago, you were sure.”

“Suppose I know who he is? That’s an inner knowledge, based on what you might call a smell of things. Where is my proof? Where is my evidence, motive?”

“Who is he?”

Masuto shook his head.

“Goddamn you, Masao, you played this game with me before. I want to know who he is!” Wainwright shouted.

“I could be wrong.”

“I’ve never known you to be wrong—not when you pull this kind of thing on me.”

“Give me until tonight. If I don’t bring him in tonight, I’ll give you whatever I’ve got, and you can take it from there.”

“Masao, don’t play this game with me. If you know who he is, we can take him and find the gun. The gun will tie him in.”

“He’s crazy, but madness is not synonymous with stupidity. You’re not dealing with a housebreaker or a mugger. If we take him now, we not only tip our hand, but we’ll have to turn him loose. And if that happens, he won’t make the one mistake that I think he’ll make sooner or later.”

“And how do you know he’ll make it now?”

“Because no one’s perfect and there are no perfect crimes. He made a whole series of errors, first with the éclairs, then with the candy, then with the kid and the chemist, killing again and again to cover his own blunders. He’s frightened and he’s in a hurry. That’s where he gave himself away. He was trapped in a moment in time, and he began to kill, and when I find that moment and find out why it trapped him, I’ve got him. Oh, he is very clever—but stupid at the same time. That’s the pathological part of him.”

“I wish I knew what in hell you’re talking about. I still want his name.”

“I can’t talk you out of that?”

“Not this time, Masao. If anything happens to one of those three women, on top of what has already happened, this whole damn department is going up in smoke.”

“If I give you his name,” Masuto said slowly, “will you give me twenty-four hours? Twenty-four hours before you turn it over to the L.A. cops, twenty-four hours before you pick him up and begin to grill him?”

“That would really be tying my hands, Masao.”

“No, sir. With all deference, that would be saving your neck. Because if you pick him up now, not only will his lawyer have him out of here in fifteen minutes, but he would slap this city with the biggest false arrest suit it ever entertained. And as you are fond of telling me, this is not downtown Pittsburgh. It’s Beverly Hills.”

Wainwright stared at him thoughtfully; then he nodded. “Okay. You got your twenty-four hours. Now give me the name.”

Masuto took a pad, scribbled the name, and then handed the bit of paper to Wainwright.

“I’ll be damned,” Wainwright said.

“I could be wrong. Remember that.”

“You’re wrong about one thing. I’d think twice before I pulled him in or handed his name over to the L.A. cops. I’d want to see some unshakable evidence.” He looked at the name again, then folded the slip of paper and put it in his pocket. “Maybe we’ll get lucky this time.”

Catherine Addison

Masuto picked up his phone and dialed the Crombie number. Mitzie Fuller answered. “Well,” she said, “if it isn’t Mr. Inscrutable himself! Do you know what I feel like? I feel like I’m under house arrest in a Banana republic. This is no life, Sergeant, and I don’t like ladies enough to spend the rest of my life in their company. Either you spring us or I’m going to bust out.”

“Give it until tonight,” Masuto said.

“Now if you’ll be our baby sitter, I might be able to relax and enjoy it.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible right now. Please stay with it. Is Detective Beckman around?”

“He is always around. Only the bathrooms are safe from Detective Beckman’s prowling presence. I’ll call him.”

Beckman got on the phone and said, “Masao, these gals are driving me nuts. Also, the phone doesn’t stop. Every goddamn newspaper, TV station, and wire service in the world has been calling here. It’s one thing for me to say no comment. But these dames—they talk to their friends. So whatever stories get out, don’t blame me. I’m just the keeper. Outside in front, we got two TV cameras and crews, maybe six reporters, and a nice sprinkling of the public. Nothing like this ever happened before on Beverly Drive.”

“Just keep the doors locked. What about the picture?”

“You’re right. There isn’t a picture of the kid anywhere in the house. I mean a framed picture, or a picture on the wall, or one of

those pictures you stand on a table or a piano.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. But let me tell you this. In Mrs. Crombie’s bedroom, I saw one of those big, classy leather-covered picture albums. I leafed through it, and, Masao, every picture in it is the daughter Kelly.”

“How do you know it’s Kelly?”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? Unless there’s some other kid in Mrs. Crombie’s life. Oh, it’s the daughter, all right, and it starts with her as an infant and takes her right through, I guess until right before she died. If you want one of the pictures, I can slip it out. Who knows if she ever looks at the book.”

“No—not yet. I think I can get a picture somewhere else. Now look, keep those women inside.”

“I’ll try.”

Masuto was on his way out when Wainwright called after him. “Hold on a moment, Masao. One thing.”

“Yes?”

“Why does he have to kill all the women?”

“Then there’s no motive—or four motives.”

“You mean that cold-blooded bastard would kill four women just to lay down a smoke-screen?”

“He’s running scared and he has a lot to protect. He’s killed three people already. A man like that is totally without conscience or morality. He will kill a human being the way you or I might kill a fly. You read about that kind of thing. There was that fellow in Texas who killed eleven people. You just don’t look for it in a place like this.”

“Which one of the four is he after?”

“I’m not sure. I could guess, but I’m not sure.”

“Alice Greene?”

“I’m just not sure.”

“And you don’t think he’ll drop it now?”

“He can’t drop it. It has him by the throat.”

“Which is what worries me, Masao. If anything happens to one of those women, we’re in it up to our ears. At this point, I don’t give a damn about the cost. I can put four men around that house day and night.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s not the problem. The problem is keeping them in the house. I’ll go down the line on the fact that nothing will happen to them while they’re there. But we can’t keep them there. You know by now the kind of women we deal with in Beverly Hills. They’ve had it their own way; they’ve always had it their own way. All I can do is ask them to stay there, and maybe while they’re scared enough they will. But the fear will wear off, and my guess is that by tomorrow, no force on earth can keep them there. But while they’re there, Beckman is with them, and there’s no one I’d trust more than Beckman in a situation like that.”

“All right,” Wainwright agreed uneasily. “Where are you off to now?”

“Downtown—oh, I am stupid, I don’t have a brain in my head.” He broke off and stalked back to his office and called the Crombie house again. This time, the phone was busy. He kept dialing, looking at his watch, dialing. It was eleven o’clock. The day was running away.

Beckman answered the phone.

“Sy, did you get her first husband’s name?”

“Whose first husband’s name?”

“Crombie’s.”

“Yeah. I forgot to tell you. She was married to a guy named Neville Addison. He invented a type of radar for use on small military vehicles and made himself millions. From what I’ve been able to get from Mrs. Legett”—he dropped his voice—“this Crombie dame is worth millions, but millions.”

“Good enough,” Masuto said. “Hang in there.”

Outside, the press was waiting, pleading with him. “Come on, Sergeant, open up. Give us something. Is the Mafia established in Beverly Hills?”

“Is this a contract job?”

“How does Monte Sweet fit into it?”

“Where is Monte Sweet?”

“Was he romancing this broad? Come on, give.”

Masuto got into his car and drove away. He was totally into it now, putting it together, piece by piece. He felt that he had most of the pieces, the only trouble being that the most important pieces were

blank. He felt driven, compelled. The shadow figure who opposed him was locked with him in combat. Masuto knew, and by now the killer was aware that Masuto knew.

He pulled his car into the parking lot at the Los Angeles Police Department and went inside. On a day when every minute counted, luck was with him. Lieutenant Pete Bones was at his desk.

Bones regarded him sourly.

"I know," Masuto said, "but if you could wrap up those two killings you got and maybe fish another one out of the bin, you wouldn't hate me so much. Right?"

"I don't hate you. You're just one curious son of a bitch, and that pisses me off. What the hell have you got, some kind of lousy Oriental crystal ball?"

"Come on now, Pete," Masuto said gently.

"How in hell did you know that those two bullets would match up?"

"Two bullets?"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. The bullet that killed the Chicano kid and the bullet that killed the chemist."

"Same gun?" Masuto said innocently.

"You know, if it was anyone else, I'd say you're mixed up in something, but the word is you're an honest cop. Not that I'm taking my hat off to the Beverly Hills Police Department."

"No," Masuto agreed. "Of course not."

"All right. You got this thing with the botulism. Omi Saiku filled me in on that. It had to be a chemist, and you figured the chemist had to be dirty, so there was a dirty chemist somewhere whom we might have picked up, and if we put the screws on him, he would have implicated your killer. So your man killed him. You laid that out uptown. But how in hell could you be sure that the Chicano kid tied into it?"

"I don't know how many plainclothes detectives you have in the L.A. force," Masuto said. "Perhaps a thousand. We don't have enough to make up a good poker game. So I have to guess. Sometimes I guess right."

"Let me make a guess," Bones said, "that the killing you had last night ties into this."

"That's good guessing."

“Nah! Not even smart. We got a Chicano housemaid who dies of botulism who works for this Crombie woman, and then we got this Mafia-type killing in her front yard.”

“Is that what you think?” Masuto asked. “The Mafia?”

“Do you?”

Masuto shook his head.

“Then what the hell are you asking me for? What am I, some kind of schmuck? When the Mafia comes into this county, I will know about it, and if they put out a contract, I’ll know about that too. I’m not saying I can make an arrest stick, but I will know about it.”

“Let’s pretend we’re on the same side,” Masuto said, smiling. “I’m not trying to do you in. I come bearing gifts.”

“What kind of gifts? And what do you want?”

“Only a little help.”

“Yeah. What kind of gifts?”

“We have four murders,” Masuto said. “Three of them took place in Los Angeles.”

“That Chicano maid was working in your town.”

“Yes, but she went home to L.A. before she ate those éclairs. So technically, it’s yours. We don’t want any more killings than we have to have. Now I think I can clear this up before midnight today, and if I do, I give you my word I’ll call you in for the arrest.”

“You can’t do that even if you wanted to, which I don’t believe for a minute.”

“You know I can. I’ll get through to you or to whoever you designate, and you have a car cutting through Beverly Hills, and I’ll put out an assist and your car picks it up and makes the technical arrest.”

“No. It’s clumsy.”

“If I already have the man? I’ll tell you something else, when I go after him, I may very well be in Los Angeles. I can’t say at this point.”

“You know, Masuto, every time I see you, you got trouble for me. Every time I see you, you got some crazy project. You come here and tell me you got a killer lined up and you want to hand him over to me. Why?”

“Justice. More killings on your turf.”

“Bullshit. You know who the killer is, give me his name and we’ll do the rest. We’re not the worst police force in the world.”

“Maybe the best. We’re not up to names. But you can’t tell me it won’t be a feather in your cap to clear up four killings.”

Bones leaned back in his chair and stared at Masuto. Finally, he nodded. “Okay. We got a deal. But don’t rat on me. If you do, I’ll take it out of your hide. Now what do you want in exchange?”

“Very little. Perhaps a month or two more than three years ago, a young woman whose name was Catherine Addison was killed in a car crash. I want to know exactly when and where the accident took place. I want you to locate the policeman or policemen who attended the accident at the time and I want to talk to them, and if you assigned an investigator to the case, I want to talk to him as well.”

Bones grinned slowly. “You got to be kidding.”

“Oh, no. I’m very serious.”

“Three years ago? Are you crazy, Masuto? Suppose no other car was involved in the accident? Suppose no one was booked? Suppose it didn’t even happen in Los Angeles? Did it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You got a lot of nerve coming down here with something like this.”

“I know.”

He opened the pad in front of him. “What did you say her name was?”

“Catherine Addison.”

“Hasn’t she got relatives, a family? There are easier ways to get at this.”

“She has a mother who won’t talk about her. My guess is that the mother can’t talk about her, and I haven’t got time for psychoanalysis.”

“All right, we’ll give it a try.”

“I want it quick.”

“Yeah? I want the moon.”

“Even if you find one of the cops, have him call our station. Polly there will patch him through to wherever I am.”

Back in his car, Masuto felt a certain satisfaction. It was beginning to come together. Very slowly, yet it was beginning to come together.

He drove back to Beverly Hills and Beverly Drive. The media had given up, and, except for a couple of curious kids, there was no one in front of the Crombie house. Still in the driveway were three cars, the Porsche, the Seville, and Beckman's Ford. Masuto parked behind the Ford, walked to the door, and touched the bell.

There was a peephole, and he could imagine Beckman staring at him. Then the door opened.

"I'm being relieved," Beckman said. "You're taking over."

"No such luck. Where are the ladies?"

"Inside playing bridge. I'm the dummy. It don't matter that I can't play bridge worth a damn. They taught me the game and now I'm trapped, and every lousy play I make, that Crombie dame rakes me over the coals. She is a lulu. Tell you something else, Masao, with these three dames locked up together, their love for each other is going downhill swiftly. They're beginning to snap and snarl, especially the two older ones."

At that moment, Laura Crombie's voice. "Mr. Beckman, what's going on out there?"

"Sergeant Masuto. We'll be in in a moment."

"It's your deal."

"Sy," Masuto said softly, "I want one of the pictures. Kelly, Catherine. The Crombie kid. Grown, not as a child. Take it out of the album."

"We could ask. I hate to steal it."

"Mr. Beckman!" from inside.

"We are not stealing it. We're borrowing it. Don't worry. We'll put it back."

"Okay," Beckman said.

"While I'm here. I only have a few minutes."

Beckman shook his head.

"Don't worry. I'll send you upstairs," Masuto said.

Beckman led him through the house to a bright, beautifully-decorated breakfast room that overlooked the gardens and pool. The furniture was bamboo and flowered chintz, the floor was of imported Spanish tile, and the bay window set in shiny brass fittings. There were plants and flowers everywhere, and Masuto looked at it with

such pleasure that Laura Crombie abandoned her tight-lipped expression of annoyance.

“You like the room, Sergeant?”

“Very much.” He turned to Beckman. “Go through the house while I’m here, Sy.”

“Again?” Mrs. Crombie asked.

“Please. Then I can report back that he checked the house while I was present.”

Beckman strode out on his mission, and Nancy Legett said, “Sometimes, Sergeant, I wonder whether you are not a little mad. This whole notion that someone is trying to murder us—”

“Stop that, Nancy!” Laura Crombie said sharply.

Nancy Legett began to cry. She sat bent over the table on which the cards had been dealt, her body wracked with sobs. Mitzie Fuller put her arms around her.

“Come on now, darling,” Mitzie said. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

“Nothing’s going to be all right,” she sobbed. “We’re all going to be killed, the way Alice was killed. You know that. I know that. He killed Alice first, and then it’s our turn.”

“Who killed Alice?” Masuto asked gently.

“Arthur Crombie. Didn’t you know?”

“No, no, that’s too much,” Laura Crombie said. “Now see here, Nancy, we’re old friends, but that doesn’t give you the right to carry on like this.”

“I wish I could stay, but I can’t,” Masuto said firmly. “Now listen to me!”

They stopped squabbling and turned to him. Mitzie said cheerfully, “Right on, Charlie Chan. Oh, no. That was terrible of me. That was inexcusable of me. Please forgive me.”

“More inexcusable since I am a Nisei, which means of Japanese parents. However, I’ll forgive you.”

“Bless you.” She leaped up and kissed his cheek. “There’s my apology.”

“Thank you. Now, I want a picture of each of your ex-husbands.”

“You’re kidding,” Laura Crombie said.

“Dead serious. Of course, Mrs. Greene presents a problem.”

“You read the *Times*,” Mitzie said. “You are one strange detective.”

“How do you know I read the *Times*?”

“Because the *Examiner* has a picture of Alice and her ex right there on the front page. I’ll tear it out for you.”

“Mrs. Crombie?”

“I’ll find a picture of Arthur for you.”

“Mrs. Legett?”

She was unwilling to meet his gaze.

“Mrs. Legett, did you hear me? I have to have a picture of your ex-husband.”

Still avoiding his gaze, blushing, she opened her purse and took a two-by-three photo out of her billfold. She handed it to Masuto. The two other women stared at her in disbelief, and then, unable to contain herself, Mitzie cried out, “Oh, no! I don’t believe it.”

“That’s enough,” Laura Crombie snapped.

“And you, Mrs. Fuller?” Masuto asked Mitzie.

“I’ve insulted you and kissed you, so no more of that Mrs. Fuller stuff. Mitzie. I’ve decided you remind me of Richard Boone, only you’re better looking. As for a picture, I wouldn’t have that little bastard’s picture within a mile of me. But all you have to do is call the studio.”

“Metro?”

“That’s right. That’s where sonnyboy is shooting his new picture.”

“I’ll be there in an hour.”

“You will? I knew it! I knew it! I knew that little son of a bitch is the one. Oh, I hope you get him, Masuto. And I hope they have public seating at the gas chamber. I want to be there, right in front.”

“Mitzie, how can you!” Nancy cried.

“It’s easy.”

“I’ll get the picture for you,” Laura Crombie said.

On the way out of the house, Beckman slid the picture of Catherine Addison into Masuto’s side pocket.

“There’s a possibility that Polly will put a call in to here,” Masuto said to Beckman, “from an L.A. cop. I’m going to stop off at my house and then I’m going on to Metro. So you’ll catch up with me in either place.”



The Director and the Producer

Long ago, it was said that no one knows Brooklyn, the suggestion implicit being that even if one set out to master such knowledge, the quest would be fruitless. The same might be said of Los Angeles. Long, long ago, the vast California county of Los Angeles contained dozens and dozens of separate towns and villages and cities, Los Angeles City being the largest. Through the years, under the impetus of urban sprawl and enormous population growth, these dozens of cities had come together, the way cookie dough placed too close on the cookie sheet will spread and join. Masuto worked in Beverly Hills, which was almost entirely surrounded by metropolitan Los Angeles; he lived in Culver City, which was another enclave into Los Angeles, and the studios of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer were also in Culver City.

But there was no non-urban countryside to be crossed between Culver City and Beverly Hills, or between the two of them and Los Angeles. The streets of one merged into the streets of the other, and even the oldest citizens would have been hard pressed to tell you what constituted the border between one place and another.

Usually, driving from work to his home, Masuto would take Motor Avenue or Overland Avenue south from the Twentieth-Century Fox Studios on Pico Boulevard. Both routes were in the direction of the MGM Studios, which were less than a mile from Masuto's home. Perhaps Motor Avenue passed closer to his house. Masuto drove that way, and a few minutes before one, he parked in the driveway of his house.

Kati, who was vacuuming the living room, let out a squeal of surprise as he entered. "Masao, what is it? What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"You're afraid to tell me. I don't care. I'm just so happy to see you. I don't care."

"What don't you care about?"

"You've been fired. All right. Good. I never enjoyed having a policeman for a husband."

"I haven't been fired. I'm going to MGM, and this is on the way, and I'm tired of eating junk food. I thought that if I stopped off here, I'd get a decent lunch. But maybe with the consciousness-raising, you haven't got the time or inclination, and if that's the case I'll understand."

"Stop teasing me. I have tempura all prepared for tonight, but you may just call me and tell me that you're having dinner with four more women—"

"I might."

"I have shrimp and string beans and sweet potato and zucchini all cleaned and ready."

"It sounds incredible."

He sat at the kitchen table, while the room filled with the delicious smell of deep-fried shrimp and vegetables. He had the pictures spread out in front of him, the three men and the girl.

"What do you think of Monte Sweet?" he asked Kati.

"Monte Sweet?"

"The comic. You've seen him on television."

"The one who hates everyone. Oh, no, I can't bear to watch him, he's so filled with hatred and rage. How can a man be so terrible?"

"It's his stock in trade."

"Why is it funny to say terrible things about other people?"

"Perhaps all humor consists of a kind of hatred. We laugh at the suffering of others."

"I don't."

"Because you, Kati, are a very special person."

She placed the platter of tempura and a bowl of rice in front of him, and Masuto picked up his ivory chopsticks, reflecting on what a pleasure it was to eat with these beautiful artifacts rather than with

the barbaric knife and fork, which turned an approach to food into an attack.

“What are those pictures?” Kati asked him.

“The men were once married to the women whose lives are threatened.”

“And the lovely girl?”

“Tell me, Kati. What do you see in her face?”, “Very open, very trusting.”

“Yes, I think so. Your tempura, as always, is brilliant.”

“How can tempura be brilliant?”

“Ah, believe me. Why don’t you sit down and eat with me?”

“Because I ate an hour ago,” Kati said. “Now that my consciousness has been raised at least a little bit, I can enjoy the position of the Japanese housewife who serves her husband hand and foot. I don’t mean that I really enjoy it, but I can see what I am doing objectively and I know something about what a male chauvinist pig actually is.”

“You mean all that in one session?”

“I don’t think you are a male chauvinist pig, Masao. That’s a terrible thing to say. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“And you’re not a Japanese housewife.”

“You mean they don’t have vacuum cleaners?”

“No. I understand Japan is quite advanced. But you happen to be a very beautiful American woman.”

“Ah so! Really!”

She was blushing, Masuto realized, and as he finished eating and stood up and kissed her, the telephone rang.

“Not in the middle of the day,” Kati said. She pulled away from him and picked up the phone. “For you, Masao.”

“Yes, this is Masuto,” he said.

“This is Officer Commager, L.A.P.D. Lieutenant Bones said you wanted to talk to me.”

“About the Catherine Addison case?” Masuto asked.

“That’s right.”

“Good! Great! How did he find you so quickly?”

“He put the word into the Hollywood and North Hollywood Stations. I guess he found out that it happened on Mulholland Drive.”

“Did you say Mulholland Drive?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I’ll be damned. Do you have the exact date?” He covered the phone. “Kati—pen and paper.”

She brought him a pad and a pen.

“Yes, sir. It was March third, nineteen seventy-five.”

“Time?”

“We estimated that she went over the cliffside at about eight o’clock. It would be dark at that time of the year.”

“You’ve got a good memory, Commager.”

“No, sir. The truth is that I barely recalled the case at first. But Lieutenant Bones had them pull my report from the files. I have it right here in front of me.”

“Good, good. Now exactly where did this happen?”

“You know, Sergeant, we got to draw maps for this kind of thing. On Mulholland, for anything between Laurel Canyon and Coldwater Canyon, we take our measurements from the crossroads. In this case, from the point where Laurel Canyon Boulevard crosses Mulholland Drive. Measuring west from there—you really want this exactly? You know, it was three years ago.”

“As precisely as you can give it to me.”

“Okay, Sergeant. Measuring west from the Laurel Canyon crossover, you drive exactly one mile and seven twentieths. There the road curves to the left. On the left you have the high shoulder of the hill, on the right a sheer drop of about a hundred feet.”

“I think I know the spot. But I don’t remember a perpendicular drop.”

“I don’t mean absolutely perpendicular, Sergeant. There is a slight slope that’s covered with chaparral, but it might just as well be perpendicular for anything that goes over there. Now this Addison kid’s car was coming from the east, from Laurel Canyon, and she must have lost control, because instead of making the curve she went straight ahead and over.”

“At what speed?”

“You know that’s only an estimate,” Commager said. “But we get pretty good at that kind of thing. I got down here in my notes that she was moving at thirty miles an hour.”

“Were there brake marks where she went over?”

“No.”

“How did you account for that? Was her brakeline cut or broken? Was her brake fluid gone?”

“No, sir.”

“Are you telling me that there were no skid marks and you didn’t come up with an explanation? Or a question?”

“Now hold on, Sergeant. We’re not halfwits. We knew she didn’t try to break her speed. If she had, then the car would have tumbled over the edge of the road and there would have been broken brush from there on down. But there wasn’t any broken brush under the road. She went over the side like the car was shot out of a catapult. That’s the way we figured the thirty miles an hour. It maybe don’t sound like much speed on a highway, but over the side of a cliff, it’s a hell of a lot of speed.”

“It could have been fifteen or twenty miles an hour?”

“I suppose so.”

“A man who knows a little mechanics can wire a throttle down. Then he throws the car into gear and jumps out. Did you look for that kind of a device?”

“We had no reason to. It went down as an accidental death.”

“What did the autopsy show?”

“My God, Sergeant, that car tumbled down maybe over a hundred feet and then burst into flames. There wasn’t much left of the car or the kid inside of it.”

“How was she identified?”

“Her purse was thrown clear. Then her rings, dental work, the usual thing.”

“Did her mother make an identification?”

“I can’t tell you that, Sergeant. That would happen down-town. But in the normal course of events they would call her in for an I.D.”

“Were there any witnesses?”

“Not to the crash. People saw the flames and called us.”

“What kind of a car was it?”

“A little red car. It must have been a beauty, one of those little convertible Mercedes.”

“Red?”

“That’s right, red.”

For a long moment of silence, Masuto sat with the telephone in his hand.

“You still there, Sergeant?”

“One more point, Officer Commager. You’ve been very helpful, and now I’m going to ask you to do the impossible. Close your eyes and go back to that night. You’re in a radio car, a black-and-white. You get the call. Where are you when that call comes in?”

“Southbound on Laurel, going up the hill.”

“All right—up the hill, and you turn right onto Mulholland. Now between that point and the place where the car is, did you see a man on foot?”

Now the silence was on Officer Commager’s end. Kati watched Masuto’s tense face as he listened and waited. She did not often see him at moments like this, and she was not sure she liked him like this, his nostrils quivering slightly, his ordinarily placid brown face suddenly the face of the hunter.

“Jesus Christ,” Commager burst out, “this is crazy. I see these characters on the witness stand giving testimony from five, six years ago—this is only three years ago and it’s like a dream. I think I saw a man on foot, and then I don’t know. If you put me on the witness stand, a lawyer could tear it to shreds. I think so, but I can’t swear to it. It was nighttime, and I was responding to a call.”

“You’ve done nobly,” Masuto said. “Thank you. Maybe this will save some lives.”

He put down the phone and sat and stared at the notes he had made.

“Masao?” Kati said.

“Yes?”

“Whose lives will be saved?”

“Three women—if I am lucky, if something breaks in this lunatic puzzle. I keep moving, but he moves faster.”

“Will you be careful?”

He kissed her again and went out to his car.

During the short ride from his house to the sprawling Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lot, Masuto speculated on whether he should have called the studio and made an appointment with Billy Fuller, the

director. Then he shrugged it off. He had no time for second thoughts. He'd manage.

The guard at the gate said, "Mister, if you don't have a pass, if nobody put your name on my list, I don't let you in."

"I'm Detective Sergeant Masuto of the Beverly Hills Police." He showed his badge.

"That cuts no ice here. This is Culver City."

"What would cut ice? Suppose I took you in for obstructing justice?"

"Here? In Culver City?"

"Now look, this is a homicide investigation. If you don't think I can arrest you right here in Culver City, I suggest you pick up your phone and call the local cops. Meanwhile, I'll be talking to whoever runs this place. Or we can settle it cool and civilized. Which is it?"

"Okay. You win. Billy Fuller?"

"That's right"

"He's shooting on Stage Three. That's the trouble, Sergeant. I can get my ass burned right off if he wants to be nasty."

"Lay it on me."

Masuto parked his car. Then he walked through the gate and found Stage Three. A red light was swinging lazily outside the door of the sound stage, an indication that inside filming was in progress. Masuto knew enough about film studios to know that no take, as they called it, lasted more than a few minutes at most; and when the red light went out, he entered the dark, cavernous interior. Coming out of the brilliant sunshine, the comparative darkness was impenetrable at first, and he stood for a minute or two, waiting for his eyes to adjust. Bit by bit, he made out the jungle of wires and cables that confronted him. The scene was being shot at the other end of the sound stage, the view blocked by a set of flats. Masuto walked carefully toward it, and then, coming around in a circle, he was confronted by a brightly-lit New York summer street scene, a Greenwich Village cafe, tables, actors, cameramen, grips, electricians—and a man who barred his way and told him that this was a closed set.

"I'm looking for William Fuller."

“He’s on the set, mister. We’re shooting, and he can’t be disturbed. And like I said, this set is closed. So I suggest you call his office and make an appointment.”

“I have to see him now,” Masuto said.

“Buzz off, yes? Don’t give us a hard time. Or do I have to call the studio cops?”

“I’m Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills police. I suggest you let me talk to Mr. Fuller.”

By now, a circle of people had gathered around. A small man, about five feet seven inches in height, energetic, tight, with long hair and a lean, birdlike face, dressed in blue jeans and a blue work shirt, pushed into the circle and demanded, “What in hell goes on here? I’m trying to make a movie.”

“This clown says he’s a cop and he wants to talk to you.”

“This clown,” Masuto said coldly, “is used to being addressed as Detective Sergeant Masuto.” He took out his badge. “Now here’s my badge. I’m investigating a homicide. If you’re William Fuller, I’d like ten minutes of your time, in a place where we can talk privately.”

Evidently, it was Fuller. “Are you nuts?” he demanded. “We’re in the middle of shooting. Do you know what it’s going to cost if we close shop now?”

“I’m not asking you to close shop. I’m asking for ten minutes of your time.”

“It’s impossible. Forget it. I don’t know one goddamn thing about any homicide, so forget it.”

“All right.” Masuto nodded. “I get a warrant and I pull you in as a material witness. We hold you twenty-four hours. What will that cost?”

“You wouldn’t dare. Jesus, I live in Beverly Hills. I pull some weight there. God damn it, you’re going to hear about this.”

“Well, which is it? The easy way or the hard way?”

Billy Fuller stared at Masuto. Then he turned to the circle of people and snapped, “Take ten! But stay close!” Then he motioned to Masuto and led him past the set to a line of portable dressing rooms. “In here.” It was fitted out as a small office, with a desk and several chairs.

“Now what the hell is this all about?” Fuller wanted to know. He dropped into a chair. Masuto sat facing him.

“Last night a woman named Alice Greene was killed.”

“You mean that thing on Beverly Drive?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know the dame from Adam. Never met her.”

“She was a friend of your ex-wife, Mitzie.”

“I don’t know her either. The bitch doesn’t exist.”

“She exists,” Masuto assured him quietly. “I want her to continue to exist. She’s in very great danger. The same man who killed Alice Greene is trying to kill her.”

“Come on!”

“Believe me.”

“Look, you came to the wrong party. I don’t start any defense fund. If someone is looking to finish off Mitzie, he doesn’t get my help. But I don’t interfere either.”

“I see. Are you by any chance planning to kill her?” Masuto asked quietly.

“What are you, crazy? I’m in the middle of a picture, and you’re asking me am I planning to kill some miserable broad.” He shook his head. “Are we finished? I told you I don’t know this Greene woman. You want to know would I kill Mitzie? Maybe. If I could get away with it. If I could find enough time between pictures.”

“That’s a lot of hate. Why?”

“That, Mr. Detective, is none of your goddamn business.”

“Why did your marriage break up?”

“What are you, the Louella Parsons of the Beverly Hills cops?”

“It’s very important that you answer that question.”

“Not to me.” He got to his feet.

“A few more questions, Mr. Fuller. Were you in the service?”

“Yes, I spent a lousy year in Nam with an army film unit. But you know what occurs to me? I don’t have to answer any one of your damn questions. You blackmailed me out there, telling me you’d kill a day’s shooting if I didn’t talk to you. I think I’ll talk to my lawyer about that.”

“You could do that,” Masuto agreed. “But I think it would be easier to spend a few minutes more with me and not lose the day’s

shooting. You can still take it up with your lawyer.”

“Okay, okay, let’s get it over with.”

“Do you own a pistol?”

“Four of them, and I got the papers on all of them.”

“What kind?”

“I have a Colt forty-five hogleg.” For the first time, his tight face relaxed slightly and he smiled thinly. “That’s a reproduction of the old frontier Colt, bring down a man at a hundred yards, blow a hole through you big as a saucer. I got a Browning thirty-caliber automatic and I own two target pistols, both of them twenty-two.”

“What kind of guns are the twenty-twos?”

He was relaxed now. He enjoyed talking about guns. “One is an old Smith and Wesson hand ejector. It’s got to be fifty years old, but perfect. A little pocket gun, but a beauty. That’s the one I carry when I carry a gun.”

“You carry a gun?”

“Not now. At night.”

“Why?”

“Man, you got to be kidding. Do you read the newspapers?”

“Sometimes. And the other twenty-two?”

“That’s a Browning target pistol. Automatic, and it fires twenty-two longs.”

“Where do you keep your guns?”

“Like I said, sometimes I carry the little piece at night. I keep the thirty-caliber in my desk, and the hogleg and the target gun have the usual plush-lined boxes. I keep both boxes in my study.”

“Where do you live, Mr. Fuller?”

“I don’t see where the hell all this fits in.”

“If you will bear with me just a few minutes more,” Masuto said softly, “we can finish this and you can go back to your work. I was asking where you live.”

“I rent a little house on Camden. I had a goddamn mansion on Palm Drive, but it went to that bitch. You know, this is the age of the ripoff and the land of the ripoff. But there’s one ripoff that cuts everything else down to size. Divorce. I pay that bitch four thousand clams a month. I had to give her the house. We’re talking about that target pistol. She gave me that. The one goddamn thing she ever

gave me, except maybe a dose of the clap. Nah! I'm only talking. The only dose she gave me was a dose of herself, and that was plenty."

"She gave you the target pistol?"

"So she did."

"You said it came in a large, wooden box?"

"Right."

"Who takes care of your house?"

"I got a housekeeper, a black lady. She comes in every morning, leaves at nine."

"Then she's there now?"

"Certainly."

"When," Masuto asked him, "did you last look at the target pistol?"

"When? Jesus, I don't know. This film you're lousing up right now—I been with it three weeks. I know I haven't touched the pistol in that time."

"I suggest to you that it's not there."

"What's not there?"

"The target pistol."

"You got to be kidding. What are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm saying it was stolen."

"What! How the hell would you know? You mean one of your guys picked up a target pistol? Who says it's mine?"

Masuto shrugged.

Fuller picked up the telephone on his desk and dialed a number. Masuto could hear, faintly, the voice of the woman who answered. Fuller said, "Lanie, this is Mr. Fuller. I want you to go into my study and open the rosewood box on my desk and tell me what's in it. You know, there are two boxes. There's a black teak box that I keep locked. Look in the other box, the reddish one." There was a pause. "Yes, I'll hold the wire."

He stood there with the telephone in his hand, watching Masuto. It had become a game, and it had caught his attention. "You know," he said to Masuto, "they keep arguing, does art imitate life or does life imitate art—I mean if you can call movies art. I mean this kind of a ploy is exactly what one of those movie detectives would pull. Then,

if the gun's still there, all you got to say to me is, Sue me. So I'm wrong."

The phone demanded his attention again. He listened. Then he said, "Thanks, Lanie. No, it's okay." He put down the telephone and stared at Masuto.

"The gun is gone," Masuto said.

"How the devil did you know?"

Masuto shrugged.

"Stolen?"

"You didn't give it to anyone?"

"What does that mean?"

Again, Masuto shrugged.

"So the gun is gone. What do I do now?"

"I suggest you call the Beverly Hills Police and report it. Give them the serial number and the registration number."

"I'm reporting it to you."

"That won't do. By the way, where were you last night, between ten and eleven o'clock?"

"Come on, what in hell is this?"

"I told you. It's a homicide investigation."

"All right. I was home."

"Alone?"

"Alone, in bed, reading a screenplay. After a day in this place, I don't even want to get laid."

"No witnesses, no one to vouch that you were there?"

"Just tell me one thing, mister—what are you trying to accuse me of? Of murdering this Alice Greene, who I never even laid eyes on? Or of planning to murder Mitzie? If it's a crime to plan a murder, you can take me in right now. Oh, shit, the hell with it! I got a film to make."

Masuto stood up. "All right, Mr. Fuller. Don't forget to call in about the gun. By the way"—he held out the snapshot of Catherine Addison—"do you know this girl?"

He glanced at the picture without interest. "Should I?"

"I don't know. Would you take a good look at it?"

Fuller stared at the picture for a moment. "Good-looking kid, but the woods are full of them. No, I don't know her."

Masuto nodded and put the picture back in his pocket. As he left the soundstage, the strident voice of Billy Fuller was calling the actors back to their places. Outside, the blazing sunlight blinded Masuto as much as the darkness had previously, and squinting, he walked back to the guard at the gate.

“How’d it come out?” the guard asked him.

“Not too bad. Tell me, isn’t Fulton Legett here on this lot?”

“Going down the list, huh?” The guard nodded and pointed. “Over there in the executive building.”

“Are you going to give me a hard time again?”

“You’re really a Beverly Hills cop?”

For the second time, Masuto took out his badge and exhibited it.

“I didn’t know they had plainclothes cops on the Beverly Hills force.”

“They even have them in uniform,” Masuto said. “I’ll step in there and have a word with Mr. Legett.”

Inside, there was another guard at the desk, and once again Masuto went through the routine.

“I’ll call up,” the guard said.

“Why don’t you let me surprise him?”

“What is this? Are you going to make some kind of arrest?”

“No arrest. But I have some questions for him. If you call up there, and he says he won’t see me, and then I go up there anyway, you’re in hot water. This way, you just figured it was okay for me to go up. You can’t get into trouble.”

“He’s in room six eleven.”

“Thanks.”

The girl in six eleven—Masuto decided she was receptionist and secretary—looked up at him in surprise and said that they were not casting. She was a very pretty girl, with blonde hair and wide blue eyes.

“I’m not here for casting. I wish to see Mr. Legett.”

“Oh? Did you have an appointment, mister—?”

“Detective Sergeant Masuto. Beverly Hills police.”

“Oh? Are you sure it’s Mr. Fulton Legett you wish to see?”

“Quite sure.”

“And you’re sure you’re a policeman? I never saw a Chinese policeman before.”

“I’m a policeman,” Masuto said, showing her his badge.

She pressed a button on her telephone and said unhappily, “F.L., there’s a policeman here to see you.” She listened for a moment and then said plaintively, “He asked me if I’m sure you’re a policeman and not one of the studio guards. He thinks I can’t tell the difference between a policeman and a studio guard. That’s hitting below the belt, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Through that door,” she said, pointing.

Masuto opened the door and went into a large, square carpeted and wood-paneled room. The furnishings were all chrome and leather, with glass-topped tables and non-objective paintings on the walls. Fulton Legett sat behind a very large desk. He was a short, overweight man who looked more than his fifty years. He had pudgy hands with well-manicured nails, nails polished to a high sheen, and he had a small cupid’s bow of a mouth.

“Are you sure you want to see me?” Legett asked.

Masuto nodded. “Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills police.” He held out his badge.

“Ah, I see. I suppose it’s about that terrible thing at the Crombie house. Poor Alice. She deserved better.”

“Then you knew Mrs. Greene?”

“Oh, indeed, indeed. Knew her very well. I called Laura as soon as I saw it in the papers.”

“You knew Mrs. Crombie?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, indeed.”

“Do you know Mitzie Fuller?”

Legett’s eyes narrowed. He hesitated a moment too long. “No,” he said shortly.

“But you do know Billy Fuller?”

“Of course I know the little son of a bitch. We’re on the same lot. He’s got a head as big as the Goodyear balloon. I’ve showed him a few scripts, nothing good enough for the little king—” He had forgotten grief and the dead; he was a producer whose scripts had been turned down by a director.

Masuto interrupted. "Your ex-wife, Nancy—"

"Yes, I spoke to her."

"When?"

"When I called Laura Crombie. Nancy told me about the situation there. I just can't believe it—that there's some bloodthirsty lunatic out to kill those women."

"There is."

"Well, damn it, it's one of those things that are hard to believe. Who would want to kill Nancy?"

"I don't know." Masuto shrugged. "Would you?"

"Are you serious?"

"I only meant would you know anyone who might want to kill her. I didn't mean to suggest that you might want to kill her. But since you appear to take it that way, I'll ask you. Would you want to kill her?"

"That's a hell of a question."

"Yes, I suppose so. But Mrs. Legett suggested it."

"What? You mean she said I wanted to kill her?"

"Not exactly. But when I asked her who might want her dead, she pointed to you."

"That miserable, crazy woman!"

"Oh? Then I take it she was responding emotionally."

"What a lousy thing to say! I give that woman blood. Practically every nickel I got goes to paying my alimony. She is loaded. Loaded. That house of mine—which is now hers—up on Lexington Road is one of the best pieces of property in Beverly Hills. It would fetch a million, and from an Arab or an Iranian, maybe a million and a half, and she's got it and I eat at Hamburg Hamlet. And now she tells the cops that I'm out to murder her. You know something," he snapped at Masuto, "it's not a bad idea. If I knew where to buy one of those contracts you see in films, I wouldn't mind putting it out on her."

"That's not anything to tell me."

"The hell with it! Who gives a damn?"

"Do you own a gun?" Masuto asked him.

"A gun? What in hell would I do with a gun?"

"Then you don't own one?"

"No, of course not."

"I asked you about Mitzie Fuller before," Masuto said.

“Yeah?”

“You said you don’t know her.”

“You’re sitting here,” Legett said, “because you bulled your way into my office and I let it be. I don’t have to answer one goddamn question. As a matter of fact, I can have you thrown out of here. You’re a small town cop who’s off his range.”

“You called Mitzie Fuller a number of times, asking for a date. Why deny it? You’re divorced.”

“You have got one stinking nerve.”

Masuto slid Catherine Addison’s picture across the desk. Legett glanced down at it. “What’s this? That’s Kelly. What has she got to do with all of this?”

“You knew her?”

“Of course I knew her. She was Laura’s kid.” He pushed the picture back at Masuto. “That’s enough. Get out.”

Masuto put the picture in his pocket and left.

Monte Sweet

Masuto was building his structure, but it was still a house of cards, fragile, unsupported. He had written the name of the murderer down on a slip of paper and had handed it to Wainwright, but that was a gesture, a touch of ego that he was almost ashamed of, and always there was the possibility that he could be wrong. If he was wrong, then he had slandered an innocent person, and the fact that only he and Wainwright knew about the slander did not lessen his guilt. Whatever else he was—a policeman, a father, a husband, a rose-grower, a Nisei—he was still above all a Zen Buddhist with an ultimate responsibility to himself.

Yet as he picked up piece after piece, the pattern he looked for was beginning to emerge. Still, it was without meaning; he had built an arch out of intuition, psychological guesswork, and shreds of disconnected evidence. The keystone was missing.

Lost wholly in his thoughts, he ran a red light, narrowly missing a cursing motorist, and then he saw the blinking light of a Beverly Hills black-and-white behind him. He pulled over to the curb, the black-and-white behind him. The officer got out of his car, walked over and said, “Traffic lights don’t mean anything to you, do they, mister?”

Then the cop bent down and said, “I’ll be damned!”

“I will if I keep this up,” Masuto said.

“Are you chasing something, Sergeant?” the officer asked.

“No, Macneil. The only thing I’m chasing is an idea. I just ran the light. I haven’t done it in years.”

Macneil shrugged. "We can't all be perfect."

"You ought to give me a ticket. I deserve it."

"Ah, the hell with it! Only keep your eyes open, Sarge. You missed that guy by inches."

Masuto drove on. He turned off Santa Monica Boulevard into the parking space behind the real estate offices of Crombie & Hawkes. Their three-story building oozed prosperity. Over the door, heavy brass letters spelled out the names of the dead Hawkes and the living Crombie. Inside, the first floor was reminiscent of a bank, with two rows of desks, four on each side, and behind each desk an attractive woman. These, Masuto surmised, were the residential agents. A broad staircase led up to the second floor, and brass letters indicated that business properties were dealt with up there. Next to the entrance a pretty blonde woman—there was a pretty blonde woman at almost every reception desk in West Los Angeles and Beverly Hills—supplied information. But then the pretty girls from every town in America poured into Los Angeles to become film stars, an ambition which very few of them ever achieved.

The pretty girl at the reception desk informed Masuto that Mr. Arthur Crombie was not in.

"When do you expect him?"

"He left for lunch. It's after three now, and he's usually back by two-thirty. So he may have had an appointment with a customer. He'll call in sooner or later."

Masuto gave her his card. "I would appreciate hearing from him when he returns."

"I'll tell him."

Back at headquarters, Wainwright intercepted Masuto. "Well, what about it, Masao? Where are we?"

"God knows."

"That's a hell of an answer. Pete Bones called. He wants to talk to you."

Dropping down behind his desk, Masuto dialed the number and asked for Bones.

The thick, throaty voice said, "Masuto?"

"Wainwright said you wanted to talk to me."

“Right. We’re going to put away the chemist. No one’s claimed the body, so he goes into Potter’s Field. Do you want to look at the corpse before we bury it?”

It was as cold and sad and terrible as so much of the human comedy or tragedy, depending on one’s point of view. A man is trained as a chemist. What did he dream of as a kid, Masuto wondered? What wonderful adventures marked his first days with test tubes and retorts? And then what began to corrode and rot, until his knowledge produced a botulin that destroyed a poor Chicano girl who never knew of his existence or of the existence of the man who hired him. And now as alone as any corpse could be, he went into the earth, unmourned, unknown, and unwanted.

“What was his name?” Masuto asked, out of a curiosity he could not repress.

“Alfred Bindler.”

“Poor devil.”

“The son of a bitch is not worth your sympathy. Tell me, do you want to look or do we dump him?”

“No, I don’t want to see him. Wait a moment. He was shot behind the ear?”

“Right.”

“Were there powder burns?”

“No. The way we see it, the range was the whole length of the room. The killer opened the door. Bindler had his back to him. The killer raised his gun and popped him.”

“Twelve feet?”

“Just about.”

“If he picked his spot and Bindler was in the act of turning, that was damn good shooting.”

“You can say that again.”

Masuto put down the phone. Someone knocked at the door to his office.

“Come in.”

He knew the face. A smallish man, balding, with protruding blue eyes and a wide mouth. It was a face millions of people knew.

“You’re Sergeant Masuto?”

Masuto nodded.

“I’m Monte Sweet. They told me to see you. They told me you were in charge of the case.”

“Sit down, Mr. Sweet,” Masuto said.

“Yeah.” He sat down in the chair next to Masuto’s desk. “Yeah—look at me. I’m ugly as sin. I make a living out of that, out of being ugly and nasty and rotten. They pay me thirty grand a week to insult the yokels in Vegas. An Italian sits down in the front row, I call him a wop. My real name’s Seteloni. I see you sitting there, I say, Hey, Chink, where’s the laundry? Stupid stuff, and they laugh themselves sick. It turns my stomach to watch those muttonheads laughing, but that’s what I do for a living and it stinks. I’m fifty-three years old. You think a guy of fifty-three can’t fall in love? You think Monte Sweet couldn’t love anything? Well, let me tell you different. I loved that woman the way I never loved anyone. And she loved me. God damn it to hell, she loved me! It was real! And now that lousy creep killed her.”

He was shaking with emotion, tears welling out of the corners of his eyes, his hands trembling. “I’ll get you some water,” Masuto said.

“I could use a drink.”

“I’ll try.”

Masuto went out of the room, closing the door behind him. Three uniformed cops were standing there. “Is that Monte Sweet you got inside?” one of them asked.

“It is.”

He went into Wainwright’s office. “This is a police station,” Wainwright said.

“Come on, I know you keep a bottle in your desk.”

“For emergencies.”

“This is an emergency.”

Wainwright poured into a paper cup. “What the devil goes on in there?”

“He’s taking Alice Greene’s death very hard. Apparently, he loved her deeply.”

“You got a soft streak that laps up bullshit, Masao. Men like Monte Sweet don’t love anyone deeply.”

“All men love something.”

“Yeah? You tell me who Monte Sweet is going to love when he discovers that his light of love left her fortune to a passel of dogs.”

“Maybe he knew that. He tells me that they pay him thirty thousand dollars a week in Las Vegas. If that’s the case, he can live without her fortune.”

“Thirty grand a week? You believe that?”

“I read such things. He’s very big there and on TV. And Alice Greene was not that rich.”

“What’s he here for?”

“He’s mad.”

“Then he ought to tell you something.”

Masuto went back to his office, holding a paper cup which he gave to Sweet. “This is vodka. A police station is not a good place to look for a drink.”

“Okay, okay.” He took it in a single gulp, grimacing.

“Who killed Mrs. Greene?” Masuto asked him.

“Don’t you know? What the hell are you—Keystone cops?”

“We have a case and we’re trying to solve it.”

“Oh, that’s beautiful. You got a case. A woman is dead, a woman who was the best thing that ever happened to me, and you tell me that you got a case.”

“You were talking about it before,” Masuto said evenly. “You indicated that you knew. Who do you think killed her?”

“I don’t think. I know.”

“Who?”

“Alan Greene.” And when there was no reaction from Masuto, he went on, “I know what you cookies think. You think because her car was wired, it was a Mafia job, and they been telling you that I’m hooked up with the Mafia. That is a carload of crap. I got no more connection with the Mafia than you have, mister, and maybe less. And who says you got to be a contract man to wire a car? I could wire a car if I had to and so could Greene. Did he tell you that he once ran a garage? No, sir. You bet your sweet patooties he didn’t.”

“So you think Alan Greene murdered his ex-wife. Why?”

“Because he hated her guts. He played the big macho game with her and beat her to within an inch of her life. You didn’t know that?”

“No, I didn’t,” Masuto admitted. “You’re talking about a physical beating?”

“What other kind is there?”

“How bad? Was she hospitalized?”

“You’re damn right she was,” Sweet said.

“What hospital?”

“They took her to Cedars-Sinai and she was there three days. After that, he didn’t have a leg to stand on. She agreed to keep it quiet, and he agreed to the divorce and the settlement. He was paying her five thousand a month and he gave her the house on Roxbury Drive. I would have married her in a minute, but Alice and I agreed that we’d never let that bastard off the hook as long as he lived. Well, he got off the hook.”

“Apparently he was rich enough to afford the alimony. Why should he kill her?”

“No one is rich enough to afford sixty grand a year.”

“Do you inherit from Mrs. Greene?” Masuto asked him.

“Come on, if you haven’t spoken to her lawyers you’re lousier cops than I imagine. Her money goes to dogs. You know that. I never wanted a nickel of her money, and I’m as crazy about dogs as she was.”

“Yes, of course. I was not trying to trap you. I just wondered whether you knew what was in her will.”

“All right. That’s your job. Now what are you going to do about Greene?”

“You make an accusation. That’s not evidence.”

“You bring him in and put the screws on him, and you’ll get plenty of evidence.”

“We don’t do things that way,” Masuto said.

“I just bet you don’t, with your two-bit police force. If it was the L.A. cops—”

“They don’t go in for torture either. But I can tell you this, Mr. Sweet. We’ll have the evidence and the killer.”

“When?”

“Ah, that’s not easy to say.”

When Monte Sweet had departed, Wainwright said to Masuto, “Well, what did he give you?”

“He said Greene once owned a garage and that he could wire a car. As a matter of fact, Sweet said he could wire a car himself.”

“So where are we, Masao?”

“Closer.”

“And now?”

“I think I’ll try Laura Crombie again.”

The Bar

Going to the Crombie house, on Beverly Drive, Masuto's car was almost sideswiped by a tourist bus. It was the second time in a single day that he had narrowly avoided an accident. It was unlike him. He had allowed himself to become submerged completely in a game of chess with an invisible antagonist—and to become absorbed in this manner was dangerous, dangerous for himself and dangerous for the women he was committed to protect.

He was crowding too much into a single day, and he was being drawn too thin, yet he could not stop. He found himself quietly cursing the tourist bus, and the fact that he could be thus irritated disturbed him. Yet, he reflected, it was ridiculous to allow these huge tourist buses to prowl the streets of Beverly Hills, adding their noxious blasts to the prevailing pollution. People from all over the country and all over the world came here to look at streets not too different from streets in any other wealthy community, content to pay then-money to have the homes of movie stars pointed out to them. Masuto knew it was a swindle. Three quarters of the places pointed to as the tourists rode by in their big buses had been vacated by the stars years ago, sold and resold since then, but still giving the tour guides a reason to sell their tickets—and of course Beverly Drive, the broad main street of the town with its magnificent mansions, was the focus of all the tour buses.

Driving more carefully, he pulled into the Crombie driveway, parking behind Beckman's Ford. Beckman let him into the house.

“Quiet, very quiet, Masao,” Beckman said. “The ladies are driving me crazy. I don’t know if I can hold them tonight. And to make it worse, someone at the station gave my wife this number. She called here three times. Now I stopped answering the phone. I let the ladies do that.”

They were standing alone in the entrance foyer, and Masuto said to Beckman, speaking softly, “Tell me about Mitzie.”

“What’s to tell? I’m forty-three years old, Masao. If I was fifteen years younger, I’d leave my wife and marry Mitzie. Except why the hell should she look twice at a cop who makes fifteen thousand a year? I’d have to put away three years of wages to buy that Porsche of hers.”

“You’ve spent twenty-four hours with those women, and that’s all you’ve got?”

“What do you want?”

“Who is she?”

“You mean where does she come from? I’m not totally a jerk, Masao. She comes from Dallas, Texas. Her mother was a laundress. Her father was a no-good bum and a drunk. Mitzie cut out of there first chance she got and came here like all the other kids do to become a movie star. She worked around as a waitress and for a while she worked in a hair-dressing place.”

“Wait a minute—not Tony Cooper’s place?”

“That’s right. She gets a big bang out of the fact that she can go there now and lay down thirty bucks for the same service she used to dish out.”

“It’s a small world. Did you ever ask her why she and Billy Fuller split up?”

“There’s a general consensus among all three dames that he’s a son of a bitch.”

“Okay, Sy. Now I want to talk to Mrs. Crombie. I’ll wait here. Where are they?”

“Watching TV.”

“Get her.”

Laura Crombie came into the foyer with Beckman and said, “I’m sure you’ve solved everything, Sergeant, and we can stop living this nightmare.”

“Not quite.”

“Of course it can’t go on, you know that. We can’t continue to live here shut up and away from the world like this.”

“I know that.”

“When?”

“Soon, I hope,” Masuto told her. “I have just a few questions that might help. For one thing, did your ex-husband own a pistol?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what kind?”

“I’m afraid not. To me, one pistol is the same as another.”

“Did you ever see it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you do know what an automatic pistol looks like and how it differs from a revolver. Was his an automatic pistol or a revolver?”

“I think it was an automatic pistol. I’m not sure.”

“And by any chance did he belong to the same pistol club that Alan Greene belonged to?”

“Yes, I think he did.”

“Thank you,” Masuto said. “I’ll only ask you to endure this through the rest of this evening. One way or another, it will come to an end.”

“I hope you’re right,” Beckman said as Masuto was leaving.

“We’re trying.”

Masuto got into his car, but instead of driving off, he sat there brooding. He was a meticulous man; that came with his Japanese ancestry and with his Zen training. His Zen training had taught him how elusive the truth is and it had also enabled him to use his insight to capture flashes of the truth. The meticulous quality went along with his distrust of his flashes of insight.

He released the hood of the car, got out, raised the hood, and stared at the motor. He had never wired a car with dynamite, yet faced with the necessity he felt he could pull it off. Six sticks of dynamite in a confined spot behind the engine, a detonator stuck in place with so simple a device as a couple of Band-Aids, and then a lead from the ignition.

He closed the hood of his car and sat down behind the wheel. Again he brooded for a while. Then he called the station on his radiophone. “Put me through to the captain,” he told Polly.

“For a dashing, handsome Zen Buddhist Oriental, you are the most unromantic person I know.”

“The captain, Polly.”

“What’s up?” Wainwright asked.

“I’m troubled and I’m nervous.”

“Maybe you ought to knock it off. Go home. Give it tomorrow.”

“That’s no good. If I let this go until tomorrow, something will happen tonight. I feel it in my bones.”

“You got the three dames boxed up with Beckman. If you want me to go over there and lecture them, I will. I’ll talk them into staying put another night.”

“That won’t do it. He’s too aggressive, too bold. He’s running for his life now.”

“Well, damn it, Masao, what do you want me to do?”

“I want to pick him up.”

“Are you crazy?” Wainwright exploded. “Maybe you got another career lined up, but I got twenty years in this police force. What are you going to charge him with? Picking his nose in public? You got nothing on him, nothing but that crazy intuition of yours. I believe you because I know you and I seen this happen before, but you got nothing. Bring me something. Bring me the gun, and we’ll pick him up in a minute.”

“It wouldn’t help. He’s using Billy Fuller’s gun.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that Fuller’s gun was stolen.”

“Did he report it?”

“He only discovered the theft today.”

“And what makes you so sure our man stole it?”

“I’m not. Just another guess. You can be sure the gun will turn up, and then when the bullets are matched, it leads straight to Fuller.”

“And it’s also a beautiful alibi for Fuller.”

“Yes, it works both ways. You won’t pick him up then?”

“Masao, we can’t. All we’ll have is one beautiful lawsuit, and if he hits the city for a million bucks, we can pack up and go.”

“All right.”

“Where are you off to now?”

“Maybe to find the missing piece.”

Masuto started his car and pulled out of the driveway. It was only about a mile to Tony Cooper's hairdressing establishment on Camden Drive. It was past six o'clock, and the streets of the business section were empty. Masuto wondered whether he had delayed too long.

He parked his car in front of the beauty shop, and through the glass window, it appeared to be a repeat of the night before. Cooper stood over a single customer, combing and shaping a head of black hair. He glanced at Masuto as the detective entered, raising an eyebrow. Masuto nodded, took a seat at the side of the room, and then sat silently and thoughtfully, watching Cooper. Cooper, he decided, was quick, skilled, and meticulous. He recognized the quality. Whatever Cooper did, he decided, he would do well. Why then had he come to hairdressing? Why does any man come to what he gives his life to? Why had Masao Masuto become a policeman?

Questions were easier than answers. The woman whose hair was being cut had fingernails as long as a Mandarin's; they were painted bright red. They were claws on the ends of her long fingers, and above the hands, the wrists were encased in jeweled bracelets.

Cooper finished. The woman signed the pad he held out to her. Masuto wondered what the monthly bill of a woman who used Tony Cooper's hair-dressing shop amounted to.

Cooper took her to the door, and then closed and locked the door behind her. "Do you wait until you see me with my last customer?" he asked Masuto.

"Just a coincidence."

He dropped into the chair next to Masuto and stretched out his legs. "Have you caught your killer yet?"

"I'm close."

"But not close enough."

"That's right. Not close enough. It's like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. You solve the puzzle, and then when you've finished, you discover that two or three pieces are missing."

"I noticed you were looking at that woman's fingernails," Cooper said.

"You notice things. That's a rare gift."

“To a great many men, those long, painted red fingernails are pretty disgusting. I’ve had men tell me it’s a complete turnoff. Yet the women do it. I guess they feel it’s a sex symbol.”

“Or a class symbol. You don’t mop floors or play a piano with those fingernails,” Masuto said. “You know, the missing pieces can be the most important.”

“Missing pieces?”

“There’s no time left,” Masuto said. “There’s no time to play games. Anyway, I don’t like to play games. Not when someone’s life is at stake.”

“Don’t you tend to dramatize, Sergeant?”

“Now look,” Masuto said, “don’t be deceived by the fact that I don’t act the role of a TV cop. I’m not joking and I’m not playing games. I told you yesterday that I didn’t give a damn whether you were a homosexual or not. I don’t. But if you keep on lying to me, I’ll make you wish you were never born. I’ll slap more violations on you than you can carry. I’ll hound you right out of this town, and don’t think I’m making empty threats. So if you want me to walk out of here and forget that we ever met, just answer my questions and answer them truthfully.”

“You got one hell of a nerve! You can’t come in here—”

“I can and I am! Now why didn’t you tell me that Mitzie Fuller worked here?”

“You didn’t ask me.” He took a deep breath. “Anyway, she was only here a week and she only worked mornings.”

“Did the other women know her then?”

“No. That was before they became my customers.”

“Why did she leave?”

Cooper hesitated, and Masuto said, “I want it all. All—and quickly.”

“Because I wanted to marry her.”

“You’re gay.”

“And what you don’t know about gay, Mr. Detective, would fill a book. Sure I’m gay. That doesn’t mean I can’t fall in love with a woman. That doesn’t mean I can’t stop being gay.”

“But she didn’t marry you?”

“She would have. She just said that she saw too much of that kind of marriage end up as tragedy. She didn’t want to do it to me or to

herself.”

“So she married Billy Fuller.”

“Yes.”

“They were married six months. What broke up that marriage after six months?”

“Why don’t you ask Mitzie? Why don’t you ask Fuller?”

“You know damn well that I asked them and that I got nowhere.”

“Maybe that’s the way it should be. Maybe there are some things that even cops don’t have the right to know.”

“Granted. I’m not curious, Cooper, and I’m not peddling gossip. I could guess the answer to the question I asked you, but it’s no damn use for me to guess. I have to know.”

Cooper sat with his legs stretched out, staring at his clasped hands. The moments ticked by. Finally he said, “You really think this creep intends to kill those dames?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Mitzie?”

“Yes, Mitzie.”

“Okay. Here it is. Mitzie was a hooker, a hundred-dollar-a-night hooker. Billy Fuller married her without knowing that. Can you imagine what it did to a man with Fuller’s phony macho when he found out? I’m amazed he didn’t try to kill her right then and there. Oh, he slapped her around all right. She showed me bruises the size of purple plums. But mostly he cried. Mitzie said if the little bastard weren’t so impossibly nasty, she would have felt sorry for him. That after he used her for a punching bag.”

“How did he find out?”

“You always got a good friend who’ll tell you what you don’t have to know.”

“But when she was married to him, she had stopped?”

“Hooking? Yes, of course.”

“I’m not up on all the folkways. Now exactly when did she begin to work as a prostitute?”

“Is that important?”

“Yes, very.”

“Mitzie is twenty-nine. She came to Los Angeles about eight years ago, dreaming the old impossible dream. And it is impossible,

believe me. She worked around as a waitress, and that's when I got to know her, maybe six years ago when she was waiting a joint around the corner. I talked her into a job here, because I wanted her around and because I thought she was the prettiest kid I ever saw. Well, she was already turning a trick every now and then, and after she left here, she didn't go back to slinging hash."

"She became a full-time prostitute."

"If you want to call it that."

"What would you call it?"

"I don't call it. To me, it's no worse than being a cop."

"We won't discuss that. You said she was a hundred-dollar-a-night girl. You don't walk the streets and pick up hundred-dollar customers. Did she have a pimp?"

"No!" Cooper snapped. "She hated their guts."

"Then how did she work?"

"Do you know a place called The Bar?"

"Just that, The Bar?"

"That's right. It's in Hollywood, up on a hill to the left as you drive into Laurel Canyon. A driveway up to a parking lot, and then from the parking lot up a staircase. It's got a lot of color and a wonderful view of the city lights. It's a bar and restaurant, and the food isn't bad, and it's the kind of place people go when they don't want to be seen. There's always two or three girls working out of the place, and the guy who runs it, George Denton, is pretty decent to the girls. It brings him trade. There's no cheap pickup. I suppose you could call George a pimp, because if a guy wanted something, George hustled it, but he never took more than ten percent from the girls. Mitzie worked out of that place until she met Fuller. I guess she met him two years ago. He gave her a couple of small parts, but she was no great shakes as an actress."

"And that's it?"

"That's it."

Masuto rose and held out his hand. "Thanks, Cooper."

Cooper took his hand. "Forgive me for not getting up. I'm washed out. I work my ass off in this place, and I don't know for what."

Masuto let himself out, closing the door behind him.

A strange world, Masuto thought, wherein he earned his daily bread, a world of sunshine and palm trees and million-dollar mansions where a girl with the face of an angel was a hooker and a Zen Buddhist was a cop and a grocery store in Beverly Hills sold tomatoes for a dollar and seventy cents a pound and a boutique sold dresses that weighed less than a pound for three thousand dollars. But, he wondered as he got into his car, was any world less strange? On a planet gone mad and apparently intent upon destroying itself, was Beverly Hills abnormal?

He maintained his sanity and his equanimity by refraining from judgments. He did his work, and although it was past quitting time, he still had work to do.

He drove north to Santa Monica Boulevard and then to Sunset Boulevard, through the Strip into Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Somewhere in back of his mind was a recollection of a place called The Bar. It went back through the years, but the more he plucked at it, the more it eluded him.

There on his left was the modest sign and the arrow. THE BAR. He turned onto the driveway and drove up to the parking lot, a high angle drive about a hundred yards long. Half a dozen cars were already there. Against the wall of the hill, a wooden staircase went up another forty feet or so.

Masuto climbed the staircase. From the landing at the top, the view was magnificent, the whole of the Los Angeles bowl spread out in front of him, glittering in the night like some vast jewel. He was never unconscious of the beauty of Los Angeles. The beauty resisted the most fervent march of tackiness and bad taste that the development, which is euphemistically called civilization, had ever produced. The beauty fought back, even, as Masuto thought in his more optimistic moments, as truth and decency fought back.

He looked at the view for a moment or two more, and then he went inside. Like most Los Angeles restaurants, the place was underlit. Lamps on the tables, a few lights at the entrance, but for the most part a muted interior. There was a bar, a screen, and a dozen tables. At the far end, a spinet piano at which a black man improvised the blues.

A tall, good-looking man of about fifty, dark-haired, with a long, narrow face that had become habitually fixed in an expressionless mask, wearing working evening clothes, approached Masuto. He studied the detective, examining his battered tweed jacket, his wrinkled gray flannel trousers, and his tieless shirt.

“Can I help you?” The noncommittal question which left a variety of outs.

Masuto showed his badge.

“Would you come into the light?”

Obligingly, Masuto put the wallet which contained his badge under the reservation light. “Detective Sergeant Masuto,” he said. “Beverly Hills police.”

“Aren’t you out of your territory, Sergeant?”

“Mr.—”

“George Denton.”

“I see. This is your place?”

“That’s right.”

“Now I’m sure,” Masuto said, “that you know enough about the way the law functions in Los Angeles County to know that I can go anywhere in the county in pursuit.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” Denton asked sardonically. “Hot pursuit? Isn’t that what the law says?”

“That’s what I’m doing.”

“Well, look around you. I know every customer in the place. No criminals. So unless you got a warrant, I’d rather not have the fuzz around. It gives my place a bad name.”

“Your place has a bad name.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just this,” Masuto said quietly. “You’re running a classy whorehouse. Now I don’t mind you defending your business, but don’t knock mine. I’m a mild-mannered person, but I’ve had a long day, and I’d just as soon come down on you like a ton of bricks as not. I don’t owe you one damn thing, and if you think I couldn’t smash this joint and close up your lousy business, just try me. And if you think I’m off my own turf, I’ll pick up that phone and have two black-and-whites here in five minutes, and then you can tell your story to the L.A. cops.”

“Hey, wait a minute. Hold on.”

“And you’ll address me as Sergeant Masuto.”

“Okay, Sergeant. Okay. Look, I run a quiet, decent place here. No one gets cheated and no one gets rolled. I been in business twelve years and I never had no trouble. You can’t blame me for getting a little riled when a Beverly Hills investigator comes in and starts asking questions. My God, why would you want to close me up? I’ll show you places in Beverly Hills with five times the action we ever have here.”

“I don’t want to close you up. I want some information.”

“Okay, Sure. Come over here and sit down.” He led Masuto to a small table near the bar. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thank you. Do you know Mitzie Fuller?”

“She was Mitzie Kogan when I knew her. That was before she married Billy Fuller. I suppose he found out that she had turned a few tricks, and that finished their marriage. She was a good kid. A real beauty. A real strawberry blonde beauty. But she hasn’t been back here since she met Fuller. She told me she wasn’t coming back. I was glad. I wished her luck.”

“That was how long ago?”

“Almost two years ago.”

“And before that, how long did Mitzie work out of this place?”

“Three years, give or take a few months.”

“How did it work?” Masuto asked. “I mean, what time did she turn up?”

“Between eight and nine most of the time. You can see, there’s not much action before then. Of course, there were nights when she’d come in at six or seven and just hang around listening to Joe over there playing the piano. She was crazy about his blues, and you don’t hear much blues these days, nothing but rock.”

“Joe was working here then?”

“That’s right. I keep my help. That ought to say something about the kind of a place I run.”

“Would Mitzie stand at the bar or sit at a table?”

“Sometimes the bar, sometimes a table, sometimes up there with Joe. It would depend. Say, what’s she into? I’d hate to see that kid get hurt.”

“So would I.” Masuto took a picture out of his pocket. “Do you know this man?”

“I know him,” Denton said, studying the picture. “His name was Smith, but that ain’t his name. Nobody’s name is Smith.”

“Do you know his real name?”

“No. I’m not curious about the customers’ names.”

“When did he first come here? Can you remember?”

“Jesus—who can remember? Maybe four years ago, maybe a little more. He gave Mitzie a short fling. Then he turned up with a girl, and after that, no more Mitzie. Mitzie left him alone. Like she never saw him.”

“He came back with the girl—or was that the last time?”

“He came back, two or three times a week. Why not? My food is as good as anything in L.A. and the prices are not out of line. I don’t bother people and I don’t ask questions.”

“Didn’t he use a credit card?”

“No, cash. Always cash. That’s all right. This is a place where men come with other men’s wives. It happens. I handle a lot of cash.”

“Always with the same girl?”

“Yeah.”

“And how long did that go on?” Masuto asked.

“Maybe nine months.”

“And what did he call the girl? And what did she call him? If they were here that many times, you must have heard names.”

“Yeah. She called him Jack and he called her Kate.”

Masuto took out of his pocket the picture of Kelly—Catherine—Addison that Beckman had lifted from the album in Laura Crombie’s bedroom. He put it in front of Denton.

“That’s the girl.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

He put the picture back in his pocket. “What was their relationship?” he asked Denton.

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. You watched them night after night. Were they sleeping with each other?”

Denton shrugged. "I'd say so. I don't know what the kid saw in him, except that he was good-looking and knew his way around. These stupid kids go for older men. I didn't like him. I felt he was a bastard. So did Mitzie. But what the hell, it was no business of mine."

"Can I talk to Joe?" Masuto asked, nodding at the black pianist.

"Yeah."

"How's his memory?"

"Better than mine."

He took Masuto over to the black pianist. "Joe, this is Sergeant Masuto of the Beverly Hills police."

Joe nodded and went on playing. "A Nisei. They're beginning to integrate."

"Talk to him."

"I'm not crazy for fuzz," Joe said.

"I said, talk to him."

"Okay, boss. I'll talk." He stopped playing. Masuto took out the two pictures. Joe nodded. "That's right. That's the poor kid who went off the road up on Mulholland. Her name was Catherine Addison. You remember," he said to Denton, "I told you about that."

Denton didn't remember. He wasn't covering, Masuto decided, he just hadn't remembered. He remembered now.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant," he said.

"He don't read the papers. I do," Joe said. "I think I told him but I'm not sure."

"Was she here the night she died?" Masuto asked him.

The black man closed his eyes and with one finger began to pick out a mournful tune on the piano. Masuto waited. Denton turned away to deal with a customer.

"Yes," Joe finally said.

"And the man?"

"Yes."

"Were they happy?"

"What's happy, Sarge? Who's happy? No, they was not happy. The kid was crying. She came to me and asked me to play 'Blues in the Night.' I ain't crazy for it, but I played it."

"Was Mitzie here that night."

The black man's eyes turned cold, as if he had pulled a film over them. "I don't know nothing about Mitzie."

"I like Mitzie," Masuto said. "I'm trying to save her life. Maybe what you tell me could save her life. That's the truth."

He thought about it for a while, his finger picking out a tune again. Then he said, "Yeah, Mitzie was here. Mitzie came over to me and asked me if I knew why the kid was crying. I remember because we never saw her again. We never saw Smith either."

"You wouldn't remember what time that was?"

"Jesus, man, you want a lot, don't you? That was over three years ago. All right, I can tell you this. It was before the tables began to fill, so maybe it was before eight o'clock."

"Thanks, Joe," Masuto said.

"No sweat. Only don't make it hard for George. He's a decent man."



The Killer

“Am I going to have trouble?” George Denton asked Masuto.

“Not unless you make it for yourself. I’m not a vice cop. Now I have to use a telephone.”

“Sure—sure, Sergeant. Use this one right here.”

Masuto dialed Laura Crombie’s number. It was busy. He dialed it again. Busy. He was becoming increasingly nervous, increasingly irritated. Couples were coming into the restaurant now, an occasional single woman, an occasional single man. The women were good-looking, the men well-dressed, middle-aged. An open menu told him that the least expensive entree was twelve dollars.

He dialed again. Beckman answered. “Masao—thank God! We been turning the town upside down for you.”

“What happened?”

“Mitzie’s gone.”

Masuto controlled an impulse to explode with anger. “All right,” he said evenly. “Tell me exactly what happened, short and quick.”

“She got a call from someone said he was Wainwright, and he said he was calling for you, and she was to meet you.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. All the ladies know is that it was a bar.”

“God damn you, where the hell were you?” Masuto demanded.

“In the can, taking a crap.”

“Oh, great—in the can!”

“There are times when you got to.”

“And you called Wainwright and it wasn’t Wainwright.”

“Right. Jesus, Masao, who would think of it? She saw a chance to get sprung and she shot out of here in that yellow Porsche of hers. We got out an All Points. What do I do now?”

“Don’t let either of those women out of your sight, if you have to tie them up. Wait a minute. What did she say—a bar or the bar?”

“Hold on.”

Masuto heard Beckman calling out to the women, “What did Mitzie say—a bar or the bar?”

And then in the phone, “Masao, they think she said The Bar.”

“All right. Tell Wainwright to put everything he has on that yellow Porsche.”

Masuto slammed down the phone and bolted out of the door of the restaurant. Below him, he saw the yellow Porsche pull into the parking lot. A man stood there. As the yellow car stopped, the man opened the right-hand door and got in. Masuto was already racing down the stairs, three at a time, as the Porsche pulled out of the parking lot.

Masuto took the last six steps in a single bound, ran to his car, started the motor, and then found the narrow driveway blocked by an incoming car. He waited, cursing himself for being a fool, for not having a second man in the house with Beckman, for not seeing the whole pattern and anticipating what would happen—and most terribly for a death that he could have prevented.

The driveway was clear, and he shot down it to the Laurel Canyon intersection. The Porsche was nowhere in sight. He had two choices. He could turn right down into the city of Los Angeles, and if the Porsche had gone that way, it was hopeless even to dream of finding it. That might be the clever turn for the Porsche if the man knew he was being followed. But there was no reason for him to suspect that he was being followed. On the other hand, if Masuto turned left, the road led up to Mulholland Drive, and in the past there was a connection with Mulholland Drive.

Masuto turned left. He threw his car into low gear, gunning it ahead and almost crashed his way into the line of traffic that was crawling up the single lane of Laurel Canyon Boulevard. He could hear the curses of the drivers, but he was unwilling to put on his

siren and announce the chase. If he did and if the yellow Porsche was ahead of him, it could leave his Datsun as if his car was standing still. Instead he took risks that no sane man would take, swinging into the left lane again and again to pass cars, forcing oncoming cars to squeeze over to the wall of the canyon, bulling his way back into the traffic again and again.

As he approached the top of Laurel Canyon Pass, where Mulholland Drive intersects it, and where Laurel Canyon Boulevard sweeps on down into the San Fernando Valley, another choice faced him. If indeed the yellow Porsche was ahead of him, it had three choices: to continue ahead and down into the Valley, to turn right and follow Mulholland Drive to Cahuenga Pass, or to turn left on Mulholland. Since he couldn't see the car he hoped he was following, if indeed he was following it, he could toss a mental coin. Except that it was not in Masuto's manner to toss coins for lives, even mental coins. Just as he himself was in violent motion, so, he believed, was the killer. The killer would do what he had done twice before, turn left and westward on Mulholland Drive and let the road be the murderer.

Masuto saw the traffic light at the top of the pass now, red, with a line of cars stopped in front of it. He pulled into the left-hand lane, providentially empty, and roared up to the top of the hill, taking a left turn on two wheels and then racing down Mulholland Drive, his headlights cutting a crazy twisting beam through the night.

It was, Masuto remembered, one mile and seven-twentieths, as Officer Commager had read it from his report. It was not history repeating itself, but the tortured, maniacal mind of a sick man. There was a limit to how fast any car could go on this road. Masuto pressed his car to that limit, screaming around the curves, with the whole sparkling spread of the San Fernando Valley a thousand feet below him, with his tires skidding almost to the edge of the sheer drops that lined the road.

And then he saw it in front of him, the yellow Porsche, the motor hood in back of the car open, and the man, standing there bent over the motor, and then straightening up to see the car approaching. At that point on the road, there was a shoulder of earth off the right lane. A car could park there while the traffic went by—yet there was

almost no traffic on Mulholland at this hour—and that was where the Porsche stood, off the road, its nose facing the edge of the cliff.

Masuto's brakes screamed and his tires skidded as he headed straight for the Porsche. Then the man had a gun in his hand, and he began to fire at the oncoming car. It all happened in the space of a second or two, the man standing and shooting, three holes in the windshield, the bullets so close that Masuto could almost feel them as he ducked down behind the wheel, and then the scream of a black-and-white's siren. Masuto opened his car door and propelled himself out, skinning his hands on the road, rolled over, pulling out his gun—and then saw the man who had fired at him leap over the edge of the parking place into the black, mesquite-covered hillside.

The black-and-white pulled up alongside his car, and two Los Angeles cops leaped out, covering him with their drawn guns.

“Just drop that gun, mister, nice and easy.”

Masuto let his gun drop.

“Are you that crazy bastard who just drove up Laurel Canyon?” the other cop asked. “Because if you are, we are going to throw everything the book says at you.”

“I'm Detective Sergeant Masuto of the Beverly Hills police. There's a girl in that car who needs attention, if she's still alive. So call an ambulance.”

“Just don't move, mister.”

The other went to the Porsche. “Get an ambulance, Joe.”

“Is she alive?” Masuto wanted to know.

“She has a pulse. She has a bad crack on the head, but she's alive. Who did you say you are?”

“Masuto, Beverly Hills police. If you'll let me put my hand in my pocket, I'll show you my badge.”

“All right, but nice and slow. I got a nervous finger.”

Masuto took out his badge and handed it to him. While he was studying it, the other officer looked at the Datsun.

“Three bullet holes in the windshield. What in hell goes on here?”

The officer called Joe was handling Masuto's gun, smelling it. “Not fired,” he said.

The other cop gave Masuto's badge back to him.

“Let me look at the girl,” Masuto said.

“Better not move her.”

“Where’s the guy who did the shooting?”

The door of the Porsche was open. Mitzie was slumped behind the wheel, a huge welt on the side of her head. She stirred and groaned.

“I asked you, where is the guy who did the shooting?”

Masuto pointed down the dark, mesquite-covered hillside. “He went down there.”

“Then that’s where we ought to be looking.”

“In the dark? Forget about that,” Masuto said.

“You’re pushing a lot of weight around here for a Beverly Hills cop.”

Now a second black-and-white pulled up, and with it, the ambulance. Sergeant Jack Kelly, in the second black-and-white, knew Masuto.

“Thank God for a friendly face. Kelly, will you tell these guys that I’m legitimate? They almost shot me.”

“What goes on here?” Kelly asked.

“A damn lot,” Masuto said. “Down there”—pointing over the edge “—is a man who’s wanted for three killings in L.A. and for a fourth in Beverly Hills. The woman they’re putting in the ambulance is the witness who’s going to hang him. If you talk to Pete Bones downtown, he’ll fill you in. But what’s important now is that no one gets near that woman. Her name is Mitzie Fuller—”

“Hold on, Masuto. If that son of a bitch is down there, we ought to be down there looking for him.”

“In the dark? He’s half a mile away by now. There’s a whole ring of houses around the canyon. All he has to do is pick up a car and get out, and maybe by now he’s done that. Don’t worry about him. I know where to find him. The important thing is the girl. Hold up there!” Masuto called out to the ambulance driver. And to Kelly, “I’m going with the ambulance. The keys to my car are in the ignition. Can you have someone drive it over to the Beverly Hills station on Rexford?”

“What about the Porsche?”

“Are the keys in it?”

Kelly looked. “They’re there.”

“Send them both to the station, and give the keys to whoever’s on duty. I’m going to steer the ambulance to All Saints in Beverly Hills.”

In the ambulance, Mitzie Fuller opened her eyes and began to cry. She tried to talk. Masuto put his finger across his lips. “Later, Mitzie, later.”

“I want to tell you—” she managed.

“I know. There’s nothing to tell me. Don’t try to talk.”

“She’ll be all right,” the attendant said. “She wouldn’t be talking like that if it were anything worse than a bad concussion.”

“I hope so,” Masuto said, and then dropping his voice, “you might get an inquiry. Any inquiry. Just say you took her to All Saints in Beverly Hills.”

“You don’t want it kept quiet?”

“No.”

Mitzie was trying to talk again. “He wanted to kill me—”

“I know, Mitzie. The danger’s over. I want you to rest.”

It was almost ten o’clock when they reached the hospital. Mitzie Fuller was taken into the emergency room. Masuto went to admissions, where Sister Claridge was on duty.

Sister Claridge managed to squeeze a smile out of her long dour face. “What now, Sergeant? What awful things do you bring us tonight?”

“It’s the nature of my work, Sister. We brought a lady into emergency. Her name is Mitzie Fuller, and she has a concussion. In other words, someone hit her over the head and tried to kill her.”

“It just gets worse, doesn’t it, Sergeant? Worse and worse.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps it’s always been this way. The point is this: I want her put in a room, but I want the records to show her in another room. In other words, when inquiries come, I want whoever it is directed to the second room.”

“Why?”

“Because someone may try to finish the job, and I’ll be in the room he comes to. I don’t want her there.”

“Isn’t that rather dramatic, Sergeant?”

“It comes with being a cop.”

“We’ll bill her for the room she’s in. We’ll have to bill the police department for the other room.”

“Just for me to sit there?”

“Hospital rules. You’re using the room. We’ll have to change the linen.” The smile was gone. Sister Claridge considered Masuto an unredeemed heathen. For a time she had tried, gently, to show him the path. Lately, she had given up. “Also, Sergeant, I’ll have to check with my supervisor. We can’t have violence here in the hospital.”

“I’m trying to prevent violence, Sister. Now what room can you give me?”

Still she hesitated.

“I’m trying to save her life—and the lives of two other women. Please help me,” Masuto said quietly.

She sighed and nodded. “All right. Room three fifty-one.”

“Thank you. And spread the word, please. Hospital people, floor people, and anyone who calls, friends, press, anyone. Room three fifty-one.”

“I feel like a conspirator,” the sister said.

“In a good cause. Is there a phone I could use?”

She pointed to a booth on the main floor. Masuto looked longingly at the phone on her desk. She shook her head. “I’m sorry. It’s for hospital use only. Really, Sergeant, you can’t walk in here and use the hospital as a police station.”

He went to the booth and called Wainwright. Mrs. Wainwright answered the phone in a tone not unlike that of Sister Claridge. “He is not here, Sergeant,” she said acidly. “He’s at the station.”

Masuto called the station. Wainwright’s snarl was almost comforting after talking to the two women.

“Where the hell are you?” Wainwright demanded. “The whole thing busts loose, and you disappear. Do you know that Mitzie Fuller’s gone? Beckman let her walk out of there. I’m going to have his head for this—”

“Take it easy. Beckman couldn’t help it.”

“Why? Because he was taking a crap? Who the hell says he has to take a crap when he’s on duty! If that dame’s dead, we can all spend our time on the crapper.”

“She’s not dead.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she’s here with me at All Saints Hospital. She got a nasty concussion, but she’s all right.”

“Why am I always the last to know? What happened?”

Masuto summed it up as tersely as possible.

“You can’t be sure that he’ll try it tonight,” Wainwright said.

“It’s in his nature. He’s in motion, and now he’s desperate. He planned this whole thing like a lunatic chess game, and it came to pieces at the seams. That girl’s testimony will send him to the gas chamber.”

“For what, Masao? For attempted murder. You still have no way to tie him into the murders.”

“Mitzie can.”

“You tell that to the D.A. when the time comes.”

“I have the owner of the bar and the piano player.”

“To do what? To tell us that he was there?”

“Captain, don’t worry it. Let me pick him up. We have the assault on the girl and the shots he fired at me. If the bullets are in the car, we may have something. And he’ll have a gun tonight.”

“Which gun? You don’t think he’s walking around with the murder weapon?”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Masuto said.

He came out of the booth and walked over to Sister Claridge. She nodded smugly. “I trust I’m doing the Lord’s work and not the devil’s work, Sergeant Masuto. While you were in the booth, a gentleman called. He said he was Mrs. Fuller’s husband.”

“Mrs. Fuller is divorced.”

“I am simply telling you what he said. He said he was Mrs. Fuller’s husband. He was very concerned about her condition. I told him she would be all right but we were keeping her here overnight. He was very insistent on seeing her tonight, and I told him at this hour it would be impossible. I told him we were discharging her at ten o’clock tomorrow morning and that he could pick her up then.”

“Did he ask what room she was in?”

“Yes, he did. And I told him she was in room three fifty-one.”

“Thank you,” Masuto said. “You did nobly. I don’t know how he’ll get in, but if anyone comes through the front door between now and midnight, I want you to pretend to be dozing. For your own safety.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Please, please do as I say. I don’t have the time to stand here and convince you. All the odds are that he won’t come in the front door, but if he does—”

“I don’t know why I’m going along with this—”

Masuto went to the elevator. On the third floor, he said to the nurse on duty, “I’m Sergeant Masuto, Beverly Hills police. I’ll be in room three fifty-one. You can check that with Sister Claridge. If a man comes up here and asks for Mrs. Fuller or for room three fifty-one, don’t stop him. If anyone—doctor, attendant—if anyone wishes to go into room three fifty-one, don’t interfere.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Masuto said harshly. “I don’t have the time. And if anyone asks, I’m not in that room. Mrs. Fuller is—alone. Do you understand me? And above all, do not interfere.”

Then Masuto walked down the corridor and into room three fifty-one. It was a very ordinary hospital room, one window, the hospital bed and two chairs. There were two pillows on the bed. On a shelf in the closet, Masuto found a third pillow and two extra blankets. With the pillows and the blankets, he put together a vaguely lifelike form which he covered with the counterpane, pressing it into shape. Then he switched on a small blue night light and switched off the overhead lights.

Then he went into the room’s bathroom and stood there in the dark, his gun in his hand, the door open just a crack. His mind was clear, without memory or anticipation. He was aware of himself, of his feet on the floor, of the gun in his hand, and of his view of the room through the crack in the door.

Nothing else existed. Time did not exist. When finally he heard the steps outside the door, he had no notion of how long he had been waiting there. The door opened. The man stepped into the room, grotesque in the blue light. For a long moment, the man stood without moving, one hand in the pocket of his jacket. Then the hand came out with the gun, the heavy, long-nosed .22-caliber automatic target pistol. The gun came up, and he fired into the bedclothes, five shots, one after another, lacing across the simulated body.

Masuto kicked the toilet door open and snapped, “Drop it, Crombie!”

Crombie was very quick. Masuto lived because he was in the dark, because he presented no visible target, but Crombie got off two more shots before Masuto fired. Crombie’s shots splintered the edge of the bathroom door. Masuto’s single shot caught Crombie between the eyes.

15

The Question

It was after one o'clock in the morning when Masuto drove his Datsun, three bullet holes in the windshield, into the driveway of Laura Crombie's house on Beverly Drive, parked, and rang the doorbell. They were still awake, and a tired, harassed, and miserable Detective Beckman answered the bell and opened the door.

"I don't know what to say, Masao," he pleaded. "I never goofed off like that before."

"Forget it. Maybe it was the only way. At least it's over."

"That's what we heard," Beckman said.

"I want to talk to Laura Crombie."

"They're both in the kitchen drinking coffee."

He led Masuto into the kitchen. Nancy Legett poured a cup of coffee for him. Laura Crombie sat at the end of the table, her face gray and tired.

"How is Mitzie?" Nancy asked.

"She's all right. She'll be out of the hospital tomorrow."

"And I can go home?"

"You can go home."

"Sit down and drink the coffee," Laura Crombie said. "You look as terrible as I feel. Do you want some cookies?"

"No, thank you."

"Beckman says it's over."

"It's over."

“Beckman says it was Arthur. I don’t understand that,” she said. “What possible reason could Arthur have for wanting me dead?”

“He didn’t want you dead. He wanted Mitzie Fuller dead.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to tell you about that, Mrs. Crombie. If I don’t tell you, you’ll hear anyway, in dribs and drabs, with all the innuendo that the newspapers and the media can make of it. That’s why I came here tonight—to tell you the whole story very precisely. It’s going to be very painful, but there’s no way to avoid that. Sometime about four years ago, maybe a few months more, your ex-husband, Arthur Crombie, met your daughter. She fell in love with Crombie.”

“No!”

“You must listen to me,” Masuto said, almost severely. “I can’t spare you. You must know the truth. As I said, she fell in love with Crombie and they had an affair. Then Crombie met you. I don’t know where he met you, but it was in circumstances apart from your daughter.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I met him at Acapulco. Then I went to Boston. He was here. Kelly was here—oh, my God.”

“He decided to marry you. But to do this, he had to dispose of Kelly. There was a place where they met, called The Bar, a restaurant off Laurel Canyon. He met her there one night. They drove off to Mulholland Drive in her car. He hit her as he had hit Mitzie, and then he wired the throttle of her car to take it over the cliff.”

Laura Crombie was weeping now. “That’s enough. I can’t stand any more of this. I can’t.”

“You can and you will,” Masuto said coldly. “There are no more secrets. Do you want to read about it tomorrow?”

“Please, must you?” Nancy Legett begged him.

“Yes, I must. Now listen, both of you. That last night he was in the restaurant with your daughter, people had seen them together. Mitzie was there. She knew who he was. The others didn’t. But Mitzie did not know who the girl was. She did not know that Catherine Addison was your daughter, and she had no reason to think that what had happened on Mulholland Drive was anything but an accident. Three years went by, and then you brought Mitzie into your bridge game,

and Arthur Crombie learned about it. If you're in the real estate business in Beverly Hills, there's very little you don't hear about. He realized that sooner or later Mitzie would see a picture of your daughter—and that would open up the whole can of worms. So he hired a chemist with a criminal record, paid him to prepare a batch of poisoned pastry and deliver it here. He didn't care how many of you died—as long as Mitzie died. The rest of you were a diversion to cast suspicion elsewhere, as was the box of poisoned candy he sent to Alice Greene. Then he killed Alice Greene, to throw suspicion on her husband. He killed the chemist to keep his mouth closed. He killed a Chicano boy for the same reason. And finally, tonight, he tried to kill Mitzie Fuller. There was nothing human left in this man, nothing to shed a tear over. He had become a monster. Now he's dead."

Masuto stood up. "Drive Mrs. Legett home, Sy. As for you, Mrs. Crombie, I'm sorry it had to be this way, but that's the way it is. You're safe enough now. It's over."

At the door, as Masuto was leaving, Beckman said to him, "You were pretty hard on her, Masao."

"Was I? Don't you think it's time she faced up to reality? She's lived with illusions all her life, the illusion that the whole world's like Beverly Hills, the illusion that a human pig can be a decent man, the illusion that you buy happiness—ah, the hell with it!" And he went out, slamming the door behind him.

He got into his car and drove back to Culver City. The light was on in the kitchen, and he entered the house by the side door. It was two o'clock in the morning. Kati, wrapped in a kimono, was waiting for him. She stared at him, and then she cried out, "Oh, Masao! What happened?"

He managed to smile. "Indeed? What happened to your raised consciousness? I thought you would be furious. I forgot even to telephone you."

"I called Captain Wainwright. Oh, I was upset, but when you walked in, your face was so sad, so very sad."

"I killed a man, Kati."

"Oh, no."

"An evil man—but, Kati, I am not one to judge and I judged him."

Being a wise woman, she deflected his thoughts. “I have hot soup on the stove, very tasty. I am sure you had no supper. And while you eat, I’ll draw a hot bath.”

“That would be so good, a hot bath.”

After his bath, he dried himself and slipped into his saffron robe.

“You’re not going to sleep now?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll meditate for a while.”

“And then you’ll sleep?”

“I’m sure.”

“Then I’ll go to bed. I can sleep as long as you’re home. Masao—?”

“Yes?”

“I know you don’t want to talk about it, but this evil man—what did he do?”

“He murdered five people—”

“No, you must not talk about it,” Kati said.

Masuto went into the sun parlor, which he liked to think of as his meditation room. It was cold here, but that was good. It would help him to stay awake. He sat down cross-legged and tried to make his mind empty and calm. But he could not erase Wainwright’s words from his mind. They had no evidence to convict Crombie of the murders. He was convinced that when they examined the bullets tomorrow, they would not match the bullets used in the murders. For those, Crombie had used Fuller’s stolen gun. The chemist was dead and the Chicano boy was dead. Had he, Masuto, known that there was not enough evidence to convict Crombie of the murders? In the fraction of the second, when Crombie was shooting at him, had he come to a decision to be both judge and jury? Could he have wounded Crombie and taken him alive? His shoulder was a better target than his head.

But as much as he asked himself the question, he was unable to come up with an answer. The gray light of dawn was in the sky before his mind stilled itself and he had stopped asking the question and was finally able to meditate.



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**THE CASE
OF THE SLIDING
POOL**

A Masao Masuto Mystery



THE SLIDING POOL

Detective Sergeant Masao Masuto of the Beverly Hills Police Force was a Zen Buddhist, which meant that he was willing to accept his karma and his fate perhaps with as much resignation as any man might hope for. But on this day he rebelled. His fate, he felt, had become intolerable.

He was the victim of one of the many legends that abound in southern California. This particular bit of folklore held that it did not rain after the tenth of March, whereupon Masuto had scheduled a long awaited and long overdue week of vacation time to begin on the twelfth of March. The rains began in November, as they frequently do in southern California, and for the next several months it rained intermittently and at times constantly. On the twelfth day of March it rained, and for the next six days it rained. It rained with fury and anger, as it had all winter. Hillsides turned into mud and slid down upon houses and roads; houses left their foundations and were engulfed in mud, and the dry, concrete-lined flood channel, which was euphemistically called the Los Angeles River, became a roaring torrent of white water.

Masuto's beloved rose garden, which contained forty-three varieties of rare and exotic roses, and which was enclosed by a wall of hibiscus and night-blooming jasmine, and where he had planned to spend at least one full day nurturing and pruning, became a sodden bog, and his own small and treasured meditation room,

which he had built with his own hands, developed four separate leaks, so spaced as to make proper meditation impossible.

These two blows of fate were dealt to Masuto. What of his wife, Kati, and his two children—his daughter, Ana, who was nine years old, and his son, Uraga, who was eleven? Instead of the picnic at Malibu, the bicycle day on the path at Venice Beach, and the day to be spent at Disneyland, they were all cooped up, day after day, in their cottage in Culver City. Even though Masuto and his wife, Kati, were Nisei, which means that they were born in the United States of Japanese parentage, they had raised their children in the Japanese manner—whereupon neither Ana nor Uraga complained, as American children might well have done. And this only served to increase Masuto's frustration and unhappiness.

On the final day of his aborted vacation, at his wits' end for varieties of indoor amusement, Masuto produced his game of *go*. For those unfamiliar with the ancient Japanese game of *go*, it can only be said that it defies the Western mind and makes chess appear absurdly simple. According to Japanese tradition, the game of *go* was devised by the Emperor Yao in the year 2350 B.C. The true *go*—not the Western simplifications which Masuto would not tolerate in his home—is played on a board that is divided into squares by 19 vertical and 19 horizontal lines. This results in 361 intersections. Each player has 181 pieces with which to play, and the play proceeds in a manner which can conceivably be taught but hardly described.

Now, on this last day of Masao's vacation, Masuto was trying to entice Uraga into a game of *go* when the telephone rang. Perhaps providentially, for Uraga frequently won at *go*, and a defeat by his son would not at this moment have raised Masuto's spirits. Kati answered the phone and then came into the living room and informed Masuto that his boss, Captain Wainwright, chief of detectives on the Beverly Hills police force, would like to speak to him.

"Tell him I'm on vacation," Masuto said sourly.

"He knows you are on vacation. He is apologetic. But he would like to talk to you, Masao."

Masuto went to the telephone and listened as Wainwright sympathized. “I know what a pain in the ass this weather’s been, Masao, and the last thing in the world I’d do would be to break in on your vacation time if it wasn’t raining. But I told myself you’re bored as hell, and this is your thing.”

Which was Wainwright’s delicate way of announcing a homicide. There was no homicide squad as such on the Beverly Hills police force. With almost two dozen plain-clothes detectives in a city of not much more than thirty thousand inhabitants, there was no need for a permanent homicide detail. There were simply not enough murders, but when homicide did occur, Masuto and his partner, Sy Beckman, took over.

“If you’re interested?” Wainwright added.

Masuto glanced into the living room, where his son stared bleakly at the go board. “I’m interested,” he said, “providing I get an extra day next time.”

“Good. We’re up at Forty-four hundred Laurel Way. Take an umbrella. It’s raining like hell.”

As if Masuto didn’t know.

Kati did not try to dissuade Masuto—at this point it was a relief to have him out of the house; but she made him wear a raincoat and take an umbrella as well, and she kissed him and clucked sympathetically over the mess his vacation had been. “Take care of yourself, please, Masao.” But that was always on her lips when he left.

Driving north from Culver City across Motor Avenue to Olympic Boulevard and then to Beverly Drive, Masuto reflected on the fact that he was delighted to be back at work. He had once read somewhere that vacations are for amateurs. Could it be that he had lost the ability to enjoy anything but his work? Did he love being a policeman to that extent, or was it the puzzle, the question, the deeply mysterious and always disturbing problem of crime? Crime encapsulated the general illness of mankind, and as a Buddhist he was involved with mankind. Well, let that be as it might; it was a question he had turned over in his mind a hundred times. Answers were simple, so long as one did not dwell on the question.

Laurel Way—not to be confused with Laurel Canyon Drive, which is in Hollywood—is a Beverly Hills street that winds up into the Santa Monica foothills, a left turn off Beverly Drive just north of Lexington. The street follows the lip of a curving, ascending ridge, and the expensive houses on either side of the roadway overlook two canyons, one on either side of the ridge. Now, in the pouring rain, the road had become a shallow stream, and Masuto drove carefully, pleased that his old Datsun dealt so well with the elements; this was a day for elements. Forty-four hundred was a sprawling, stucco-covered, single-story house. There was just room in the driveway to park his car between Wainwright's Buick and a city prowler car.

As Masuto climbed out of his car and opened his umbrella, Detective Sy Beckman appeared on a path that seemed to circle the outside of the house. Beckman, a huge man, six feet three inches and built like a wrestler, grinned sympathetically. "It never rains but it pours," he said. "Me, I take my vacation in the summertime."

"Thank you. Now what have we got here?"

"Come and see. This one's a doozy."

He followed Beckman along the path, around the side of the house, through an alley of rain-soaked acacia to the terrace behind the house. It was a lovely terrace, about sixty feet long, paved in red brick, decorated with a proper assortment of palms and jasmine, with a splendid view of hills and canyons descending to the city below, and with a space in the center for a swimming pool. But the swimming pool was gone, and with it a goodly part of the terrace, leaving a gaping hole, or rather a three-sided gap in the outer rim of the terrace. Moving gingerly, Beckman led Masuto to where the outer edge of the terrace still survived, an iron railing originally placed there as a safety precaution. Where the hole was, the railing had been torn away. Now, leaning over the railing, Masuto saw the swimming pool sitting halfway down the canyon side, a wide gash in the mesquite marking its journey from its original position.

"Nothing like a little rain in Los Angeles," Beckman said. "Full of surprises."

"Masao, is that you?" Wainwright shouted.

He was in the hole left by the ambulatory swimming pool, and with him, in rain hat and raincoat, was Dr. Sam Baxter, the part-time

medical examiner of Beverly Hills. There were not sufficient homicides in Beverly Hills to warrant a staff medical examiner. Baxter, chief pathologist at All Saints Hospital, doubled as medical examiner when needed.

“Get down here, but do it carefully,” Wainwright told him. “I wouldn’t give you twenty cents for the rest of this terrace.”

Masuto folded his umbrella and let himself down into the hole that had contained the swimming pool. Beckman followed. The rain was tapering off, and in the distance, over the Pacific, the clouds were breaking apart, revealing gashes of blue sky.

“Now that your Oriental wizard has arrived,” Baxter said sourly, “I’d like to go. Never should have been here in the first place.”

Masuto had resigned himself to being ankle deep in mud, but the bottom of the hole was quite firm, the water having drained down into the canyon. Actually, the excavation was in that peculiar soft rock which characterizes most of the Santa Monica hills and which is called, locally, decayed granite; and while the force of the constant winter rains had loosened the pool, overflowed it and weakened its supports to send it finally sliding down into the canyon, most of the ground it had once rested on was intact and firm, sloping from the shallow end to the deeper part. Wainwright and Baxter stood in the middle section. Masuto joined them. Wainwright pointed at the ground in front of them.

“There it is, Masao.”

From the terrace a uniformed policeman called out, “The ambulance is here, captain.”

“We’ll be through in five minutes.”

“Can I go now?” Baxter demanded.

Masuto stared silently and thoughtfully at what Wainwright had pointed to. A groove about six feet long, two feet wide and a foot deep had been gouged out of the decayed granite upon which the pool had rested. The groove was half full of muddy water; the rest of the water apparently had been bailed out with a plastic pail that stood nearby. Lying in the water that remained, there was a human skeleton.

“Well, go ahead, ask me!” Baxter snorted. “Ask me what killed him and how long he’s been dead!”

"I wouldn't dream of asking you that," Masuto said mildly. "You said 'he.' It's a man, I presume?"

"It was, and that's all I know. When we pick up the bones and get them back to the lab, I may know more and I may not. Have you seen enough, or are you going to stand there gawking at it all day?"

"I've seen enough," Masuto said.

"Then I'm going."

Wainwright thanked him.

"For what? For getting a case of pneumonia?" He stalked over to the shallow end of the pool and climbed out. "Get all the bones," he snapped at the two ambulance men, who were waiting with their basket. "And don't mess things up."

"Lovely man," Beckman said.

"Where are the owners of the house?" Masuto asked.

"Inside. Nice people. They're a bit shaken. Bad enough to lose a swimming pool—a skeleton under it doesn't add to the pleasure."

"No, I suppose not."

"You talk to them, Masao. See what you can pick up about this. The pool's been here about thirty years, so I suppose we'll come up with a dead-end John Doe. Give it a shot anyway. We can't just write the poor bastard off."

The ambulance men finished collecting the bones and departed, Wainwright following them. Masuto said to Beckman, "Let's get rid of the rest of the water in there, Sy."

"Why?"

"Did they bury him naked? I wouldn't think that shoes are biodegradable. Where are they? Buttons, belt buckle, even pieces of cloth. There was nothing on the bones."

"Maybe it washed out. That was a damned heavy rain. It washed most of the dirt out of the hole."

"Let's look."

Beckman sighed, picked up the plastic pail, and began to bail. He got the water down to a level of about an inch, and then he and Masuto explored the grave carefully with their hands. There was nothing but bits of decayed granite and loose dirt.

Wet and dirty, the two men looked at each other and nodded.

"Buried naked," Beckman said.

“Which bespeaks a sense of thoroughness,” Masuto decided. “It’s a beginning.”

“How’s that?”

“First facts concerning the killer. He’s a careful man, a thorough man. Doesn’t like loose ends. A sense of neatness.”

“Providing he’s still alive. This was thirty years ago.”

“Providing he’s still alive. We also know he could operate a backhoe.”

“How do we know that—you don’t mind my asking?”

“He dug the grave. Conceivably, it could have been done with a pickax, but that would take hours. Anyway, here at the edge”—Masuto bent and touched two marks at the end of the grave—“that looks like the teeth of a backhoe. Most likely they had finished the excavation and the backhoe was still available. Maybe they planned to pour the concrete the following day. He could have come by at night, used the backhoe, cut out the grave, put in the body, and then packed it over with dirt.”

“That’s a lot of maybes.”

“Just the beginning.”

They were up on the terrace now. The rain had ended, the sky in the west was laced with pink and purple clouds that formed a curtain across the setting sun. The two men stared at it in silence for a minute or so, and then Beckman said, “There’s no way we’re going to break this one, Masao.”

“We’ll see. Let’s go in and talk to the people who own the place.”

JOHN DOE

John and Mary Kelly were the fortunate “creative” proprietors of a soap opera; fortunate in the fact that it provided both of them with enough money to live in Beverly Hills, and creative in the sense that John Kelly, a writer, had originated the soap opera—which was called *Shadow of the Night*—and Mary, an actress, was its chief running character. John, tall, stoop-shouldered, and nearsighted, had banged out the script, day in and day out for five years, and Mary, blond, blue-eyed, and pretty, had played in it day in and day out for five years. Today, being Saturday, their single day of rest, they were at home, sitting in the living room, comforting themselves with white wine and trying to adjust to the loss of a swimming pool and the ownership of a long-deceased skeleton, both in the same day. They had already spoken to Wainwright and to their public relations man and to the network—so that the latter two might decide whether to make the most or the least out of these happenings—and they were now trying to make sense of their insurance policy when Masuto sounded their doorbell. John went to the door and stared with dismay at the two bedraggled men. Masuto showed his badge.

“We would like to talk to you and your wife, if we might. I’m Detective Sergeant Masao Masuto. This is Detective Sy Beckman, both of us with the Beverly Hills police force. We’re wet and dirty, so perhaps we should talk in the garage.”

“Absolutely not,” said his wife, Mary, coming up behind him. “You poor dears. Just give me your coats and come on into the living room. We have a fire going. Anyway, nothing so exciting has ever

happened to us before, and here are two in-the-flesh detectives, and John, if that isn't grist for your mill, I don't know what is."

"Right on," John agreed. "Forgive my rudeness, but you're a Nisei, aren't you? I mean, on the Beverly Hills force, that's something. I mean if we can demonstrate some sanity in Beverly Hills, it can happen anywhere, wouldn't you agree?"

"Absolutely," Masuto said.

A few minutes later, sitting in the living room and drinking hot coffee, and listening to Beckman discussing a soap opera with its creator, Masuto reflected, as he had so often before, on the wedding of the tragic and the ridiculous in his work. Beckman was explaining that while his wife never missed a segment of *Shadow of the Night* if she could help it, he only caught it on his days off. "When I tell her that we were here—well, never mind that. It's off the subject."

"Yes, of course," Kelly said. "But did you ever catch a segment with the narc—Henderson, the narcotics squad."

"Afraid not."

"No? That's a pity. I would have appreciated a professional opinion."

"I think," the wife said, "that Sergeant Masuto would like to talk about the swimming pool."

"Oh? Oh, absolutely. You know, when I think of all the laps I've done in that pool with some poor devil's corpse right under me—sorry, go ahead."

"Just a few questions. First of all, when did you buy the house?"

"Just about four years ago, when the show got rolling. It was the first windfall Mary and I had since we married. We never dreamed we could afford a place like this."

"Captain Wainwright said you told him the pool had been there for thirty years. How did you know?"

"Just the word of the real estate agent when we bought the place. He said it had been built in nineteen fifty."

"Who owned it before you?"

"Carl Simmons. Very rich. He traded for a place in Bel-Air. He's in the plastics business in Irvine."

Beckman made notes.

"And how long did he live here? Do you know?"

“Six years, I believe.”

“By the way,” Masuto said, “how certain are you that the pool and the house were built at the same time?”

“Only what my real estate man told me. This was one of the first houses built on Laurel Way, and it set the pattern.”

“And do you know the name of the pool builder? Most pools have metal plates set into them with the name of the builder.”

“I suppose they do, but not ours.”

“You sure about that?”

“Absolutely. I was curious about it. I asked our pool-care man about it once, and he said that back in those days, most pools were not gunnite, which is a way of spraying a metal form with concrete. Ours is—or was, I should say—just an enormous concrete tub, with walls eight inches thick. That makes a great pool, but I guess it was just too much weight for the hillside to carry after the rains we’ve been having.”

“That still doesn’t explain the absence of the builder’s nameplate.”

“No, but our pool man—”

“What’s his name?” Beckman asked.

“Joe Garcia. I have his address inside. He lives in Santa Monica. Do you want it?”

“Later,” Masuto said. “Go on.”

“Well, he said that probably the pool was built by the same contractor who built the house, and since he was not mainly in the pool business, he wouldn’t have a nameplate.”

“Do you know the contractor’s name?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“It was so long ago,” Kelly’s wife said. “Thirty years. Do you really think you could ever find out who put the body there—or even who the man was?”

“We have to try,” Masuto told her.

“You can’t write off a homicide,” Beckman added.

“But how can you be sure it was a homicide?”

“It generally is when they hide the body,” Masuto said. “But let’s get back to the house. We’ve accounted for ten years. Do you know who the owner was before Simmons?”

“We think it was Jerry Bender, the comic,” Mary Kelly said. “We still get some of his mail—can you imagine, after ten years.”

“But I think he only lived here a year or two,” Kelly told them.

“All right. You’ve been very helpful. Now I want you to think about this very carefully. In the time you’ve lived here, have you ever had a visit from a man you didn’t know? Let me be more explicit. This man is between fifty-eight and sixty-five years old. He might have offered some excuse, perhaps that he was from an insurance company or from some city agency or from the water company—but in any case, he would be interested in seeing your terrace.”

“Got you,” Kelly said eagerly. “After all, I write these things. You’re thinking that the killer might have come back, to see that his burial ground is undisturbed—am I right?”

Masuto smiled. “Quite right.”

“The trouble is,” Mary Kelly said, “that I can’t think of anyone who fits that description. Can you, John?”

“Not offhand, no.”

“But people do come around, I’m sure,” Mary Kelly said. “The trouble is that John and I spend so much time at the studio. He has his office there, where he writes the show, and when you do a daily soap, it’s very often eight or ten hours a day for me.”

“And who takes care of the house?”

“We have a sweet Mexican lady, whose name is Gloria Mendoza. She comes in every day, cleans, and cooks if we come home for dinner. We give her weekends off, so she’s not here today. But she’ll be here on Monday.”

“Perhaps we’ll speak to her on Monday. Meanwhile, in a few hours you’ll be besieged by reporters and media people. I would appreciate your not mentioning that either Detective Beckman or I are working on this case. If they ask you what the police are doing, you can refer them to Captain Wainwright.”

When they left, Masuto informed Beckman that there was an old road at the bottom of the canyon from which they could reach the swimming pool.

“You got to be kidding. Aside from the mud, the brush is soaking wet.”

“The way we look now, what difference will it make?”

It nevertheless made a difference, for by the time they reached the shell of the swimming pool, clawing up the brush-covered slope of the canyon, they were soaked from head to foot and their shoes and trousers had become soggy clumps of mud. Nor was anything to be found there, only the big concrete form, split along one side and perhaps destined to lie there on the hillside for years to come. There was no identifying plate or mark.

“Well, that’s that,” Masuto said.

“The hell with it,” Beckman concluded. “He’s been dead for thirty years, and another day or two won’t hurt. Let’s knock off and get into dry clothes.”

With the end of the rain Kati removed the four pans she had set out in Masuto’s meditation room to catch the leaks in the ceiling, thinking at the same time that she must have the roof repaired. She had heard that more roofs leaked in Los Angeles than in any other city because the rainy season was four months long, leaving eight dry months to lull the population into believing that it would never rain again. Well, it would, and this time she would make certain that the roof was repaired.

Tonight, the room was once again usable, but Masuto’s meditation was not successful. Again and again there intruded the image of a naked man, put to death thirty years ago. The moment he arrived home, Masuto had telephoned All Saints Hospital, only to be informed by the intern on duty in the pathology lab that Dr. Baxter had left for the day. It was understandable. The bones had kept for thirty years; they would keep for another day. But Masuto found the puzzle compelling. He felt that all of life was a puzzle, and most of it beyond answer.

Later, at dinner, with Masuto and his wife eating together after the children had been put to bed, Kati asked tentatively about what horror had called him out into the rain. Her questions were always tentative, voiced with the understanding that the worst things would be concealed from her.

“We found the skeleton of a man murdered thirty years ago.”

“How very awful!” But with a note of relief. If it had happened so long ago, there was surely no threat to her husband. That concerned

her most.

Masuto told her the story, stressing the fact that the couple who owned the house were very nice people. It was not often that he could bring Kati a story about nice people.

“But surely there’s no way you can find the killer now?”

“We’ll try.”

“I’m sure he’s dead,” Kati said firmly. “There are other punishments beside the police.”

“Possibly. In any case, we’ll try.”

“But not tomorrow,” Kati said firmly. “Tomorrow, the man on the television tells us, will be the first sunny day in a week, and we are taking the children to Disneyland.”

“I was supposed to check in,” Masuto told her, but without conviction. “Today is the last day of vacation. I do not work on Sunday.”

“You worked today.” She had changed a good deal since she joined a consciousness-raising group of Nisei women. “You can point that out to Captain Wainwright. No one else works on Sunday.”

“Except policemen.”

“We are all going to Disneyland.”

Masuto telephoned Wainwright, who unexpectedly admitted that the bones would keep. The Masuto family spent the day at Disneyland. And on and off, when Masuto glanced at his wife, he noted a strange, slight smile of satisfaction on her lips.

Monday morning Masuto stopped off at All Saints Hospital and made his way to the pathology room, where Baxter’s two young, bearded assistants leered at him knowingly, as if every corpse sent there by the Beverly Hills police was his own handiwork. Behind them Dr. Baxter bent over the skeleton, which he had laid out on an autopsy table.

“Well, here he is,” Baxter said unpleasantly, which was his normal manner. “I suppose you want his name, sex, age, and the details of what killed him?”

“Only because of my enormous respect for your skill.”

“Bunk! Anyway, his name is your business, not mine.”

“Very true.”

“Have you got it? No. Of course not. Do you know why some murders are solved? Because murder is an idiot game. Show me a murderer, and I’ll show you an IQ of ninety-five. When an intelligent man turns his hand to murder, your numbskull police force is paralyzed.”

“And is that what we have here?” Masuto asked gently. “An intelligent murderer?”

“You’re damn right, which is why the body stayed in its grave for thirty years. If not for these ridiculous rains, it would have remained there forever.”

“Perhaps, or perhaps nothing is forever. But acknowledging that neither of us knows the name of the victim, I’m sure you can tell me the rest.”

“You’re damn right I can. The deceased was a male Caucasian, about five feet eight inches tall, age between twenty-five and thirty, and killed by a knife wound, a hard, deep thrust from the rear. How do I know? Come over here.” Masuto took his place on the opposite side of the autopsy table. “This,” Baxter said, pointing, “counting down is the sixth of the thoracic vertebrae. Notice that scrape on the left side, actually nicked a piece of the bone. Tremendous force, drove right through the vertebral aponeurosis into the heart. A long, heavy blade, maybe something like a bowie knife, back to front, right through the body and heart and nicked this rib, right here. The son of a bitch who killed him knew what he was doing. I’ve seen a hundred knife wounds, but not like this. This gent had practice. Nobody drives a knife through the entire thickness of a human body unless he’s been trained to do it and has done it before.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Was I there? I’m sure of nothing. I’m telling you what the bones say.”

“How do you know it was a white man?”

“It’s my guess—shape of the skull, relationships of tibia and femur, and here in the skull, the shape of the mesethmoid, right here where it holds the cartilage. Could be a black man, but not likely. Like I said, I wasn’t there.”

“And the age?”

“Condition of the teeth, good teeth, two missing—knocked out, I’d guess—but not one damn cavity for you Sherlocks to fool around with dental charts.”

“Why do you say knocked out?”

“Because I use my head. You can see the broken stump.”

Masuto ran his finger over the stump. “Worn smooth. Not a rich man. He could have had it capped. I think your conclusions are brilliant, doc.”

“You’re damn right they are!”

“Well, at least you don’t suffer from modesty.”

“Modesty is for fools. I ought to be chief medical examiner downtown, and instead I waste my years in Beverly Hills.”

“What about broken bones?” Masuto asked. “Any healed fractures?”

“Not a one.” He grinned at Masuto with satisfaction. “Really handed you one, didn’t I? You find the man who did in this stack of bones and I’ll take back every nasty thing I ever said about you.”

“If he’s alive, I’ll find him.”

“Talking about modesty—”

“As you said, it’s for fools.”

* * *

Wainwright was waiting for Masuto in the police station on Rexford Drive. “I suppose you’ve seen the papers,” he said. “This city needs flashy corpses like I need a hole in my head. Would you believe it, the city manager’s blaming me for a murder took place thirty years ago.”

“Who else can he blame?”

“I told him to forget about it. This is a dead end. In a few days the newspapers will get tired, and we can close the file. I’m shorthanded enough without you and Beckman wasting the city’s money trying to find a murderer who’s maybe dead ten years ago. Especially when our chances of finding out who was zonked are practically zilch. Beckman spent half the day Sunday down at L.A. Police trying to spot a disappearance that would fit. Nothing. We got nothing, and we’re likely to get nothing.”

“Where’s Beckman now?”

“Over with the town records. They were closed yesterday. He’s trying to find out who the contractor was and when the pool was poured. But goddamnit, I know you, Masao. I don’t want any federal case made of this.”

“Ah, so,” Masuto said mildly. “Murder is done in Beverly Hills, and the captain of detectives is indifferent. A thousand pardons, but how does one explain that?”

“Don’t give me that Charlie Chan routine, Masao. I can see you licking your lips and getting set to chase ghosts for the next two months. Meanwhile, houses are being broken into and stores are being robbed.”

“Will you give Beckman and me a week?”

“Why? What have you got? Bones.”

Beckman walked in. He stood watching Wainwright and Masuto with interest.

“Bones that once belonged to someone, to a white man, five feet eight inches tall, in very good health, but poor, a laborer, I suspect, and truculent—oh, about twenty-seven, twenty-eight years old.”

“You got to be kidding,” Wainwright said.

“Who was murdered,” Masuto went on, “possibly on a Sunday by his friend, a man who had commando training in World War Two, who planned the murder very carefully, and who knew how to operate a backhoe.”

“And you also have an eyewitness,” Wainwright said sardonically.

“An assortment of intelligent guesses put together mostly by Dr. Sam Baxter, but it’s a starting point, isn’t it? I’m only asking for a week. And what a feather in the cap of my good captain if we can come up with the answer.”

“I’ll tell you what. Today’s Monday. If you can come up with a tag for the deceased and a motive by Wednesday, you got the rest of the week. If on Wednesday you still got nothing but Sam Baxter’s pipe dreams, we close the file.”

“You’re all heart,” Masuto said.

“I’m a sucker for your Oriental flimflam, that’s what I am.” He turned on Beckman. “Don’t stand around wearing down your heels. Get in there with Masuto and do something. I got a police

department to run,” he said with disgust. “Crime in this city is up eight percent from a year ago, and you work on puzzles.”

In Masuto’s office Beckman observed that Wainwright was in a lovely mood this morning.

“Just normal good nature. What have you got, Sy?”

“I got the name of the contractor. Alex Brody on Maple Street in Inglewood. Here’s the address, but whether he still lives there or is alive or dead, God knows. According to the records, the first building permit for Forty-four hundred Laurel Way was issued on May ninth, and the final inspection took place on August twelfth, both nineteen fifty. I got hold of the plans, which include the swimming pool, but there’s no way of telling from the records when the pool was poured or whether it was separately contracted. If it was, it would have been a subcontract, because only one set of plans was filed.”

“Was the house built on slab?”

“I thought of that,” Beckman said with satisfaction. “According to the building guys they were just beginning to pour slab foundations around that time. You’re thinking they would have poured the concrete for the pool at the same time.”

“It makes sense. It was a slab base?”

“According to the plans.”

“We’ll suppose they started on May ninth, the day they got their permit. They had to put down the footings, excavate, wait for an inspection, then bring in the plumbers and lay the pipes and the ducts. It has to be three weeks to a month before they pour the concrete. Let’s say the first of June—which means that our John Doe disappeared during the month of June nineteen fifty.” He took a file folder from his desk and labeled it John Doe. Inside, on a sheet of paper, he wrote, “John Doe, white, age 25 to 30, height 5/8, died June 1950.” He handed the file to Beckman. “There’s our starting point. What did you learn yesterday?”

“From the L.A. cops—nothing. They got this new computer, and we ran through every disappearance for three years, forty-nine, fifty, and fifty-one. We turned up a lot of kids and three adult women—but nothing like an adult male. Plenty of murders, but they always managed to lay hands on a body.”

“All right. I’m going to drive down to Inglewood and see if I can find the contractor. Meanwhile, check the county out with the sheriff’s office, and you might as well do the adjoining counties, Ventura, Orange, and San Bernadino. Try the F.B.I. too. They keep a file on kidnapings, but I’m not sure they have one on disappearances. Anyway, check them. You might also try San Francisco and San Diego and Long Beach—”

“You don’t think I’ll turn up anything, do you?”

“Why do you say that?”

“If you did, you’d include every county in the state.”

“And have Wainwright screaming about the phone bill?” Masuto shrugged. “Maybe you’re right, but give it a try anyway. You see, I don’t think this was a crime of passion, Sy. I think it was a coldblooded, planned execution. I think the killer selected John Doe because there wasn’t a soul in the world who cared whether John Doe lived or died. If you want to kill someone, you kill them. It’s not hard to kill a human being, and this killer was a pro. I think the killing was an adjunct to his intention and his need. His need was to make John Doe disappear—forever. That’s why the body was naked.”

“You’d think that with fifty thousand pounds of swimming pool on top of the body, he’d rest easy.”

“No. He was or is a very thorough man. Neat, cold, calculating—and orderly. And if he’s still alive, now that the body’s been uncovered, he will be very unhappy, very nervous, and as sure as there’s a thing in this universe called karma, our paths will cross—perhaps in the next few days.”

“Come on, Masao,” Beckman said, “I’ve seen you pull off some creepy ones, but this is way out. We may never find out who John Doe is, and now you’re telling me that the killer is going to play footsie with us? How? Why?”

“All right, Sy—you tell me. Why was John Doe stripped naked? Why was he put down under the pool? Why wasn’t the killer satisfied with a plain, old-fashioned murder?”

“You’ll have to ask the killer those questions.”

“Or perhaps not. I’ve wracked my brain for reasons, and I can come up with only one. It was not John Doe who had to disappear; it was our killer. And since in our very complex society it is not enough

to disappear, the killer had to become someone else. He had to have a new name, a new driver's license, a new social security card, a new birth date, a place of origin and in that place, a birth certificate. He was not content with changing his name—he was too ambitious; he planned his future. He had to have a whole new identity. Do you see it now?"

"You mean, when we find out who John Doe is—"

"Exactly. We find our killer. If John Doe was twenty-eight, somewhere there's a man of fifty-nine, living with John Doe's name and credentials."

But having recited this detailed program, Masuto felt ashamed of himself. He hated a childish display of cleverness in others, and he found it intolerable in himself. The dead man did not have to be twenty-eight at the time of his murder. He could have been two or three years younger or older. That the killer needed his identity was a guess; there could be other reasons why the body had been buried naked. And would they find the killer when they discovered who John Doe was?

"He might be dead," Beckman said, too worshipping of Masuto to list other flaws in his thinking.

"Or he might be ten thousand miles away and we might discover nothing in the end," Masuto admitted.

MURDER MOST FOUL

The City of New York includes five counties, and Chicago is synonymous with Cook County, whereby the belief is current that the City of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County are one and the same thing. But while the City of Los Angeles is enormous and sprawling, the County of Los Angeles is even more enormous—larger in fact than a number of European countries. Aside from the City of Los Angeles, there are in Los Angeles County dozens of other civic entities, small cities, villages, and unincorporated areas; and to make the situation even more confusing, many of these independent communities, such as Beverly Hills, Inglewood, Vernon, Culver City—to name only a few—are entirely surrounded by metropolitan Los Angeles. Each of these civic entities has its own police force, while the unincorporated areas are the domain of the county sheriff and his several thousand brown-clad deputies. No one planned this crazy quilt of authority; it just happened. And since it was Los Angeles, it happened uniquely. Yet one positive result of this weird complexity was an unusual amount of cooperation among the respective police forces, a fact which Masuto was grateful for when he found two Inglewood prowl cars parked in front of the house on Maple Street, the house where the contractor Alex Brody had once lived.

On the other hand, he had a sinking feeling of unhappy anticipation, which combined with a wave of anger against his own insensitivity, the indolence and frustration which had permitted him to

spend the previous day wandering with his family through Disneyland. Even as he parked his car an ambulance swung in ahead of him, and two men with a litter got out and were ushered into the small, aged, and rather shabby house by an Inglewood cop.

Masuto showed his badge to the officer, who remarked that he was a long way from home and told him to go ahead inside. The small crowd on the street watched in silence.

Whatever Alex Brody had been, he had not been rich. The living room that Masuto walked into was neat and clean, but the cheap furniture was old, the carpet worn, the walls discolored. It was crowded with another uniformed policeman, two plainclothesmen, the two ambulance men, two frightened women who sat huddled on a worn couch, and a corpse that the two attendants were lifting onto the stretcher.

Masuto identified himself and asked to look at the corpse before they took it away.

"Be our guest," said one of the plainclothesmen. "My name's Richardson. This is Macneil," he added, nodding at the other. "What I want to know is how come a Beverly Hills cop gets here a half hour after that poor lady is killed?"

Masuto was staring at the corpse. It was a very old lady, perhaps eighty years old, with thin white hair, pale, pleading blue eyes, and savage marks on her face and head.

"She was beaten to death," Macneil said. "God almighty, what the hell is this world coming to?"

"Just two blows," Masuto said. "Crushed her skull."

"We been looking for something in the room might have done it. Nothing."

"Brass knuckles," Masuto said.

"You sure or guessing?"

"That's how she's marked." He turned away and studied the room. The two ambulance men moved out with the body. "Nothing stolen," Masuto said, more as a statement of fact than as a question.

"What's to steal? That old TV wouldn't bring five bucks at a flea market. Her bag's inside on the kitchen table. Three dollars and an uncashed social security check. I still want to know what brings you here, Masuto."

“Can we please go?” one of the ladies on the couch asked. They were both in their middle thirties, frightened, tearful.

“Just a few minutes more, ladies.”

“My kids will be coming home from school.”

“It’s only one o’clock,” Richardson said. “You’ll be back home long before school’s out.”

“What was the old lady’s name?” Masuto asked softly.

“That was Mrs. Brody, God rest her soul,” one of the women on the couch said. “Never harmed no one, never bothered no one. Why do these things happen? This was once a decent place to live.”

“How about it, Masuto?” Richardson reminded him.

“Let’s go inside,” Masuto suggested.

They sat down at the kitchen table, which was covered with a hand-embroidered blue and white cloth. A delft clock on the wall matched the cloth. The linoleum was scrubbed clean and worn through. As with the living room, the kitchen was spotless.

“Cigarette?” Richardson asked.

Masuto shook his head glumly.

“You sure as hell look miserable, Masuto. Did you know the old lady?”

“No, but she would have been alive now if I had used my head.”

“You’d better explain about that.”

“You read about the skeleton we found under where a swimming pool had been up in Beverly Hills?”

“I read what the papers had to say.”

“Well, the man who built that pool thirty years ago was Alex Brody. We got his name and address out of the town records. I imagine that he’s dead and the old lady was his widow.”

“And you figure Brody for the man who put the body under the pool?”

“Oh, no. No, indeed. I think the man who put the body there is still alive, and that he came here today and he killed Mrs. Brody. It was his style. He’s a man who long ago was trained to kill with his hands.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Some evidence, a lot of guesswork, educated guesses.”

“You got a name for him?”

“No.”

“You got a name for the skeleton?”

“No.”

“Seems to me you don’t have a hell of a lot, Masuto.”

“No, not a hell of a lot. Who are the two ladies outside? Did they see anything?”

“Maybe. Let’s ask them,” Richardson said. “You figure maybe Mrs. Brody knew something about her husband’s business which might have led you to the killer?”

“That’s why she’s dead.”

“Still guessing. We ain’t that smart down here in Inglewood. We don’t make four until we got two and two.”

They went back into the living room. “They live down the street,” Richardson explained. “This is Mrs. Parsons. This is Mrs. Agonian. They say they saw a man come out of the house in a hurry. They know the old lady and she don’t have many visitors. So they went to the door and the door was open and they found the body.”

The two women began to sniffle.

“Could you tell us something about the man?” Masuto asked kindly.

“Only from the back. We were almost a block away.”

“What was your immediate reaction to him? I mean, did you feel that he was a young man or an old man or middle-aged?”

“He wasn’t an old man,” Mrs. Parsons said.

“He wasn’t young. Maybe your age,” Mrs. Agonian said, pointing to Richardson, who appeared to be in his middle fifties. “I mean that he went down the street sort of half running, you know, walking very fast.”

“To his car?” Masuto asked. “Did you see a car?”

“No, he turned the corner.”

“How was he dressed?”

“A business suit. He wore a gray suit.”

“How tall was he?”

They both shook their heads.

“Visualize it if you can. One always has an impression of height—just your first impression. Try to remember?”

“He wasn’t small.”

"I think he was a big man, I mean broad, not fat, broad," Mrs. Agonian said.

"Is that all?" Richardson asked Masuto.

"I think so." He thanked the women. "You've been very helpful."

"I hope you catch him," Mrs. Parsons said. "She was a nice old lady. She never harmed a soul."

"One more thing," Masuto said. "Did she ever talk about relatives? Did she have children?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Agonian said.

"I know, I mean whatever there is to know, because she once mentioned a daughter," Mrs. Parsons told them. "But she hadn't seen her daughter for years and years. They had a terrible fight years ago when her daughter married someone she and her husband didn't want her to, and she didn't even know where her daughter was living now."

"What was the daughter's name?"

"Henrietta."

"And her married name?"

Mrs. Parsons shook her head.

"Did she have any close friends in the neighborhood?"

"Only Helen and myself. No one ever came to see her."

After the two women had left, Richardson said to Masuto, "It don't pay to grow old, it sure as hell don't. You got all you want? We got to seal up the place. We got a guy works on fingerprints, but he's off today."

"You won't find prints. I'd like to look around. Do you mind?"

"Make yourself at home. I'll tell them to hold it open until you leave."

It was a modest house, small, in the California bungalow style, with all the rooms on one floor—living room, kitchen, breakfast room, and two bedrooms. One of the bedrooms had been converted into a kind of den and TV room; the other was used as the bedroom, and on the dresser was a picture of a young man and woman. A wedding picture. The date on it was 1922. They were an attractive couple, Masuto thought. Another photo in a small silver frame revealed a teenage girl with light hair and light eyes, smiling. Masuto went through drawers reluctantly, the worn clothing of the old lady, some

child's clothes, a rag doll and some other mementos, a sad, poverty-stricken past. What had happened to Brody the contractor? What misfortune? Why this awful poverty?

Masuto was looking for records, payroll lists, tax reports. He found nothing. After half an hour of searching he gave it up and called the Beverly Hills police station. "What have you got?" he asked Beckman.

"Nothing, Masao. Absolutely zilch. June, nineteen fifty, was a lousy month for disappearances in the state of California, if you don't count lost kids. And only one of those is still missing, fourteen-year-old girl."

"What about the F.B.I.?"

"Same there. Nothing that fits in. They have a millionaire who was kidnaped in Mobile, Alabama on the sixteenth of June that year, and his body never turned up, but he was only five foot six and most of his teeth were capped. What have we got here, Masao? Can a man just walk off into thin air and disappear, with nobody putting in a complaint or a missing person?"

"It's a big country. It happens."

"What do I do now?"

"I want you to find out what services trained their men in close quarter killing during World War Two. I think the O.S.S. and the Rangers did, but there might have been others. I mean the hand-to-hand commando tactics. One thing we know about our man is that he's proficient at killing, and since that was a time when killing did not go unrewarded, he may have earned himself a bronze star or an oak leaf cluster or even a medal of honor. Who knows! So see what you can dig up. It's just a hunch, but all we got to play is hunches."

"What about Brody? Did you track him down?"

"He's dead, Sy, and an hour and a half ago, his wife was murdered."

"No!"

"Two quick blows to the head and neck. Brass knuckles. Crushed her skull and broke her neck."

"He's a real pro, isn't he?"

"When it comes to old ladies, he certainly is."

"Same address, Masao?"

“The one you dug up, yes.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Where are you off to now?”

“Whittier. That’s were Kati’s Uncle Naga has a contracting business. It’s time I talked to a contractor.”

But before he left the Brody house to go to Whittier, Masuto telephoned the Los Angeles Police Department and asked to speak to Lieutenant Pete Bones, who was in homicide, whose path had crossed Masuto’s a number of times in the past, and who had more than a little respect for Masuto’s ability.

“What Chinese puzzle are you working out now?” Bones wanted to know.

“I’m interested in homicide.”

“Oh? Anything special?”

“A killing without a gun. A knife or brass knuckles or even bare hands.”

“What in hell are you talking about?”

“I’m asking you whether you’ve had that kind of a homicide today,” Masuto said patiently.

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? You’re in homicide. You would know.”

“So help me, Masuto, either you got a weird sense of humor or E.S.P. There was an old lady killed a couple of hours ago in Inglewood. We just got it from the Inglewood cops. Now what in hell are you up to?”

“I know about that. I’m sorry. I should have mentioned it. I’m calling from her house.”

“What in hell are you doing in Inglewood?”

“It’s a long story, and I’ll give it to you first chance I get. I’m talking about another homicide with the same M.O.”

“Tell me about it,” Bones said angrily.

“There’s nothing to tell. I’m asking you whether it happened.”

“Oh, you’re a doll, Masuto. You’re cute. Now will you tell me what in hell you’re talking about? Has someone been killed? Do you know about it? Or is someone going to be killed?”

“The latter is a possibility,” Masuto agreed, forcing himself to be patient.

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“You call me up and tell me that someone is going to be killed and ask me whether it has happened yet, and you don’t know who?”

“That’s about it. I’m sorry I bothered you, Pete.”

“Get your head examined,” Bones snarled, slamming down the telephone. To Masuto, the click was more like a crash. He sighed and walked out of the house.

[*Buy The Case of the Sliding Pool Now!*](#)

A Biography of Howard Fast

Howard Fast (1914–2003), one of the most prolific American writers of the twentieth century, was a bestselling author of more than eighty works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and screenplays. Fast's commitment to championing social justice in his writing was rivaled only by his deftness as a storyteller and his lively cinematic style.

Born on November 11, 1914, in New York City, Fast was the son of two immigrants. His mother, Ida, came from a Jewish family in Britain, while his father, Barney, emigrated from the Ukraine, changing his last name to Fast on arrival at Ellis Island. Fast's mother passed away when he was only eight, and when his father lost steady work in the garment industry, Fast began to take odd jobs to help support the family. One such job was at the New York Public Library, where Fast, surrounded by books, was able to read widely. Among the books that made a mark on him was Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, containing prescient warnings against fascism that set his course both as a writer and as an advocate for human rights.

Fast began his writing career early, leaving high school to finish his first novel, *Two Valleys* (1933). His next novels, including *Conceived in Liberty* (1939) and *Citizen Tom Paine* (1943), explored the American Revolution and the progressive values that Fast saw as essential to the American experiment. In 1943 Fast joined the American Communist Party, an alliance that came to define—and often encumber—much of his career. His novels during this period advocated freedom against tyranny, bigotry, and oppression by exploring essential moments in American history, as in *The American* (1946). During this time Fast also started a family of his own. He married Bette Cohen in 1937 and the couple had two children.

Congressional action against the Communist Party began in 1948, and in 1950, Fast, an outspoken opponent of McCarthyism, was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Because he refused to provide the names of other members of the

Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, Fast was issued a three-month prison sentence for contempt of Congress. While in prison, he was inspired to write *Spartacus* (1951), his iconic retelling of a slave revolt during the Roman Empire, and did much of his research for the book during his incarceration. Fast's appearance before Congress also earned him a blacklisting by all major publishers, so he started his own press, Blue Heron, in order to release *Spartacus*. Other novels published by Blue Heron, including *Silas Timberman* (1954), directly addressed the persecution of Communists and others during the ongoing Red Scare. Fast continued to associate with the Communist Party until the horrors of Stalin's purges of dissidents and political enemies came to light in the mid-1950s. He left the Party in 1956.

Fast's career changed course in 1960, when he began publishing suspense-mysteries under the pseudonym E. V. Cunningham. He published nineteen books as Cunningham, including the seven-book Masao Masuto mystery series. Also, *Spartacus* was made into a major film in 1960, breaking the Hollywood blacklist once and for all. The success of *Spartacus* inspired large publishers to pay renewed attention to Fast's books, and in 1961 he published *April Morning*, a novel about the battle of Lexington and Concord during the American Revolution. The book became a national bestseller and remains a staple of many literature classes. From 1960 onward Fast produced books at an astonishing pace—almost one book per year—while also contributing to screen adaptations of many of his books. His later works included the autobiography *Being Red* (1990) and the *New York Times* bestseller *The Immigrants* (1977).

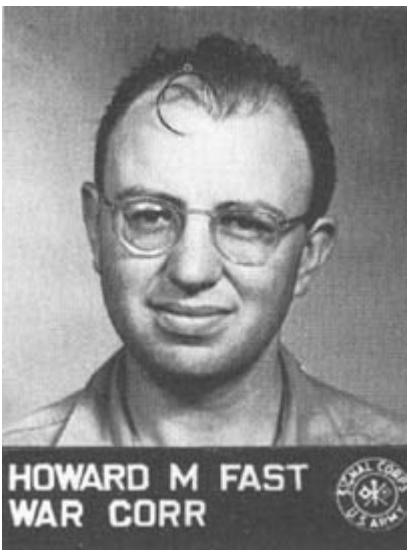
Fast died in 2003 at his home in Greenwich, Connecticut.



Fast on a farm in upstate New York during the summer of 1917. Growing up, Fast often spent the summers in the Catskill Mountains with his aunt and uncle from Hunter, New York. These vacations provided a much-needed escape from the poverty and squalor of the Lower East Side's Jewish ghetto, as well as the bigotry his family encountered after they eventually relocated to an Irish and Italian neighborhood in upper Manhattan. However, the beauty and tranquility Fast encountered upstate were often marred by the hostility shown toward him by his aunt and uncle. "They treated us the way Oliver Twist was treated in the orphanage," Fast later recalled. Nevertheless, he "fell in love with the area" and continued to go there until he was in his twenties.



Fast (left) with his older brother, Jerome, in 1935. In his memoir *Being Red*, Fast wrote that he and his brother “had no childhood.” As a result of their mother’s death in 1923 and their father’s absenteeism, both boys had to fend for themselves early on. At age eleven, alongside his thirteen-year-old brother, Fast began selling copies of a local newspaper called the *Bronx Home News*. Other odd jobs would follow to make ends meet in violent, Depression-era New York City. Although he resented the hardscrabble nature of his upbringing, Fast acknowledged that the experience helped form a lifelong attachment to his brother. “My brother was like a rock,” he wrote, “and without him I surely would have perished.”



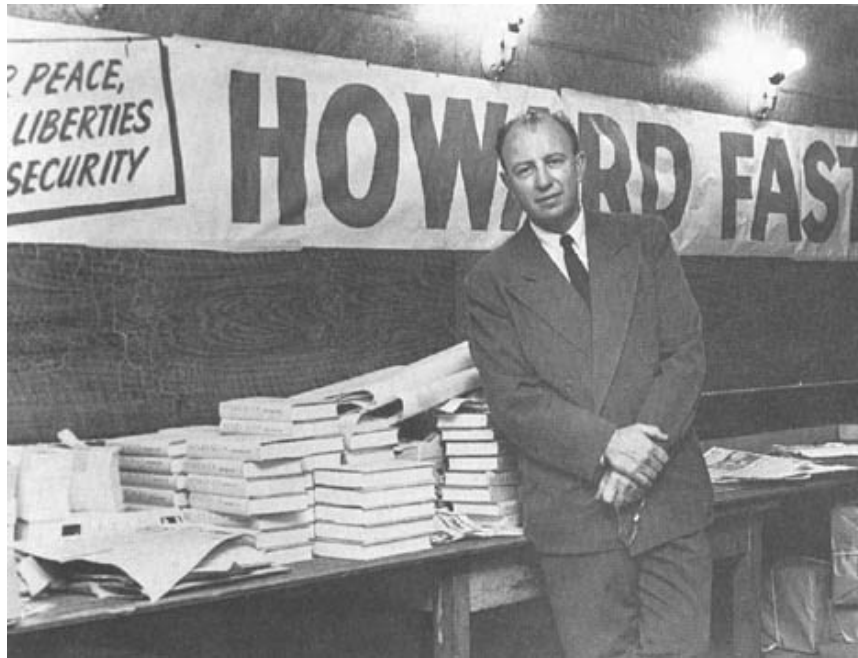
A copy of Fast's military identification from World War II. During the war Fast worked as a war correspondent in the China-Burma-India theater, writing articles for publications such as *PM*, *Esquire*, and *Coronet*. He also contributed scripts to *Voice of America*, a radio program developed by Elmer Davis that the United States broadcast throughout occupied Europe.



Here Fast poses for a picture with a fellow inmate at Mill Point prison, where he was sent in 1950 for his refusal to disclose information about other members of the Communist Party. Mill Point was a progressive federal institution made up of a series of army bunkhouses. “Everyone worked at the prison,” said Fast during a 1998 interview, “and while I hate prison, I hate the whole concept of prison, I must say this was the most intelligent and humane prison, probably that existed in America.” Indeed, Fast felt that his three-month stint there served him well as a writer: “I think a writer should see a little bit of prison and a little bit of war. Neither of these things can be properly invented. So that was my prison.”



Fast with his wife Bette and their two children, Jonathan and Rachel, in 1952. The family has a long history of literary achievement. Bette’s father founded the Hudson County News Company. Jonathan Fast would go on to become a successful popular novelist, as would his daughter, Molly, whose mother, Erica Jong, is the author of the groundbreaking feminist novel *Fear of Flying*. (Photo courtesy of Lotte Jacobi.)



Fast at a bookstand during his campaign for Congress in 1952. He ran on the American Labor Party ticket for the twenty-third congressional district in the Bronx. Although Fast remained a committed leftist his entire life, he looked back on his foray into national politics with a bit of amusement. “I got a disease, which is called ‘candidateitis,’” he told Donald Swaim in a 1990 radio interview. “And this disease takes hold of your mind, and it convinces you that your winning an election is important, very often the most important thing on earth. And it grips you to a point that you’re ready to kill to win that election.” He concluded: “I was *soundly* defeated, but it was a fascinating experience.”



In 1953, the Soviet Union awarded Fast the International Peace Prize. This photo from the ceremony shows the performer, publisher, and civil rights activist Paul Robeson delivering a speech before presenting Fast (seated, second from left) with the prestigious award. Robeson and Fast came to know each other through their participation in leftist political causes during the 1940s and were friends for many years. Like Fast, Robeson was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the McCarthy era and invoked his Fifth Amendment right not to answer questions. This led to Robeson's work being banned in the United States, a situation that Robeson, unlike Fast, never completely overcame. In a late interview Fast cited Robeson as one of the forgotten heroes of the twentieth century. "Paul," he said, "was an extraordinary man." Also shown (from left to right): Essie Robeson, Mrs. Mellisk, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, Rachel Fast, and Bette Fast. (Photo courtesy of Julius Lazarus and the author.)



Howard and Bette Fast in California in 1976. The couple relocated to the West Coast after Fast grew disgruntled over the poor reception of his novel *The Hessian*. While in California, Fast temporarily gave up writing novels to work as a screenwriter, but, like many novelists before him, found the business disheartening. “In L.A. you work like hell because there is nothing else to do, unless you are cheating on your wife,” he told *People* after he had moved back East in the 1980s. Of course, Fast, an ardent nature-lover, did enjoy California’s scenic beauty and eventually set many of his novels—including *The Immigrant’s Daughter* and the bestselling Masao Masuto detective series—in the state.

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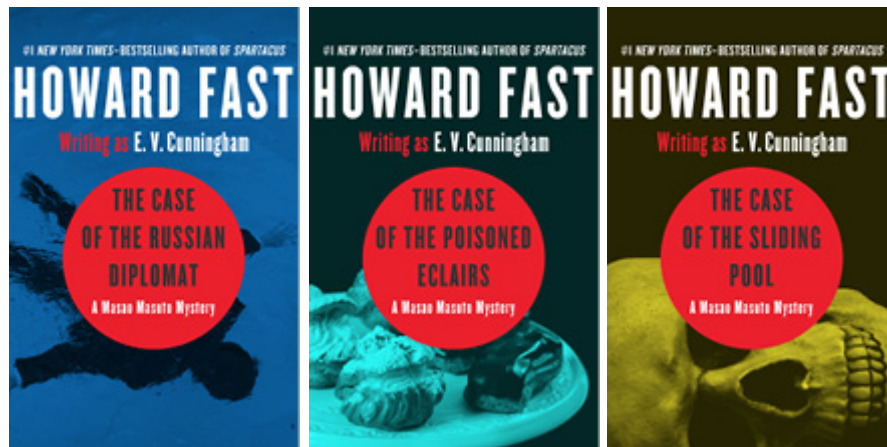
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