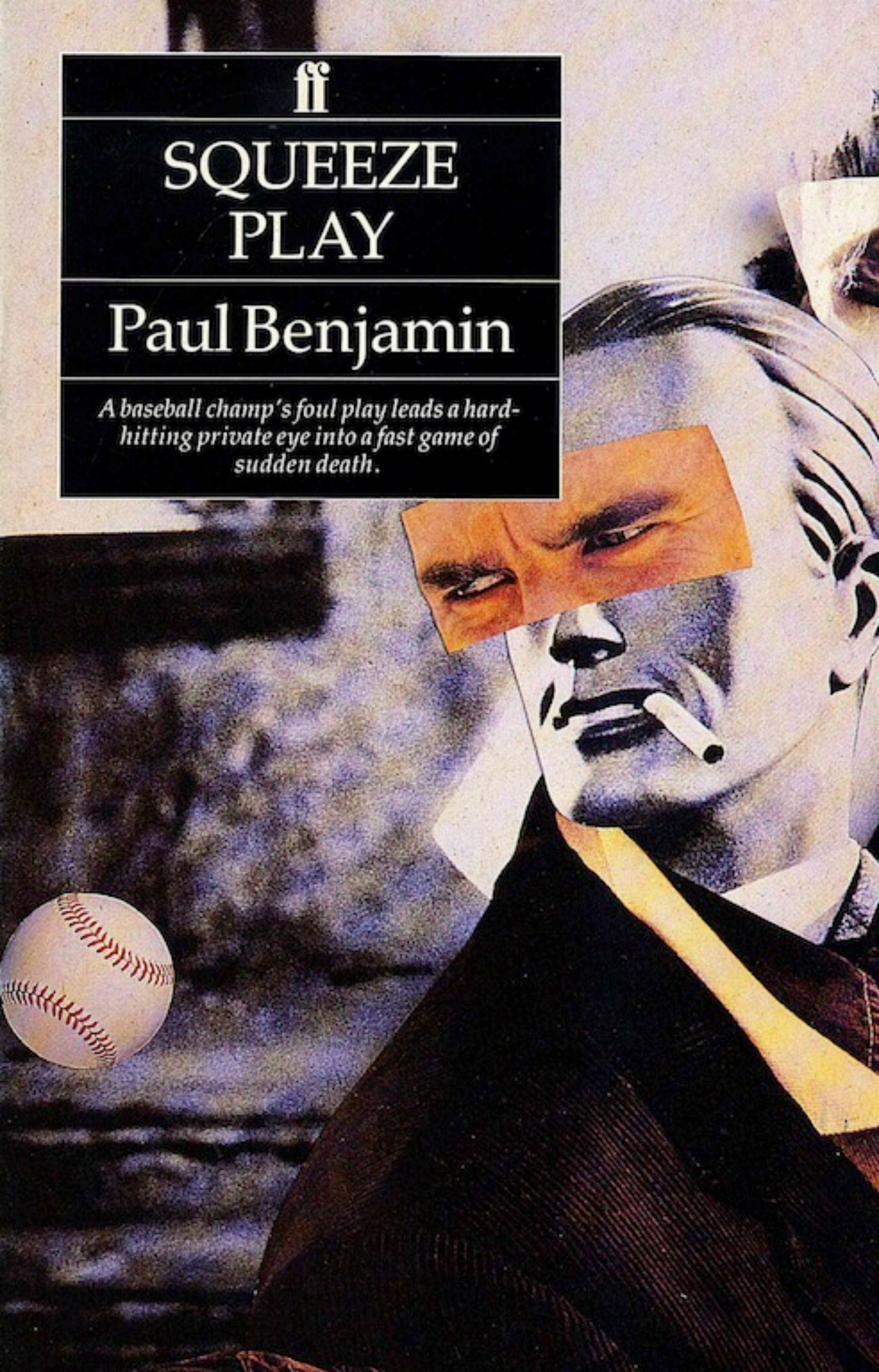
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SQUEEZE PLAY
Paul Benjamin
A baseball champ's foul play leads a hard-hitting private eye into a fast game of sudden death.

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PAUL BENJAMIN

faber and faber
LONDON BOSTON

First published in Great Britain in 1991
by Faber and Faber Limited
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU
First published in the USA in 1984 by Avon Books,
a Division of The Hearst Corporation, New York

Photoset by Wilmaset Birkenhead Wirral
Printed in Great Britain by
Cox and Wyman Ltd Reading Berkshire

A CIP record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 0-571-16148-0

SQUEEZE PLAY

ONE

It was the second Tuesday in May when George Chapman called me. He had been given my name by his lawyer, Brian Contini, and he wanted to know if I was available to take on a case. If it had been anyone else, I probably would have said no. I had just spent three tedious weeks looking for the nineteen-year-old daughter of a wealthy suburban family, and the last thing I wanted at the moment was a new client. After going down a dozen dead ends I had finally found the girl in Boston working as a Combat Zone hooker. The only words she said to me were, 'Fuck off, fuzz. I don't got no mommy and daddy, you dig? I got born last week when you screwed some dog up the ass.'

I was tired, and I needed some time off. The parents had given me a bonus when they learned their daughter was still alive, and I was thinking about blowing the money on a trip to Paris. But when Chapman called, I decided to let it wait. I sensed that whatever it was he wanted to talk about was more important than looking at paintings in the Louvre. There was something desperate in his voice, and his reluctance to talk about it over the phone made me curious. Chapman was in trouble, and I wanted to know what it was. I told him to meet me in my office at nine o'clock the next morning.

Five years earlier, George Chapman had done everything a baseball player can possibly do in one season. He batted for a .348 average, hit forty-four home-runs, knocked in one hundred and thirty-seven runs, and was given the Gold Glove at third base. The New York Americans won it all that year. The division title, the pennant, and the World Series. And when it was over, Chapman was named the Most Valuable Player in the league.

It was almost unreal. Every time you opened a paper it

seemed that Chapman was getting headlines for a ninth inning home-run or a superhuman play in the field. In a year of garbage strikes, political scandals, and foul weather, Chapman became the hottest story in town. His picture was printed so often you started seeing his face in your sleep. Even the junkies on the Lower East Side knew his name, and a poll conducted by one of the local radio stations found that he could be identified by more people than the Secretary of State.

Chapman himself was almost too perfect a hero. He was big and handsome, he always talked openly to reporters, and he never turned down a kid for an autograph. What was more, he had gone to Dartmouth as a history major, had a beautiful and sophisticated wife, and actually did things other than play baseball. This wasn't the kind of guy you'd look for to turn up in a deodorant commercial. When Chapman appeared on television, it was to do a plug for the Metropolitan Museum of Art or to solicit donations for refugee children. That winter after Chapman's great season, he and his wife made the covers of all the magazines, and the American people learned what books the Chapmans read and what operas they went to, how Mrs Chapman prepared *poulet chasseur*, and when they were planning to have children. He was twenty-eight years old at the time and she was twenty-five. They had become everyone's favourite couple.

I remembered Chapman's season all too well. It had been a bad year for me. My marriage was breaking up, my job in the DA's office had gone stale, and I was up to my eyeballs in debt. Every time I turned around a black ox was standing there ready to stomp me. When spring came I found myself retreating into my childhood, trying to put some order in my world by immersing myself in a time when life still seemed full of promise. One of the things I started to get interested in again was baseball. The very unreality of it was soothing to me. It didn't matter that I was using it as a way to avoid having to face the mess I was in. I had had enough of prosecuting black teenagers for nickel and dime robberies, of hanging around courtrooms with fat, sweaty cops, of dealing

with crimes that turned everyone into a victim. And I had had enough bickering with my wife, enough pretending that we could still make it work. I was lying low, getting ready to abandon ship.

As the season wore on I got more and more wrapped up in following the Americans, poring over the box-scores every morning and catching the games on radio or television whenever I could. Chapman interested me more than any of the other players because we had played against each other in college. At the same time Chapman had been doing his number at third base for Dartmouth, I had been plodding along at third for Columbia. I was never much of a prospect. I batted something like .245 for my college career and led the league in errors at my position for three straight years. While Chapman was destroying college pitching and getting ready to sign a major league contract, I just hung in there, playing for the fun of it and preparing to drift into law school when it was over. Following Chapman during his great season, I somehow thought of him as my alter ego, as an imaginary part of myself that had been inoculated against failure. We were the same age, the same size, and had been through the same Ivy League education. The only difference was anatomical: he had the world at his feet and the world had me by the balls. When he stepped up to the plate at the Stadium I sometimes found myself rooting for him so hard that I became embarrassed. It was as though his success could save me, and the idea of transferring so many private hopes to another person frightened me. Of course, I had gone a little crazy that year. And Chapman went on doing so well, day after day, that in some sense I suppose he really did keep me from going off the deep end. I probably also hated the guy's guts.

As it turned out, that was Chapman's last season in the major leagues. Whatever secret jealousy I felt towards him disappeared one night in February just before the start of spring training. Driving back to the city in his Porsche from a baseball banquet upstate, Chapman collided head-on with a

trailer truck. At first it didn't look like he'd survive. And then, when he did survive, he came out of it minus his left leg.

For a year or two after that you didn't hear much about George Chapman. A little story now and then – 'Chapman Fitted With Artificial Leg' or 'Chapman Visits Disabled' – and nothing more. But then, just as it seemed he was going to slip out of sight permanently, he published a book about his experiences, *Standing on My Own*, which made a big splash and put him back in the public eye. If there's one thing America worships more than a celebrity, it's a celebrity who makes a comeback. The talented and beautiful are always admired, but they are a little remote from us, existing in a sphere that never touches the real world. Tragedy makes a star more human, proves that he is vulnerable like the rest of us, and when he is able to pick himself up again and return to the stage, we reserve a special place for him in our minds. Chapman certainly had the knack, you couldn't deny him that. There weren't too many people around who could turn an amputated leg into a new career. But from the moment he came back, he stayed in the limelight. He had become one of the leading advocates for handicapped people's rights, sponsoring wheelchair Olympics, appearing at Congressional hearings, and doing special television programmes. Now that a vacancy had opened up for one of New York's United States Senate seats, some of the important Democrats were pushing Chapman as a possible candidate. The word was that he was going to announce before the month was out.

He arrived a few minutes early, striding in stiffly with his silver-handled cane and shaking my hand with the formality of a diplomat. I pointed to a chair, and he sat down without smiling, perfectly erect, the cane between his legs. Chapman's face was broad and muscular with an almost Apache-like slant to the eyes, and the neatness of his sandy brown hair told me he was someone who took his own image seriously. He still looked to be in top condition. Except for a touch of grey around the temples, he had lost none of his youth, none of the physical authority of an athlete. And yet, behind it all,

there was something in his face that made me wary. The brown eyes didn't seem to respond. I felt they were too determined, too fixed, as if he had somehow willed them never to betray the slightest spontaneity. Chapman appeared to be a man who made up his mind never to give an inch, and if you didn't want to play it his way, then you just didn't play. It wasn't the attitude you'd expect from an aspiring politician. More than anything else, he reminded me of a tin soldier.

He made it obvious that he wasn't very happy to be in my office, and as he sat down and glanced over the room, he had the look of someone who suddenly finds himself alone at night in the wrong neighbourhood. I didn't let it bother me. Most people who walk into my office feel rather uncomfortable, and Chapman probably had better reason than most. He didn't waste any time in telling me why he had come. It seemed that someone was planning to kill him.

'Brian Contini told me you were intelligent and that you work quickly,' he said.

'Chip Contini always had an inflated idea of my intelligence,' I answered. 'That's because we got the same grades in law school and I worked only half as hard as he did.' Chapman was in no mood for light-hearted reminiscences. He looked at me impatiently, fidgeting with the handle of his cane. 'I'm flattered that you called me,' I went on, 'but why didn't you take it to the police? They're better equipped for this sort of thing than I am, and they'd do everything they could for you. You're an important man, Mr Chapman, and I'm sure you'd be given special treatment.'

'I don't want this thing to get out into the open. It would cause a lot of idiotic publicity and divert attention away from more important things.'

'We're talking about your life,' I said. 'There's nothing more important than that.'

'There's a right way and a wrong way to handle this, Mr Klein, and I want to do it the right way. I know what I'm doing.'

I leaned back in my chair and waited for the silence to build up and make the atmosphere slightly unpleasant. Chapman's

approach was putting me in a bad humour, and I wanted him to understand exactly what he was getting into. 'When you say someone is trying to kill you, do you mean that someone has tried to push you out of a window? That someone's taken a shot at you? That you've seen someone slip arsenic into your martini?'

'I mean this letter,' Chapman said coolly. 'It came Monday, the day before yesterday.'

He reached into the inside breast pocket of his tan cashmere jacket. Chapman's clothes were casual and elegant, in a way that only the well-heeled can be casual and elegant. Most ball players dress as if they've just stepped out of a Hawaiian singles bar, but Chapman was pure Madison Avenue, right down to his charcoal grey pants and hundred-dollar shoes. I imagined that he probably spent more each year on underwear and socks than I did on my entire wardrobe.

Chapman took out a plain white business-size envelope and handed it across the desk to me. It was addressed to his East Side apartment and had been sent from the main post office in the city. The address had been typed out on an electric typewriter, possibly an IBM Selectric. I opened the envelope and read the letter inside. It had been typed on the same machine and was one page long.

Dear George

Remember Feb. 22 five yeares ago?

The way youve been acting lately it seems you dont. You were lucky that nite to be alive when they pride you from the reck. Maybe next time you wont be.

Your a smart boy George so we dont have to spell it out. We had an agreemint and your supposed to stick to it. And that means or else.

They say your going to be a candidate. The way it looks now the only thing your a candidate for is the deep freez.

A friend

I looked up at Chapman, who had been watching me with steely eyes as I read the letter.

'It doesn't take a genius to tell you that it sounds like blackmail,' I said. 'What about it, Chapman? Has someone been putting the bite on you?'

'That's just it,' he said. 'I don't know what the letter's talking about. The implication is that I've reneged on some kind of agreement. But I never made an agreement with anyone in the first place.'

'It also seems to imply that the accident wasn't an accident after all.'

Chapman shook his head back and forth, as if trying to clear his mind and make the thought of that night five years ago retreat back into the shadows. For a brief moment he looked older, almost spent. The effort to recall the past was difficult for him, and for the first time I saw the suffering in his face that until now he had managed to keep hidden.

'Believe me,' he said slowly, 'it was an accident. I skidded on some ice to avoid a fallen branch and went straight into the truck in the opposite lane. It's all too improbable to have been planned. And why would anyone have gone to the trouble?'

'What about the driver of the truck?' I asked, pursuing a line of thought. 'Do you remember his name?'

'Papano . . . Prozello . . .' He paused. 'I can't remember it exactly. An Italian name that begins with P. But it's too far-fetched to think there's anything in it. The man was sincerely upset when he found out I was the person in the car. He came to me in the hospital and begged me to forgive him, even though it wasn't his fault.'

'Where did the accident take place?'

'In Dutchess County, on Route 44 near Millbrook.'

'But the banquet was up in Albany, wasn't it? Why weren't you on the Thruway, or at least the Taconic?'

Chapman suddenly seemed at a loss. 'Why do you ask?'

'It's a long drive from Albany to New York. I'm curious to know how you wound up on a small country road.'

'Well actually,' he said, recovering awkwardly, 'I was fairly tired, and I thought that if I got off the big highway I would

have an easier time with the driving.' He paused melodramatically. 'Obviously I was wrong.'

I didn't want to side-track the discussion at an early stage, so I filed away this little detail for future reflection. I said, 'There's something that rings false about the letter. It seems to come on very hard, and yet the overall effect is somehow too vague. If, as you say, you don't know anything about the agreement it refers to, then the letter hardly even makes sense. I wonder if you've considered the possibility of a hoax, something written by a crank, or maybe even a practical joke from one of your friends.'

'If I thought the letter was a hoax,' Chapman said, 'I wouldn't have called you yesterday, and I certainly wouldn't have come down to see you in this office of yours at nine o'clock today. Naturally I've considered all the possibilities. But in the end it doesn't make any difference. The letter is a fact, and the only way to handle it is to assume it's the real thing. I don't want to go around thinking it's a prank and then wind up murdered in some alley because I made a bad guess.'

'Let's put it another way. From all I can gather, you've always been a highly successful and well-liked man. Is there anyone who hates you, anyone who hates you so much that he or she would consider the world a better place if you were removed from it?'

'I've spent the last two days trying to answer that question. But I honestly can't think of anyone.'

'Let's put it still another way, then. How is your marriage? How is your sex life? How is your money situation? How is the work you've been doing?'

Chapman cut me short. 'Don't be snide,' he said. 'I'm not here to give you my life story. I'm here to hire you to track down the person who wants to kill me.'

'Listen, Chapman,' I snapped back at him, 'I haven't even decided to work for you yet. But if I do, I'll need your full co-operation all along the line. People don't decide to make murder threats out of pure whim, you know. There are reasons, cold, hard reasons, and they usually have to do with sex, money, or one of the other things no one likes to talk

about. If you want me to find the person responsible for this letter, then you'll have to be willing to let me turn your life inside out, because more than likely the answer is buried there. It might not be very pleasant for you, but it might keep you alive. And I assume that's the object.'

As a rule, I don't like to talk this way to my clients. But sometimes it becomes necessary, especially when things get off to a shaky start. Investigative work is a dirty business, but so is crime, and it's just as well to let people know that even if they are helped, they are going to get hurt a little too. It's a game which no one wins and everyone loses. The only difference is that some people lose more than others.

Chapman was contrite, and he apologized with good grace as I'd hoped he would. Even though he had a less steady grip on himself than he pretended to have – which continually put him on the defensive – I found myself unable to dislike him. He was a curious mixture of shrewdness and stupidity, a man with a hundred blind spots who was capable of seeing things with surprising clarity, and the contradictions in his character interested me. Behind his pose of self-assurance there was something almost pathetic about him, as if he had not yet fully come to terms with himself. I had no desire to become his friend, but I did feel like trying to help him. I realized that I wanted the case.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'You're absolutely right. These past two days have put a strain on me, and I'm not myself. In general, I'm a very happy man. I know it seems hard to believe, but in many ways losing my leg was good for me, and I think it's made me a better person. I have a sense of real purpose now, and I'm working for things that are important to me. My wife is a marvellous woman who saw me through the difficult times after the accident, and I love her deeply. I am not fooling around with anyone else, my money situation is good, and I find my work satisfying – to answer your questions. The only thing I want to know is why in God's name would anyone want to kill me?'

He looked at me with a lost expression, his face full of sincerity and bewilderment. Either Chapman was a very

good actor or he really did lead a totally blameless life. I didn't know what to think. He seemed almost too sincere, too eager to convince me with his soft speech. I wanted to believe him, and yet something in my gut resisted. If I accepted Chapman's account of his life, then I had nothing to begin the case with. And someone, after all, wanted him dead.

'What about the political angle?' I asked. 'Maybe someone doesn't like the idea of your becoming a senator.'

'But I haven't even announced yet. How can I be a threat to anyone when I'm not even a candidate?'

'Are you planning to run?'

'I was planning to make my final decision by the end of next week. But now that this business has come along, everything's up in the air again. I don't know what I'm going to do.'

'And then there's your baseball career,' I said, throwing out another possibility. 'A ball player comes into contact with dozens of crazy characters – gamblers, hustlers, the so-called undesirable element. Maybe you got involved with something or someone and weren't even aware of it.'

'That was a long time ago. People hardly remember me as a ball player any more.'

'You'd be surprised. A guy who handles the stick the way you did isn't forgotten so easily.'

Chapman smiled for the first time since entering my office. 'Thanks for the compliment,' he said. 'But again, there's nothing in it, nothing in the baseball idea. I never got to know any of those people.'

It went on like this for a little while longer. I would ask Chapman a question and he would answer that he couldn't see anything in it, that there was no connection with the letter. Since my display of temper, he had become more polite and agreeable, but I suspected it was merely a change of tactics on his part. The results were the same, and they added up to nothing. I couldn't figure out the game he was playing with me. He was genuinely shaken by the letter, and yet he was acting as though his sole purpose were to prevent me from doing anything about it. He was offering me the case, and at the same time he was snatching it away from me. I felt

like a man who is given an expensive watch as a present and then discovers the watch has no hands.

The interview wound down to its conclusion and I got him to give me a list of names, addresses, and phone numbers, which I wrote down in my pocket notebook. I had no idea how useful the names would be, but I didn't want to take anything for granted. As things were shaping up now, I had a lot of legwork in front of me.

'I get a hundred fifty dollars a day plus expenses,' I said. 'Three days in advance. When the job is finished I'll supply you with an itemized list of expenses.'

Chapman took out his cheque-book, put it on the desk, and began writing with his Mont-Blanc fountain pen. 'Pay to the order of Max Klein,' he said. 'Any middle initial?'

'Just plain Max Klein.'

'I'm making this out for fifteen hundred dollars, which will cover me for the first ten days. I'm hoping to be around at least that long.' He grinned across the desk at me. 'If you happen to solve the problem before then, you can keep the difference.'

Like a lot of people when they spend money, Chapman was oddly jovial. By giving me so much in advance he probably felt he was taking positive action, that he was writing out a protection policy on his life. As they say, money talks. But I had yet to see the dollar bill that could stop a bullet.

'I have a few ideas,' I said. 'I'll call you tomorrow morning when I see how it's going. I'll probably want to have another discussion with you then.'

He ripped the cheque out of the book and handed it to me. Then he stood up, deftly putting his weight on his cane and pushing down on it. I imagined it was a gesture that had become automatic for him. I saw him to the door, we shook hands, and I watched him limp his way down the hallway to the elevator. Our conversation had lasted less than forty-five minutes.

I hadn't bothered to mention to Chapman that we had played against each other in college. It didn't seem to matter

very much at this point. I also hadn't bothered to mention that his lawyer's father, Victor Contini, was one of the heads of the East Coast mob. Or that Chip Contini had grown up in the town of Millbrook in Duchess County. As the letter said, George was a smart guy. He probably knew these things already.

TWO

My office was on the third floor of an ancient West Broadway building two blocks south of the Chambers Street subway station. It consisted of one room that measured approximately fifteen by twenty feet – too cramped to rent out as a dance hall but large enough for me to breathe in comfortably if I didn't chain smoke. The ceiling was high, patterned into rectangles with embossed swirls inside them, and here and there the plaster had bubbled below the weary plumbing, leaving certain spots that reminded me of Alka-Seltzer dregs whenever I looked up at them.

The sun did not flood through the two wire-mesh windows on the east wall; they hadn't been touched with a sponge since the day Mr Clean went bald, and I kept the overhead light on at all times. For furniture I had a scarred oak desk as solid as a Stonehenge boulder, a few chairs, a black imitation-leather couch with yellowed foam creeping out of the seams, two filing cabinets, an old refrigerator, and a spanking new one-burner electric hot plate for making coffee.

My upstairs neighbour was an artist named Dennis Redman. A few years ago he had given me three of his early paintings to put on the walls, and for about six months the look of the office was definitely improved. But then a jealous wife came in and pumped four bullet holes into one of the paintings, and the next day her husband showed up and slashed one of the other paintings with a hunting knife. It seems that people find modern art a satisfying outlet for their frustrations. I returned the paintings to Dennis and tacked up a big colour reproduction of Brueghel's *Tower of Babel*, which was being given away by my neighbourhood bookstore uptown with every purchase of two or more books. Within a couple of months I had accumulated nine of the prints, and all

of them had wound up hanging on my walls. It struck me as an admirable solution to my decorating problems. I found the painting an inexhaustible source of pleasure, and now I could look at it from any angle in the office – sitting, standing, or lying down on the couch. On slow days I spent a lot of time studying it. The picture shows the nearly finished tower reaching up towards the sky and scores of tiny workers and animals toiling away at the construction, diligently labouring over the most colossal monument to human presumption ever built. The painting never failed to make me think of New York, and it helped to remind me how our sweat and agony will always come to nothing in the end. It was my way of keeping things in perspective.

I put Chapman's cheque and the letter in the wall safe behind my desk and then sat down and made a call to the sociology department of Columbia University. I asked for William Briles.

'I'm sorry,' said the female voice on the other end. 'Professor Briles isn't in yet. Would you care to leave a message? I could have him call you back later. He should be in his office between eleven and twelve.'

'My name is Max Klein,' I said. 'The Professor doesn't know me, but it's rather important that I get to speak to him today. Could you make an appointment for me to see him at about eleven thirty?'

'I'm sorry,' said the voice. Apparently that was the only way she knew how to begin a remark. 'I don't make appointments for the faculty. We're getting to the end of the semester now, and Professor Briles probably has several conferences scheduled with students.'

'I'm sorry, too,' I said. 'And I'm especially sorry that you're sorry. But I would appreciate it if you told Professor Briles that I'll be coming to see him about a matter of life and death at eleven thirty and that if he doesn't plan to let me in he'll have to install a set of new locks in his door before I get there.'

The voice went silent for a few moments. When it spoke again, it had turned into a whine. 'You'd better tone down

your act, mister. This is a university, you know, not a pool hall.'

'Just give him the message, and don't worry your pretty head about it.'

'You're damn straight I'll give him the message. And don't call me pretty. No one gave you any right to call me pretty.'

'A thousand pardons,' I said. 'I'll never call you pretty again.'

She slammed down the receiver, putting an end to our chat. I was in a frisky mood, eager to get started with the case. William Briles was a friend of Chapman's who had once collaborated with him on a book, *Sports and Society*, and I thought he might be able to tell me something interesting about my client. I was planning to go up to Columbia anyway for a look at the microfilm files, and I didn't want to waste the time on another trip later.

There were two ways of getting up and down the building. You could take the elevator, a decrepit machine that moved about as fast as a Wagner opera, or you could take the stairs, the city's answer to cave crawling. I usually took the elevator up and the stairs down. On the second floor there was a Yoga studio run by a fortyish ex-beatnik by the name of Sylvia Coffin, and as I steered myself around the landing I could hear Sylvia instructing her nine o'clock class to forget they lived on the planet Earth, to leave behind their petty concerns to become one with the universe. It was all a matter of breathing correctly. I told myself I would keep that in mind.

When I reached the ground floor I hung around in the doorway for a moment, squinting out at the street and giving my eyes a chance to adjust to the sunlight. It was a beautiful May morning. Dazzling brightness, a touch of chill on the face, and everywhere those sudden gusts of wind that send paper scraps flying, taking them off in a way that seems to give the world a sense of purpose.

I walked the two blocks to the subway station, bought a *Times* at the corner, and went back down into the darkness. The token vendor was a sullen black man who sat hunched

over the racing forms in his cage. From the expression on his face it looked as though he hadn't had a winner in six or seven years. When the train came I settled into a corner seat and made a few half-hearted tries at tackling the paper. The only news that mattered to me any more was Chapman. Until the case was over, I was going to have trouble thinking about anything else.

I got off at 116th Street, the Columbia-Barnard stop. It never gave me much pleasure to return to Morningside Heights. I had spent seven years of my life there, and after seven years even the sweetest of relationships can go sour. Institutions are dreary places at best, and Columbia was not one of the best. The imposing pseudo-classical architecture that crowded the small campus looked like a herd of elephants trying to hold a cocktail party on a tennis court, and the new buildings that had gone up in the past fifteen or twenty years were no better. The law school, for example, looked like a toaster. Students walked in as fresh pieces of bread and came out three years later as packages of crumbs.

The files of the *New York Times* were kept in the Barnard library. I showed my Columbia alumni card to a uniformed guard drowsing over a rumpled copy of the *News* and walked up to the main room on the second floor. A few coeds were bent over their books at long reading tables in the middle of the room, but at this hour the place was more or less empty. I dug out the box that contained the papers from February of five years ago, sat down at a viewing machine, and hooked up the film to the spools. I turned the handle quickly, watching the events of three weeks race past my eyes without reading, and then stopped at the twenty-second. Chapman's accident was on the bottom of the front page, a small story that had just managed to make the final edition.

Looking at a microfilm gives you an eerie feeling. Everything is reversed. Instead of black on white the words are white on black, and it makes you think of an X-ray, as if you were looking into the insides of time, as if somehow the past were a secret dimension of the world that couldn't be recovered unless you lured it out with tricks and mirrors. It's

a little like discovering a fossil. The fern leaf has disintegrated millions of years ago, and yet its image is sitting in your hand. It's somehow both there and not there at the same time, lost for ever and yet found.

BASEBALL STAR INJURED IN AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT

Special to the New York Times

George Chapman, the all-star third baseman of the New York Americans, was injured early this morning when his car collided with a transport truck on Route 44 in Millbrook, N.Y. Authorities did not reveal the extent of his injuries, but they are believed to be serious.

Chapman had attended a baseball banquet held in his honor last night at the YMCA in Albany. He was taken by ambulance to Sharon Hospital in Sharon, Conn.

The driver of the truck, Bruno Pignato of Irvingville, N.J., reportedly suffered minor injuries.

This gave me what I had come for, but I kept turning the crank to read the follow-up stories for the rest of the month. As soon as it became clear that Chapman would not play baseball again, there were articles for several days in a row by nearly all the writers on the sports staff. They mentioned the highlights of his short career, talked about his character as a man, and eulogized the special grace and style he brought to the playing field. The writers seemed to feel cheated by not being able to see him play any more. What interested me most were the figures. In his five seasons as a player Chapman had averaged .312, hit one hundred and fifty-seven home-runs, and driven in five hundred and thirty-six runs, and each season had been an improvement on the one before. If he had been around for another six or eight years, the results would have been staggering.

I packed up the film and went downstairs to put in a phone call to Dave McBell at the DA's office from the pay booth in the lobby. McBell and I had started working there at the same time, and he was good for a favour now and then if I didn't

push too hard. Of all the people in the DA's office he was the only one who still thought I was a human being.

'Dave. Max Klein.'

'The man himself,' he quipped in his W.C. Fields voice.

'I need a little information. It shouldn't be too hard to get.'

'Right down to business as always,' he said in his normal voice. 'You might ask how things are going.'

'Well, how are they going?'

'Ugh,' he said, pausing for maximum effect. 'Don't ask.' He burst into raucous laughter at the joke.

'Not bad. I'll try to remember that one for the next meeting of my Kiwanis Club in Jamaica.'

'What can I do for you, Max?'

'Do you remember the accident five years ago – when George Chapman lost his leg?'

'I never forget a disaster. That guy could really pick it at third.'

'I'm interested in finding out about the driver of the truck Chapman crashed into. Name of Bruno Pignato, lived in Irvingville, New Jersey five years ago.'

'What do you want to know?'

'Mainly if he has any kind of record. And also if there's anything to connect him with Victor Contini.'

'I guess I can manage it. Why don't you call me back in a few hours.'

'Thanks a lot, Dave.'

'Sure, sure. And you'll do the same for me one day, I know.' He paused for a second. 'Are you on to something hot?'

'I don't know yet. I'm just digging around for the moment.'

'Well, if you stumble on to any gold, don't forget McBell.'

'Don't worry. You wouldn't let me.'

'Hey, Max.'

'Yeah?'

'Ever hear the one about the castrated cop?'

'You told it to me a few months ago.'

'Shit.'

We hung up.

THREE

She was one of the skinniest girls I had ever seen. She was sitting at her desk reading a copy of *Prevention* magazine with a smug expression on her face and reaching for a sliced carrot stick from a pile that lay on her blotter. I guessed her age at around twenty-five. To judge by her looks, she was destined to wind up playing the role of skeleton in somebody's closet. She was all bones and angles, and her blue and red peasant's dress hung on her like a sheet on an abandoned coat rack. One of the headlines on the magazine cover read: 'Smokers Are Criminals.' I took out my Gauloises and lit my fifth cigarette of the day.

'Hi,' I said. 'I'm Max Klein. I'm here to see Professor Briles.'

She looked up, annoyed at being distracted from her reading, and gave me a cold stare.

'The tough guy,' she said, as if to herself. 'You'll have to wait a minute. I'll go see if he's free.'

Her desk was in a small reception room with the closed doors of professors' offices on the three walls behind her. The spaces between the doors were taken up by filing cabinets and bulletin boards with university announcements on them. She stood up slowly with pursed lips, resenting the effort, as if I had just asked her to eat a chocolate layer cake. In spite of her slouch, she was a good six feet tall, which put her eye to eye with me. She went to one of the doors, gave a quick knock, and poked her head into the office. A few mumbled words were exchanged, and then she shuffled back to her desk and sat down. Instead of saying anything to me, she picked up her magazine and started reading again.

'Well?' I said at last.

'Well what?' she answered, not lifting her eyes from the page.

'Can I go in to see him?'

'Not yet. He's with a student. It'll be a few more minutes.'

'Thanks for telling me. I might have barged in there by mistake.'

She put down her magazine with feigned weariness and sighed deeply. She gave me another one of those hard stares with her sad brown eyes.

'The trouble with you tough guys,' she said, 'is that you have no patience. And do you know why? A lack of B vitamins. If you ate more whole grains, you'd feel a lot calmer. You wouldn't be so pushy. You'd let things take their course, let yourself become one with the flow.'

'The flow?'

'The flow of nature.'

'Is that like becoming one with the universe?'

'Not really,' she said, suddenly very serious. 'Nothing so cosmic. It's more like being in touch with your body, the functioning of your organs.'

'But I like to be in touch with other people's bodies,' I said.

She looked at me carefully again and then shook her head with exasperation.

'You see,' she said. 'You begin to talk about something important and then you get embarrassed and all you can do is make wisecracks.' She shook her head again. 'Sick. Very sick.'

I was no longer a possible convert, and therefore she had lost interest in me. She started reading again, groped blindly for a carrot with her right hand, and stuck it in her mouth. The room filled with the sound of her crunching.

The door of Briles's office opened and a young man in jeans and a plaid work shirt walked out. He was carrying a pile of books and notebooks under his arm, and he looked like he had just been told he had only six months to live.

'Don't worry,' I said to him as he walked by, 'it's only one course.'

He looked up, surprised to see me standing there, and made an attempt at a smile. 'Don't tell that to Professor Briles,' he said.

He went on out, his head bowed, conjuring up visions of what it would be like to spend vacation in summer school.

Briles appeared in the doorway of his office. He was about forty, a shade over six one, and he wore the kind of thin, tortoise-shell glasses that had recently come back into fashion. Briles had a reputation as a polished and prolific writer, and he had made his name with a series of books on the marginal figures of society: prostitutes, thieves, homosexuals, gamblers, and so on. A latter-day Mayhew. I had read a few of them and had been sufficiently impressed. I figured him to be one of the showboat professors who performs before packed classes of awed, tittering students, a man who prizes every word he speaks, which also meant he was probably something of a tyrant, if the kid who had just walked out was any indication. The academic as superstar. There were always a few of them in every university.

'Mr Klein?' He gestured for me to enter the office, closed the door when we were both inside, and pointed to a heavy wooden chair with a slatted back for me to sit in. The room was cluttered with piles of papers and books, and every inch of the walls was lined with bookshelves. Sun poured in through the windows and glared against Briles's glasses so that I couldn't see his eyes behind the lenses. It made him look slightly less than human, as though he were a creature who had been born without the ability to see. Five storeys below, students were beginning to gather in the centre of the campus for outdoor lunches and faintly, through the half-opened windows, I could hear the shout of a frisbee player, the barking of a dog, the hum of the warming day.

'I don't know who you are,' Briles began pompously, taking his seat behind his desk, 'and I don't really care. But I would like an explanation for the way you talked to Miss Gross this morning on the phone. We're accustomed to dealing with civilized people here, and frankly I'm inclined to look on your presence as a most unwelcome invasion.'

'The explanation is simple,' I said. 'She wouldn't give me a straight answer, so I yelled at her. I'm sure you would have done the same thing in my place.'

Briles looked at me as though I were some kind of curious sociological specimen. 'What exactly do you want?' he asked with distaste.

'I want to talk about George Chapman,' I said. I took out my investigator's licence and showed it to him. 'I have reason to believe he's in some danger.'

'George Chapman?' Briles had been taken completely by surprise. 'What in the world can I tell you about George Chapman?'

'Well, you did do that book with him seven or eight years ago, and I assumed you might be able to give me some of your impressions of him.'

'First of all, Mr Klein, I've published some eleven books in the past twelve years, and *Sports in Society* is the least substantial of the lot. It is not an important book. It is not even an interesting book. George Chapman was a student of mine at Dartmouth when I taught there. After his first year in the major leagues he got in touch with me and suggested we do a book together on the impact of professional sports on the athletes who play them. Because of his connections, George had easy access to the athletes and was able to arrange interviews with them. I wrote the commentaries and interpretations. He did a conscientious job of questioning, and I did what I could to organize the materials. But the book was a rush job. The publisher wanted it out during the next baseball season to capitalize on George's name. As it turned out, the sales were excellent. But it was still a bad book. I haven't been in close touch with George since that time. We see each other once or twice a year, no more.'

'Is that a fact?' I asked, not trying to hide my sarcasm.

'I'm beginning to wonder what your motives are, Mr Klein. It occurs to me that you've come here looking for dirt on George Chapman, and I refuse to be part of it. What are you trying to do, smear his name to hurt his chances of getting the Senate nomination? Or are you simply interested in dirt for its own sake? Hasn't that man suffered enough?'

The interview was rapidly slipping away from me. I had tried to be straightforward with Briles, but he was not having

any of it. Still, I didn't want to let go. I felt that if I got nothing from him now, the tiny path I was opening would close up around me and Briles would be lost to me for the rest of the case. I tried changing my strategy.

'Yes,' I said, 'I agree with you that George Chapman has suffered enough already. But right now he's having some difficulties, and I'm doing my best to try to help him.'

'And what is that supposed to mean?'

'It means that I'm asking for your help. I know very little about George Chapman except what everyone knows from reading the paper. To get him out of his predicament I need something more, something that might lead me to the heart of the problem.'

'And naturally you aren't in a position to tell me about his predicament,' Briles said. 'Believe me, Mr Klein, I've always been very fond of George and would do anything to help him. But unless I know what this is about, I'm afraid I won't be able to co-operate with you.'

'It wouldn't be ethical for me to talk about it. You know that, Professor. I'm only asking for some background so that I can locate myself and not waste time floundering around. But as to what I do with the information you give me, you'll just have to trust me.'

'Let me put it this way, Klein. George Chapman is a very important man to many people in this city and state. And important men, no matter how upright they may be in their private and public lives, are always vulnerable men. Until now you've said nothing to make me believe that you, or whoever it is you work for, are not planning to attack George in some way. You ask me to trust you. But how am I to know you haven't been lying to me from the moment you stepped into this office?'

'If you're interested in checking out my credentials, why don't you call Dave McBell in the DA's office? We used to work together there, and he knows the kinds of things I've been doing for the past five years. I think he would vouch for my honesty.'

'Mr Klein,' he said in his best lecturing voice, as if rebutting

a naïve remark by a student, 'I have no doubt that in the past you've performed honourably on numerous occasions. But I simply do not see what your past activities have to do with the matter at hand. People in your line of work are subject to all sorts of pressures and temptations, and you could very conceivably have been turned by the promise of money, power, or whatever it is you value most. I'm sorry, Mr Klein,' he concluded, leaning back and putting his fingertips together with a disdainful expression, 'but I'm afraid we'll have to terminate this talk.'

Strictly speaking, Briles was correct. I had not given him any solid proof that I was working in Chapman's interests. And it was true that Chapman was particularly vulnerable at this moment because of his political ambitions. On the other hand, I had not asked Briles any specific questions and certainly nothing that could have compromised him. When people are told that someone they know is in trouble, they are usually quick to offer help. But Briles had balked from the start, steering the conversation away from Chapman by challenging my motives. Not only was he reluctant to talk, he was lying. And doing a very poor job of it.

It's all a matter of details, coincidence, the chance gesture, the unconsciously spoken word. You have to be alert at every moment, on the look-out for the slightest note of discord, the most subtle hint that things are not what they seem to be. You go off in one direction hoping to find one small thing and instead find another thing that sends you off in yet another direction. If you're not careful, you can get lost in the labyrinth of other people's lives and never find a way out. But those are the risks. Once you get involved with human beings, there are no straight roads any more.

'You're a very impressive man, Professor Briles,' I said. 'A leader in your field, author of eleven books, an important figure on campus. But you forget that I'm not just some quaking undergraduate in here to ask your opinion of Weber's Puritan Ethic. You've sat here for the past fifteen minutes playing cat and mouse with me, refusing to answer the simplest questions. There wasn't any need. I came here to

get some help, and now you've made me think I've chanced on to something. As they used to say in the sixties, you're either part of the solution or part of the problem. And you certainly haven't been very eager to give me a solution. In fact, Professor, I've rarely encountered a more unconvincing liar than you are. It's a matter of public record that you're a close friend of George Chapman, that you've spent weekends with him and his wife in the country, that you've been to the opera with them, that you invited Chapman to give a talk here at Columbia a few months ago. You pretend that you're just a casual acquaintance, when all you had to say was that you didn't want to talk. I would have accepted that. But to lie first and then refuse to talk doesn't make sense unless you're trying to hide something.'

Briles sat there unmoving, indifferent, without the slightest trace of emotion. 'Is that all?' he finally said. His voice sounded like a machine.

'That's all. But you can expect more from me later.' I stood up. 'Don't bother to see me to the door.'

I left him there sitting at his desk in the sun-drenched room.

FOUR

I waved down a cab on Broadway and told the driver to take me to West Seventy-first Street. His name was J. Daniels, and he handled his hack like a failed bronco buster from a previous incarnation. He was about fifty, with crooked teeth and wild eyebrows that sat perched on his forehead like a pair of tiny forests. As we rattled and lurched our way downtown, I was thankful I had eaten a small breakfast.

We stopped for a light at 110th Street, and he said, 'Aren't you going to ask me?'

'Ask you what?'

'What nine out of every ten goddam people who step into this cab ask me.'

'I hear you talking. But the only thing I get is static.'

'The J in J. Daniels,' he said, as if any fool should have known. 'Everybody wants to find out what the J in J. Daniels stands for. Don't you want to ask me?'

'Not particularly.'

'Aw, come on, why don't you take a guess? It helps pass the time.' The light went green and we barrelled ahead.

'All right,' I said. 'I give up.'

'No, no, make a real guess. It's no fun if you don't try.'

He wasn't going to let go until I relented, so I finally decided to humour him. I wished I had been as persistent in my questioning of Briles.

'Since there's only one obvious answer,' I said, 'I suppose it can't be that. And if it's not Jack, then it's got to be something odd.' I paused for a moment. 'How about Jeremiah? You look like a man with a lot to complain about.'

'Wrong!' he bellowed, letting out an enormous laugh. 'You lose. It don't stand for nothing! My name is just plain J., period. My goddam parents couldn't think of anything to call

me.' His voice turned philosophical. 'But that's OK. What the hell do I care? You can call me Jack. Lots of people do.'

We made the rest of the trip in silence, and I didn't call him anything. The myth of the New York cab driver had never held much water in my experience. Cabbies are just people, and when they talk they say the same stupid things other people say. J. Daniels had come on with an original line, and now that the joke was over I didn't feel like hearing the rest of his repertoire. As I was climbing out of the cab at Seventy-first Street, he poked his head through the open window and gave me his parting shot.

'You know, mister,' he said, 'I've been driving a cab for twenty-three years, and not one person, not one goddam person has ever guessed what the J stands for.' He laughed his enormous laugh once again and sped off eastward into the jungle of New York traffic to look for his next victim.

I lived in one of those classic West Side buildings, a kind of Noah's Ark that housed almost every New York species in existence. There were white people, black people, yellow people, and several shades in between. There were families, couples of men and women, two couples of men, one couple of women, and people who lived alone. There were professional people, wage earners, and people who did not work. Among them were a poet, a journalist, a 300-pound soprano, two oboe students from Juilliard, a black homosexual art dealer, a dry cleaner, a post office clerk, a social worker, and a private investigator, to mention just a few. The whole operation was under the control of Arthur, the plump Puerto Rican superintendent. He had four kids and a wry sense of humour, and he took his job seriously. He was almost always around, either in the lobby or just outside the door, waiting with a baseball bat in his right hand and carefully scrutinizing every stranger who tried to enter the building. He cleaned up in tips at Christmas time.

I stopped at my mailbox in the lobby to collect some bills and junk mail and then rode the creaking brown-and-white speckled elevator to the ninth floor. My apartment had two dark rooms that overlooked the courtyard and a kitchen just

large enough for me to enter and exit if I remembered to hold my breath. They called it a kitchen nook, but the true word for it was cranny. For the past several years I had been telling myself that next week I was going to start looking for a better apartment, but I still hadn't managed to get around to it. I had probably grown too attached to the place to leave it.

I put on a record of one of the Mozart quartets dedicated to Haydn and made myself a ham and cheese sandwich on rye with two slices of gruyère, a leaf of Boston lettuce, and a spoonful of Poupon mustard. I took a bottle of Beck's beer from the refrigerator and carried everything out to the round table in the living room.

Ten minutes later I called Dave McBell.

'You ring none too soon,' he said. 'I was just about to walk out for lunch.'

'You don't need any lunch,' I answered. 'That's supposed to be for human beings. I thought you knew that only machines worked in the DA's office.'

'Well, this little machine needs a grease job, and then maybe a couple of beers to flush out the sludge.'

'Any word?' I asked.

'No problem. Your man Pignato has been around. Nothing too heavy, though. What you might call a bit player. He also seems to have a few dusty corners upstairs. But no history of violence. Been in and out of nut houses the past four or five years, has a wife and three kids.'

'What about Contini?'

'Patience, patience. I'm getting to it. Pignato's been clean for quite a while, since the accident with Chapman. Mainly he's a driver. The last time he was arrested it was for driving a truck with a headlight missing.'

'That doesn't sound too serious.'

'Yeah. But when they opened the truck they found about twenty thousand dollars' worth of black market cigarettes from North Carolina stashed in the back. The charges didn't stick, of course, but he was working for Contini. He's been on the payroll for fifteen years.'

'And before that?'

'The usual stuff. A few car snatches. Worked as the driver in a few hold-ups. Reform school as a kid. He's been in the can three times, but never for more than a few months.'

'Do you have an address?'

'The same town as before, Irvingville. 815 Seventeenth Street. His wife's name is Marie.'

'Thanks, Dave. I guess that should do it.'

'Good. Now maybe I can leave this place before my stomach crawls out of my body and strangles me.'

'Remember to watch the calories.'

'Yeah. And you remember to watch yourself, Max. Contini may be getting old, but he's still no pussycat.'

'Don't worry about me,' I said. 'I'm the last of the hard-boiled Yids.'

I didn't move from my chair. For a few minutes I just sat there, watching a couple of pigeons strut back and forth on the window-ledge outside. One of them, all puffed up with male pride, kept trying to mount the other, but the female managed to elude him each time he approached. Desire among pigeons is remorseless and robot-like. They seem compelled to do one thing again and again all their lives without showing the slightest awareness of what they are about. There is no true love among them as there is among sparrows. Pigeons are exemplary New Yorkers, and they display all the best-known characteristics of the city: sex without soul, gluttony, nastiness, and disease. In France they are bred with special care and eaten as a delicacy. But then the French are supposed to know how to enjoy life more than we do.

Things were breaking nicely for me so far. I had my first lead, and it seemed to be a good one. The important thing was to avoid rushing to conclusions. I had been toying with the idea that Chapman's accident had in fact been a deliberate attempt to murder him, but I was hesitant just now to consider this as anything more than a possibility. A hunch is not evidence, and I still had nothing tangible to take hold of. It was at this point that I had to begin earning the money that Chapman had given me.

I went over the names on Chapman's list and then put in a call to Abe Callahan, one of the Democratic Party leaders who had been touting Chapman as a candidate. He was one of the so-called new breed who looked, acted, and smelled very much like the so-called old breed. His secretary said he was in Washington and wouldn't be returning until Monday. I left my name and told her I would call back then.

My next call was to Charles Light, the owner of the Americans, and through his secretary I managed to set up an appointment with him for early the next day. I was a little surprised to be given the appointment so easily, but I chalked it up to the innate charm of my telephone voice. This was going to be my lucky day.

I dialled the number of my answering service to find out if there were any messages for me. There was only one. From Mrs George Chapman, and it was urgent. She was going to be waiting for me in my office at two thirty. I always left my office unlocked, and since there was no secretary, I had given the women at the answering service instructions to make appointments for me. I checked my watch. It was pushing two o'clock. If I hustled out of my apartment, I might get there just in time.

I carried my lunch plate to the kitchen and threw it into the sink with the other dirty dishes, telling myself I would take care of them when I got back. The cockroaches would be grateful, and I liked to stay on good terms with my tenants.

I went into the bathroom, splashed cold water on my face, straightened my tie, brushed some crumbs off my green corduroy jacket, and combed my hair. When I looked at myself in the mirror my face seemed eager; it was the face of a teenager getting ready to go out on a hot date. I supposed I was excited about meeting Judith Chapman. But that was only part of it. My case was beginning now, and I could feel the tension building up in the pit of my stomach. The adrenaline was flowing.

I was just about to leave when there was a knock on the door. It wasn't one of those polite, tentative knocks a neighbour gives when he wants to borrow the salt shaker, but

a loud, insistent banging that told me I wasn't going to make my two thirty appointment, no matter how hard I tried. They knew I was in there, and they didn't want to be kept waiting. My last thought before opening the door was to wonder how they had managed to get past Arthur downstairs.

There were two of them, as there always are. One of them was very big and the other was just big. Very Big was dressed in a blue and red Madras sport jacket, a purple tie, a yellow wash-and-wear shirt, and pale green double-knit slacks. It was a nightmare combination, like something cooked up by a demented circus barker. He was wearing wrap-around sunglasses, and the idiot smirk on his smooth, beefy face indicated that he was happy with his work. Big was slightly more distinguished. His synthetic brown suit looked as if he had debated over it a moment or two at the racks in Sears, and his powder blue 'American Bicentennial' tie showed that if nothing else at least he was a patriot. But I didn't like his eyes. They were the same colour as the tie and had that hard, hungry look eyes get when they've seen everything and keep wanting to go back for more. I hadn't been expecting anything like this to happen so quickly, and it scared me. Men of this sort never drop by for casual visits. They come with a purpose, and they usually don't leave until they have what they want. It was a dangerous situation, and they had caught me off guard. I told myself to stay calm.

It was Big who broke the ice. 'Max Klein?' he asked. It was a voice that had come straight from Newark by way of the Pulaski Skyway and then got lost in the traffic somewhere on Tenth Avenue.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm just the cleaning woman. Mr Klein is on vacation in Europe.'

'A funny guy,' said Very Big. He seemed pleased by this, as if it would make his visit more enjoyable.

'You'll have to excuse me, gentlemen,' I said. 'I'm already late for an appointment. Why don't you come back in about three years? We can talk about it then.'

I made a move to get through the door, but they stood there impassively, like two Easter Island statues.

'This won't take but a few minutes of your time, Mr Klein,' said Big. He was all business, and he wasn't giving me any choice.

'All right,' I said at last. 'Come on in. But mind you don't put your cigarettes out on the floor.'

'We don't smoke,' said Very Big in dead earnest.

I let them in. Big sat on the couch and I took a seat at the table. Very Big wandered around the room, inspecting the books and records. He made me think of a truck driver who had made a wrong turn and wound up in a museum by mistake.

'We know who you are,' Big began. 'So you don't have to play games with us. We know how you made a big stink in the DA's office a few years back over the Banks case. We know how you blabbed the whole thing to the papers when you quit. And we know that you don't have too many friends left in this city.' He sounded as if he had sat down and memorized his speech from 3 by 5 index cards.

'I'm glad you know these things,' I said. 'I wouldn't want to have any secrets from you. But I don't see what it has to do with the price of pizza in the Bronx.'

'It means we have more friends than you do, Klein. Which means you would be very stupid not to co-operate with us.'

'Let's hear it then. The suspense is killing me.'

Big leaned back on the couch and gave me one of those looks that are supposed to stop tigers cold in their tracks. The fact was he did a pretty good job of it. Lucky for me I wasn't a tiger.

'Stay away from George Chapman,' he said in a dry monotone.

'Oh, I see,' I said sarcastically. 'You barge in here and tell me the kind of company I should keep, and I'm supposed to nod my head and thank you for keeping me on the path of virtue.'

'Something like that,' he said.

Over in the corner by the stereo machine Very Big was studying the record I had been playing earlier. 'Who's this guy?' he asked, holding up the record jacket and looking at

Mozart's portrait on the cover. 'Looks like some kind of fag creep to me.'

'That guy, as you put it,' I said, 'has been dead for nearly two hundred years. At the age of three he had more intelligence in his kneecap than you have in your entire gorilla brain.'

'Shit,' said Very Big. 'You sure have a way with words.' He slipped the record out of its jacket, examined it carefully on both sides, and snapped it in two. He idly tossed the pieces on to the floor.

'For that,' I said, 'you'll languish in the ninth circle of hell for a thousand years.'

'Sorry,' he said, staring down at his open palms with feigned bewilderment. 'My hands must have slipped.'

'All right,' I said to Big, 'why don't you and your friend run along now. I've got your message. There's nothing more to discuss.'

'Yes, there is,' he said. 'I've given you the message, but you haven't given me an answer.'

Very Big went over to the bookcase, chucked a few books on to the floor, and then reached his long arm into the shelf and in one smooth motion swept off the rest of the books. They tumbled down, clattering on to the clear plastic top of the record player, and landed on the floor. Big paid no attention to these antics. It neither amused nor offended him. He had his job to do, and his partner had his.

'Jesus,' Very Big said. 'I don't know what's wrong with me today. I must be getting awfully clumsy.'

Very Big seemed to have aspirations as an interior decorator. No doubt he spent his free evenings combing the latest issue of *House Beautiful* for new ideas. In a matter of minutes he had nearly redesigned my entire living room, and by the time he was finished I was sure he would have it exactly as he wanted it. It was called the scatter approach, and it lent the room the kind of informal charm you find only in the best homes.

I let it pass. I wasn't going to allow anything to disturb me. This was my lucky day, and you're not supposed to tamper

with fate. I hadn't been born a Jew for nothing. You learn how to take the good with the bad from an early age. And you also learn how to count. No matter how I looked at it, two against one struck me as a convincing argument.

'Let's put it this way,' I said to Big, as Very Big got to work on the second bookshelf. 'Why the hell should I do anything you ask me to do? You tell me to drop a client I only started working for this morning, but I don't know you from a ping-pong ball. You forget that I'm trying to make a living, that I can't just take on a case one minute and quit the next. If you want to take bread out of my mouth, you'll have to offer me some cake instead.'

Big broke into a broad smile. I was talking a language he could understand now. We were both professionals, working on opposite sides perhaps, but nevertheless united by the same cynicism, the same philosophy that always gives the buck the last word.

'I knew you were one of those smart lawyer types, Klein,' he said. 'It pains me to see you get such a sweet deal, but I'm only the messenger boy around here.' He paused, as if with envy at my good fortune. 'You stay away from Chapman and you get five thousand, no questions asked.'

'And where does this money come from?'

'Like I said, no questions asked. Five grand seems like enough for no questions.'

'All right, no questions. How am I supposed to get the money?'

'In cash. Everything's been arranged.'

'And what if I decide not to?'

'You don't decide nothing. You just do. Am I making myself clear?'

'Not terribly. I still would like to know what happens if I send you back to your boss with a message to take those five bills and shove them up his ass.'

'You don't say that unless you want to wind up with a pair of broken legs.'

'But that's precisely what I am saying.'

Big was incredulous. It was beyond his comprehension that

anyone could even entertain the possibility of rejecting such an offer. Our momentary rapport had been destroyed, and he no longer knew where he stood with me. I was a stranger again.

'Are you saying no? Are you fucking saying no?' His voice had gone up a full octave.

'That's right, I'm saying no. And I don't want you to forget my message. Up his ass. The whole five thousand.'

I was taking a big risk, and I knew I would probably have to pay for it. But refusing the money was the only way I would be able to find out who was behind the offer. Someone was very serious about keeping me away from Chapman, and that meant I had even less time than I had thought. If I didn't work fast, Chapman's life wouldn't be worth the ink on a cancelled stamp.

'You're a dead man,' Big said. 'You just wrote yourself a ticket to the happy hunting ground.'

Very Big had stopped his wrecking operation and was watching Big with the expectant look of an attack dog. He was waiting for a sign.

'Let's get out of here, Angel,' Big said. 'This bastard's got to be the stupidest fuck in New York.'

'Yeah, I know,' Angel answered. 'He's a funny guy. I told you that when we got here, Teddy.' Angel grinned at me and then walked over to where I was sitting. 'He reminds me of one of them clowns with the big red noses. You know what I mean, Teddy? A real Bozo.' Without any warning he yanked me out of my chair and flung me like a beach ball on to the pile of books on the other side of the room. 'A regular barrel of monkeys. Just like one of them stand-up comedians on the TV. Only this guy ain't standing up so good right now.'

Before I had a chance to catch my breath he was on top of me again, jerking me back to my feet. I tried to double up into a crouch, but he was too quick for me, and by the time I realized I should give him my shoulder, he had sent a short, incredibly powerful right hand into my gut. It felt like the IRT had been derailed in my bowels. I went down, unable to breathe, unable to move. The whole world was turning black,

and whatever light was left in it sputtered fitfully, as cheerless as a candle in the rain.

'That's enough, Angel,' Teddy said. 'It's time to go.'

'I just wanted to give this creep a taste of things to come,' Angel said, standing over me with his fists still clenched. 'Something juicy to think about the next time he takes a crap.'

I didn't notice them leave. I was somewhere down at the bottom of the ocean looking for an iron lung. By the time I was able to breathe again, they had probably driven off in their car, stopped for a late lunch, and made it half-way back to Brooklyn. Or wherever it was they came from.

FIVE

It was after three thirty when I made it down to my office. I was a little surprised to find Judith Chapman still waiting for me. I had called the office from my apartment before leaving and no one had picked up the phone, which gave me the answering service again – and they had no new messages to report. I figured she had given up on me.

'I was late, too,' she said, turning around in her chair to greet me. It was the same chair her husband had sat in that morning. 'So I suppose I can't hold it against you.' She smiled with gentle irony, as if to say we were both guilty and therefore both innocent.

I sat down behind my desk and smiled back at her. I appreciated the way she had tried to put us on an equal footing.

'What can I do for you, Mrs Chapman? My answering service said it was urgent.'

I liked Judith Chapman's face. It wasn't pretty in the classical sense, perhaps not even beautiful, but compelling, the kind of face it's almost impossible to stop looking at. Her nose was a little too big, her jaw was too broad, and her lips were slightly too full. But somehow it all fitted together, and when you looked into her round brown eyes they almost startled you with their intelligence and sense of humour. She seemed to be one of those rare women who fit comfortably into themselves and the world, a woman who could go to the ballet one night and play poker with the guys the next night and find them equally enjoyable experiences. She was sophisticated but not brittle, and her dark wavy hair gave her a sensuousness you don't usually find in rich women. She was wearing a simple white knit dress with colourful embroidery

around the neck. There was little jewellery on her hands and wrists and only a touch of make-up around her eyes. She reached into her large brown leather bag and pulled out a Merit, which she lit with a sleek gold lighter before I had a chance to strike a match for her. She did it with the automatic gestures of someone who smokes a pack or two a day.

'It's about my husband, George,' she said. 'I know he came here this morning to see you, and I'm worried that something serious has happened.'

'Nothing serious has happened. Not yet. We talked about how we might keep it from happening.'

'Then there is something to worry about.' She looked as if whatever it was that was on her mind had been bothering her a lot longer than since this morning.

'Hasn't your husband talked to you about it?'

'My husband and I don't talk about much of anything to each other, Mr Klein.' There was no bitterness in her voice. It was simply a statement, a fact of life.

'If you didn't talk to your husband, then how did you find out he came here?'

She hesitated for a moment, as though trying to make a decision. I felt she was suddenly having second thoughts about coming to my office.

'Bill Briles told me.'

I leaned back in my chair and gazed up at the ceiling. In my most serenely innocent voice I asked, 'That wouldn't be Professor William Briles, would it? Member of the sociology department of Columbia University and author of some eleven books?' I swung my chair forward and grinned at her.

'Don't be sarcastic, Mr Klein,' she said with her first display of bad humour. 'You know who he is. You saw him yourself just a few hours ago.'

'What exactly did Briles tell you?'

'He called me at about noon in a total panic. He said you were conducting some kind of investigation involving George, that you had threatened him and said you were going to keep after him.'

'He wasn't particularly co-operative. I had the feeling he

was trying to hide something. And I'm a curious person. I like to know why people do the things they do.'

'Maybe he was scared.' Her voice had taken on an edgy, defensive tone.

'I only wanted to ask him a few questions that would help me to protect a friend of his.'

'That's exactly why he would be scared. Anything to do with George is rather difficult for Bill to deal with.'

'And why is that?'

Again she hesitated, as if afraid to say the wrong thing.

'It's complicated,' she said.

'That's all right. I'm in no rush. You can explain it to me.'

She took a deep breath to build up her courage. Then she leaned forward and stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray on my desk. As she spoke she continued to stare at the ashtray, as though she were speaking to it rather than to me. The dead cigarette was an uncritical audience.

'I don't suppose it matters now,' she said. 'Maybe it would be of some help if I told you.' She took another deep breath and waited for her body to relax. I could hear the rumblings of the afternoon traffic outside, the sound of water running in Dennis Redman's studio upstairs, the ubiquitous cooing of pigeons on the window-ledge, all the little noises that live inside the silences of the city. 'You see,' she went on, 'Bill Briles and I were lovers for a long time. That would probably explain why he was so nervous with you today. He just didn't know what you were after. I think we did a pretty good job of keeping it secret from the public. But you can never be sure.'

'You and your husband always come across as admirably devoted to each other,' I said. 'You're the model couple.'

'It's terrible, isn't it,' she said, 'living a lie, knowing you're a complete hypocrite. My marriage with George fell apart after three years. But we just went on, appearing in public together, pretending nothing had happened, and all the while leading separate lives.'

'When did the affair with Briles start?'

'About two years before George's accident.'

'And it went on the same way after the accident?'

'More or less. Bill and I stopped seeing each other for a while, but it wasn't really over. It was just a pause.'

'But it's over now.'

'Yes, we finally broke it off about six months ago. I decided to make a fresh start with George. He said he desperately wanted me back, and I believed him. Things were fine for a while, but then it all blew up in our faces again. George Chapman is an extremely difficult man to get along with, Mr Klein.'

'He told me this morning that he loved you very deeply, that you were the support of his life.'

'That's not unlike him. One of his greatest problems is that he always says the expected and conventional thing rather than reveal his emotions. He's always been like that, but even more so since the accident. It's difficult for me to talk about this. But you've got to understand that I was only a child when I married George. I was twenty-one, just out of college, and I thought he was the most extraordinary man I had ever met. I didn't know anything about baseball or what it was like to be a ball player's wife. When the season started, I hardly ever saw him. You must know something about athletes when they're on the road. George had a woman in every city. It took me a few years to figure it out, but he didn't really want a wife, he wanted me as a show-piece. I gave him a good image. That's why he pleaded with me to go back to him last winter. He was thinking of getting into politics, and he knew that a pretty wife is a great asset for a politician. It was also a way to avoid a political scandal if anyone ever found out about my relationship with Bill. George has a way of always playing both ends at once. He doesn't like to take risks.'

'I don't mean to pry,' I said, 'but didn't you ever think of getting a divorce?'

'Of course I did. Bill and I went to him several times, but he swore he'd kill us both. And I believed him. George has a great capacity for violence. Everything is so bottled up in him, it periodically explodes in terrible rages. He got used to the fact that Bill and I were lovers. He decided it was all right for me to see Bill – as long as no one else knew about it. It's

perverse, I know, but that's the way George is. I don't mean to make him out to be an evil man. He's a very complex and difficult person. In his own strange way I think he still loves me – to whatever extent he's capable of loving anyone. And in spite of everything, I find I still have some feeling for him. Pity . . . affection . . . I don't know what to call it. We've been through a lot together, and I suppose that creates a bond. And yet, I needed something more . . . I still need something more . . .'

I stood up from my chair, walked to the other side of the room, and sat down on the window-sill. I was puzzled why she had chosen to confide in me like this. After keeping her affair with Briles a secret for so long, it didn't make sense for her to talk about it with such candour. At the same time, I was pleased that she had opened up to me. I was hungry for information about Chapman, and in just a few minutes she had given me something that might have taken me weeks to discover on my own. I considered it a lucky break.

'You're a good listener, Mr Klein,' she said. 'I guess I've been wanting to tell this to someone for a long time.' She smiled with embarrassment. 'And you, as it turned out, were it.'

'You can call me Max,' I said. 'Everyone does. Even the people who think my name is Mud.'

'If you put it that way,' she said with another smile, this one a genuine show of warmth that made her eyes dance, 'then my name is Judy.'

We studied each other carefully, sizing each other up as human beings for the first time. The atmosphere in the office changed, suddenly and ineffably. We were no longer complete strangers. Something intimate had passed between us.

I went on looking her in the eyes.

'Tell me,' I said, 'has George had any affairs of his own since the accident?'

She shook her head. 'I don't think so. At least not that I know of.'

'Did the accident have any lasting physical effects . . . besides the loss of his leg?'

'If you're asking the question I think you are,' she said, 'the answer is no. George is perfectly capable of having sex.'

'They why doesn't he have it? I'm not talking about falling in love. I just mean someone to satisfy his needs.'

'George's needs are not like those of other men,' she said quietly. 'Even before the accident sex was more of a duty for him than a pleasure. I think he's afraid of it, afraid of the emotions it creates.'

I thought about that for a while, trying to fit it into the picture I had begun to form of Chapman. Things didn't necessarily make sense, but they were there, out in the open, and I had to live with them now and try to make them a part of me.

I said, 'Your husband came to see me this morning because he received a letter threatening his life.'

Judy Chapman looked at me as if I had just spoken to her in Chinese. 'I don't understand,' she said. 'What are you talking about?'

'Someone sent George a letter. The letter said that if George didn't do certain things, then George would be ushered from the world of the living. The only trouble is that George doesn't know what these things are. So that even if he wanted to co-operate, he can't. And that puts him in a rather precarious position.'

'Oh, my God,' she said. Her voice was barely audible. 'Oh, my God.'

'I have nothing definite to go on yet, but I'm working on a lead that might turn out to be fairly solid.' I paused, giving her a little time to compose herself. 'Does the name Victor Contini mean anything to you?'

'He's the father of George's lawyer, Brian Contini.'

'Have you ever met him?'

'No, never.'

'What about George?'

'He never mentioned him as far as I can remember.' She looked up at me with a quizzical expression. 'Isn't Victor Contini some kind of mobster?'

I nodded. 'One of the worst.'

She held her eyes on me for a moment, as if hoping I would break into a smile and tell her it was all a joke. When my expression didn't change, she said, 'I can't believe this is happening. It's just not real.'

I didn't say anything to reassure her. Telling her that it was all going to work out in the end would have been a lie, and I didn't want to make false promises. It was real, and because it was real anything could happen.

'Tell me a little about George's finances,' I said. 'Is he spending more than he brings in?'

'No, just the opposite. He has more money than he knows what to do with. The book sold very well, and there's still quite a bit coming in from that. Then there are the talks he gives on the lecture circuit, the investments he's made, and the salary he still gets from the Americans. He signed a long-term contract before the accident, you know.'

'Yes, I know. For eight years.'

'That money would be more than enough. It amounts to a considerable fortune, more than most people make in their whole lives.'

'Two hundred and fifty thousand a year, isn't it?'

'Not quite. But you're pretty close.'

'And what about Charles Light? I would imagine he'd resent parting with all that money every year without getting anything in return.'

'There's no question that he resents it. But he's bound by the contract, and there's nothing he can do about it. For the first few years he was very persistent about trying to arrange some kind of compromise settlement, but George stuck to his guns, and finally he gave up.'

'Is there anyone else besides Light who could possibly have a grudge against George?'

'I'm sure there are many people who dislike George. He has a very strong personality and that rubs some people the wrong way. But that doesn't mean they would want to kill him.'

'What about William Briles?'

She stopped short and looked at me closely. 'Impossible.

Bill Briles is not that kind of man. For one thing he abhors the idea of violence. For another, he's too afraid of George even to consider such a thing.' She spoke incisively, as if to banish the thought from my mind. It seemed that she was trying to sweep Briles off the stage once and for all, and I wondered if she was doing it for her own benefit or if it was an indirect way of telling me she was available. This wasn't the moment for me to try to find out.

'One last question,' I said. 'Has George ever spoken to you about why he was driving on a small country road the night of the accident?'

The question confused her. She had no idea what I was talking about. 'What difference in the world would it make what kind of a road he was on?'

'It strikes me as odd, something of a loose end. And anything that doesn't fit into a normal pattern I have to pull out and examine as closely as I can.'

'But what does the accident of five years ago have to do with what's happening now?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'That's what I'm going to try to find out.'

Judy Chapman sat lost in thought, slowly shaking her head back and forth. It seemed that the whole business was finally beginning to sink in. 'Poor George,' she muttered, almost to herself. 'Poor, poor George.'

'Will I be able to reach you at home?' I asked. 'I'll probably want to call you if I chance on to anything relevant.'

'Yes, I'll be home. And you can always leave a message on the machine if I happen to be out.'

She got up to leave. I found myself liking the way she carried herself in her lean body. Her clothes didn't form the kind of armour around her that they do around some attractive women. They seemed to enhance her presence, to remind you that she was alive inside them and didn't have to flaunt herself to be desirable. She made it all seem so effortless. I was beginning to wonder if I had ever met anyone like her.

As we were about to walk out of the door towards the

elevator, she turned around and looked back into the room at the nine Towers of Babel on the walls.

'I'll say one thing about your decorations,' she deadpanned. 'They don't compromise.'

'I'm a guy who doesn't like too many things,' I said. 'So when I discover a good thing, I like to hang on to it.'

We were talking to each other in a strange, truncated code, feeling each other out with an almost Victorian delicacy. No word was exactly what it seemed to be, and even the most trivial remark had a double meaning, a hidden purpose. She smiled at me with amusement. I had just paid her a compliment, and she had recognized it for what it was. It made me glad to know we were on the same wavelength.

We waited for the elevator in silence. When it finally came she touched me on the arm and said, 'Take care of yourself, Max.'

I told her I would.

SIX

Luis Ramirez was the day man at the Big Apple parking lot across the street. I had been keeping my 1971 Saab there for the past five years and in that time I had come to know Luis fairly well. He was a small thin man in his early thirties who always wore a blue hooded sweatshirt, and he spent his spare moments in a dilapidated wooden shack about the size of a telephone booth reading every baseball publication known to man – from the *Sporting News* to *Sport*, the *Baseball Digest*, the *Baseball Monthly*, the *Baseball Quarterly*, and Street and Smith's *Baseball Annual*. Whenever he had a car to move he would rev up the engine until it roared, back out with a screech of rubber and flying gravel, and manoeuvre the car into position with the abrupt, speeded-up motions of an old silent film. In the five years I had known him he had fathered three sons, and each one had been named after a different Latin ball player: Luis Aparicio Ramirez, Minnie Minoso Ramirez, and Roberto Clemente Ramirez. Whenever I saw him we talked baseball. His knowledge of the game was staggering. What Berenson was to art and Tovey was to music, Luis Ramirez was to baseball.

'Hey, big guy,' he said to me, looking up from the list of Pacific Coast League averages on the back pages of the *Sporting News*, 'you want your wheels?'

'That's right,' I said, 'all four of them. But from the way the car is sandwiched in there, it'll probably take you twenty minutes to get it out.'

'You kidding?' He was happy to take on my challenge. 'Three minutes. You watch. No more than three minutes.'

He grabbed the keys from the peg-board on the wall, and I watched him go into his Keystone Cop routine with a Ford

Mustang, a VW bug, and a new Chrysler. By the time the dust had settled, a good four and a half minutes had gone by.

He opened the door of my Saab for me and laughed, 'What I tell you, man? Four minutes. When I give a time I always make it. Four and a half minutes!'

I got into the car and rolled down the window. 'Who's going to win the game tonight, Luis?'

His face became serious. 'It depends. If they throw Middleton, the Americans have a chance. He likes this weather. But his slider's no good yet. If they go with Lopez, then forget it, man. That dude can't keep the fastball away from those Detroit hitters. I say Detroit wins, but it'll be close. Six to four, seven to five, something like that.'

If Luis Ramirez had been a betting man, he probably could have spent the rest of his life on a golf course in Southern California driving around in one of those electric carts. But he was a purist, and the idea of making money from baseball upset him. You didn't try to turn an art form into a business. It would kill the pleasure.

I pulled out of the lot and started to make my way uptown to the Lincoln Tunnel. It was four thirty, a bad time to contend with New York traffic, much less to try to get out of the city. But I didn't want to wait until tomorrow. I needed to get hold of Pignato right away.

Under normal conditions it's a thirty-five- or forty-minute drive to Irvingville. I had grown up in New Jersey and was familiar with the terrain. After you get out of the tunnel you take one of those highways that's given New Jersey its reputation as armpit of the Western world. Although there are no more pigs in Secaucus, there is enough industrial stench along the way to make you think you've travelled through a time warp back into nineteenth-century England. Thick white smoke charges out of giant factory chimneys, polluting the grotesque landscape of swamps and abandoned brick warehouses. You see hundreds of seagulls circling hills of garbage and the rusted hulks of a thousand burned-out cars. In a low mood it's enough to make you want to live as a

hermit in the Maine woods, feeding off wild berries and the roots of trees. But people are wrong to say this is a preview of the end of civilization. It is the essence of civilization, the exact price we pay for being what we are and wanting what we want.

The traffic was heavy when I reached the Garden State Parkway, but it moved steadily. It wasn't hot enough yet to be the season of overheated radiators and bald tyre blow-outs, and the beautiful weather seemed to urge the drivers on. They probably were hurrying home to spend the rest of the spring afternoon in their backyards planting tomatoes or drinking beer, rushing to flee the scene of their monotonous days and make a stab at pretending to be alive. It was twenty to six when I reached the ramp for the Irvingville exit.

Like most of the towns and small cities around Newark, Irvingville was a down-at-the-heels working-class community. Its better days were behind it, and even those had been nothing to rave about. Unlike the neighbouring cities, however, all of which had become predominantly black in the past twenty years, Irvingville was still almost completely white. It was a little alcove of reactionary fervor in the midst of a changing world. Back in the thirties there had been a Nazi Bund in Irvingville, and its cops were well-known to be the most brutal in the county. The town was inhabited by Poles and Italians, and most of them had never had anything better than gruelling factory jobs and desperate, exhausted lives. These were the people who stood just a half-step away from the welfare office, a half-step away from the black man's poverty, and because of this threat many of them found release in a particularly vicious kind of racism. It was a rough place, a depressing place. You didn't want to be there unless you had to.

Seventeenth Street was a neighbourhood of two-family houses bravely trying to keep a smile on its face as it went under. Most of the houses were covered with gravelly maroon or green tar shingles, and many of them had flower boxes in the windows filled with bright red geraniums. Old people sat on the porches and gazed out at the kids swarming

over the sidewalks below, shouting and screaming at their games.

The Pignato house was no better or worse than any of the other houses on the street. I walked up the rickety steps, saw their name on the black tin mailbox beside the left-hand door, and knocked. Nothing happened for thirty seconds. I knocked again, this time much harder. From inside the house a woman's voice called out wearily, 'I'm coming, I'm coming.' It sounded as though she expected it to be one of the neighbourhood kids coming to beg for a cookie.

I heard the sound of slippered feet padding towards me, and then the door jerked open. Marie Pignato was a dark, sallow-faced woman in her early forties. She stood at about five three, her stomach and voluminous hips bulging in tight black stretch pants. There were fluffy pink mules on her feet, and she wore a yellow smock-like blouse with a small silver cross hanging from a chain around her neck. She had that washed-out expression that told you she had stopped waiting for her ship to come in a long time ago. From the dark bags under her eyes it looked as if she hadn't had a decent night's sleep in years.

'Mrs Pignato?'

'Yes?' Her voice was tentative, unsure of itself. She seemed a little taken aback to find a stranger standing at her door.

'My name is Max Klein. I'm an attorney representing the Graymoor Insurance Company.' I took out one of my old attorney-at-law cards and handed it to her. 'Do you think it would be possible for me to see Mr Pignato?'

'We don't want no insurance,' she said.

'I'm not selling insurance, Mrs Pignato. I represent the insurance company. It seems that your husband has come into some luck and I'd like to tell him about it.'

She looked at my face, then down at the card in her hand, and then back at my face. 'What are you, some kind of lawyer?'

'That's right,' I said with a smile, 'I'm a lawyer. And if I could just see your husband for a few minutes, I'm sure you wouldn't regret it.'

'Well, Bruno isn't in,' she said, still sceptical, but softening.

'Do you know when he'll be back?'

She shrugged. 'How do I know? Bruno comes and goes, you can't keep no tabs on him. He's on disability, you know, so he don't have to work.' She made it sound as though a job was the only thing that kept a man coming home every night.

'Was he around today?'

'Yeah. He was here before. But then he went out.' She paused, shook her head, and sighed, as if trying to cope with the behaviour of a difficult child. 'Sometimes he don't come back for days at a time.'

'I hear your husband hasn't been well.'

'No, he ain't been well. Not for four or five years, ever since his accident. They have to take him away every once in a while for a rest.'

'What kind of accident was that?'

'With his truck. There wasn't nothing wrong with him. But mentally he ain't been the same since.'

'Do you know where I might find him, Mrs Pignato? This is rather important, and I'd hate to leave without trying to find him.'

'Well, you could go over to Angie's on Fifteenth and Grand. He sometimes goes there for a beer.'

'I think I will,' I said. 'Thank you for your help.'

I turned around to leave.

'Hey, mister,' she said, 'you forgot your card.' She held it out to me, not knowing what to do with it. It was a foreign object to her, and she almost seemed afraid of it.

'That's all right, you can keep it.'

She looked down at the card once again. 'Is there going to be money in this for us?' she asked timidly, not wanting to expect too much.

'There's money,' I said. 'I don't think it's a lot, but I'm sure there will be something.'

I smiled at her and again she looked down at the card. It seemed to exert a magical force over her, as if it were somehow more real than I was.

Fifteenth and Grand was only a few blocks away, but I

decided to take my car. I didn't want to leave it there with its New York licence plates as a temptation for the kids on Seventeenth Street. Driving along with the window down I passed more rows of two-family houses, a vacant lot filled with weeds and stray dogs, and a school yard in which a pick-up softball game was going on. The pitcher had just released the ball and the batter was drawing back his arms to swing as I went by, but before I could see what happened I was gone, my view blocked by the brick wall of the school. It was a moment frozen in time, and the image of the white ball hanging in the air stayed with me, like a vision of eternal expectation.

The neighbourhood became more commercial on Grand Avenue, and I found Angie's Palace sitting between a liquor store and a corner Gulf station. I parked my car a few doors down in front of a beauty parlour. A red and blue hand-painted sign in the window announced: 'Dolores is Back'. I hoped she wouldn't regret her decision.

In spite of its name, Angie's Palace was just a local bar, like a thousand others on a thousand streets like this one. Neon beer signs in the window, peeling green paint on the façade, and a battered red door that had been pushed open by a million thirsty hands. Over the door there was a sign displaying two tilted martini glasses with bubbles coming out of them. The lettering for the word 'Lounge' had been reduced to a dismal L U G.

It was dark inside, like the inside of a fish's brain, and it took a few moments for my eyes to adjust. The only moving things in the bar were the undulating purple lights of the juke-box, and they danced with incongruous gaiety as a mournful song of rejection and despair poured from the machine. There were only five or six customers in the place. Two of them, dressed in the grey uniforms of telephone repairmen, sat hunched over their beers at the bar talking about the relative merits of BMWs and Audis. A few others were sitting alone at wooden tables in the room reading copies of the *Newark Star Ledger*. The bartender, dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt and a white apron, looked like a

former defensive tackle who had gone to fat reminiscing over too many beers with his customers.

I went up to the bar and ordered a Bud. When the bartender returned with the beer and a glass, I put down a dollar and said, 'I'm looking for Bruno Pignato. His wife said I might find him here.'

'You're not a cop, are you?' It was a matter-of-fact question, and he wasn't trying to make an issue of it. But he had his customers to protect, and he didn't know my face.

'No, I'm a lawyer. I just want to talk to him.'

The bartender looked me over, testing me with his eyes, and then gestured to the back corner of the room. A man was sitting there at a table with a full glass of beer in front of him and staring off into space.

'Thanks,' I said. I picked up my drink and walked over.

Because of the name Bruno I had been imagining a large, powerfully built man. But Pignato was small and frail, hardly bigger than a jockey. His dark curly hair had receded a third of the way back on his head, and his face had the pointy, bug-eyed look of an underground creature. He had almost no chin, which made his long nose seem to jut out even further than it did, and every inch of him exuded unhappiness. Bruno Pignato gave off the smell of failure in the same way that George Chapman gave off the smell of success. He was wearing an inappropriately loud Hawaiian shirt, and his skinny white arms had the pathetic, unused look you find in hospital patients. I realized I would have to throw out the tactics I had been planning for our encounter. I sat down at the table.

'Hello, Bruno. My name is Max Klein. Your wife told me you would be here.'

He turned and looked at me with indifferent eyes. 'Hi, Max. Have a drink.'

'I don't want to take up much of your time, Bruno. But I do have a few questions I would like to ask you.'

'Sure, Max. What can I do for you?'

'I'd like to talk to you about five years ago and what happened to you the night of your accident.'

His placid face became troubled. It was as if I had pushed a button, automatically changing his mood. Any person with normal feelings would have stopped there and not tried to press him. But I was working on a case, and a man's life was at stake. I hated myself for what this conversation might do to Pignato. But even so, I went on with it.

'That was bad,' he said, 'very bad. A guy got hurt that night real bad.'

'Yes, I know, Bruno. Real bad.'

'Do you know who that guy was?' His voice was beginning to waver out of control. 'George Chapman. The baseball player.' He stared down at the table and drew in his breath. 'Christ, could he play ball.'

'Can you tell me how it happened, Bruno?'

He shook his head despondently, trying not to remember. 'I don't think I want to talk about it. I don't like to talk about it any more.'

'I know it's hard, Bruno. But it's important for you to try. Victor Contini wants to do something bad to George Chapman again, and unless you help me he's going to get away with it.'

Pignato's eyes flickered with recognition. He studied me carefully for the first time and then said in a querulous voice, 'I don't think I know you, do I? What do you want to talk against Mr Contini for? He's a great man, Mr Contini. You shouldn't say nothing against him.'

'I'm not saying anything against him, Bruno. I'm only saying that I need your help. You don't want anything bad to happen to George Chapman again, do you?'

'No,' he said submissively, easing back into his torpor. 'But I swear I didn't want him to get hurt. I mean, that guy could sure hit the ball, couldn't he?'

'What happened that night, Bruno? What did they tell you to do? Believe me, it's very important.'

'They didn't tell me to do nothing, really. They just wanted me to stop on the road so they could put some stuff in the truck. I don't know, I can't remember too good. But Mr Contini was always real nice to me.'

'Did they ever come with the stuff?'

'What stuff is that?'

'Did they ever come with the stuff they said they were going to put in the truck?'

'I don't think so.' Pignato looked into his hands, as if the answer were somehow waiting for him there. 'But I don't remember too good any more.'

There was a long silence. I took out a fifty-dollar bill from my wallet and put it on the table in front of him.

'Here, Bruno, I'd like you to have this?'

He picked up the money and examined it closely, in much the same way his wife had examined my card earlier. After turning it around for a while, he put it back on the table.

'What do you want to give me this for?'

'Because you've been a big help to me.'

He hesitated, then picked up the bill and looked at it again. He was thinking, trying to come to a decision. After a moment he slapped the money on the table and pushed it away at arm's length.

'I don't think I want to take your money,' he said.

'If you don't want it, why don't you give it to your wife? I'm sure she would like to have it.'

'Marie? What's this got to do with her?' He was becoming petulant. 'I thought we were having a talk. You know, man to man.'

'That's right, Bruno. Man to man.'

'Then why do you want me to give the money to Marie? I don't want to give her money,' he shouted. He picked up the fifty-dollar bill and with hasty, violent motions tore it into little pieces. 'It's not right for you to make me give money to Marie.'

I had unintentionally hit a raw nerve. He had transferred much of his resentment against himself and his illness to his wife, the person who took care of him. It was a humiliating situation for him, an impossible situation for her. I hated to think of what daily life was like for them.

'Don't give it to her, then,' I said. 'You don't have to do anything you don't want to do.'

'That's right,' he said, 'I don't have to do nothing.' It sounded as though he were making a general defence of his life.

I had hoped the fifty dollars would make him more willing to talk, but I had made a mistake. With the uncanny perception of many schizophrenics, he had seen through my gesture, and it had put him on his guard. I would have to try again some other time. At least I had made a start.

'I'm going to leave now, Bruno,' I said. 'I don't think we should talk about these things any more today.'

He stared at me with bewilderment and hatred, his mouth quivering. 'I don't like you,' he said. 'You're a no-good person.'

I stood up from my seat and started to walk away from the table.

'You're a bad man,' he shouted after me. 'I hate you! You're a bad man!'

Everyone in the bar was staring at me, watching me in the same cold and curious way you look at an animal in the zoo. I just kept walking and didn't turn around. When I got to the street and started towards my car, I could hear that Pignato had followed me outside.

'You're a bad man!' he kept shouting in his high, broken voice. 'You're a bad man!'

I reached my car and unlocked the door to get in. I turned around for a last look and saw him standing in front of Angie's Palace, no longer screaming at me, but at the whole world, his tiny white body in those ridiculous clothes weaving back and forth in the dusk like an emaciated bird without wings.

SEVEN

In the five years since the break-up of our marriage Cathy and I had gradually learned how to become friends again. Once the bitterness wore off, we both came to realize that we still meant something to each other. But that had taken time. The marriage had fallen apart because of me, because of a job I didn't believe in, and I could hardly blame Cathy for leaving me when she did. I had almost goaded her into it, in some way secretly trying to sabotage the marriage – as if I had to prove my life really was in a shambles before I could begin to change it. I wanted to feel sorry for myself, and I wound up doing a very good job of it. Cathy took a job as a music teacher in a private school for girls and refused to accept any help from me. We weren't even tied together by the usual alimony string. Although I told myself that I knew better, I couldn't help feeling hurt by this as yet another rejection. Not even my money was good. The day of the divorce was probably the low point of my life.

Things didn't start to improve for me until a few months later when I finally convinced myself that I hadn't been cut out to be a lawyer after all and went into detective work on my own. The Banks case gave me a convenient excuse to get out from under as Assistant District Attorney.

Jo Jo Banks was a twelve-year-old black boy from Harlem who had been shot and killed by a thirty-seven-year-old white cop by the name of Ralph Winter. Winter claimed the boy had pulled a gun on him. As in most of these cases, the matter probably would have ended there. Winter would have been given a brief suspension and everyone eventually would have forgotten about it. But Jo Jo Banks's father, as it turned out, was no elementary school janitor willing to resign himself to his son's death as the natural consequence of

being black and poor. James Banks worked as a journalist for the *Amsterdam News*, and he wasn't about to let the public forget that his son had been murdered in cold blood one Saturday afternoon by a drunken off-duty cop. As the pressure started mounting on the police department, Banks suddenly found himself accused of pushing drugs. Thirty thousand dollars' worth of heroin was discovered in his apartment. When the case came up, I was given the assignment of prosecuting him. I refused. And later that same day I quit. Winter was guilty, Banks had been framed, and I didn't want to be part of a police snow job on the city. I gave quite a few interviews to the papers that week, and it did me a lot of good to get things off my chest. It didn't matter that every cop in the city hated my guts and that the DA considered me a left-wing subversive. I had done it according to my own rules, and my self-esteem had been restored. Six months later Winter was kicked off the force for another incident and wound up drifting into construction work. He died eighteen months after that when he fell off a steel girder on the twenty-first floor of an office building that was going up on Third Avenue. He had been drunk on the job.

The day after the story of my resignation hit the papers Cathy called to congratulate me. We had a pleasant talk, and it was the first time in more than a year that we had spoken to each other without quarrelling. We had reached a kind of emotional truce, and I felt we were both finally cured of all the resentments that had followed the divorce. It was the moment for us to forget the past, to walk out of each other's lives for good. If it hadn't been for our little boy, Richie, we probably never would have seen each other again. But he was there, and I kept coming around every week to see him. Cathy had never been very convinced of my abilities or dedication as a father, and in the beginning she was always out when I came to pick up Richie, leaving her mother to take care of him before I got there and after I dropped him off. It took her a while to understand that I cared about him as much as she did. When that happened, we started to trust each other again.

For the past eight or ten months all three of us had been having dinner together every Wednesday night. Cathy had decided it would be good for Richie if he could see both of us at the same time. Relations between us had become warmer, more relaxed, and she figured we could do it without too much strain. We could. We had been through the wars together, and the friendship that had come out of it meant a great deal to both of us. We counted on each other now for the kinds of things no one else could give us. But at the same time, neither one of us wanted to get too close, to presume too much. We were afraid of hurting ourselves and destroying what we had managed to build up again. We never asked each other whom we were seeing, whom we were sleeping with. We got together because of Richie and because we liked being together. But we had no holds over each other.

Richie was nine years old now. Not long ago he had been into dinosaurs. After that it was bugs, and soon after that Greek mythology. One day last summer we went for a drive in my car, and when we returned to the parking lot Richie got into a conversation about baseball with Luis Ramirez. Luis took Richie into his shack and showed him his baseball books and magazines. It was like being initiated into a mystical universe of arcane numbers, obscure personalities, and cabalistic strategies, and Richie became hooked. Luis became his Virgil, his guide through this land of gods, demi-gods, and mortals, and an outing with me was no longer complete for Richie unless he could have his conference with Luis in the parking lot. Richie had memorized two thirds of the *Baseball Encyclopedia* I had given him for his birthday, and he rarely went anywhere without his collection of baseball cards.

It was quarter to nine when I rang the bell at the East Eighty-third Street apartment. Richie answered the door in his pyjamas.

'Mom says the dinner's ruined,' he announced.

'I hope you didn't wait for me,' I said.

'She didn't let me. I had a hamburger and spinach at six thirty.'

Cathy appeared in the living room. She was wearing blue jeans and a light grey sweater with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows. Her long blonde hair hung loose, falling down to her shoulders, and I was a little startled by how young she looked. My stomach had begun to ache with the after-effects of Angel's punch, and I was feeling particularly old and worn out. For a moment I imagined I had come to visit my daughter and grandson. But when Cathy came up and kissed me on the cheek I saw that she looked tired around the eyes, and it reassured me. It somehow meant that she had been marked by this day too, that the two of us were travelling through life at the same pace. I wondered what we would be like in thirty years.

'We'd pretty much given up on you,' she said.

'I'm sorry,' I said, trying to think of a plausible lie. 'I thought I was going to make it, but there was a big accident on the Garden State Parkway.'

'Was anybody killed?' Richie asked. He was at an age when the thought of violent death was exciting, as unreal as an explosion on TV. I wondered if he would still find it so fascinating if one day I suddenly didn't show up any more.

'Nobody killed,' I said. 'But a lot of smashed-up cars.'

'Boy,' he said, trying to imagine the scene. 'I wish I could have been there.'

I put the bottle of Beaujolais I had brought on the coffee table and took off my jacket.

'There's not much to eat,' Cathy said. 'I had everything ready for six thirty. But it's all turned to leather now.'

'What was it called before it expired?'

'Veal *saltimbocca*.'

'And now you're going to punish me by never making it again.'

'That's right,' she said, half-smiling and half-annoyed at having her efforts go to waste. 'From now on you get only TV dinners.'

We settled on a meal of odds and ends. Lentil soup, a tin of pâté, salad, and some cheese. Beginnings and endings, as Cathy said, with nothing in between. Richie was allowed to

stay up past his normal bedtime, and he sat with us at the table with a glass of milk and a pile of graham crackers. It was difficult for Cathy and me to say much of anything to each other, since Richie had decided he was going to run the show tonight. We were all going to play Baseball Quiz, and he was the master of ceremonies. The only problem was that his questions were impossible to answer. Who was the last player on the Cleveland Indians to win the American League batting championship? Bobby Avila, 1954. Who led the National League in stolen bases more times – Maury Wills or Lou Brock? Brock, eight times. Wills led six. And on and on. It seemed it was never going to end.

'I think you've proved to us,' Cathy said at last, 'that you know more about baseball than anyone else in this room.'

'That's not saying much,' he offered modestly. 'The day I know more than Luis, then I'll have something to brag about.'

'I'm sure you've already passed him,' I said. 'After all, he has a job to go to and a family to support, and he doesn't have as much time as you do for all this stuff.'

'Well, I have to go to school,' Richie said, 'and that takes a big chunk out of my day.'

He realized his mistake almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, but it was too late. Cathy had been willing to let his bedtime slide a little, but now that the subject had come up, he was a doomed man. After some feeble protests, including a statement that Einstein slept only four hours a night, he gave in without much of a struggle. It was quarter past ten.

I supervised him as he went through the motions of brushing his teeth and washing his face. He dealt with the water in that tentative way kids go about things when they don't fully believe in what they're doing. When I got him into bed and asked him if he wanted me to go on with *Treasure Island*, he said he'd grown tired of waiting for me to finish it and had gone on and read the end himself. He wanted to talk instead. I had bought tickets for Saturday's game at the Stadium, and he was having trouble thinking about anything else. It was going to be his first trip to a major league game.

'When we go to the game,' he asked, 'are we going to be on television.'

'The game is on television. But chances are they won't show us.'

'I told my friend Jimmy I was going to be on television. He'll think I'm a liar.'

'All you have to do is show him your ticket stub,' I said. 'That will prove you were there. It's not your fault if the cameras don't pick up your face.'

That seemed to reassure him. 'Are we going to a double-header?' he asked.

'No, only one game. But that should be enough. If there were two, you'd probably wind up in the hospital with stomach poisoning. Those hot dogs are lethal.'

'Mom doesn't let me eat hot dogs,' he said glumly. 'But I think they're pretty good.'

'Your mother is a smart lady, Richie. You should do what she tells you.'

He looked at me with sleepy eyes and said, 'Do you love Mom, Dad?'

'Yes, very much,' I said.

'Then why don't you come back and live with us?'

'We've talked about this before, Richie. It just can't be. That's the way it is.'

'I know. I was only asking.' His eyes were closed now, but then he opened them again one last time. 'I don't understand grown-ups,' he said. 'I don't understand them at all.'

'I don't either, Richie.'

I sat there watching him sleep for a few minutes. When I got back to the living room, Cathy had already finished the dishes and was sitting in a chair beside the piano smoking one of her infrequent after-dinner cigarettes. I opened a new bottle of Beaujolais and sat down on the couch. I liked sitting in that room. Cathy had arranged it in a way that didn't impose itself on you, that made you feel the walls and furniture and pictures were somehow trying to work for you and put you at your ease. The fact that she always kept a good supply of wine on hand didn't hurt either.

We talked for a while about some of the things that had been happening to us in the past week. Cathy said the school year had been a difficult one and that she was looking forward to the summer vacation in six weeks. I told her about my plans to go to Paris and how I had delayed them because of a new case I was working on. When we were half-way through the bottle of Beaujolais she got up from her chair, came over to the couch, and curled up with her head in my lap. It was her first gesture of physical affection towards me in over five years.

'I've got to talk to you, Max,' she said. 'I need your advice about something.'

I stroked her soft blonde hair with my hand. Her body seemed tense, and she tucked herself into a foetal position, the way a child does at night in a strange house.

'Why do we have to talk?' I said. 'I like being slightly drunk on this couch with your head on my lap.'

'I have a decision to make, and I don't know what to do.'

'You've made a lot of decisions in the past five years without my help. Most of them have been good ones.'

'This is different. And I'm scared that I'm about to make a big mistake.'

'The last time you were scared of anything,' I said, 'was the day you forgot your lines in the fourth-grade play.'

'No, I really am scared, Max.' She hesitated. 'You see, someone wants to marry me. And I just don't know what to do.'

It was a little like being thrown into a freezing river in the middle of December. Every time I tried to come up for air I kept banging my head on a piece of floating ice. One voice in me was frantically saying that this was none of my business, that she could do whatever she liked, and another was trying to persuade me to get up and smash everything in the room.

'I think maybe you've come to the wrong person for that kind of advice, Cath,' I said. That was about the best I could manage.

'I know, Max. It's not fair. But there's no one else I can turn to.'

'Who's the lucky man?' I asked. 'Do you love him? Is he rich? Will he offer you a life of leisure and distinction?'

'No, he's not rich. He's a teacher, an English professor at the University of New Hampshire, and he loves me very much.'

'But do you love him?'

'I think so. But I'm not sure.'

'If you're not sure, then maybe you should wait.'

'But if I wait, I might blow the whole thing. And I keep thinking it would be good for Richie. Good for him to have a man around all the time. Good for him to live in the country away from all this New York madness.'

'And what does Richie say?'

'He says to me, "Mom, if it will make you happy, then I'll be happy." I don't know where he picked up that line. Probably from some old movie on TV. I don't really know how he feels.'

'It sounds like it's up to you.'

'I know. And I know I should probably go ahead with it. But I just keep thinking . . .' She let her sentence hang in the air. We didn't say anything for half a minute.

'Thinking what?' I asked.

'I don't know . . . It's hard for me to say it.' She paused again. When she spoke, her voice sounded 1,000 miles away. 'That maybe you and I could eventually get back together again.'

'Would you want that, Cathy?'

'I've thought about it a lot lately. Deep down inside, I think that's really what I want.'

'And you're able to forget everything that happened five years ago?'

'I'll never forget it. It's just that we're different now. We've finally grown up.'

This was one of the most difficult conversations of our lives, and we were both afraid to look at each other, as if eye contact would break the mood and prevent us from speaking our thoughts. And speaking honestly was crucial now; everything depended on it. Cathy kept her head buried in my

lap, and I stared out at the light switch beside the doorway to the kitchen, somehow hoping it would provide me with the words I needed to say.

'You're not thinking about the work I do now, Cathy,' I said. 'You don't know what it would be like waiting up for me every night, worrying about whether you were going to have to go down to the morgue at three a.m. to identify my body. That's no kind of life for you and Richie.'

'Other women live with it,' she said. 'Think of policemen's wives. They go through the same thing. We're all going to die someday, Max. Life is full of risks, but it shouldn't stop us from living.'

'It's not the same as being married to a cop. They have regular jobs with regular hours, and once they're through for the day they go home and forget about their work. But when I'm on a case, it's a total commitment, twenty-four hours straight. I'd bring it home with me, all the ugliness, all the brutality. You wouldn't be able to stand it. And eventually you'd be after me to quit, to go into something else.'

'No, I wouldn't, Max. I understand what you need now, and I wouldn't interfere.'

'You say that now. But after a year or two it would be too much for you. You need good things, Cathy, steady things, music and books, nice food, and a man who will be there when you need him. I couldn't give you any of that. You'd be miserable.'

'You don't want me any more, do you, Max?'

'You can't possibly know how much I do want you. But I've already lost you once, and I don't want to lose you again. I wasted a lot of years of my life before I discovered what I liked doing. This work means something to me, and I can't get out of it now. But that's what I'd have to do if we got back together. And without my work, we'd gradually slip back into the same scene we lived through before the divorce. At least this way I don't have to lose you again, not really. We'll still be as close as we are now.'

Faintly, at first so faintly that I hardly noticed, she began crying. As I talked I could feel her body trembling under my

hand, and each wave travelled into my bones like the echo of some distant tremor from the core of the earth. When I was finished, she sat up and looked at me with tears streaming down her face.

'Oh, God, Max. Why does it have to be this way? Why can't we just love each other again?'

She threw her arms around me and clung to me as hard as she could, weeping out of control. I held her tightly, praying to myself that I hadn't just made the worst mistake of my life. I couldn't tell if I was really doing it for her own good, or if I was simply too afraid to commit myself again. It was the kind of choice that never stops haunting you.

I kissed her on the mouth, and she gave herself willingly to me, as if in this closeness we could cancel out the terrible decision I had just forced on us. When we made love, it was not the beginning of anything, not the promise of a new start, but a kind of farewell, a desperate leave-taking of all we had lived through together in the past. Cathy couldn't stop crying, and when it was over neither one of us had found release from our unhappiness. The flesh has no solutions. It can be a place of infinite sadness.

It was after two o'clock when I unlocked the door of my apartment. For more than an hour I methodically cleaned up the havoc left by my afternoon visitors. My mind was blank, and I craved order. When I finally went to bed, I couldn't sleep. And when at last I did sleep, I dreamt that Cathy and Richie were standing in my room with anger in their faces. They were screaming at me, 'You're a bad man, Max Klein. You're a bad man.'

EIGHT

I woke up feeling as though I had spent the night in a steam shovel. It was seven thirty, and the grey gloom in the apartment told me it was going to be a cloudy day. With all the enthusiasm of an arthritic tap dancer, I crawled out of bed and groped my way into the bathroom where I turned on the shower and stepped into the steam. The hot water felt good on my tired body. By the time I towelled myself down and started shaving, I was beginning to think about auditioning for a role in the human race. If I got lucky, maybe they would give me a walk-on part.

I put on my bathrobe, went into the kitchen, and got busy making the morning's coffee. My system was to use a number six Mellita filter on top of a wide-mouthed thermos bottle. I usually had a supply of Mellita filter papers on hand, but my box had run out so I tore off a couple of paper towels and used them instead. I put up some water to boil, took out the bag of Bustelo from the refrigerator, and measured out four level tablespoons. When the water started bubbling I poured a little over the coffee and then waited. The trick is to wait. Thirty seconds, maybe forty. If you can hold off from dumping all the water in at once, the coffee will have time to expand with the moisture and give off its full aroma. Only then do you pour the rest of the water through. When everything was ready I put the thermos on a tray along with a cup, a spoon, a carton of milk, and the sugar bowl, and then carried it all into the living room. After the third cup I persuaded myself to get dressed.

At nine o'clock I called the Chapman apartment. It was Judy Chapman who answered.

'Hi,' I said. 'Max Klein.'

'I know.' She sounded pleased. 'I never forget a voice.'

'I'm not waking you up, am I?'

'Are you kidding? I've already done my five miles in Central Park, baked a batch of croissants, and read the last two hundred pages of *Crime and Punishment*.'

I gathered she had just woken up.

'I know it's a little early,' I said. 'But it's going to be a busy day.'

'How are things going?'

'They're going. But it's hard to say in what direction.'

'It sounds as though you've been working.'

'I try. If I keep at it, one of these days I might actually accomplish something.'

'You know what they say about Jack.'

'I know. But my name isn't Jack. It's Max.'

'And fortunately you're not dull either.'

'That depends on who you talk to. Take my accountant, Mr Birnbaum. He considers me the dullest man he's ever met.'

'What do accountants know?'

'Arithmetic.'

She laughed. 'This is a nice way to greet the day. Maybe you should call me every morning. I could hire you as my wake-up service.'

'Next time I'll give you breakfast in bed, too. It's all included in the one charge. You have to pay extra for the second cup of coffee, though.'

'I'm looking forward to it already,' she said. 'The only trouble is that I don't usually eat breakfast.'

'So much the better.'

She laughed again. 'You're really wicked, aren't you?'

'Only on Thursday mornings. I spend the rest of the week spinning my prayer wheel.'

'I hope you pray for George,' she said, suddenly very serious.

'Why do you say that? Nothing's happened, has it?'

'No. It's just that I'm worried. I hope you solve this thing quickly, Max.'

'So do I. I don't want to drag it on. Time always increases the dangers.'

'Do you want to speak to George?'

'That's why I called.'

'Just a minute. I'll go tell him you're on the line.'

She put down the phone and went to get him. A minute later I heard the click of another phone being taken off the hook, and Chapman's voice came on. The first phone was never hung up.

'Hello, Klein,' he said. 'What's the word?'

'Everything and nothing.'

'Which means nothing, I assume.'

'Not exactly. If you put it that way, it's more like everything.'

He sounded anxious. 'What have you found?'

'I'd rather not talk about it over the phone. Would it be all right if I came by your apartment between eleven and eleven thirty?'

'Yes, that will be fine. I'll be in.'

'I just want you to know,' I said, 'that I don't think you've been playing straight with me.'

There was a pause at the other end. Chapman was peeved. 'That's not true, and I resent your saying it. I've been as open and honest with you as any man in my situation could possibly be.'

'We'll discuss it later, Mr Chapman.' I hung up.

At ten minutes to ten I was sitting in an oatmeal-coloured designer's chair facing the receptionist's desk in the offices of Light Enterprises on Madison Avenue. I had put on my best lawyer's pinstripes for the occasion and had even made sure that my shoes were shined. After all, I was paying a visit on several hundred million dollars, and I thought the least I could do was to show some respect.

The offices of Light Enterprises didn't so much suggest a place of work as an environment, someone's vision of what life will be like when we no longer inhabit our bodies. You felt as though you were sitting in a twenty-third century hotel lobby and that any moment a Martian was going to walk up and ask you if you wanted to play a game of extra-sensory

checkers. Nothing was real. The thick beige carpeting muffled every sound, and I had to put my watch against my ear to make sure I hadn't gone deaf. People glided in and out like apparitions, and when the chic, long-legged receptionist dressed in a two-hundred-dollar imitation of a parachutist's costume took my name, I was surprised to learn that she could speak. I had thought she was a piece of furniture. In any case, it seemed likely that she had been hired by the interior decorator. Beyond sitting at her modular desk and looking stylish as she smoked a cigarette about fifteen inches long, she didn't seem to have any work to do. The name plate on her desk read Constance Grimm, Receptionist, and that seemed to say it all. I wondered if she would cry real tears if I pinched her cheek.

Charles Light had inherited his family's shipbuilding business thirty-five years ago. In that time he had diversified into airplane parts, computer equipment, magazine publishing, fast food, and coal mining. The activities of Light Enterprises now extended into forty-one of the fifty states, and branch offices had been opened in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong. Light had bought the New York Americans twelve years ago when they were struggling along in fourth place, and within a couple of seasons he had turned them into division champions. Ever since then the team had been at or near the top. With the club now firmly established, he had begun toying with another hobby in the past year or two – politics, specifically conservative politics. Although it would take longer to accomplish, he was hoping to use his money for the right-wing cause in the same way he had already used it for baseball: to produce a winner. Light was the kind of man who nearly always got what he wanted, and no matter how unlikely his views might have seemed, he had to be taken seriously. He was sixty-two years old, a physical fitness buff, and the father of five children who had in turn given him eleven grandchildren. He was celebrated for his ability never to forget a face and had once written an article for *Reader's Digest* on the art of memory. His stamp collection was said to be one of the largest in America.

I found him a pleasant-enough-looking man, about five nine, stockily built, with the watery blue eyes of a New York patrician. His greying hair was just the right length to make him look at home at a conservative banquet in Texas or a cotillion ball in New York. He had a deceptive moon face that wasn't quite as bland as you thought at first, but it was somehow featureless. It gave him a chameleon-like quality, as if his success had been built on being able to adapt to the different kinds of people he had to deal with and to blend quietly into his surroundings. Like many powerful men, he was an actor in the drama of his own life, and he seemed to savour each new encounter as a challenge to the acting talent he had cultivated so carefully in himself. I realized it was going to be difficult to get much out of him that he didn't want to give.

His private office was roughly the size of the state of Rhode Island, and by the time you got half-way to his desk you almost expected to see a sign announcing a Howard Johnson's a mile up the road. The office had one virtue, though, which was that it made a point of belonging to the present rather than the future. The decor extolled traditional masculine values. The walls were made of dark oak panelling, there were Persian rugs on the floor, and the furniture was rather stuffy and old-fashioned. The walls were covered with nineteenth-century paintings of the ships built by Light's ancestors, pictures of the modern products manufactured by Light Enterprises, and several dozen photographs of former players for the Americans. I didn't see George Chapman's face among them.

Charles Light stood up when I reached his desk, shook my hand vigorously, and gestured to a vast red velvet wing chair for me to sit in.

'I'm not usually able to see people on such short notice, Mr Klein,' he said, settling into the chair behind his desk. 'But when my secretary told me you were a private investigator, I decided to cancel my ten o'clock appointment to find out what it was all about. To tell you the truth, I was intrigued.' He smiled broadly.

'I hope I don't disappoint you,' I said. 'It's a minor matter really, one small detail in a rather complicated case I've been working on. It has to do with a series of bomb scares over the past six months, and some evidence has turned up that suggests a possible connection with the person who made the call threatening George Chapman's life five years ago during the World Series. I understand it was you who took the call, and I wonder if you remember anything about it – the caller's voice, what he said, and so on. It just might help me find the missing link I've been looking for.'

Charles Light reared back his head and laughed heartily, as if I had just told a very amusing joke. 'Very good, Mr Klein. Very, very good,' he said, gradually subsiding and wiping the tears from his eyes. 'I was curious to know what kind of story you were going to invent for me when you walked in here. But I had no idea you would concoct such a far-fetched tale. You must have spent some time working on that one.'

'I'm glad you find it so entertaining,' I said. 'I wouldn't want you to think I lacked imagination.'

All traces of Light's good humour suddenly vanished. It was like seeing a blackboard wiped clean. His face closed off, and his voice became hard, sarcastic, irritated. 'Come, come, Mr Klein. You don't have to play games with me. I know why you're here today, and I know everything about you that I care to know. I know where you were born, what schools you went to, and how much money you make. I know about your brief and inglorious career as Assistant District Attorney. I know where you live, where you buy your groceries, and that you have an ex-wife and a nine-year-old son.' He paused for a moment. 'You lead a very boring life, Mr Klein.'

'You find it boring,' I said, 'because you don't know anything about it. What about all my dark secrets? My hundred-dollar-a-day habit, for example. Or my penchant for twelve-year-old girls. Not to speak of the compromising pictures I take of all my clients. I think you should hire yourself a new research assistant. The one you've got now has been sleeping on the job.'

'You can joke all you like. But the fact is that I'm three steps

ahead of you, Klein. I make it my business to know the people I deal with. Don't think you can play with me, because I guarantee you that you're going to lose.'

'OK,' I said. 'You're Chief Hard-as-Nails, and I'm trembling in my boots. But there's still one point that confuses me. If you know so much already, why did you agree to see me today?'

'That's simple. I wanted to give you a lecture.'

'Sounds exciting,' I said. 'Do you want me to take notes?'

'That won't be necessary. What I have to say is so simple you won't have any trouble remembering it.'

'Does your lecture have a title?'

Light's eyes narrowed. 'Let's call it "Background Material for a Study of George Chapman – with Incidental References to a Private Investigator Named Klein".' He leaned forward and paused, waiting until he was sure he had my full attention. 'I want to talk about George Chapman with you because I know you've been hired by him and I want you to hear my side of the story. I am a man with a great deal of money, Mr Klein, and I use my wealth for a wide variety of purposes. Most of it is put to work to make even more money for me, but a portion of it, a very small portion of it, I spend for my own amusement. Over the years one of my greatest entertainments has been owning a major league baseball team. I like the competition of sports, I like the recognition the team gives me, and I enjoy getting to know the athletes who work for me. They're like big children, and I find their innocence of the real world touching. Deprived of their skills, 90 per cent of them would probably be working as filling station attendants or farm hands. But the peculiar economics of professional sports turns them into rich men and gives them a prestige way out of proportion to what they contribute to society. But such is life, and I have no qualms about it. In fact, I've probably helped to create this situation as much as anyone else. No doubt you know that the salaries I pay the Americans are among the most generous in baseball. I want my players to be happy, and I've always had excellent relations with them. Every once in a while, however, a player

comes along who tries to take advantage of me and abuse my trust. Most often the young man in question soon finds himself playing somewhere else, in a city like Cleveland or Milwaukee. George Chapman was such a player. But I was unable to trade or sell him because of his value to the team on the field and his popularity with the people of this city. If I had gotten rid of him, I would have been hanged in effigy, and that would hardly have been good for business. So I swallowed my pride and did my best to come to terms with Chapman. Unlike most of his colleagues, he was not stupid. Everyone knows this, and I would be the last person to deny it. I first met him when he was twenty-one, and already he knew exactly what he wanted out of life. He knew that sports are a limited and limiting occupation, but he also knew that he had been blessed with an extraordinary gift. George Chapman, I believe, derived no pleasure from playing baseball, but he realized he could use it as a stepping stone for bigger and better things. Not long after his fifth season with the club, we began negotiating a long-term contract. His demands were totally outrageous, but eventually we worked out a compromise, a compromise that still made Chapman one of the highest-paid players in the history of baseball. My better judgement told me I was being a fool, but I'm sometimes susceptible to the grand gesture – a tragic flaw you might say. Then, a mere two weeks later, just twelve days after the signing of the contract, Chapman was involved in the auto accident that ended his days as a ball player. Believe me, I was as devastated as the next man. Whatever my personal feelings for Chapman, it's a terrible thing to see a young man's career cut short in such a violent manner. After the initial impact wore off, however, I realized that I was in a particularly difficult situation. I had committed myself to paying Chapman an enormous sum of money over an eight-year period, and now he wasn't even going to play. And my hands were tied because of an injury clause in the contract. It was not a just arrangement, given the unforeseen events that had occurred, and I suggested to Chapman that we work out a settlement. He refused. I asked him to manage the team. He

refused. I asked him to take over as general manager. He refused. I offered him a job as president of the team. He refused. I believe George Chapman was secretly glad to be out of baseball. And he didn't even have the common decency to deal with me fairly. I have conceived a most inordinate loathing for George Chapman. The man is a charlatan, an out-and-out impostor, and I can think of no one in the world I would rather see fall on his face. My moment has finally come, Mr Klein, and I'm going to break Chapman. Now that he's involved in politics, I'm going to break him into little pieces.'

He leaned back with a self-satisfied smile, revelling in his own cleverness and pedantic turns of phrase. I had just heard the world according to Light, and now I was supposed to roll over dead, foaming at the mouth. I had never seen a bigger ham in all my life.

'Very interesting,' I said. 'But none of this has anything to do with me. It's strictly between you and Chapman. And I'm still waiting for the references to a private investigator named Klein.'

'I'm coming to that. But first I wanted you to know the kind of man you're working for.'

'It may be difficult for you to understand, but I don't choose my clients, and I'm in no position to pass judgement on their moral qualities. They come to me with specific problems, and I do my best to try to solve them. I don't require them to give me a list of character references.'

Light had no interest in the subtleties of my profession. It was as though he hadn't even heard me. He folded his hands together and spoke in a measured voice.

'I'm only going to say this once, so listen carefully, Mr Klein. I'm declaring war on George Chapman, and I'm not going to be satisfied until I've won. It's going to be a very messy affair with many casualties and skirmishes. I realize you're only an innocent bystander, but by working for Chapman I'm forced to consider you an enemy. Unless you relish the idea of getting caught in the crossfire, I suggest you terminate your relationship with Chapman at once. Even

though you and I seem to disagree about most things, I have nothing against you personally. You're a man of spirit, and I wouldn't want to see you get hurt in a matter that doesn't concern you.'

'Aren't you going to offer me any money?' I asked. 'I thought this was the part where money always comes into it.'

'I'm willing to give you five thousand dollars.'

'It seems I've heard that figure mentioned before.'

'Five thousand dollars. That's my one and only offer.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'But no thanks.'

Light shrugged. 'Suit yourself.'

That was the end of it. Our interview was over. Light put on his horn-rimmed glasses and began studying various papers on his desk with great concentration. The curtain had come down on the play, all the actors had gone home, and I was just another inanimate prop collecting dust backstage. I stood up from my chair and started walking towards the door.

'You should remember,' I said, turning around, 'that I'm not in the habit of giving in to threats.'

Light looked up from his papers, pushed his glasses down to the tip of his nose, and peered at me over the frames. He seemed surprised that I was still in the room.

'I realize that,' he said. 'That's why I chose not to threaten you. I merely presented you with the facts. You can deal with them as you see fit. Your decision is of no concern to me.'

NINE

I bought a pack of cigarettes at the cigar counter in the lobby and went to look for a cab. My watch said ten past eleven, and outside it was raining hard. People were crowded in around the doorway waiting for it to pass. In the street it was all wind and weather, one of those torrential spring rains that hits the city like an act of divine vengeance. The rain was bouncing up from the pavement with such force that it looked as though it were raining upside down. A bus pulled up by the kerb in front of the building with wings of water, gliding in like a speedboat.

I waited in the doorway with the other people, breathing in the pleasant smells of damp wool, perfume, and tobacco smoke. A short woman of about fifty with bleached blonde hair and a pink raincoat was saying that the raindrops looked like bullets. 'In India,' she said, 'when the monsoons come it rains so hard you can get killed if you go out.' Her companion, a chunky brunette in a black raincoat and clear plastic hat, nodded her head in agreement. 'I can believe it,' she said. 'India is a terrible place.'

I lit a Gauloise, took two drags, and put it to my lips for a third. At that moment a hand appeared before my face and ripped the cigarette out of my mouth. I looked up and saw that it was Angel, my friend from yesterday, along with his keeper, Teddy.

'You shouldn't smoke, funny man,' he smiled. 'It's bad for your health.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'It's nice to know that somebody cares.'

'We didn't want you to forget about us,' Teddy said. 'So we thought we'd say hello.'

'You underestimate the impression you make,' I answered. 'Guys like you never fade.'

I took out another cigarette and lit it.

'How's the old gut feeling today?' Angel asked.

'Terrific,' I said. 'I had a stomach transplant at Roosevelt Hospital last night, and I'm fit as a pin.'

The cloudburst was over, and the rain had turned to a drizzle. Some of the people in the doorway decided to venture outside.

'You can expect to be seeing a lot of us,' Teddy said.

'That should be fun,' I said. 'Maybe next time we can all play tennis. I'll bet you two look cute in shorts.'

Angel took a glance at the street through the glass door. 'Those were some cats and dogs, eh, funny man?'

'It's good for the flowers,' I said.

'That's right,' he said. 'Good for the flowers they make into funeral wreaths. Right, Teddy?'

'Just count yourself lucky, Klein,' Teddy said. 'Every day you go on living is a gift from heaven.'

'I'll remember to say my prayers.'

'You do that. And pray real hard. Because you're gonna need a lot of help.'

'Hang loose, gumshoe,' Angel said. 'Until next time.'

He blew me a kiss, and then the two of them went out through the revolving door, waddling off down the street like a pair of baby hippos. I could sense their frustration. Angel and Teddy were conscientious workers, and they didn't like being held back. But whoever was giving them orders had decided to wait before moving in on me. This meant that he still wasn't quite sure what I was up to, and it gave me a little more time to play with. I hoped I would use the time wisely.

I turned in the opposite direction, walked uptown for a couple of blocks and managed to find a cab that was dropping off a load of passengers. I climbed in and gave the driver the Chapmans' address in the Seventies off Lexington Avenue.

George and Judy Chapman lived in one of those luxury high-rise apartments that have been going up on the East Side for the past few years. Their neighbours were people who supported the ballet, kept Bloomingdales in the black, and

drove the finely tooled cars that made being an auto mechanic one of the highest paying jobs this side of the law. To walk by a building like this one was enough to create the illusion that New York was still in business.

The door was tended by a tall Irishman with woebegone eyes who appeared to have been standing there without a coffee break since the last Memorial Day parade. He was sweating under a heavy blue coat with red trim that resembled something from a Polish cavalry uniform, and on his head he wore a matching military hat with the address of the building stitched on to the peak. As he gazed out at the traffic with his hands in his pockets, it looked as though he were dreaming about the horse they had forgotten to deliver with the uniform. His face brightened when I gave my name.

'Mr Klein,' he said, pulling an envelope from his pocket. 'Mr Chapman wanted you to have the keys to the apartment so that you could let yourself in. He said he was going to be taking a bath sometime late this morning and was afraid he might not be able to get out of the tub if you rang. It's apartment 11-F.'

It was a bizarre kind of arrangement, and it puzzled me. Something seemed to be going on, but I had no idea what it was.

'And Mrs Chapman isn't in?' I asked.

'She went out about an hour ago.'

'Did Mr Chapman come down and give you the keys himself?'

'No, he called down on the house phone and gave me the instructions. We keep spare sets of keys for all the apartments in the basement.'

'When did he call?'

'Shortly after Mrs Chapman left.'

I thanked him, walked through the mirrored lobby, and rode the elevator upstairs. My watch read precisely twenty to twelve. The eleventh floor was decorated with bright Miró and Calder exhibition posters, and I wandered through the long carpeted halls like a rat in a maze. When I found the apartment I rang the bell a few times just to be sure Chapman

wasn't up and about. I waited for an answer and then let myself in with the keys.

The apartment was quiet. I closed the door behind me and walked into the living room. It was an impressively furnished place, not at all the chrome and glass coldness you see in the pages of *New York* magazine, but something softer, more subtle, that showed definite signs of intelligence behind it. At the same time, there was an unlived-in feeling to the room. It made me think of a beautiful painting an artist had laboured over for several months and then stored away in a closet as soon as it was finished. There were no books or magazines on the coffee table, no cigarette butts in the ashtrays, no dents in the pillows on the couch. I imagined that the Chapmans spent most of their time at opposite ends of the apartment and avoided meeting on the common ground of the living room. It had become a no man's land.

I walked in and out of the various rooms, keeping my ears open for the sound of sloshing water from the bathroom. I tried to visualize how Chapman went about taking a bath and wondered whether it was painful for him or just a matter of routine now after so many years. In what was obviously his study I browsed through the books on his shelves, mostly works of history and political science, and found a few titles by William Briles, one of them inscribed 'To my good friend, George Chapman – W.B.' A set of weights was on the floor in one corner of the room, which helped to explain why Chapman was still in such good shape. I took a glance at some papers on his desk and discovered what seemed to be a draft of the speech announcing his Senate candidacy. It wasn't dated, and I couldn't tell how recently he had been working on it. What struck me most about the room was the absence of baseball memorabilia. There were no trophies or photographs on display, nothing to indicate Chapman had ever played baseball. Maybe Charles Light had spoken the truth when he said that Chapman had not been happy as a professional athlete. Or maybe it had meant everything to him and he simply found it too difficult now to be reminded of it.

I was getting restless. It made no sense for Chapman to take

a bath when he knew I was coming. I was aware of the fact that I fell into the category of hired help for him, but there were less elaborate ways of being rude to someone who's working for you. I found the bathroom door and pressed my ear against it. No sound came from inside. I knocked softly and got no response. I tried the door knob, felt it click open, and decided to chance a look inside. The room was empty. Unless George Chapman was the neatest man who ever lived, no one had taken a bath in there today. Fresh blue towels with white GC monograms hung in perfect order on the racks, and there was not a drop of water in the tub or on the floor.

I walked through all the rooms of the apartment again. It wasn't until I tried the kitchen that I found him. He was lying face down under the table, and he was motionless. There was a stench of vomit and faeces coming from his body, and the moment I saw him I knew that he was dead. There is a particular kind of inertness about a dead body, an almost supernatural stillness that tells you no one is there any more, that what you are seeing is just flesh and bones, a body without a soul. I knelt down, turned him over, and felt for a pulse. Everything was silence, everything was death.

Chapman had died fighting terrible pain. His face was a rictus of agony, and his eyes seemed locked on some distant object, as if in the far reaches of nothingness he had chanced upon a hideous, unteliable truth. His clothes were covered with blood-speckled vomit. He had literally coughed up his guts, and I couldn't bear to look at it any longer than I had to. There didn't seem to be any doubt that he had been poisoned.

The table had been set for two. In the centre stood an almost full pot of coffee, a plate of cold uneaten toast, an open jar of orange marmalade, and a stick of butter that had begun to go soft. There was an empty coffee cup on one place mat, a full cup on the other. It looked as though Chapman had been eating breakfast with someone about two hours ago – probably his wife. I turned the scene over in my mind and came up with several possibilities, none of which seemed very convincing. Accidental poisoning was out of the question. A

lethal dose of whatever it was Chapman had swallowed could not have passed unnoticed. I rejected suicide as well. Chapman had too many things to live for – and I had a fifteen-hundred-dollar cheque in my office safe to prove that he wanted to stay alive. Nor did I think a suicide would have opted for such a gruesome death. Chapman had probably suffered for more than an hour, and I was certain he had not done it out of choice. That left murder. When Judy Chapman left the apartment, her husband had still been alive; the doorman had talked to him on the phone. Someone else might have entered the apartment soon after. But the doorman had not mentioned any other visitors. And would Chapman have sat down calmy to coffee and toast with a person who was planning to kill him? There was no sign of struggle, nothing to indicate the presence of another person. It didn't make sense to me, and I felt lost, like a blind man stumbling around in a darkened house. Even if I was given back my sight, I still wouldn't have been able to see anything.

I went into the living room and called the police. It wouldn't take them long to arrive. It never does when someone is already dead. I lit a cigarette and flicked the match into one of the pristine ashtrays on the coffee table. My thoughts at that moment were not pretty. A man had asked me to help prevent him from being murdered, and I had agreed to do it. Now, a little more than twenty-four hours later, he was dead. I hadn't done my job. Chapman had trusted me with his life, and I had let him down. The damage was mortal, irreparable. I studied the matchbook cover in my hand. It advertised a correspondence course in television repair, and I wondered if I shouldn't send away for the brochure. Maybe I was in the wrong line of work after all.

Lieutenant Grimes of Homicide led the delegation from the police. I had encountered him on a case once before, and we had not hit it off. His attitude towards me was the same as a watchdog towards the mailman. He knew I had a job to do, but he couldn't stop himself from barking. It was something in his blood, a result of his breeding. Grimes was about fifty, heavy-set, with thick eyebrows, and he walked around with

the rumpled, weary look of a chronic insomniac. In spite of our personality differences, I considered him to be a good cop. He was accompanied by two young sergeants I hadn't seen before. Both of them were named Smith, but they didn't have beards, and they didn't look like brothers. The photographers and lab men followed.

'When I heard you were the one who called it in,' Grimes said by way of greeting, 'I was going to give the case to Metropolis. But then it turned out he had a pressing engagement at the hospital to have a bullet taken out of his side.' He pinched the bridge of his nose with fatigue. 'It's been a rough week, Klein, so don't get too close.'

'Don't worry,' I said. 'There's a collapsible ten-foot pole in the trunk of my car, and I'll let you hold it every time we have to talk.'

'Just don't breathe on me, that's all I ask. There's enough pollution in this city already.'

'You should talk,' I said. 'I could smell your pastrami sandwich before you came through the door.'

'Corned beef. I don't eat pastrami. It doesn't agree with me.'

We went into the kitchen to have a look at Chapman's body. Grimes stood there for a while without saying anything and then shook his head. 'I remember that guy when he used to play for the Americans,' he said. 'Best goddam natural hitter in twenty years. He made it all look so easy, as if he didn't even care. And now he's just a piece of dead meat.' He shook his head again. 'The funny thing is that I was probably going to vote for him if he ever ran.'

'A lot of people were going to vote for him,' I said. 'Until this morning he was on his way to big things.'

Grimes let out an enormous sigh. 'The shit is going to hit the fucking fan with this one.'

He wanted to talk to me, and we went back into the living room while the technicians went about their business in the kitchen. I told him how Chapman had come to see me in my office yesterday and described the threatening letter. I also explained how I had been given the keys by the doorman

downstairs so that he would know I had entered the apartment legitimately. I said nothing about anything else. Contini and Pignato, Briles and Judy Chapman, Angel and Teddy, Charles Light – nothing. They were my leads, and this was my case. I owed it to Chapman and to my own pride to pursue it. I had been paid for ten days' work and I wanted to earn the money. I didn't want to have to think of myself as one of those guys who backs off when no one is looking. And then there was the matter of being able to look Richie in the eyes when I told him about the kind of work I did. Grimes was going to make his own case, and if he needed to know these things, he would find them out. The last thing he wanted from me was advice.

'I'm going to have to get that letter from you,' he said.

'It's sitting in my office safe. We can go down for it now if you like.'

'It probably doesn't mean a damn thing, though,' he speculated.

'At the moment it's the only thing we've got,' I said.

'Until I talk to Chapman's wife. Because if it's poison – which it sure as hell looks to be – then she's got to be number one. Unless, of course, someone else was sitting at that breakfast table. But that seems pretty unlikely.'

'You forget that Chapman was alive after she left. He called the doorman about the keys.'

'Poison takes time. He might have called too soon afterwards, before he knew anything was wrong.'

'It still doesn't figure,' I said. 'Why would she leave all her dishes on the table? If she poisoned Chapman, she would have cleaned up after herself to make it look as though she hadn't been there.'

'She probably panicked. Rich women are sensitive types, Klein. They like to think their wicked thoughts, but as soon as they do something naughty they get all upset.' Grimes started walking towards the front door. 'Let's get out of here and take a look at that letter. The Smith boys can handle all the questioning in the building without me.'

We went downtown in a patrol car driven by a young cop

with a bad case of acne. He seemed terrified of Grimes, and his driving showed it. He missed every green light, kept hitting the brakes too hard, and took three or four wrong turns. Grimes stared out the window, muttering under his breath.

We left the driver outside in the car and took the elevator up to my office. Once inside, Grimes began looking over the place like a prospective tenant.

'This is one hell of a dump you've got here,' he said.

'I know it's not much. But home is where the heart is.'

Grimes ran his finger over the dust on the filing cabinet. 'I mean, Jesus, I wouldn't wish this place on a cave man. I thought you were making out all right. But from the looks of this hole, you're a prime contender for the poor house.'

'You forget that I'm a man with responsibilities, Lieutenant. I've got an ex-wife and a son to support, as well as a couple of old parents, a maiden aunt with epilepsy, and six young cousins I'm seeing through college. And I always make a point of giving away half of what I earn to charity. I couldn't live with myself otherwise.'

'I'm glad you could find someone to live with you. If I had to look at that face in the mirror every day, I'd walk around in bandages.'

I walked over to the wall safe and opened the combination lock. When I reached my hand in for the letter, I couldn't find it. I took out Chapman's cheque and the few things I usually kept in there – a bottle of Chivas Regal, my passport, my two diplomas, and the Smith and Wesson .38 I was lucky enough not to have carried in almost a year. I put them on the desk one by one and then reached my hand back into the safe. It was empty.

'The letter's gone,' I said.

Grimes looked up at the ceiling sarcastically, as if begging for help. 'I should have known,' he sighed. 'Nothing in this life is ever simple. God wants me to suffer because I'm so good-looking.'

I was angrier than I had been in a long time. 'The letter was here yesterday,' I almost shouted. 'Chapman left it with me in

the morning after our interview. I immediately locked it away, and I haven't touched it since. There's no way anyone could have taken it except by cracking the safe. There are no signs of forcing, and the combination isn't written down.'

'Sure, sure,' Grimes said. 'You want me to believe in this letter, so you drag me half-way down to goddam Mississippi to make me think you've got it. But there is no letter, there never was.'

'There's no letter now. But I give you my word it was here yesterday.'

'Your word isn't worth much, Klein.'

'I'm not going to stand around here arguing about it. I know there's a letter, and you know there's a letter. The important thing is to get it back. The fact that it's missing means it's crucial to the case.'

'Nothing's stopping you from going off to look for it. At least that will keep you out of my hair.'

'And you'd better pray that I find it. Because if I don't, your case is going to look about as promising as a rainy weekend at the beach.'

'I never go to the beach,' Grimes said. 'I like the mountains. Much better for your health.'

TEN

As soon as Grimes was gone, I sat down and put in a call to Chip Contini. He was the one who had sent Chapman to me in the first place, and I wanted to use him as a means for getting to his father. Men like Victor Contini are not in the habit of making appointments with strangers over the telephone, and I didn't have time to start cultivating his friendship. I needed to have a long, quiet talk with him, and I needed to have it as soon as possible.

I hadn't spoken to Chip for several years, and for the first few minutes of the conversation we caught up on each other's news, mostly his. Things were going well for him, and he wasn't too bashful to let me know it. Like most insecure people, Chip felt a constant need to justify his life, to make it seem exciting and enviable. He had spent his first thirty-odd years trying to get out from under the burden of his father, and even though he had made a success of himself, I suspected he still walked around with the feeling that a building might fall on top of him at any moment.

'I was hoping you'd call,' he said.

'I'm curious about why you sent Chapman to me.'

'I thought you could probably use the business. When George told me about the letter he received on Monday I figured it might be best for someone to investigate it. It doesn't look like anything too serious to me, but George was scared and I wanted to take some action so that he wouldn't worry so much.'

'He had reason to be scared,' I said.

'Why?' Have you found out who wrote the letter?'

'No, I haven't found out. But Chapman is dead. He was murdered in his apartment this morning.'

'Don't put me on, Max.'

'I'm not. Chapman is dead. They're probably already talking about it on the radio.'

'Jesus Christ.'

'You're going to be pretty busy. From the looks of things, Judy Chapman is the leading suspect.'

'That's ridiculous. I've never heard anything so stupid.'

'You're probably right. But tell that to Lieutenant Grimes of Homicide. In the meantime, she's going to need a lawyer.'

'What a mess,' he groaned. 'What a god-awful mess.'

'Before you start feeling sorry for yourself,' I said sharply, 'maybe you can give me a little help.'

He was chastened and took hold of himself. 'Anything I can do I will, Max.'

'For starters I want you to set up a meeting between me and your father. Right away. For today or tomorrow.'

'What in the world for? My father has nothing to do with George.'

'Not so. I've found a definite link concerning the accident five years ago, and I need to talk to your father.'

'Bullshit,' Chip said angrily. 'Just because of my father's past, people assume he's responsible for everything that happens. He's an old man, and he's been out of the rackets for years.'

'Maybe that's what you tell yourself to soothe your conscience, Chip. That's your privilege, and it's none of my business. But we both know it isn't true. Your father's old, yes, but he hasn't retired. He's only slowed down a bit. I wouldn't have brought it up unless I was sure. A man is already dead, and before this thing gets out of hand I've got to do something about it.'

'All right. I'll call him and try to set it up.'

'You'll do more than try. You'll do it. There's no more time for diddling around.'

I gave him my number and told him I would sit there until he called back. Two cigarettes and about fifteen minutes later the phone rang.

'Ten thirty tomorrow morning in my office,' Chip said.

'Did you tell him what it was about?'

'I gave him a rough outline. He's going to stay with us for the weekend and spend some time with the kids.'

'I appreciate it, Chip.'

'I still think you're making a big mistake, Max. My father has nothing to do with Chapman.'

'Then he wouldn't have agreed to see me. I know I'm right now, and all the wishing in the world isn't going to change it.'

I put everything back into the safe except the Smith and Wesson. I loaded the revolver, stuck it into my shoulder holster, and put the whole business on. I wasn't used to wearing it any more, and it felt bulky and uncomfortable. But I was going up against the big boys now, and I wanted some sense of security. My neck was the only collateral I had left.

Down in the parking lot Luis was full of last night's game. Detroit had won six to five in twelve innings, and he was bemoaning the Americans' lack of stable relief pitching and their inability to hit with men on base.

'Two times they get bases loaded with no outs and they don't get nothing.' He spat out the words in disgust.

'Don't worry, Luis. It's only May. Things don't start getting serious until August.'

'By then it's too late.'

For a true fan a loss or a win can colour the mood for an entire day. Your team wins and every tuft of grass pushing through the pavement is a beautiful wildflower, a testimonial to the perseverance of nature. Your team loses and you're surrounded by weeds, cracked asphalt, and ugliness. Luis was suffering. I didn't bother to tell him it was only a game.

The drive to Irvingville was easier this time. The midday traffic moved quickly, and it looked as though the weather were clearing. The rain had stopped more than an hour ago, and although the sky was still cloudy, you could see the sun bravely trying to fight its way through. This was May, after all, and the sun had a reputation to uphold.

I turned on the car radio to one of the all-news stations. When the half-hour headline report came on, Chapman's death was the lead story. They didn't have much yet. George

Chapman had been found dead in his apartment by a private detective and the police suspected foul play. They went on to talk about Chapman's baseball career and how he had been planning to announce his candidacy for the Senate. I moved the dial up to WQXR and found myself listening to Richter's version of the *Wanderer Fantasy*. I stuck with Schubert and didn't go back to the news.

It was going to be a tough case for Grimes. It always is when a well-known person is involved. The press refuses to sit still, crackpot theories multiply like fruit flies, and the police wind up conducting an investigation in the middle of Grand Central Station. Pressure builds up. The mayor feels the heat from the public, the DA feels the heat from the mayor, the Chief of Homicide feels it from the DA, and the Lieutenant in charge feels it from the Chief. I wondered how long it would be before Grimes buckled under. He had a lot of experience, but I had never seen how he handled himself in a tight situation. It usually brought out the worst in a man. For Judy Chapman's sake I hoped his skin was as thick as it looked.

It was after two thirty, and I realized that I was hungry. I found a place on the highway called the Coach Lantern Diner and pulled into the parking lot. It was one of those modern, pretentiously rigged-out diners with flashy chrome, marbleized formica, and imitation brass lamps that are supposed to make you think you've just climbed off the Canterbury–London coach and stepped into an eighteenth-century English inn. There were about twenty pies on display shelves behind glass. They were so puffed up they looked like they had gone through a series of silicone injections. I found them about as appetizing as a row of basketballs.

It was an off hour and the place was nearly empty. I sat down at the counter and studied the menu, an outsized affair with more entries than the Milwaukee phone book. A squat waitress in a starched red uniform bounced over to take my order. Her dyed red hair was a shade or two darker than the dress, and the way it stayed in place a foot and a half above her head defied every law of Newtonian physics. With her

false eyelashes, bright gold ear-rings, and clattering bracelets, she somehow reminded me of a sports car. Her name was Andrea and she called me honey.

I ordered a hot turkey sandwich and three minutes later it was sitting in front of me. There was so much gravy on the plate that for a moment I thought I had been given an aquarium to eat. But I was too hungry to care. It wasn't until the last few bites that I realized it actually didn't taste bad. The waitress said I was the fastest eater she had ever seen, and I gave her a dollar tip. I was a big shot who spent his time making everybody happy. Santa Claus was my middle name. I walked out of the place sucking on a mentholated toothpick.

At ten past three I found a parking space a few blocks up from the Pignato house on Seventeenth Street. It was a little too early for the kids to be back from school, and the wet weather had kept the old people inside. The neighbourhood felt deserted, as if it had been evacuated for a disaster. I wondered if I was that disaster, or if it had already struck. Water dripped slowly from the branches of the trees. The world was dark under those trees, and the sky glowed through them eerily as if from another planet. Nothing felt right. I had that sinking sensation you get when you walk into the wrong movie. I had put down my money for Buster Keaton, and they were giving me John Wayne instead.

No one came to open the door after I knocked. I knocked again, waited two, three, four minutes, and still no one came. I tested the door. It was unlocked. I opened it softly, slipped inside, and shut it behind me. Doors had been opening for me all day, and behind them I had been finding nothing but myself. I knew I was too late. As soon as I stepped across the threshold, I knew what I was going to find. I was reliving the same experiences of a few hours ago, and it made me feel as though I had been locked into some cruel dream, condemned to go on discovering images of death.

It was a shabby house, and it stank of poverty. Children's toys were scattered over the floors, and the unwashed dishes of several meals were piled high in the kitchen sink. There were religious pictures hanging in most of the rooms. Tacked

on to the wall over the colour television set in the living room was a big red, white and blue tapestry portrait of John F. Kennedy that looked as if it had been bought in some novelty shop on Times Square. All the shades were drawn, as though the unhappiness of the house could be prevented from leaking out and contaminating the rest of the neighbourhood. I found myself thinking about Pignato's children, wondering if they would miss their father, or if his death would free them from this darkness.

He was in the bedroom, stretched out on the unmade bed with half his face blown away. There was a pool of blood on the pillow and blood was splattered on the wall behind him. On the bureau a few feet from the bed a portable television was tuned to a soap opera with the sound on very softly. The whispering phantoms were sitting in a bourgeois living room, drinking from delicate teacups and talking about their neuroses, their love affairs, and how they were going to spend their summer vacations. In a peculiar way, they seemed to represent the dead man's thoughts. It was as if he had already gone to heaven and from now on would be able to lead the same life they did.

There was nothing to be done. I went back into the kitchen and called the police. I was getting very good at calling the police. Pretty soon they were going to give me my own special hot line so I wouldn't have to go to the trouble of dialling any more.

Pignato's murder looked like a professional job. One quick bullet and that was the end of it. A split second of incredible pain, and then nothing, nothing at all. The killer had chosen his moment carefully, making sure that Pignato's family was out of the house when he arrived. I wondered if Pignato had been expecting him, lying on his bed watching television until he came. It seemed logical to assume that Pignato had called Victor Contini after my visit yesterday and that Contini had sent someone over to silence the man who had let out the secret of George Chapman's accident. It was logical, but logic doesn't always count for much.

The police arrived noisily, barging into the house like a

bunch of invading Goths. I immediately regretted not ducking out after I made the phone call. For the past two days it seemed I had been doing nothing but making wrong decisions.

Captain Gorinski was in charge. He was a bull of a man in his early forties, still solid, with a bit of a paunch that spilled out over his belt buckle. He had the erratic eyes of a drinker, and from the dishevelled clothes he wore I gathered he had personal problems. I didn't want to become one of them.

He seemed unmoved by the sight of Pignato's corpse. When he walked into the bedroom and saw the body his only comment was, 'Nobody's going to fuck on those sheets any more.' It was all hard-guy stuff, a way of looking at the world with the mind of a reptile. Compared to him, Grimes was as gentle as a den mother.

He asked me who I was and what I was doing there. I answered the first question by showing him my investigator's licence. He studied it with contempt, as if I had just handed him a pornographic picture.

'A Jew-boy shamus from the big city,' he said.

'That's right,' I answered. 'I come from a long line of rabbis. All those people you see walking around in the funny hats and long beards are my cousins. At night I sprout horns and a tail, and every spring at Passover I kill a Christian baby to use its blood in a secret ritual. I'm a Wall Street millionaire and a Communist, and I was there when they nailed Christ to the cross.'

'Shut the fuck up, Klein,' he snapped, 'or I'll break your goddam neck.'

'Just watch the way you talk to me, Captain,' I came back at him. 'There's no way I'm going to co-operate with you unless you act like a human being.'

'You assholes from New York are all the same. You think you're the toughest, smartest guys that ever came down the pike, but just let somebody call your bluff and you go screaming for a lawyer. This ain't New York, Mr Rabbi, it's Irvingville. This is my town, and I'll act any goddam way I want to.'

'Suit yourself,' I said. 'I had this crazy idea that maybe you wanted to do something about solving a murder. There's a dead man lying in the next room, and while you stand here talking about your beautiful town, the murderer is getting farther and farther away.'

'That's where you're wrong, sweetheart,' he said with a sadistic grin. 'The murderer ain't going nowhere. I'm standing here with him right now.'

'That's quite a clever theory you've got,' I said. 'Let me see. I walk in here and shoot Pignato in the face. Then, instead of running out, I stroll into the kitchen, call the police, and offer to help them. Yeah, I see what you mean. It makes a lot of sense. You must be some kind of genius, Captain.'

'Mike,' Gorinski barked at one of the cops watching our conversation, 'come over here and take this joker's gun away from him.'

Mike was a young one, no more than twenty-five or twenty-six, and he was having a good time. He seemed to think Gorinski was Irvingville's answer to Sherlock Holmes, and he was all too happy to do his bit. He sauntered over to me and stuck out his hand.

'All right, Klein, let's have it.'

'This gun hasn't been fired in months,' I said. 'All you have to do is smell it to know I haven't used it today.'

I opened my jacket, put my hand on the butt, and was about to pull the revolver out of its strap when Gorinski rushed over and struck a tremendous blow on the side of my head. I went down like a collapsible chair, my ear ringing with the impact. I sat up after a moment in a half-daze to find Gorinski standing over me and screaming.

'Don't you know it's against the law to pull a gun on a police officer, you idiot! I could have put you away a long time for that stunt. Mike,' he said, turning again to his faithful assistant, 'put the cuffs on him. We're all going to have ourselves a little discussion down at the station.'

Mike did as he was told, and then the two of them marched me out of the house and into one of the squad cars outside. It

didn't take more than ten minutes to get to the station. I told Gorinski to call Lieutenant Grimes in New York, and he told me to go fuck myself. That was one of the things I liked about him. He always had an original remark for every situation.

They threw me into an interrogation room and spent the next several minutes kicking me round. I had heard of the third degree before, but in their hands it was a fine art, more like the nth degree, or a lesson in how to play soccer without a ball.

It seemed to put them in good spirits, because every time Gorinski knocked me out of my chair it got a big laugh from Mike. Naturally, I didn't fight back. They were the police after all, officers of the law. And I happened to be in handcuffs. I tried to separate my mind from my body, to pretend that what was happening to me was actually happening to someone else. It's a method for fighting pain that's supposed to work very well in the dentist's chair. Unfortunately, it doesn't work in police stations.

Eventually they got down to business. They wanted to know who had hired me to kill Pignato, how much money I was being paid, and what other jobs like this one I had done recently. They called me kike, faggot, and Commie. I told them I was working on the Chapman murder case and that they should call Louis Grimes of Homicide in New York. I couldn't be sure that Grimes would stand up for me, but I figured it was my only chance of getting out of Irvingville before the year 2000.

It didn't make much difference what I said. They knew I hadn't killed Pignato, but they went through the charade because they enjoyed it. It made them feel like important men. They were good, red-blooded Americans, and it wasn't every day an easy target like me fell into their hands. Besides, they knew they were never going to solve the case anyway. Pignato had been connected with the Contini mob, and the killing was a matter of internal politics. In a place like Irvingville, gangland executions weren't considered murders. They were part of the local scenery, the same as the Fourth of July fireworks or the policemen's ball. They didn't

get solved, they got ignored. Gorinski wasn't about to do anything to upset Victor Contini. As the saying goes, you don't bite the hand that feeds you.

What finally rescued me was Gorinski's stomach. It was getting on towards dinner time, and after an hour of going through the same comedy again and again, I could see that he was beginning to lose interest. The thought of eating appealed to him more than turning me into ground chuck. He left the room, and Mike carried on without him. Fifteen minutes later he returned.

'You're a lucky man, Klein,' he said. 'I just spoke to Grimes in New York. Make yourself scarce. We don't want you around here.'

'I don't know how to thank you,' I answered. 'You've made my stay in your town such a pleasant one, I almost don't want to leave. I sure hope I can come back soon. Maybe I'll bring the wife and kids next time.'

'You so much as show your face around here,' Gorinski said, 'and I'll turn it into spackling. I'll make you so unhappy, you'll wish the hospital went up in flames the day you were born.'

Mike took out a key and unlocked the handcuffs. I tried to get the blood flowing again, but I couldn't feel a thing. I was dead from the elbows to the finger tips.

'You're a courageous man, Gorinski,' I said, 'and a credit to every police force in the country. Without guys like you, the streets wouldn't be safe for ordinary citizens like me. I just want you to know how grateful I am. I thank you. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.'

Gorinski muttered something to himself, turned on his heel, and walked out of the room. Mike escorted me to the front desk.

'I'll give you one thing,' he said. 'You sure know how to take a punch.'

It was all a sport for him, and he wanted to thank me for being a worthy competitor. It didn't matter that the game had been rigged, that they hadn't given me a chance. I refused to shake his hand when he held it out to me.

'That's quite a hero you've picked for yourself,' I said. 'Is that what you're planning to be like when you grow up?'

'He's really not such a bad guy once you get to know him.'

'Sure,' I said. 'And Hitler loved children. It's the same old story. In every brute there's a humanitarian crying to get out.'

Mike's eyes turned hard again. 'Just be glad you got off as easy as you did, Klein.'

'I'll try to remember. Every time I walk by a church I'll go in and light a candle for Gorinski. And maybe one for you too.'

It was six o'clock. I called for a cab from the pay phone and arranged to be taken back to Seventeenth Street to pick up my car. My body was going to hurt for the next few days, but I would survive. That was more than George Chapman or Bruno Pignato could say.

ELEVEN

There were three men hanging around my car on Seventeenth Street. They were waiting for me, and I knew it wasn't because they were interested in talking about 1971 Saabs. I could have told the cab driver to go on past them and take me to the bus station. There were other ways of getting back to the city. But I was curious. If they wanted something from me, then maybe I could get something from them. I was realistic enough not to expect an equal exchange. I only hoped I wouldn't be too far behind when it was all over.

They were an odd group. One of them, dressed in blue jeans, a leather jacket, and motor-cycle boots, looked like a recent youth-gang graduate. He was leaning against the car with his hands folded across this chest and chewing gum, the expression in his eyes as empty as a bullet hole in a tin can. The second was in his thirties, neatly appointed in a powder-blue leisure suit and spotless white loafers. He was smoking a cigarette and pacing back and forth, lost in his own thoughts. He was obviously the ideas man. The third was the oldest, somewhere in his mid-forties, and more conservatively dressed in a brown suit, brown shirt, and white tie. He was smoking a cigar and kept looking at his watch. They were all about my size. Except for the differences in their clothes, they seemed to be images of each other at various stages of life. It was a group portrait of three generations of hoods.

I paid off the driver, got out of the cab, and walked across the street. All three of them followed me with their eyes.

'Nice car, isn't it?' I said to White Tie. 'I'll give you a good deal on it and throw in the snow tyres to boot.'

'Let's go, Klein,' Leisure Suit said. 'You've got a rendezvous with destiny.'

'Sounds like a redhead,' I replied. 'Is she good-looking?'

'She's a dog,' said Leather Jacket, getting into the act. 'But you're just going to have to take it as it comes.'

They had it all worked out. Leather Jacket took my gun from me and went off to fetch a green Buick that was parked down the street. The other two told me to get into the driver's seat of the Saab and then climbed into the car after me. Leisure Suit sat in the back, and White Tie sat next to me in the front.

'Before I buy any car,' White Tie said, 'I gotta see how it handles. I don't wanna get stuck with a lemon.'

'Just tell me where you want to go,' I said, 'and I'll take you there.'

Leisure Suit leaned forward in the back seat. 'Do you know the North Mountain Reservation?'

'I know it.'

'Well, that's where we're going. And no monkey business, Klein. I've got a thirty-eight pointed at the back of your head. Any tricks and your brain is going to decorate the windshield.'

I started the car and pulled out. The Buick followed right behind me. For the moment at least I knew I was safe. In spite of Leisure Suit's threat, he wasn't about to pull the trigger while I was driving. As long as we were in the car, nothing was going to happen.

The situation seemed clear to me. These were Contini's men and they were taking me off to finish what had been started earlier in the day with Pignato's murder. I was the one person who knew about Chapman's accident, and with me out of the way Contini would be home free. The answer to the most important question still eluded me however. Why had Contini wanted Chapman dead in the first place? I had been hoping to find that out in my meeting with him tomorrow. But now I wasn't so sure I was going to be around tomorrow. Or any other tomorrow for that matter.

'I don't suppose you'd like to give me a hint about why you find it so important to be with me this evening,' I said to White Tie.

'You're a troublemaker, that's why,' Leisure Suit answered

for him. 'You don't know how to keep your nose out of other people's business. Sooner or later a guy like you is bound to come down with a bad case of grief. And this is the day, lover boy, this day is it.'

'You seem to have lots of answers,' I said. 'Here's another question. Who do you work for?'

'I've got six big answers sitting in the palm of my hand,' Leisure Suit sneered, 'and any one of them can put an immediate end to this conversation.'

'You've sure got a quick tongue. You go through clichés as fast as a baby goes through diapers.' I looked at him in the rear-view mirror. 'Maybe you should lay off all those comic books.'

'Just drive, Mr Snoop. When I want your opinion I'll write you a letter.'

I drove. We went west for several miles along Spring Avenue, the main commercial street in Irvingville, and up towards the brighter, wealthier towns beyond. The scenery changed. From factories and warehouses we moved on to a stretch of used-car lots and Dairy Queens, and then through modest residential neighbourhoods, which gradually turned into plush suburbs with vast, manicured lawns, three-car garages, and kidney-shaped swimming pools. We were climbing up into the mountains, away from the dirt of cities and into a never-never land of doctors, executives, and slum lords. This was the world in which people played golf at the country club, fooled around with each other's wives, and sent their kids off to expensive summer camps with three thousand dollars' worth of orthodonture work in their mouths. It gave me a strange feeling to be driving past these mansions with a gun pointed at the back of my head. It was as though I had passed into another dimension, a place of absurd juxtapositions and nursery-rhyme logic. Fear was a black Lincoln speeding through a red light. Violence was a hunch-backed gardener methodically pruning a rhododendron. Death was the punchline of a joke told over cocktails on the terrace. Everything was something else, and nothing was what it was supposed to be.

The North Mountain Reservation consisted of several hundred acres of woods, picnic areas and hiking trails at the top of the hill. At quarter to seven it was almost completely deserted. White Tie told me to turn off on to a small dirt road which ran through the oak and maple woods. The green Buick followed close behind us. After about half a mile we came to a large meadow on our right, and Leisure Suit told me to pull off the road and go up on to the grass. I followed his instructions. It was going to be almost impossible for me to break away from them. I would be out in the open and an easy target if I tried to make a move. My only chance was the woods on the other side of the road, but they were more than 200 yards off. I wondered why I had ever decided to get out of the cab on Seventeenth Street.

I stopped the car when they told me to and the three of us climbed out. Leather Jacket pulled up, cut the engine of the Buick and came over to join us. For a moment we all stood there in the tall grass and orange light of dusk without saying anything. I felt as though we had become human shadows, motionless figures locked in the spectral landscape of a de Chirico painting.

'I don't think I like the car, Klein,' White Tie finally said, 'It's got no pick-up, and the engine knocks.'

'That's all right,' I said. 'I decided I don't want to sell it after all.'

Leather Jacket opened the trunk of the Buick and took out a sledge hammer. He walked over to the Saab and examined it with a sarcastic leer. 'The trouble with foreign jobs like this,' he said, 'is that they're not built to last.' He swung the hammer over his head and brought it down on the windshield. The glass shattered to pieces. 'See what I mean? One little tap and the whole thing falls apart.'

'That was pretty good,' I said. 'Maybe you should apply for a job on a chain gang breaking up stones.'

'Shit,' he said, 'that was nothing. Watch this.'

Again he swung the hammer over his head and in quick succession knocked out all the other windows in the car.

White Tie and Leisure Suit grinned. They seemed glad to be letting youth have its day.

'You see, Klein,' Leather Jacket went on, 'you were going to sell this car to a friend of mine, and I think you were trying to stick him with a bummer. I just want him to see what a piece of junk you were peddling.'

His words became self-fulfilling prophecy. Whatever life had been left in the Saab when the day began was battered out of it for ever. In fifteen minutes the car was literally turned into a piece of junk. He smashed the doors, put several holes in the hood, cracked the steering wheel to bits, and then ripped up the upholstery and slashed the tyres with a switchblade. It no longer resembled a car. It had become a piece of exotic sculpture.

Leather Jacket had worked up a sweat, and when he was finished he stood there panting with a triumphant smile on his face. Leisure Suit clapped with mock politeness.

'That's the end of act one,' he said. 'Not a bad performance, eh, Klein?'

'Olivier was better in *Wuthering Heights*,' I said. 'Your pal here doesn't know how to emote. It's hard to believe in him as a character.'

'You'll believe him all right,' White Tie said. 'Show him something he can believe in, Andy.'

Leather Jacket was just getting warmed up. He had that maniacal kamikaze glare in his eyes, and all his attention was focused on me. It flashed through my mind that maybe he was on drugs, in which case I knew I could take him. He charged at me with a wild right I could see coming all the way from Pittsburgh. I blocked it with my left forearm and countered with a hard right into his belly. He gave out a loud grunt and doubled over. That punch gave me infinite satisfaction. After being pushed around for two days I was at last fighting back, and my body responded to the situation with more fury than I thought was in me. Leather Jacket was only temporarily stunned, and he came up smiling.

'That's all you get,' he said. 'One punch. Now it's my turn.'

He rushed at me again with the same over-confident

abandon. He must have thought he was invincible, that no matter what he did he couldn't be touched. This time I ducked his right and came up with a sharp left to the jaw. It was a wicked shot that sent waves of pain from my knuckles to my shoulder. He went staggering back five or six steps and then fell. He wasn't out, but he was down, and before he could rush me again I wheeled around to protect myself from behind. Leisure Suit was standing there with his gun pointed at my stomach. White Tie calmly lit another panatela.

'A waste of time, lover boy,' he said without emotion. 'All this is going to get you is a sore hand.'

'It's in a good cause, though,' I said, breathing hard. 'I like to see friends of yours fall on their ass.'

And then the sun set very rapidly. It had been there, just behind Leisure Suit's shoulder, a huge disc of red fire, and then it wasn't there any more. The blow struck at the back of my head and I went down like a Raggedy Ann doll. For a long time I was a coal miner digging under the earth. The lantern on my helmet projected a beam of light down a tunnel twenty miles long. I had to keep walking. When I reached the end of the tunnel I would find the biggest lump of coal in recorded history and get my picture in the newspaper. I started wondering if my high school graduation picture would be appropriate, and then suddenly I wasn't a coal miner any more. I had become a corpse. The undertakers were carrying me to the cemetery, and no one had come to mourn me. They were going to put me in a pauper's grave and throw stones at my body just for the fun of it. I heard one of them say, 'It never hurts to make sure. What if he decides to wake up?'

I opened my eyes. I was on my back, and the whole world was shaking under me. I puzzled over that for a little while, wondering how I could be moving and yet lying perfectly still at the same time. Then I realized I was lying on the floor in the back of a car. I was very impressed by this discovery, and for a few moments I treated it with all the enthusiasm of a major scientific breakthrough. Then I noticed that my hands were tied together with a piece of rope. Outside it was dark. Night had come in my absence.

'Rip Van Winkle's about to return to civilization,' Leisure Suit said from the back seat. White Tie turned around from the front and looked down at me. That left Leather Jacket as the driver.

'Too bad,' White Tie commented, 'you missed most of the ride. We're almost there.'

I moved my head slightly and groaned. I felt like an artichoke whose leaves had been plucked. My brain was exposed to the air and had the same consistency as a bowl of warm jello.

'Just catching up on my beauty sleep,' I said.

'The way you snore,' Leisure Suit answered, 'it's more like ugly sleep.'

'That's because I was dreaming of you,' I said. 'And now I wake up to find out it all really happened. It's just like a fairy-tale. You know the one I mean – Beauty and the Beast.'

'I'll tell you another bedtime story later,' Leisure Suit said. 'Maybe if I make it real good you won't wake up again.'

Five minutes later the car slowed down to make a turn, and then we were driving over gravel. After what seemed to be a quarter of a mile the car stopped.

'End of the line,' Leisure Suit said. 'This is where all the deadbeats get off.'

He opened the door, climbed out, and then he and Leather Jacket yanked me from the car on to the ground. The gravel cut into my back as though I'd been raked over a bed of knives. They told me to stand up. I gave it my best effort, but apparently it wasn't good enough. Leisure Suit gave me a kick in the kidneys with one of his white shoes, and that slowed down my progress a little. After a few more tries and a few more kicks, I eventually made it to my feet. My head felt as heavy as a bowling ball, and it took me a while to learn how to cope with this new distribution of my weight.

The situation didn't look good for me, but nevertheless I was getting my confidence back. I had been with them for nearly two hours, and I was still breathing. If their instructions had been to kill me, I would have been long

dead by now. It seemed that Contini was willing to let me live. He just wanted to make things difficult for me, to put me out of commission until the Chapman investigation was over. Maybe the old man was going soft, I thought to myself. Or maybe it had something to do with my phone call to Chip. If I turned up dead, then Chip would know his father had been responsible. Contini wasn't afraid of the law, and I'm sure he didn't give a damn about my life. But he didn't want his son to know he was a murderer. Strange how morality creeps into the most unlikely places. A man will do almost anything to gain the respect of his son. I had done quite a bit of thinking about it myself.

The four of us walked for ten minutes. White Tie held a flashlight to guide us over the stones and Leisure Suit held a gun in my back. I made a guess that we were in Kern's Quarry, an old gravel excavation that had gone out of business about seven years ago. It was no more than twelve miles from the Reservation, and it was probably as good a place as any to keep someone out of sight for a while. When we started climbing up the gravel slope and walking around the rim of the excavation, I saw that I had guessed correctly. A small triumph. But at least I knew where I was.

We came to an abandoned foreman's shed. White Tie opened the door and said, 'This is your new house, Klein. You're gonna get to know it real good in the next week or two.'

'That's swell,' I said. 'When can you have my piano sent over? I don't want my fingers to get rusty.'

'I wouldn't joke if I were you,' Leisure Suit said. 'You don't realize how lucky you are. I mean, you're so goddam lucky it makes me want to puke. By all rights in a situation like this you get whacked. But for some reason the old man wants you alive.'

'I guess that makes him a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.'

Leisure Suit went on as if I hadn't said anything. 'He wants you alive, but that doesn't mean it's going to be much fun for you. There are ways of keeping a guy alive that are a lot worse

than dying. You step out of line and you'll start begging for a bullet in the head. It'll seem like a vacation to Bermuda compared to what we can do to you.'

It was a bare, dusty room, damp with the smell of rotting wood, and it measured about 8 by 15 feet. As the flashlight panned over it, I saw a table, a few chairs, and a couple of old ledger books. It was the kind of place that hangs out welcome signs for the rats, and I didn't like the set-up at all. There wasn't going to be much room for me to manoeuvre, especially with a gun pointed at me the whole time. I was beginning to resign myself to the thought of a long stay. But then I got a break. Leisure Suit and White Tie left. They told Leather Jacket they were going out for some food and that they would be back in an hour. Leather Jacket asked them to buy him a sausage hero and a six-pack of beer, and off they went, just like that. That left me alone with the kid. The odds had improved considerably, but they still weren't good. I had to figure out a way to pick a fight without getting my head blown off.

He sat in one of the chairs by the door, a flashlight pointed at my face in one hand and the gun pointed at my face in the other. I sat on the floor in the corner, looking the other way to avoid the light. Outside the crickets were chirping to the moon, and every now and then a bullfrog croaked, sounding like a strange Chinese instrument with only one string. We didn't say anything for five or six minutes. I listened to the kid work over his chewing gum.

'Hey, Andy,' I said. 'There's something that's been bothering me. I wonder if you can help me figure it out.'

'What's that, Klein?'

'I just want you to tell me how it feels.'

'How what feels?'

'Being a fag.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Sure you do, Andy. You try to come on as a muscle man, but you've got sissy written all over you.'

'I don't have to take none of your crap, dumbbell.'

'Just try to stop me. I can open my mouth any time I please.

A pansy like you doesn't have the balls to try to close it. You're too afraid of messing up your pretty face.'

'One more word and you'll be sorry.'

'Little faggy Andy's getting upset,' I pouted.

By way of response he fired a bullet into the wall above my head.

'Boo hoo,' I went on. 'I don't think Mr Fruitcake likes me.'

'Any more shit and I'll aim lower next time.'

'You wouldn't have the guts to shoot me. You're supposed to keep me alive. If you go against orders, your life won't be worth two cents. And you can go to the bank with that.'

'That's what you think, big mouth. Nobody tells me what to do. If I emptied this gun into you, they'd probably give me a medal.'

'Why don't you try it then, pussyfoot? I mean, it must make you feel mighty tough holding a gun on a man with his hands tied. It's just the kind of arrangement a punk like you has to have. Everything stacked in your favour.'

'Any time, any place, Klein, I'll beat you to a bloody pulp.'

'Why not now, pimple face? Or are you afraid you might get the shit kicked out of you again? You look pretty terrific smashing up a car that can't fight back, but boy are you a sucker for a punch. You couldn't hit your way out of a bag of vomit.'

I had begun to lose hope. He was never going to give in, and I would be sitting there spouting these insults at him until Leisure Suit and White Tie came back. But it finally worked. I had managed to push him over the edge. He put the flashlight on the table so that it was shining on me, stood up, and tucked the gun under his belt. Then he walked over to where I was sitting.

'Get up, motherfucker!' he screamed at me, beyond all patience. 'I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget.'

I stood up and faced him. With the light coming from behind him only the outline of his body was visible. I couldn't see his eyes. But I didn't have to see them to know what was coming. He pulled back his right hand and brought it down full force into my jaw. It was a good punch, and for a moment

I thought he had broken something in my face. I tottered backwards and banged into the wall, but somehow I was able to keep my balance. That was what I wanted. More than anything else in the world, I wanted to stay on my feet. I knew that if I could take his best punch without falling down, I was going to have him. And he knew it too.

'If that's all you can deliver, Andy boy,' I said through the pain, 'then you'd better write away to Charles Atlas for the crash course in body building. A punch like that wouldn't hurt my grandmother. And she weighs ninety pounds.'

He was incensed. In all his years of beating up people he probably had never come up against anyone who could hold his ground against him. That's the trouble with bullies. They spend so much of their time picking on people smaller than they are that they get a false idea of their own strength. I wasn't some old guy who ran the corner grocery store. I was a little bigger than Andy, and I had a lot more experience than he did. It was enough to destroy his pride, to make him plunge on and make more mistakes, instead of quitting while he was still ahead.

'Nobody talks like that to me!' he ranted. 'Do you hear me? Nobody can get away with that kind of shit around me!'

In the same way he had over-reacted in the Reservation earlier, he now came around so wide with his second punch that I was able to duck under it and come up at him from below. My bound hands were like a double fist, and I put everything I had into it. He caught it on the chin and went flying back into the table, knocking off the flashlight and throwing the room into darkness. I rushed for the door, but he was able to stick out his arm and trip me as I was crossing the threshold. I went down hard on to the gravel, unable to break the fall with my hands, and then scrambled quickly to my feet, my lungs fighting for air. I knew that if I gave him enough time to stand and draw the gun, it would be all over. It was a clear night, lit by a half-moon, and there were no trees to hide behind. I had to put as much space between us as I could.

I started running. But the kid was faster than I was, and I could hear him gaining on me as our feet crunched wildly

over the stones. I realized I wasn't going to get away. Suddenly, impulsively, I made a decision to stop. If I couldn't out-run him, then I would have to surprise him. I skidded to a halt, planted my feet as firmly as I could, and then drew my hands back as if I were about to swing a baseball bat. I aimed for his head. He ran straight into it, and I felt the bones in his face shatter into little pieces. It was as though he had crashed into a brick wall, and he went down straight, fast, and screaming. But still he didn't know when to quit. Like a wounded animal fighting for its life, he had become pure instinct. He got up in blind pain and came at me once again. By now my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and I could see where we were standing. But there was no time to move away. I side-stepped his charging body, and that was all. He was already over the edge of the excavation, falling to the bottom seventy-five feet below.

For a few minutes I didn't do anything. I just stood there panting like a pig under the half-moon, trying to get my breath back. Then I started to shake. It wasn't anything I wanted to do, but my body decided to go ahead and do it without me. For a moment I thought I was going to faint, so I sat down on the ground, and then promptly retched up everything inside me. I wasn't really sure if I was throwing up or sobbing. It was the same violence in the chest, the same breathless scald in the lungs. If I hadn't stopped running when I did, I said to myself, I would have gone over the edge first. It almost didn't matter. There had been too much death today, and I was sick of it, sick of my life, sick of everything I had done to myself in order to stay alive. I had become a destroyer, and I didn't know who I was any more.

It took me a good ten or fifteen minutes to settle down. By then I was rational enough to know I couldn't stay where I was. The other two would be coming back any moment, and I realized I couldn't face any more. It wasn't that I cared about what happened to me. But I knew I couldn't go through the same thing again. I had come to the limit of myself, and there was nothing left.

I got the hell out of there.

TWELVE

I was dreaming of a city with no one in it but me. Everyone had vanished because of a strange and devastating power that had taken hold of my voice. Whenever I spoke to anyone, he would disappear. All I had to do was open my mouth, and everyone around me would be gone. People started running away from me whenever I approached, but I would shout after them, trying to explain that it wasn't my fault, and suddenly they too would evaporate into thin air. Eventually there was no one left. I had become the last man in the world. I sat down in a hotel lobby somewhere, filled with grief and self-pity. I wondered if there was any way to undo the damage I had caused and concluded there was none, that the people would never reappear. I resolved never to say another word, to atone by taking a lifelong vow of silence. Then I heard a hammering noise from one of the upper floors of the hotel. I got out of my seat and started climbing the stairs. There was still another person in the world, and if I could manage to find him, I would be saved. Hour after hour I climbed the stairs, and the noise kept getting closer.

Just as I was about to reach the top, I opened my eyes. Someone was knocking on the apartment door. I made a move to get up and heard all the muscles in my body howl with outrage. I felt as if I had been used to fill a pot-hole in the West Side Highway. I was never going to walk again, and for the rest of my life I would be confined to this room, attended by an old wrinkled nurse in a white uniform who would feed me nothing but chicken broth. The knocking continued, and I told whoever it was that I was coming. I looked at my watch and saw that it was ten past eight. I had been asleep for less than five hours.

Three weeks later I made it to the front door. It took me

another four days to undo the locks and at least six hours to pull open the door, but at last my visitor was standing before me. It was Grimes.

'Sweet Jesus,' he said. 'Your face looks like a contour map of the Rocky Mountains.'

'Yeah, and I'm lucky too. I almost wound up in Death Valley.'

I let him into the apartment. This time he didn't try to make any witty remarks about the furniture. We were beyond the stage where jokes mattered now. It had become all business.

'I won't be able to put two sentences together until I get some coffee inside me, Lieutenant,' I explained. 'You're welcome to join me if you like.'

I went into the kitchen, turned on the cold water, and stuck my head under the faucet. I kept it there for a good three or four minutes, trying to will myself back into one piece. As I towelled down my head, I set about preparing the coffee.

'Seeing that I had breakfast two hours ago,' Grimes said, 'I guess I won't refuse. You private dicks sure do lead the life. You get up any time you want, and then if you feel like it you can take the day off and lie around in bed eating chocolates and reading French novels.'

'I'm out of chocolates today, but any time you want to borrow a book, feel free. I'd recommend starting off with *The Red and the Black*. Stendhal would help get your mind off your work.'

'How about *The Black and the Blue*? I always wanted to read your autobiography. Maybe I could learn a few of your secrets. Like who gave you your first boxing lesson. And why you disappear into New Jersey when you're supposedly working on a case in New York.'

As soon as the coffee was ready I put the thermos on a tray along with two mugs, two spoons, a couple of paper napkins, the sugar box, and a half-empty carton of milk, and carried it into the living room. Nobody could say I wasn't a gracious host.

Grimes liked the coffee, which both pleased and surprised me. I found myself beginning to like him.

'I suppose I should thank you for bailing me out yesterday,' I said, lighting a cigarette with my bruised and swollen hand. 'It seems so long ago, I had almost forgotten about it.'

'I nearly told Gorinski that I didn't know you. But then I remembered what Irvingville is like, and I decided that maybe you needed a little help.'

'I was hoping you would. I didn't know who else to call.'

Grimes drank off the last of his coffee and put down his mug. 'I'm glad I could do you a favour, Klein, I really am. But now you've got to tell me what you were doing out there in the first place.'

'I was following down a lead on the Chapman murder. I still don't know who did it, but I've got something almost as good.'

I told him about Chapman's accident five years ago, about Victor Contini's involvement in it, and how Bruno Pignato had worked for Contini. I gave him the story of both my trips to New Jersey, describing how I had found Pignato dead in his house, and then going on to outline my experiences with Captain Gorinski. I finished off with an account of my car and what had happened during the night. Grimes poured himself another cup of coffee.

'If you'd told me about this yesterday,' he said, 'you could have spared yourself a lot of lumps.'

'I didn't think things were going to happen so fast. I was waiting for something really solid before I told you about it.'

'It's not for you to decide what's solid and what's not solid, Klein. When you've got a lead on a case like this, it's police business, do you understand? You come straight to me with it. No snooping around on your own. That guy Pignato might still be alive if you'd opened your mouth yesterday.'

'That's just talk, Lieutenant, and you know it. Yesterday you weren't interested in a thing I had to say. You treated the letter as if I'd made it up.'

'The letter doesn't exist until I see it. It's not evidence, it's not a lead, it's not anything.' Grimes got up from his chair and began walking around the room. 'The mistake you're making with this thing is that you want it to be too complicated. You

think it's all part of a big plot that goes back to the moment Chapman was born. You spend your time worrying about what happened five years ago, when you should be using your clever Jewish brain to think about what happened yesterday. That's when Chapman got murdered, if you remember, and today's the day to do something about it.'

'I believe Victor Contini is mixed up in what happened yesterday. The letter sent to Chapman made explicit references to the accident five years ago. If I find out exactly what took place in the past, it stands to reason I'll know a lot more about the present. I'm not just talking about some minor coincidence, I'm talking about a definite connection. And I think you're a fool if you can't see it.'

Grimes threw up his hands and slapped them disgustedly against his sides. We weren't only talking about Chapman, we were examining basic principles, and he wanted to convince me that he was right.

'Look,' he said, 'I'm not saying Contini didn't have anything to do with the accident. I'll put someone on it today. But you know as well as I do it's going to be next to impossible to get anything to stick on that guy. In the last thirty-five years he hasn't come up for anything worse than a parking ticket.' He held up his hands to silence me, wanting to go on with his argument without interruption. 'OK. Say we find out that Contini set up Chapman five years ago. Where does that get us? Does it mean that Contini had Chapman murdered yesterday? Maybe yes, maybe no. We can discuss it all you like, but we've still got a dead man on our hands, and that's what we have to start with. You're going about it ass backwards, Klein. You should try looking at what's in front of your nose before you take out your telescope. It doesn't take a genius to solve a murder, it takes hard work.'

'The difference between us,' I said, 'is that I'm interested in finding out why Chapman was murdered, and what you care about is how. I want real answers, and you want a conviction.'

'That's what I get paid for,' Grimes said. 'That's what police work is all about.'

'I guess I'm in a different business, then.'

'That's right. And you're not going to get a pension, either.'

'So how have you been earning your money lately, Lieutenant?'

'I thought you'd never ask.' Grimes paused, walked back to the table, and sat down again. He was smiling. 'In fact, that's why I came to see you. I wanted to tell you about the arrest we made yesterday.'

'And I suppose you're going to tell me it's Judy Chapman.'

'You're damn straight I am. Because she did it. That woman's guilty as hell.'

I didn't like it. It was all too easy, and it didn't make sense. At nine o'clock yesterday morning I had talked to Judy Chapman on the phone. After making a few jokes, she had stopped short and told me how worried she was about her husband. Her voice had been genuine, concerned. It wasn't the voice of someone who was about to become a murderer.

'I don't know what kind of evidence you think you have against her,' I said, 'but I guarantee you she didn't do it.'

'Bullshit,' Grimes retorted. 'You want evidence, I'll give you evidence. Number one, she admits to having breakfast with her husband. Number two, her fingerprints are not only all over her cup but on the cup Chapman drank out of too. Number three, we found the bottle of poison in the kitchen cabinet, and it was bought at a hardware store on Monday by Mrs Chapman herself. Number four, she was fooling around with that Columbia professor, Briles. She wanted a divorce from Chapman, and he wouldn't give it to her. Do you want me to go on?'

'Where is the Chapman woman now?' I asked.

'At home. Out on bail.'

'Is Brian Contini working for her?'

'Yeah. But he won't be handling the case in court. He's no trial lawyer, and they're going to need someone pretty good. I hear he's going to hire Burleson for her, one of the hotshot criminal guys.'

I decided to give it one more stab. 'And it doesn't seem a

little curious to you that the son of the man who arranged the accident five years ago was Chapman's lawyer?'

Grimes was bored with the argument, and he let out a sigh of irritation. 'It won't wash, Klein. You can't hold someone responsible for the man who signed his birth certificate. Brian Contini is just a normal guy who had the bad luck not to be able to choose his father. I know that smart types like you and me don't get born unless we have a say in the matter. But all the other slobs have to settle for what they get.' He waved his hand impatiently, as if trying to chase away all these idle words. 'Forget it. Let the whole thing drop. It's an open and shut case, and it's finished.'

'That's just the trouble. It's all too pat, too simple. The case shuts before it even opens. There's almost too much evidence. It looks more like a frame-up than straight murder. For Judy Chapman to have left behind all the clues you say she did, she must have been in some kind of trance.'

'A guilty conscience maybe. It could be she wanted to get caught.'

'That's too easy.'

'Well, life is easy once in a while, too,' Grimes said, standing up from his chair. 'Just because most cases are hard, it doesn't mean we should turn up our noses when an easy one comes our way.' He started walking towards the door. 'I've got to run along now, Klein. I just thought you'd appreciate it if I stopped by to tell you what's been happening.'

'I do appreciate it, Lieutenant. Without you as an alarm clock I might never have woken up today.'

Grimes smiled, got half-way out the door, and then poked his head back into the room. 'Hey, Klein,' he said. 'Thanks for the coffee. It wasn't bad at all. If you ever get tired of detective work, you might think about opening one of those expresso shops down in the Village.'

He didn't wait for an answer. His head disappeared into the hallway, the door shut, and he was gone.

I remained in my chair, studying the dregs at the bottom of my coffee-cup. They didn't tell me anything I wanted to

know. I lit a cigarette and spent the next few minutes blowing smoke rings into the room. But they didn't give me any answers either. I got up, walked around the room until I had counted ninety-nine steps, and then sat down on the couch. My mind was blank. It seemed to be getting into the habit of deserting me whenever I needed it most.

The whole business had taken a wrong turn, and I was suddenly in danger of being left behind. For the past two days I had been struggling to fit together a complex puzzle of motives, personalities, and relationships, and now Grimes had come along and swept it all off the table. I wondered if there would be enough time for me to pick up the pieces. I wondered if there would be any pieces left.

Almost unconsciously, I found myself thinking about Chapman. I watched myself trying to crawl inside his skin, trying to see the world through his eyes. After a little while it slowly began to dawn on me that he had never really been in control of himself. He had been a prisoner of his own talent. I tried to imagine what it felt like to be better at something than anyone else, to be so very good at one particular thing that you would come to resent it. Chapman had achieved every possible success – and yet in some way he had not done it himself. His talent had done it, a kind of monster that lived inside him, using him only as an instrument to further its own ends. He must have felt detached from himself, somehow separated from his own life, as if he were a fraud, a substitute Chapman who had abdicated responsibility for his own actions. The monster was in command. The monster had given him everything – and taken everything away.

And then, suddenly, the monster was slain. Would it have freed him, or would it have engulfed him in a new and more terrifying emptiness? If his whole existence had been defined in terms of the monster, where would he begin to look for himself now? A man like Chapman would have felt unreal, as if the essential part of him had never truly been born. He would have been lost, stranded somewhere between the self that had been stolen from him and the self he would never be able to find. I saw the bitter contract dispute with Light as a

way of getting back at the monster for all it had done to him. It was a blood debt, and Chapman had been determined to extract payment.

I wasn't going to let it drop. No matter what Grimes might have thought, the case still wasn't over, and I wanted to see it through to the end. The only thing I needed was a client. I decided to offer my services to Judy Chapman.

It was an older woman who answered the phone. 'Judith is not taking any calls,' she said. 'It's quite impossible to speak to her now.' I assumed it was Judy's mother. Only parents call their children by their full names.

'Please tell her it's Max Klein. The last thing I want to do is intrude. But this is extremely important, and I think she'd be willing to talk to me.'

She said she would ask. Less than a minute later Judy came to the phone.

'Oh God, Max. I'm so glad you called. It's so awful. You can't believe what's been happening.' Her voice had lost all its assurance. In the past twenty-four hours she had been through the ordeals of death and false accusation, and she was scared.

'I know,' I said. 'Things look very bad right now. But the way to do something about it is to fight it, and I want to help you, Judy.'

She took a deep breath, as if struggling for air, as if it required a special effort for her to keep breathing. 'When can you come? I want you to be here.'

'Soon. There's something I've got to do first. But I should make it by twelve.'

'Don't be late.'

'I'll be there as close to noon as I can.'

'I'll be waiting.'

'Me too.'

We hung up, leaving everything else unsaid. I had promised to help her, and yet I had not given her anything tangible to hold on to. I wondered how long she would be able to stand up to the pressure she now had to deal with. A woman like Judy Chapman had no frame of reference for

coping with a murder charge. She wanted to lean on someone, and I had given her my arm. I wondered if I would be able to clear her. And if I did, I wondered if she would still want to lean on me.

I went off to get ready for my meeting with Victor Contini. Looking at myself in the mirror, I saw that my face wasn't quite as bad as I thought it would be. There was an ugly welt on my left cheek, but for the most part the injuries were inside where they didn't show. The back of my head was still tender, and my ribs smarted every time I moved too quickly. But there was nothing that wouldn't heal. I counted my blessings.

I was just starting to loop my tie around my neck when the phone rang. I automatically made a move to go answer it, got half-way there, and then decided to leave it alone. I returned to the bathroom on the fourth ring, started to reconsider my decision on the sixth, and went back to answer it on the ninth. The caller was obviously determined, and I thought it might be something important. One of the facts of modern life is our belief in the sanctity of the telephone. People will interrupt passionate love-making or suspend a violent quarrel just to obey its command. Refusal to answer is equated with anarchy, an assault on the very structure of society. I picked up the phone on the eleventh ring. Pavlov would have been pleased.

'Klein?' The voice was muffled, throaty, menacing. It sounded as though it were coming through a handkerchief, and I didn't recognize it.

'That's right,' I said. 'What can I do for you?'

'It's not what you can do for me, it's what you can do for yourself, Klein.'

'Such as what?'

'Such as disappearing.'

'I already tried that. But the magic potion I took wasn't strong enough. My nose kept sticking through.'

'Let me say, Klein, that if you do not disappear of your own accord, you will be made to disappear – in a way that will have permanent effects. I would like to tell you that you will

regret your stubbornness. But a dead man doesn't have any regrets, does he, Klein?'

'Look, if you're trying to move in on my subscription to the *New Yorker*, you can forget it. It ran out in February, and I didn't renew.'

'I'm not trying to move in on anything, Klein, I'm only interested in seeing you move out. Out of the Chapman case, out of everything to do with George and Judith Chapman.'

'In the past three days everyone I've met has said that. They're all so worried about my health, they think I should go away on vacation. But I like it where I am. There are only two or three decent months each year in New York, and May happens to be one of them. Why don't you call back in November? Maybe I'll be more interested then.'

'November will be too late, Klein. You'll be dead.'

'And so will the poppies. The World Series will be over, and the birds will be flying south. What else is new?'

'Goodbye, Klein. You are an ignorant man.'

'Same to you, Muffle Mouth. It was a pleasure.'

And so began my day. I wasn't going to let it bother me. There had been too many threats for me to get alarmed any more. I had filled my alarm quotient for the week, and from now on it would be one step at a time. There was no more room for me to look back. And in front of me there was a wall. My problem at the moment was figuring out how to get through it, especially since there was no door in sight.

THIRTEEN

Chip had put on weight since I had last seen him, and he had taken to wearing glasses. You always notice changes when you meet up with an old friend after a long interval, but the years had been particularly hard on Chip. The thickness around the belly was probably not unusual for a man moving into his mid-thirties, but there was something in him that had already become old, used up, and for a split second I almost didn't recognize him. He had lost some hair and a lot of grey had crept into his temples, but that wasn't what confused me. It was more a kind of stodginess or resignation, a feeling he gave off that told you he wasn't interested in conquering new worlds any more, that he would be content to spend the rest of his life holding on to what he had already won. He was a good family man with three kids and a nice-looking wife, and they lived in an expensive house in Westport. He had become a solid citizen, a commuter, and a man who made money. I didn't know whether I should call him Chip any more. He didn't look like the kind of person who would use a nickname.

He came out to the receptionist's desk wearing a dark blue three-piece suit, and we exchanged the usual smiles, handshakes, and back slaps. Underneath it, though, I could see that he was worried. The situation was upsetting to him, and he wasn't sure if I had come as a friend or an enemy.

We went on talking for a few minutes, making conversation about the past. He wanted to know how long it had been since we'd seen each other, and I told him four years. He didn't want to believe me, but I remembered the restaurant where we had eaten lunch that day, and he finally remembered too.

'That was two kids and thirty pounds ago,' he said. He made it sound as though he were talking about another century.

He led me out of the reception room down a hallway with thick burgundy carpeting, stylish spotlights, and expensively framed seventeenth-century etchings. The place had been redecorated since my last visit. Ryan and Baldwin, the two senior partners, were both ready to retire, and Chip had become the head man. The office had been remodelled to keep up with the times, and the decor served as a kind of advertisement to the clients, as if to say this was a first-class operation and naturally the fees were going to be high.

Half-way down the hall Chip took me gently by the elbow and stopped. He wanted to talk to me before we walked in on his father, who was waiting in Chip's private office. I felt like a boxer being told the rules by a referee before the first round of a fight. The only thing Chip didn't know was that his father had already gone a few rounds with me in absentia.

He no longer seemed so glad to see me, and all the forced cheer of his greeting was gone. His face had become pinched with apprehension, as if I were some kind of bomb about to explode at any moment. He spoke to me almost in a whisper.

'Listen, Max, I don't know what you're up to, but go easy, OK? I don't want any trouble.'

'I'm not here to cause trouble. The trouble started a long time ago, before I ever arrived on the scene.'

'I mean, don't push too hard. My father has a bad heart, and I don't want anything to upset him.'

'You don't have to worry about that. Guys like me can't upset your father. You should be worried about me, not him.'

'Just remember that I did you a favour by setting this up.'

'I've already put you in my will, so cool it, Chip. I'm not calling the shots, your father is.'

Chip pursed his lips unhappily. He realized it was out of his control. 'I knew it was a mistake,' he said, 'I knew I shouldn't have done it.'

Before we went in I changed the subject. 'What's happening with Judy Chapman?'

'I've gotten Burleson for her.' He looked at his watch. 'They're probably meeting together right now.'

'I'm going over there myself a little later. We're on the same side, Chip. Try to remember that.'

'I know, I know,' he groaned. 'I just wish I wasn't on any side. I'm not cut out for this sort of thing.'

'Buck up, lad,' I said, clapping his shoulder. 'Discomfort is good for you. It makes you tough.'

Chip grimaced and opened the door of the office. His father was sitting in a leather lounge chair and staring out the window. Victor Contini was a short, pudgy man in his late sixties who looked no more dangerous than a toad. He was dressed in casual clothes, with a flowery shirt under a navy-blue golf sweater, red and blue plaid slacks, and white shoes. If you didn't know who he was, you might have taken him for a senior citizen reclining in the sun at Miami Beach. The only thing that gave any hint he wasn't living on social security cheques was the large diamond ring he wore on the pinky of his left hand. He didn't get up when we entered.

'This is Max Klein, Pop,' Chip said.

'Pleased to meet you, Mr Klein,' the old man said. He couldn't have cared less.

'Max and I went to law school together. He used to be quite a ball player in his day,' Chip continued.

'Very nice,' the old man replied. He made it sound as though he had just been handed a finger-painting by a three-year-old. 'Why don't you run along now, Chipper. Mr Klein and I have business to discuss.'

Chip blushed with embarrassment. He had been treated this way a thousand times by his father, and yet each time it came as a fresh humiliation. Instead of standing up to it years ago when it would have mattered, he had allowed himself to be dominated, and now it was too late for the relationship to change. Chip's solution had been to make himself into everything his father wasn't: studious, sincere, straightforward. In one way it had made his father proud of him. But in another way it had made it impossible for him ever to gain his father's respect. He had managed to make it on his own, but

he was still nothing more than the obedient boy who brought home straight A's from school. He would never be treated as an equal.

'I'd rather stay, Pop,' he said, making a token defence of his rights. 'Max and I are old friends. We don't have any secrets from each other.'

The old man spoke gently but firmly. 'This is private stuff, Chip, and I don't think you should be here. It'll only take a few minutes.'

Chip looked at me with an expression of hopelessness and envy, and then left the room without saying anything.

When he had gone, Victor Contini said, 'Brian is a good boy, but he's an innocent. I don't like him getting mixed up in my business. There's business and then there's family, and my son is family. You shouldn't have called him to arrange this meeting, Klein. That's not playing by the rules, and a guy like you should know better.'

'Maybe you should send me a copy of your rule book,' I said. 'It seems there are a lot of twists in the game you play. Like sending three against one. Like agreeing to come here today and then booking reservations for me in an abandoned quarry to make sure I'd never show up.'

'OK, so you're a big tough guy,' Contini said in his hoarse, expressionless voice. 'But from the looks of your face, you're not a well man, Klein. Maybe you should see a doctor.'

I walked across the room and sat down on the window-ledge behind Chip's desk, about four feet from Contini. I wanted to be face to face with him while we spoke. It was like looking at a sculpture of a bulldog. Contini's liver-spotted jowls hung in loose folds down the sides of his face, and his tiny dark eyes seemed to repel all light. There was too much shrewdness in them to betray any emotion. He had it down to a science.

'If you think my face looks bad,' I said, 'you should see the other guy. He's at the bottom of a big hole keeping company with a bunch of stones.'

'So I heard.' Contini looked so relaxed that I kept expecting him to open up a newspaper and start reading as we talked.

'But that was yesterday, and today is today. I'm not interested in the past.'

'With a past like yours I wouldn't think you'd like to do much looking back. But I'm asking you to make an exception for me. I want you to help me understand some things that happened five years ago. You see, Mr Contini, the past sometimes has a funny way of catching up with the present.'

'Maybe for some people, but not for me. If you want to talk about five years ago, OK, I'll talk about five years ago. But there's not much to say about the present. I could tell you about my golf scores maybe, or about the restaurants I like best, but that's about all. I had open-heart surgery two years ago, and I don't do much business now. It's mostly family. You know, the kids, the grandchildren, picnics on Sunday, bedtime stories, boat rides, things like that.'

'Sounds terrific. Too bad I didn't grow up in your family. Think of all the things I missed.'

'I'm really not such a bad guy, Klein. Everybody loves me. I do people favours, and they remember me for my kindness.'

'Like Bruno Pignato, I suppose. There's a man who was literally killed with kindness.'

Contini met my eyes for the first time. He didn't care for my joke, and my insinuation seemed to offend him. 'I don't like that kind of talk,' he said in the same unmodulated voice. 'Bruno Pignato was the son of a second cousin of mine, and I looked after him all his life. He was a very unhappy person with lots of problems. Whoever whacked him had to be a real creep, one of them sick perverts.'

'You mean to say you didn't have Pignato killed?'

'That's what I'm telling you, I didn't have him killed. Why would I have killed him when I treated him like my own son? Who do you think paid his doctor bills, gave him money for his medicine, and got him into one of those fancy private hospitals with the green grass and pretty nurses? That stuff ain't cheap, you know. I really cared about Bruno. I'd like to get my hands on the creep that did it to him.'

'And now I suppose you're going to tell me Pignato never called you two days ago about seeing me?'

'I'm not going to tell you that, because it's not true. You know that, and I know that, so why beat around the bush? Bruno called me and told me about talking to you. You really upset him, Klein. It took me twenty minutes before I could figure out what he was saying, he was talking so crazy.'

'We talked about five years ago,' I said. 'In particular, George Chapman's accident. And that's what I want to discuss with you, too. If you can give me some decent answers, maybe I'll decide to leave you alone. But if you fool around with me, then I'll start digging even deeper. I've already found enough dirt to make a lot of trouble for you. If I go any farther, I'll probably have enough to put you away for a long time, Contini. You might think a guy like me doesn't count for much, but I've got two things going for me. I'm persistent, and I have a hard head.'

Contini took out a huge cigar from his shirt pocket and studied it casually. 'I don't like your act, Klein. You come on too strong when you don't have to, and you don't know what you're talking about. That's two things going against you. You think you're some kind of a smart aleck because you got out of a little scrape last night. But I was doing you a favour, and you shouldn't forget it. One word from me and you don't breathe any more. You owe me one, Klein, and I can make you pay up any time I want to.'

'You're avoiding the subject, Contini. I asked you about George Chapman, not your opinion of me. When I decide to change my style, I'll ask you to write me a recommendation for a scholarship to the Dale Carnegie School.'

'There's not much to say about George Chapman,' Contini answered. 'He's dead.'

'You're very astute.'

'So they tell me.'

I stood up from the window-ledge and walked back and forth in front of the old man's chair. He followed me lazily with his eyes, as if each time I came into view I was a different passer-by, a new stranger deserving of a mildly curious glance.

'I want it all, Contini, from the very beginning. How you met Chapman. What kind of business you had with him. Why you arranged the accident five years ago. Why you sent him a threatening letter earlier this week. And why you had him killed in his apartment. The facts, Contini, from top to bottom, and everything in between.'

Contini raised his right hand. 'Slow down, cowboy, you're going too fast. First you say you want to talk about five years ago, and I say OK, I'll talk about five years ago. But before I get a chance to say anything, you start asking me about last week. Now I already told you to forget about recent things. I'm not involved, do you understand? I spend my time playing golf, and that's it. If you knew anything about anything, you'd know you were asking stupid questions. When business is over it's over, and that's the end of it. Sure I knew Chapman, what's the big deal? We did some business together, settled up, and that was that. The rest you can figure out for yourself. I'm not going to sit around here and give you my life story. You can go to the library and read about it there.'

'How did you meet Chapman in the first place?'

'Chapman was a big man, right? And I was a big man, right? So it was only natural for us to get together. In a place like New York it was only a matter of time.'

'Forgive me if I sound a little incredulous,' I said, 'but I find it hard to imagine a guy with Chapman's class wanting to hang around with a mug like you.'

Contini smiled, not so much at me, but inwardly, as if enjoying a private joke with himself. 'What do you know about class, Mr Private Detective? You think just because a guy is good-looking, wears nice clothes, and doesn't say "ain't" that he's got class? You take a type like Chapman and scratch the surface, he's just like everybody else, maybe even a little worse. It's the ugly ones like me who've got all the class. We are what we are, and we don't pretend we're something else. We're the ones with character. Guys like Chapman aren't worth a tinker's fart.'

'What were you into him for, Contini? What kind of

blackmail scheme had you worked out? And why did you want him dead?'

'No blackmail,' he said, waving off the word with his cigar. 'Never any blackmail. I'm a business man. Nothing more, nothing less. I don't go screwing around in people's private lives. Like I said, Chapman and I had business. We settled up, and then the business was over.'

'You mean you settled up. Chapman reneged on something, and you decided to arrange the accident to teach him a lesson. Nobody reneges on Victor Contini. A deal's a deal, and if you try to back out of it, you get burned. Isn't that right?'

'Whatever. You're the one with all the bright answers. Why bother to ask me?'

'It won't take me long to find out what you were working on with Chapman. And when I do, I'm going to blow the thing open. It's going to be a lot of fun for me to see you have your day in court.'

Contini laughed. It wasn't much of a laugh, hardly more than a grunt. But for him it was just short of rolling in the aisles. The situation was too fraught with irony for him to contain himself.

'The only trouble with your plan is that there's never going to be any day in court. You're forgetting about my heart. No court doctor would ever let me go to trial. It would be bad for my health, too much of a strain on me. You can find out all you like about five years ago, but it's not going to do you any good. You can't touch me.'

'It doesn't make any difference,' I said, 'I'll expose you, give it all to the papers, and the effect will be the same.'

'Rumours, gossip, hearsay,' Contini said, with complete indifference. 'I've been through it before, and it doesn't bother me. If you took all the things they've printed about me and put them in a book, I'd come out looking worse than what's-his-name, Nixon. Let them think what they want. I know how to live with myself, and that's all that matters. How your grandchildren feel about you, that's what counts.'

'You're not only one of the great golfers of our time,' I said,

'but you're also a Zen master. How do you find enough time in the day to pursue so much wisdom?'

He ignored my remark and went on with his own train of thought. 'I'll tell you what, Klein. Maybe we can get together after all. You find out who killed Bruno, and I'll give you two grand, straight across the table.'

'So you can send your boys after the guy who did it?'

'I'm going to find out anyway, so it doesn't matter. I just thought you'd like to make some extra cash. It's no skin off my back who does the work.'

'Thanks, I appreciate the offer. But I don't want to have to cover up all the mirrors in my house. I'm still going to need them when I shave.'

'Whatever you say, Klein. No hard feelings.'

'That's right. No hard feelings. No feelings at all.'

Contini closed his eyes and didn't say anything for a while. I was beginning to think he had drifted off to sleep.

'This has been a pleasant conversation, Klein,' he said at last, opening his eyes. 'But it's getting late, and it's time for my pills. I've got so many pills it sometimes takes me ten minutes to get them all down. But I do what the doctor says. I stick to my diet, and I don't smoke these cigars any more.' He held up the cigar and examined it wistfully. 'Two dollars a piece and I just play with them in my mouth. But that's the way it goes. I take care of myself because I'm planning to stick around for a few more years. That's what you call character.'

I left him there on the lounge chair looking at his cigar. His whole life had become one long leisure moment spent by the side of an imaginary swimming pool, and nothing could faze him any more. It had amused him to talk to me for a while, but in the end it had left him cold. He had been through it so many times before, he could have done it in his sleep. I wished him luck with his pills and walked out the door. Chip wasn't in sight when I reached the reception room, and I didn't have time to go looking for him. He probably didn't want to speak to me anyway.

FOURTEEN

The same doorman was on duty in front of the Chapmans' building. He had put his overcoat in mothballs for the summer and was now dressed in a lightweight uniform. Otherwise, he looked the same, if a trifle less substantial. He greeted me with a sad smile.

'That was a nasty business you walked in on yesterday, Mr Klein,' he said.

I nodded. 'It's not the kind of thing you expect to find when you go calling on someone.'

'No, I wouldn't think so. At least not in a building like this one.' He seemed to be one of those people who thought of violence as a disease that struck only the lower classes.

'I was wondering,' I said, 'if anyone came to see Mr Chapman between the time Mrs Chapman went out and the time I got here.'

'I've already talked to the police about that,' he said, studying the bruises on my face but not daring to mention them. 'There was no one.'

'Is there another way of getting into the building besides the front door?'

'There's the service entrance downstairs around the side, but that door is usually locked.'

'Was it locked two days ago?'

'Not in the morning. Some workers from Con Edison were here, and they were running in and out for several hours.'

'Who's responsible for keeping the door locked?'

'The superintendent.'

'Is he the only one with a key?'

'No, everyone in the building has a key. It's convenient to use the door when there's something bulky to take upstairs. There's more room in the service elevator.'

'Thanks. This will be a help.'

'But I already told this to the police yesterday.'

'I'm sure you did. But the police sometimes forget what they're told.'

He called the Chapman apartment on the intercom phone, and I went inside to get the elevator to the eleventh floor. It was quarter past twelve.

The door was opened by an older version of Judy, a woman of about fifty-five with the same large brown eyes and lean, athletic body as her daughter. She was puffy around the eyes and was wearing slightly too much make-up. I imagined she had done a lot of crying since yesterday. She looked at me as if I had just stepped off a flying saucer.

'Yes?' It was the same voice that had spoken to me on the phone earlier.

'I'm Max Klein. The doorman just called up with my name.'

'Of course.' She was too distracted to feel embarrassed by her lack of hospitality. 'Come right in, please.'

Judy was sitting at a round table in the far corner of the living room with a grey-haired man I took to be Burleson and a younger man who was probably one of his associates. Judy was wearing a simple cotton dress with blue and white checks, and it made her look very young, more like a college student than a thirty-year-old widow. I had somehow been imagining her dressed in black, displaying all the traditional signs of mourning. But then this was not an ordinary situation. Her back was to the wall, and she was fighting for her life. No sooner had she absorbed the shock of her husband's death than she was forced to defend herself for his murder. The simple dress and schoolgirl look were a badge of innocence she had put on to prove the accusation wrong. No woman who looked like that could possibly be a murderer. I wondered if she was wearing it for the benefit of her lawyer or to reassure herself, and I wondered if she had done it consciously or not. In the end it probably didn't make any difference.

She smiled when she saw me and stood up from her chair. I

walked over to the table, and Burleson and his associate stood up as well. Judy introduced me to the two men, and we all shook hands. They had already been told who I was, and they greeted me more as a colleague than a stranger. We were all in it together, they seemed to be saying, so let's get down to work. I was encouraged that Burleson didn't resent my presence which had often been my experience with lawyers. He was one of the best in the business, and he knew that someone like me on the case could be a big help to him.

He was a curious mixture of flamboyance and reserve. His dark grey suit was expensive, subdued, and perfectly tailored, which showed that he was a man of the world, someone for whom success came naturally. At the same time, he sported an almost foppish mane of long silvery hair, which showed that he was an eccentric, perhaps even a genius, who could dazzle you with unpredictable brilliance in the courtroom. It was a carefully studied image, and he gave off the kind of self-confidence that seemed calculated to soothe the nerves of his clients. It wasn't a style I either liked or felt comfortable with, but I wasn't about to pick a quarrel with him. He had made a career out of winning highly publicized trials, and it was only natural for him to be something of a performer. The only thing I cared about was that he get Judy acquitted.

'I wonder if I could have a word with Max in private, Mr Burleson,' Judy said. 'There are some things I want to discuss with him before the three of you sit down together.'

'Go right ahead,' Burleson answered. 'Harlow and I have a lot to go over. Take your time.'

Judy led me out of the living room, down the hallway, and into her bedroom. She closed the door quietly, and then without a word came over to me and put her arms around my body.

'Hold me tight,' she said. 'I'm so scared I don't think I can stand up any more.'

I wrapped my arms around her and let her put all her weight against me. We stood there for a moment in silence, her head leaning on my chest. I kissed her on the forehead

and cheeks and told her not to worry, that it would be all cleared up soon. She closed her eyes and parted her mouth, asking me to kiss her, wanting me to take her, as if she could wipe out the reality of the situation by losing herself in my body. I made myself back off.

'We've got to talk, Judy. There's no time now.'

'I just wish I didn't have to think about it,' she almost whispered. 'I just wish this had never happened.'

'But it has happened, and now we have to do something about it.'

I walked her slowly to the bed and sat her down. She held on to my hand, unwilling to let go. It was as if I had become a source of electricity and could keep her functioning even though there was no life left in her. She looked up at me and seemed to notice the condition of my face for the first time. It brought her back to earth.

'Good Lord! What happened to you? You look awful.'

'It's a long story,' I said. 'You remember my asking you about Chip Contini's father the other day. This was done by a few of the surgeons who work for him.'

'Then he's involved in this after all, isn't he?'

'He's involved, but to what extent I can't say. There's no question that he arranged your husband's accident five years ago. I know that now beyond the slightest doubt. I don't think he was the one who sent the threatening letter, and I'm fairly certain he's not responsible for what happened in this apartment yesterday.'

She reached for her cigarettes on the bedside table, lit one with trembling hands, and took a deep drag. 'You mean George's accident wasn't an accident? Are you saying that Victor Contini was trying to kill him?'

For five years she had been living with the assumption that her husband's crash was a freak occurrence, an act of God. Now she had learned that it was the act of a single man, and this new knowledge frightened her. It was like discovering you've been living with a defective furnace for five years and that at any moment your house could have blown up. It was the horror of hindsight.

'Nearly everything I've discovered about George has been unexpected,' I said. 'And Contini isn't the only one who had it in for him. No one I've spoken to has had anything nice to say about your husband.'

'I told you he's a difficult person,' she said, and then stopped, momentarily confused. 'I mean was. Was, dammit. George is dead, isn't he? I still can't get used to it.' She looked up at the door, as if half-expecting him to walk into the room.

'I know you've probably been through it a hundred times already with the police and Burleson, but I want you to tell me what happened here yesterday morning. The DA will be building his case on the fact that you had breakfast with George in the kitchen and that you were seen leaving the building very close to the time he swallowed the poison. I've got to know what really happened, or else I'm not going to be able to do much.'

She put out her cigarette in the ashtray and then immediately lit another one. She was chain smoking in the way some people drink. She didn't know she was doing it. 'It's very simple,' she said, 'and I tried to explain it to that man Grimes, but he just wouldn't believe me.' She paused and took a deep breath. 'George and I had an argument. He had heard me talking on the phone to you, and he got very angry. He flew into a rage, saying that I was meddling in his business, and that if I ever did it again he would kill me. It was one of our typical fights, I suppose. I thought it might calm George down if I offered to make him breakfast. He apologized, and for a few minutes it looked like the whole thing had blown over. But then, as soon as we sat down at the table, he started in on me again. He was like a crazy man. He said that I was throwing myself at you, that I was acting like a cheap slut. He said some terrible things, Max, and I couldn't listen any more. I just turned around and ran out of the apartment. When I got back a few hours later, the police were there and George was dead.'

'What about the poison? Grimes says he has definite proof that it was bought by you.'

'It's true. I did buy it.' She raised her shoulders and let them

drop with a painful smile. 'That's the trouble. The more I tell the truth, the worse it looks.'

'Why did you buy it?'

'George asked me to. He said there were mice in the kitchen at night and he wanted to get rid of them.'

'Were there any?'

'I don't think so. I don't remember that George ever really used the poison. And I'm positive that he didn't keep it in the kitchen cabinet, because I know I never saw it there.'

I got up from the bed and walked around the room, trying to assimilate this new information, trying to fit it into the new pattern I sensed was gradually taking shape. I knew I would have to begin looking at Chapman's murder from a completely different perspective, but I didn't yet know how. Judy watched me with a worried expression and finally asked me if anything was wrong. I avoided answering her question directly.

'It's going to be a difficult case for Burleson,' I said slowly. 'Everything stacks up so neatly against you. The police are satisfied that you did it and are no longer working on the case. It's with the district attorney now. Which means the pressure is off the real murderer and he can just sit back and wait for you to be convicted.'

'I trust Burleson. He won't let me get convicted.'

'I don't trust anyone. Not in a case like this. The evidence is just too good, and I don't like to think of what a jury might do to you. Your husband was a very popular man, and when they find out about your affair with Briles they'll have the motive they need.'

She lit yet another cigarette and stared down at the bed. 'It does look bad, doesn't it?'

'It's bad unless I can find the person who did it.'

She looked up with a flickering of hope in her eyes. 'But won't it count for something when they find out that Bill and I broke it off six months ago?'

'They'll also find out that you broke off once before and managed to get back together again. But more importantly, they'll know you weren't a faithful and devoted wife.'

'And it doesn't matter that I tried to be,' she said glumly.

'Tell me a little about Briles,' I asked, wanting to jar her from her thoughts.

'What do you mean?'

'How did he take it six months ago when you told him you were calling it off?'

'He was very upset. He begged me not to.'

'Is he someone given to jealousy?'

'No, I don't think so. Bill is an intellectual, and he usually manages to rationalize his feelings, to see every issue from the other person's side. That's why he's such a good sociologist. If he has any failing, it's a lack of aggressiveness. He's not the type to get very heated up about anything.'

'Does he still love you?'

'I'm sure he does.'

'And what about you? How do you feel?'

She looked up at me with those big brown eyes that seemed to have been robbed of all their radiance. 'It's all over, Max. I'm not going back to him, no matter what happens.'

I returned to the living room, and Judy went off to the kitchen to be with her mother. I outlined for Burleson and Harlow what had seen happening to me since George Chapman walked into my office Wednesday morning. The important thing, I explained to them, was for me to go on with my investigation as before. If I could turn up something that proved Judy's innocence, then the case would never have to go to court. In the meantime, they would prepare their defence. Burleson asked what I thought my chances were of turning up anything, and I said they weren't good. He and Harlow were not too optimistic about their own prospects either. We all agreed that we would have to get lucky. We shook hands and promised to stay in touch.

As I was walking down the front hall on my way out of the apartment, the doorbell rang and I opened the door. It was Briles. He looked me over with a sour face.

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'I was just going to ask you the same thing.'

'I came to see Mrs Chapman. I'm a good friend of hers.'

'That's not what you told me the other day. I thought you hardly knew her.'

'I don't like your tone, Klein. You shouldn't butt into things that don't concern you.'

'But it does concern me. I'm working on the case. If you'd been a little more forthcoming with me the other day, maybe Chapman would still be alive.'

'You have no idea what you're talking about.'

'But then again,' I went on, 'maybe it doesn't matter to you that Chapman is dead. With the husband out of the picture, you can come back and try to make another play for the grieving widow. Maybe this time you can win her over.'

Briles's face tensed with anger, and for a second I thought he was going to react with his fists. 'I'm not a violent man, Klein. But I can be pushed just so far. I find your comments obscene. You have no right to speak to me that way.'

'Why don't you try to make something of it, Professor?' I said, continuing to bait him. 'You might feel better if you let it all explode.'

I wasn't sure why Briles's presence had triggered off such hostility in me. It was almost as though I considered him a rival, a threat to the way I felt about Judy. I was allowing my own emotions to interfere with the case, and I knew I was acting stupidly. But I couldn't help myself. I felt an almost chemical desire to tangle with him.

I never got to find out what his breaking point was. At that moment Judy appeared in the hallway.

'Bill. What in the world are you doing here?'

'Hello, Judy,' he said, forcing a smile. 'I was coming in to see you, but then this thug decided to block my way.'

'We were just having a conversation,' I explained. 'About what motivates people's behaviour.'

Judy was upset by the anger in our voices, and she reacted with anger of her own. 'I don't care what you were talking about. It's stupid for two adult men to carry on like children. Why don't you leave him alone, Max? He hasn't done

anything to you. There are enough problems in this house without bringing in a shouting match.'

'It's all over now,' I said. 'I was just leaving.'

As I walked out the door, I turned to catch a last glimpse of Judy's face. She was looking at Briles, and her expression was one of both hatred and pity. There was a darkness in her eyes I had never seen before, a depth of passion that was almost frightening. I bore the image of that face in my mind for the rest of the day.

FIFTEEN

I started all over again. I decided to forget what I had learned, to unteach myself the lessons of the past few days, to go back to zero. From the very beginning, I realized, I had been running around in circles. Chapman had come to me with a threatening letter, and after his murder I had gone on assuming that the letter writer and the murderer were the same person. But that was making things too simple for myself. There was nothing to say that only one person was involved. The letter writer seemed to have gained access to some secret Chapman wanted to protect. And if one person knew the secret, it was possible that another person knew it as well. In fact, it was more than likely. Chapman had received the threat on Monday and just three days later – too soon for him to begin getting scared – he had been poisoned. The letter writer would not have acted so quickly. It had to mean that Chapman was being squeezed from the other end, that something else was going on at the same time. From all I had learned about Chapman, this made sense. He was a man who had been involved in many things, had known many people and had made many enemies. Any one of them could have wanted him dead.

The thing I needed most was Chapman's secret. I hadn't known what I was looking for during my first encounters with Light and Contini, but now that I did I wouldn't let them hold out on me again. In the meantime, I decided to cover some ground. If I studied the map carefully, maybe I would find a road to get me off the detour I had been following since Wednesday. I was tired of eating dust.

I got back to my office at two thirty with a fresh pack of cigarettes, a couple of sandwiches, and a few beers in a paper

bag. I settled into the chair behind the desk, laid out my lunch, and got busy with the telephone.

I called Abe Callahan first. Chapman's death had brought him back to New York early, and I figured he might be willing to talk to me. The first thing he said was that he remembered me from the Banks case. It seemed that everyone remembered me from the Banks case and that for the past five years I had ceased to exist. I had been news for a couple of days, like one of those characters who mountain climbs to the top of the World Trade Centre or walks across the Brooklyn Bridge on his hands, and then I had vanished into the smog. Pretty soon my name would be mentioned in one of those 'Where Are They Now?' columns.

Callahan didn't say if he was pleased or displeased by the memory, and I didn't ask him. I told him I was working on the Chapman case.

'There is no Chapman case,' he said. 'Or don't you read the papers? His wife was arrested yesterday, and everybody's talking about what a great job the police did. Everybody but me, that is. Not only did we lose one of the best-looking candidates this country's seen in a long time, but we also lost one hell of a fine man.'

'I read the papers. But as I said, I'm working on the Chapman case.'

'What are you, one of those believers in lost causes?'

'I don't give myself labels. I just go about my work until it's finished. And at the moment it's far from finished. I'm calling you for some information.'

'What kind?'

'Private information. I'd like to know if you ran any security checks on Chapman in the past few months, and if so whether you turned up anything questionable.'

There was a pause at the other end. 'A lot of reporters would cut off their right arm for that kind of stuff. Why should I give it to you when I wouldn't dream of giving it to them?'

'Because a reporter doesn't care about anything but a good by-line, and because I won't pass on what you tell me.

Because I care about cracking this thing, and because I don't have much time left.'

There was another pause, and I could almost feel Callahan wrestling with the decision. I took another sip of beer. 'All right, Klein, here it is, for whatever it's worth. We did do an investigation, but only because the political climate is what it is. Five or six years ago this kind of thing would have been unthinkable. But you know what happens today when there's the slightest hint of scandal. A political party has to be very cautious. In some sense we're almost doing a disservice to the people we represent.'

'You don't have to give me a preamble. I'm aware of the situation. Just the facts will do.'

'Well, the facts are these. We discovered that George was involved in a potentially dangerous situation over a contract dispute with Charles Light, the owner of the Americans.'

'I know about that. Was there anything else?'

'We also discovered that George's marriage was liable to blow up right in the middle of the campaign.'

'Everyone knows about his marriage now. I'm thinking more in terms of something that had to be hidden at all costs. Something criminal, maybe, or at least something so dubious that it would have discredited him.'

'No, there was nothing like that. The two things I mentioned were serious enough. But we decided that George could handle it if either one became an issue.'

'Who did the investigation for you?'

'One of the men from the Dampler Agency. A guy by the name of Wallace Smart. And he did a good job, too. Stayed on it for more than a month.'

'You really thought Chapman was going to win, didn't you?'

'Let's put it this way. All our private polls put him at 63 per cent against the strongest Republican, and that's almost unheard of. George was a natural. He had all the instincts, all the moves. I wouldn't have been surprised to see him run for President one day.'

'Interesting.'

'Interesting my ass. It's a tragedy, that's what it is. A goddam brutal tragedy.'

I called the Dampler Agency and asked to speak to Wallace Smart. That was impossible, I was told, Mr Smart had left the Agency three weeks ago. Did they know where he could be reached? No, he had retired from detective work altogether. He had come into a small inheritance and had decided to pull up stakes. The word was he had gone off to Hawaii. I asked if he had any family in the city I might contact to find out his address. No, Mr Smart's wife and children had been killed in a car accident ten or twelve years ago. He had no living relatives.

I took out a blank sheet of paper from my desk drawer and wrote down Wallace Smart's name in large block letters. The number of people who knew Chapman's secret had now been increased to three. Smart had retired on his so-called inheritance, which meant that he had sold his information to someone who could meet his price, someone with money to spare. Charles Light, for example. If all else failed, I could always go off looking for Smart. Mr Wally Smart: ex-detective, ex-New Yorker, a seller of secrets. My ace in the hole.

I finished my second sandwich and then spent five minutes in intimate conversation with a sweet, drawling operator from Charleston, South Carolina. She very patiently helped me track down the name of a restaurant owned by Randy Phibbs. It turned out to be Dandy Randy's: Ribs by Phibbs. As she flipped through the book she asked me what the weather was like in New York, called me 'Sugar', and said I had the sweetest accent she'd ever heard, just like one of those actors on television. She sounded so pretty, so engaging that I was reluctant to hang up. It didn't matter that she was probably a sixty-year-old grandmother with lumbago.

Five years ago Randy Phibbs had been an ageing utility infielder for the Americans. Of all the players on the team he was the only one who had managed to form any kind of friendship with Chapman. Phibbs spent most of his time on the bench, but he could still do a solid job at second base for a

couple of weeks if necessary. In the World Series five years ago he wound up playing the last three games, got four or five hits, and turned in some sparkling fielding plays. It was an impressive enough performance to prolong his career for one more season. He was a player who did it with desire rather than talent, and I had always enjoyed watching him stuff his cheek with tobacco, pound his glove in an old-fashioned gung-ho way, and scream at the umpires until the veins in his neck stood out like snakes. He and Chapman made an unlikely pair of friends. But Phibbs was probably the only player on the team not intimidated by Chapman's being an Ivy League intellectual and a possible Hall of Famer. He came from a universe in which these things simply didn't matter. Phibbs was a good ol' boy and, as far as he was concerned, Chapman was a good ol' boy too.

It took him a few minutes to understand why I had called. He had heard about Chapman's murder on television last night, and he also knew about Judy's arrest from a report on the radio today. He called her a nice little swatch of woman and was damned if he knew why she'd want to do in poor ol' George. George was his great buddy, and they still sent each other Christmas cards every year.

'I want you to think back to George's last season five years ago, Randy.'

'I'm with you, buddy,' he said. 'Five years ago would be when George hit all them home-runs.'

'You were his best friend, Randy, so you would be able to tell me better than anyone else what I need to know.'

'I wasn't just his best friend,' Phibbs said matter-of-factly, 'I was the only damned friend George had on the whole team. He never said more than but a few words to the rest of them, like as if he really didn't want to be there. George was a tough one. Never would take no shit from nobody. But he and me, we hit it off just fine. I think he liked the way I talked.'

'Can you remember if George acted at all differently that last year, whether there seemed to be anything weighing on his mind?'

'There was always something weighing on George's mind, mister. He had one of them big minds, if you know that I mean, and everything that got inside it made itself real comfortable and settled in there for a long time. George did more thinking than any two men I ever saw.'

'But did you notice anything special about that last year? Did he seem to be pressing more than he had in the past?'

'George was always what you call a presser. He took that ol' game of baseball mighty serious, sort of like it wasn't a game no more, but real work. I don't think he ever got much fun out of it, he was always concentrating so hard. A dumb cracker like me, it just tickled me every time I walked out on the field.'

'So there was no real change in the last year?'

'Well, I'm just thinking . . . though I don't know if it's much for a dee-tective like you to sink your teeth into. But George did act a little strange at times. Long about the middle of the season he'd start coming up to me before the game and say, "Randy, today I'm going to go three for four", and damn if he didn't get angry at hisself if he went two for four. Once he hit a frigging two-run double in the ninth inning to win a game and come back to the club-house shaking his head, saying it should have been a home-run.'

'Did he seem more interested in his own performance than in how the team did?'

'No, I wouldn't say that. George always wanted to win as much as the next fella. It was just that he had these high standards, you know, like he had to carry the whole team on his back. When you come to think of it, I guess he did.'

There was a short pause, and I asked, 'How's the restaurant business, Randy?'

'Real fine, real fine. I gave the home-town folks a lot of thrills when I was playing up North, and they remember ol' Randy Phibbs.'

'If I ever get to Charleston, I'll be sure to stop in for dinner.'

'You do that,' he said enthusiastically. 'You'll get a plate of ribs that'll stick to your ribs and make you the happiest damn Yankee that ever stepped foot in this place.'

*

After Charleston I dialled San Diego and spoke to the Mexican housekeeper who worked for Chapman's parents. The phone had been ringing steadily since yesterday morning, and both the mother and father had stopped taking calls. In between the housekeeper's ranting about what a terrible thing had happened, I managed to learn that arrangements were being made to have Chapman's body flown back to California and that the funeral would take place in San Diego.

My next call was to Minnesota. Chapman seemed to have no real friends, no one he confided in, and I wondered if he hadn't kept in touch with his older brother, Alan, a doctor who lived in Bloomington. The nurse at Alan Chapman's office told me the doctor had gone to San Diego last night. There had been a tragedy in the family, she explained. Yes, I said, I had heard something about it.

My answering service had two messages for me. One was from Alex Vogel, a reporter from the *Post*, and the other had come from Brian Contini just minutes before I returned to my office. I figured Vogel had gotten my name from a contact in the police department and that he wanted a story from me about discovering Chapman's body. The *Post* was very big on doing background scoops connected with the bloody stuff on the front page. It had become the kind of paper that treated every murder, fire, and mugging as the first spark of the apocalypse, and I tried to stay away from it now on principle. If Vogel wanted to talk to me, he would have to keep trying.

Chip was gone from his office when I called, gone for the day, the secretary said. I asked her if she knew why he had called me, and in one of those bored, I-only-work-here voices, she said she didn't. I guessed that he and his father had taken off early for their family weekend in Westport. It disappointed me that Chip was leaving everything to Burleson in preparing Judy's defence. The practise of law had become a cosy refuge of documents, contracts, and hearty handshakes for him, and he had become too timid to venture outside it. Like the roll of soft flesh that had developed around his middle, there were now several layers of fat around his mind that helped to insulate him from the real world. And this was

the same man who had talked about going straight into the Legal Aid Society after he graduated from Law School. I wondered how long it would be before his arteries hardened.

I had just put my hand on the receiver to make another call when the phone rang, sending its metallic vibrations into my palm. After dialling out so many times in the past hour and a half, it seemed almost unnatural that anyone should want to call me. I hoped it wasn't the reporter from the *Post*, and my wish came true. It was Muffle Mouth.

'You don't give up easily, do you?' I said.

'And neither do you, Klein. You have been watched for the entire day, and my conclusion is that you have no intention of doing what you were asked to do.'

'I've been going through travel brochures ever since I got back to my office. You wouldn't believe the number of places you can go to these days on the American plan. But you'll be happy to know that I've finally made my decision. I want to spend my vacation in Anchorage, Alaska. The problem is that the only way to get there from New York is by tramp steamer through the Panama Canal and the next ship doesn't leave for another six months.'

'I suggest you pick another vacation spot.'

'Well, I do have a second choice. New York City. They say it's a great place to visit, even though most people don't want to live there.'

'You won't be living anywhere if you decide to stay.'

'You must be the nervous type. I already got the message this morning. It's not going to get any clearer if you keep repeating it.'

'Then why don't you listen?'

'For two good reasons. I have work to do here, and I'm not afraid of you.'

'You'll be sorry you said that. Just remember that you've been warned.'

'I'll go right out and buy some string to tie around my finger.'

'Walking the streets is going to be dangerous for you from now on. Any step you take might well be your last.'

'It's pretty dangerous for the hookers, too, but they seem to make out all right. Maybe I'll get lucky.'

'Impossible, Klein. Your luck has just run out.'

'Thanks for the tip. I was going to put some money on a horse tomorrow, but maybe I won't bother now.'

'There are a lot of things you won't be bothering about, Mr Klein. Your future has suddenly become so short, it wouldn't stand knee-high to a midget.'

'A pretty image,' I said. 'I'll have to use that one sometime.'

But Muffle Mouth didn't hear me. He had already hung up.

I swept the crumbs off my desk and threw the sandwich wrappers and beer cans into the trash. It was four fifteen. I started to open the safe to get out my .38 in case Muffle Mouth was waiting for me outside, but then I remembered that I didn't have a gun any more. It had been taken away from me last night and lost somewhere in the quarry. I wondered if it would come back to haunt me.

There was no one lurking about the street, but I decided to take a cab anyway, just to be cautious. It took twenty minutes to reach the Eighth Street Bookstore. Along with the Gotham Book Mart and a handful of other places in the city, the Eighth Street was dedicated to the idea that books live in their own special time and do not suddenly wither away when the new spring list arrives. You didn't rush in there to plunk your money down for the latest 900-page saga written by a computer masquerading as a lady novelist from Beverly Hills, you came to make your own choices. There were some books of poetry that hung around on the shelf for six or seven years before the right buyer came along. The idea was that good books manage to survive us all.

I told myself there was no time to do any browsing and went straight up to the third floor where the books on history, sociology, and psychology were kept. Six of William Briles's eleven books were available in paperback. I looked over the titles and finally decided on three of them, *In and Out: The Life of a Professional Thief*, *The Other Side of the Law: Investigations*

into Criminal Behavior, and *The Gangster in the Gray Flannel Suit: The Mafia Leader as Businessman*.

The young man behind the cash register was wearing an army fatigue shirt and had the open-eyed expression of someone new on the job. He seemed amused by my choice of reading matter. I must not have looked like the studious type to him.

'Actually, I'm thinking of a career in crime,' I said, 'and I thought I would do a little boning up before I got started.'

He smiled, happy to play along. 'What are you going to do for your first job?'

'I was planning to rob a bank. What do you think?'

He shook his head. 'Too risky. I'd go in for something a little more respectable. Maybe blackmail.'

'The only problem is that you have to find a victim first, and that could run into a lot of work.'

He waved his arm in a broad gesture that included all the customers in the store. 'Everyone's a victim,' he said. 'Just take your pick. I'll bet you there's not one person in this whole city who doesn't have something to hide.'

'You sound like you just came out of a Jimmy Cagney movie.'

'Yeah,' he nodded sheepishly, 'I go to a lot of flicks.'

The bill came to more than fifteen dollars. I wondered how much of it would go into Briles's pocket and solaced myself with the thought that I could write it off as an expense.

Forty minutes later I was back in my office armed with a take-out pizza, a few more cans of beer, and my books. I sprawled out on the couch, made myself comfortable, and spent the next several hours reading. I felt the night gradually come on as the street emptied of sounds and traffic. West Broadway was a daytime neighbourhood and by dinner hour there was nothing left to it but darkness. I no longer felt the presence of the city, and I read with the quickness and attention of a student cramming for a final exam.

By nine thirty I decided I had had enough for one evening. I washed up in the basin, brushed the lint off my jacket, and

got ready to go out again. It seemed as good a time as any to pay an unannounced call on Charles Light.

The weather had turned cool and I walked uptown at a brisk pace, hoping a cab would show up in the deserted street. I had gone about a block and a half when the first shot came humming by my ear and landed in the brick wall to my left. I fell to the pavement without thinking – as if by ducking after the shot I could avoid being hit. Panic sometimes makes the body act before the brain has time to give it instructions. I was still on the ground, realizing that I had to get up and away from there, when the second shot was fired. It churned up the sidewalk and sent concrete dust flying into my face. I rolled towards the darkness of the building and heard the third shot go through the window above my head. Shattered glass fell on top of me and a burglar alarm immediately went off inside. It was probably the noise of the alarm that saved me. I had nowhere to hide, and if the gunman had moved in on me then, it would have been all over. But the noise scared him off. I heard the sound of running footsteps across the street, and for a moment I couldn't believe they were running away. But then they were gone. In less than thirty seconds, I had passed from life into death and then back into life again. I said a little prayer of thanks to the owner of the electrical parts shop whose window had been broken. Muffle Mouth had been wrong. I wasn't at the end of my luck yet. And I had my beating heart to prove it.

SIXTEEN

It was one of those New York mansions Henry James might have written about. Standing in floodlit dignity on a side street off Park Avenue, it made you think of women in long white dresses, musical soirees, and grim black-suited men discussing why Teddy Roosevelt's foreign policy was good for business. The Light House, as it was called, had been in the family for generations, and it was a monument to a lost age of imperialism, hard currency, and cheap labour. The tour buses usually made a stop there so the people from Wichita could go back home with a lasting impression of what New York wealth looked like. This was not your quick post-war boom money from Houston and Los Angeles that drove around in white Cadillacs. The Light money was so old it had to be pushed around in a wheelchair. Little matter that the wheelchair was slightly larger than the *Titanic*. Someone could always be hired to push it.

The servants, of course, were no longer around at this hour to answer the door. I stood in front of the massive grille-work that guarded the entrance and pushed the bell. It was connected to an intercom system that looked like something from a radio control tower. I waited, looked at my watch, and rang again after a minute. I repeated the process. Just when I was debating whether to push the button a fourth time, Light's voice came through the speaker. There was no static or crackling in the machine, and I could hear him as clearly as if he had been standing next to me.

'Go away, or I'll call the police,' he said.

'It's Klein, Mr Light. I've got to talk to you.'

'We did all our talking yesterday. There's nothing more to say.'

'Just ten minutes, that's all I ask. It can't make much

difference to you now. The game with Chapman is over, and you've come out on top.'

Instead of answering, Light rang the buzzer which automatically unlatched the door, and I let myself in. I walked up the vestibule stairs and another buzzer went off, opening the inner door. I crossed the threshold and found myself standing in an entrance hall as big as the whole first floor of a normal house. There were black and white square tiles on the floor and a huge cut-glass chandelier on the ceiling about twenty feet up. It was the kind of room that had been built for the sole purpose of impressing anyone who walked into it. I let myself be impressed.

Light entered the hall wearing khaki pants, slippers, and a green pullover, looking like someone who had spent the day cruising on a yacht. He eyed me with amusement and said, 'You seem to have been busy since I saw you last.'

I glanced down at my jacket and saw that it was torn at the elbow. 'Yeah,' I said. 'Yesterday I accidentally got mixed up with the lions' food at the Central Park Zoo, and then tonight I thought it would be too boring to take a cab over here, so I decided to crawl. It's fun, but a little rough on clothes.'

Light grinned vaguely, turned on his heel, and led me through the living room, through another room, and then down a hallway which brought us to a small room under the back stairs. One wall was lined with glassed-in shelves that held black stamp binders arranged in alphabetical order. There were several gaps in the rows for special displays of framed stamps and first-day cover items. A ten-foot-long light table occupied most of the opposite wall, and in the middle of the room there was a round oak table cluttered with open stamp binders, loose stamps, a set of tweezers, glassine envelopes, and a magnifying glass. I had never seen a room like this in a house before. It was like walking into a mausoleum.

'This, as you may have gathered,' he said with unmistakable pride, 'is the stamp room. The temperature and humidity are controlled to guard against moisture damage. Take a look

around. This is probably the most valuable collection in the country.'

'Very interesting,' I said, browsing at the displays behind the glass. 'It must be wonderful to be able to lose yourself in such a stimulating hobby.' He didn't hear the irony in my voice.

'Yes, I try to give it at least a few hours a week. It's a way for me to commune with myself and keep in touch with the past. The whole history of the modern world is in stamps. They are the one thing in everyday life that contains a record of the important events that define a period.' He stopped abruptly, suddenly aware of himself. 'But of course you're not interested in stamps.'

'On the contrary. I'm interested in everything you're interested in, Mr Light. I've been spending a lot of time lately trying to understand you. Nothing is irrelevant to me where you're concerned.'

'You do tend to push rather hard, don't you?' he said pompously. 'Ringing my bell at ten o'clock is something I could easily have you arrested for, if I felt like it. Fortunately for you, I don't feel like it tonight. That's because I'm in an excellent mood. I'm celebrating George Chapman's death, which has given me no end of joy.'

'You don't have to put on an act for my benefit, Mr Light. Celebrating is actually the last thing in the world you feel like doing tonight. You're upset that Chapman is dead. You win the game, yes, but at the same time you're denied the pleasure of playing. It's more like a forfeit. You were looking forward to destroying George Chapman in public. It meant so much to you that you were willing to run over anyone who stood in your way. And now suddenly you're very confused about how things have turned out. That's the only reason you let me in tonight. You think I might have something important to tell you.'

Light sat down in an armchair to the side of the round table and studied me carefully. 'You're a clever man, Mr Klein,' he said quietly. 'I believe I've underestimated you.'

'I'm not that clever. If I was really clever, it wouldn't have

taken me two days to figure it out, and maybe Chapman would still be alive.'

'Ridiculous. Chapman was killed by his wife. His death had nothing to do with anything.' He picked up the magnifying glass from the table and began playing with it nervously. 'It was strictly a family affair.'

'That's the official version. It makes for a good story, but unfortunately there's no truth in it. Judy Chapman is no more guilty than Mahatma Gandhi.'

Light seemed to take this as a veiled accusation. 'Just what are you trying to say, Klein? That you're on the prowl for suspects and you think you can somehow drag me into this?' He waved the magnifying glass at me in a gesture of disgust. 'I'm completely out of it. My hands are clean.'

'I'm not saying you had Chapman killed. I just finished explaining why. But your hands are not clean, Mr Light. In fact, they're just about as dirty as your mind.' I walked around the table slowly, wanting to leave him hanging for a moment, and then stopped at the display case. I lit a cigarette and threw the match on the floor. Light looked aghast when he saw that I was about to smoke. No one ever smoked in his stamp room. I waited for him to protest, and when he didn't, I went on. He was too afraid of what I was going to tell him to say anything. 'Of course, you were prepared to kill Chapman if you had to. But that would have been much later. For the time being you were much more eager to pursue your plan of public humiliation. You're obviously not a man who needs money, but in every other respect you're no better than the tawdriest blackmailer. Everything was going along fine until I appeared on the scene. Chapman was going to announce his candidacy and win the primary. That much was almost certain. And that was just where you wanted him to be – out in the open, at his most vulnerable. But when Chapman hired me, you assumed he knew what you were up to and that therefore I was also in on the secret you were planning to expose. It didn't really matter that Chapman knew, because like all victims of blackmail he was in a double bind. To protect himself from you would have meant letting out the

secret, and that was the one thing he had to hide. But it did matter that I knew. And so you started to apply the pressure. You sent your two thugs around to buy me off the case, but that didn't work. Then you tried to threaten me off, but that didn't work either. In a way it was almost lucky for me that Chapman died when he did. You probably would have sent Angel and Teddy to kill me in just a few days. You were so afraid I would cross Chapman and let out the secret that you were willing to see me dead.'

Light sat there without moving. I had hit too close to the truth for him to be able to formulate a quick response. I put out my cigarette on the counter of the display case, and he didn't react. His voice came softly, distantly, as if from some remote corner of himself, and it seemed that he spoke almost unconsciously.

'What is it you want?' he asked.

'I want to make a trade with you.'

'Money? I thought you weren't interested in money.' He sighed with disappointment and exhaustion.

'I said a trade, not money. You give me the information I want, and I promise to keep silent.'

'I don't understand what you mean.'

'I realize you're a very powerful man, Mr Light, and that no matter what I did, a person like me can't cause you much permanent harm. But I can create considerable unpleasantness for you, and I can damage your reputation. Now that you're in politics, your reputation is your most valuable asset. All I have to do is tell one of my friends at the *Times* about the dirty tricks you've been up to, and you'll be spending so many hours with your stamps it will make you sick just to look at them.'

'You goddam liberals are all the same,' he said resentfully, his brashness beginning to return. 'Politics is power, and power is a dirty business. Whenever a Democrat does something, he's being pragmatic. But just let a Conservative do the same thing, and he's committed a terrible crime. And meanwhile this whole country of ours is playing right into the hands of the Reds.'

'This wasn't politics,' I said. 'It was pure personal hatred. I know that you're committed to your cause and that in your eyes the government is run by a conspiracy of card-carrying Communists who can't get up in the morning without permission from the Kremlin, but you weren't thinking about your ideals when you decided to go after Chapman. You didn't want to defeat him in an election, you wanted to crucify him.'

'And I would have, too. Then people would have seen what you socialists are really like.'

'The funny thing is that if you hadn't done anything, you wouldn't be in this mess now. But you over-reacted, in the same way you over-react in politics. You see, I resent it that you sent those two imbeciles to my apartment. They walked in and destroyed my living room, roughed me up, and thought it all some kind of outing to an amusement park. You should have it happen to you some time and see how much you like it.'

I slid open the door of the display case and took out one of the binders. It threw Light into a panic. 'What the hell are you doing!' he screamed.

I tossed the binder on to the floor and said, 'This is the slow-motion replay of what happened. It helps to see it with your own eyes, doesn't it? Much more vivid than the radio commentary.'

I threw another binder on to the floor. I did it gently, with a kind of feigned negligence. I wasn't interested in damaging the collection, but I wanted to upset him, to make him understand that he was no longer in control of the situation.

Light sprang out of his chair and came at me with an almost hysterical anger. He was an old man but very fit and still strong. I didn't want to hurt him, but I also didn't want him to get a chance to throw a lucky punch. I pushed him in the chest as hard as I could and he went flying back into the table and fell to the floor. It was enough to convince him that he didn't want to try again. He got to his feet slowly.

'All right,' I said. 'Let's talk. Talk to me clearly and I'll leave.

But any more bullshit, and I'll rip up every stamp in this room.'

Light sat down on the armchair again. He was humiliated, and yet he knew there was nothing he could do about it. It was a terrible defeat for him, but I felt no pity.

'Tell me what it is,' he said, 'and I'll give you a straight answer.'

'I want to know what you had on Chapman. I want to know what it was you thought could destroy him.'

He was stunned. It hadn't occurred to him that I didn't know. His whole strategy had been based on the assumption that I had been privy to Chapman's secret, and now he realized that he had been wrong, that he had out-tricked himself. It was an exquisite moment, and I savoured it. More than a minute went by before Light spoke again.

'Chapman was involved with mobsters,' he said, looking me in the eye, as if to prove it wasn't costing him anything to tell me.

'You mean Victor Contini?'

'That's right. Contini.'

'Involved in what way?'

'Chapman owed him a great deal of money. Gambling debts which he refused to pay.'

'And when Contini saw that he wasn't going to get it, he arranged Chapman's accident.'

'You seem to know as much about it as I do.'

'Not quite. There are things I still don't understand. The gambling, for example. Chapman didn't strike me as the kind of man who would go in for that sort of thing.'

'It wasn't gambling in the usual sense. Chapman met Contini somehow, probably through the son, and got to know him fairly well.'

'How did you find out about this friendship? It certainly wasn't common knowledge.'

'I keep a close check on my players. It's a way of avoiding embarrassing situations before they get out of hand. Ball players become bored on the road, and they tend to run into trouble, especially with women.'

'So what you're saying is that you hire spies to follow around the men who work for you.'

'I don't think of it as spying. It's protection. We have to maintain the image of the team. Baseball players are easy targets for the press. For more than half the year every move they make on and off the field is reported in the daily papers. These are just ordinary kids, and yet they're watched as closely as the President. A great actor or opera singer gets reviewed only on the opening night of a performance, but a baseball team gets reviewed 162 times a season. And not just in one city, but all around the country, and on television and radio as well as in magazines. The first hint of something unusual in a player's behaviour and it quickly becomes a major scandal. Baseball is the great American game, a symbol of all this country stands for, and I'll be damned if I'll let any player try to destroy it.'

It calmed Light down to talk about how he controlled the private lives of his players. It reminded him of his own importance and re-established a certain equilibrium in the struggle that had been going on between us. I didn't want to allow the conversation to meander and broke in on him before he could say anything else.

'Getting back to Chapman. What kind of gambling do you mean?'

'Chapman signed a pact with the devil.'

'That might be your opinion of what he did, but you'll have to be more specific than that.'

'I'm telling you, Chapman signed a pact with the devil. He gambled on himself. Before each game he would predict his performance – a certain number of hits, a certain number of runs batted in, a home-run, two home-runs, and so on – and then wager on the prediction with Contini. They played for high stakes. I believe he was nearly five hundred thousand dollars in the hole by the time the season was over.'

I had been expecting something else – an unintentional mistake that Chapman wanted to cover up, a momentary lapse, a stupid blunder – anything but this. This was genuine

madness, a pure and deliberate attempt to destroy himself. Chapman had tried to take control of his talent by pushing it so far that no matter what happened it was bound to fail him. He had had one of the most extraordinary seasons a baseball player could have, and yet it had all come to nothing. But in this way Chapman had gained ascendancy over the monster. It didn't matter that he would ruin himself in the process. Nothing mattered but coming into possession of himself, if only for an instant. It had been like walking through fire. The pain had made him real.

Light was grinning at me. It pleased him to witness my confusion, to know that he had been holding the trump card after all. It was a small victory, perhaps, but it made him momentarily forget that he had lost the war.

'I see that you're surprised, Mr Klein,' he gloated. 'And small wonder. It's rather meaty stuff. You can see what it would have done to a man running for office. It would have finished him.'

'Why didn't he pay Contini what he owed him? Given the insanity of the situation in the first place, you'd still think he would have paid up.'

'I can't tell you that,' Light said, not very interested in this point. 'Perhaps he didn't have the money. Or perhaps he did it only as a game to amuse himself and never had any intention of paying. Chapman had one of the most inflated egos of any man I have ever met. He thought he was invulnerable.'

'An inflated ego, but not nearly as big as yours.'

'Perhaps.' Light grinned at me again. He was enjoying himself now, and he seemed almost eager to prolong the conversation. I changed the subject abruptly, hoping to catch him off balance.

'What do you know about Bruno Pignato?'

The grin on Light's face vanished. He looked at me and frowned. 'I never heard of him.'

'It was in your interest to keep the facts about Chapman's accident quiet until the election campaign started. Pignato worked for Contini, and he was the driver of the truck that

Chapman's car crashed into. I went to see Pignato on Wednesday, something I'm sure you were aware of. On Thursday he turned up dead, murdered in his own house. I want you to tell me about it.'

'I still don't know what you're talking about. Why in God's name would I want to harm someone I didn't even know?'

'Because Pignato was a very unstable type. He was obsessed by guilt, felt responsible for ending Chapman's career, and seemed ready to talk about it to the first person who asked him. There was a good chance he would let the whole thing out before you wanted it out.'

'You're wrong, Klein. I know nothing about any of this.'

I didn't press the point. Chapman had been Light's sole obsession – he hadn't even bothered to consider the other man in the accident.

'There's just one more thing,' I said. 'I assume you got your information about Chapman's contract with Contini from your team spy. But all the rest – the details of the gambling, the fact that the accident was arranged – was given to you by someone else, wasn't it? A man by the name of Wallace Smart, an operative from the Dampler Agency.'

'A very disagreeable little man.'

'How much did you pay him? I'm curious to know how much the information was worth to you, just for the record.'

'Twenty thousand dollars.'

'He must have driven a hard bargain.'

'He thought he was. But I was actually prepared to spend a great deal more. A man of his sort is always satisfied with too little. It worked out well for both of us.'

'Until yesterday, that is.'

Light shrugged. 'That's one way of looking at it, I suppose. But I don't regret losing the money. It was all in a good cause.'

'If destroying a man can ever be considered a good cause.'

'For me it was.'

I looked at Light with disgust. 'It's too bad that people with money are always sons of bitches like you.'

'Perhaps,' Light said with a smile. 'But at least I get a chance to enjoy life. You have no idea how wonderful it is to be me.

Being Charles Light is the most exhilarating sensation in the whole world.'

'In Charles Light's world, maybe. For the rest of us it looks about as appealing as a case of lung cancer. I know some lepers who wouldn't want to trade places with you, and they're not even alive any more. Go on enjoying yourself, Mr Light. Maybe you'll slip on the dance floor one day and break your neck.'

I told him not to trouble himself about seeing me to the door. I knew the way out.

SEVENTEEN

It was well past midnight when I got back home. Walking into the lobby of the building, I felt like someone returning from a long stay in a foreign country. It had made me uncomfortable to be in Light's house, and I was glad to be back. I was a citizen of life on the ground, and in spite of the car exhaust, the overflowing garbage cans, and the smoke from greasy spoons, I was able to breathe there. To have lived in the upper reaches of the atmosphere as Light did would have meant wearing an oxygen mask, and that didn't interest me. Oxygen masks make you look like an insect.

It had been a long day, and I was dead tired. My body had been pushed as far as it could go, and more than anything I just wanted to sleep. I was a little less discouraged than I had been when the day started. The form of the case was taking shape in my mind, and I could see now that I wasn't going to get lost again. It was simply a matter of doing the work. I was on my way, but I still didn't know how far I'd have to travel before I came to the end.

I started to open the door of my apartment and saw that there was a light on somewhere inside. I knew I had turned out all the lights before leaving in the morning, and my body suddenly went taut with apprehension. I wasn't in the mood for another fight, and I didn't feel like getting shot at again. But it was too late to turn around and leave. Whoever was waiting for me in the apartment had heard me fumbling with my keys and had seen the door open. I decided to take my chances.

Judy Chapman looked up and smiled when she saw me enter. She was curled up on the sofa with her shoes off, reading a copy of John Donne's *Devotions* that she had taken

from the bookcase. She was wearing green velour pants and a grey turtleneck sweater, and she looked beautiful.

'Hello, Max.'

'How the hell did you get in here?' I asked. My voice came out sounding harsh and angry.

She gave me a devilish smile and said, 'Your superintendent is a great romantic. I told him we had a lovers' quarrel and that I wanted to surprise you by being here when you got back. He liked the idea and opened the apartment for me. He even tried to give me some advice.'

'You nearly scared me to death. It's lucky I didn't have my gun. I might have come in here shooting.'

She was very different now than she had been during the afternoon. The nervous anxiety of twelve hours ago had given way to a kind of giddiness – and I wondered if this was the prelude to an even deeper anxiety, or if she was beginning to internalize the pressure, learning to live with it. There was a standing lamp behind the couch, and its light filtered through her hair with the strange glow of an obscured candle, creating an almost ethereal nimbus around her face, like something from a Renaissance portrait. She seemed incredibly fragile to me at that moment, as if the slightest stirring of air would go right through her and turn her into a cloud of vapour.

'Aren't you going to ask me why I came?'

I looked at her coyly and said, 'I thought you just told me.'

She was amused by that and smiled at me again. Then her face became serious. 'Actually, I did come to apologize. I'm sorry about the way I acted this afternoon. That's not like me, really.'

'It was one of those things,' I said. 'Everyone's been under a lot of pressure, and tempers flared for a moment.'

'It's just that I wasn't expecting Bill to turn up. And when I saw the two of you going at each other . . .' She shook her head, leaving the rest of the sentence unfinished.

'Briles and I don't seem to get along very well. It must be some kind of astrological intolerance.' I paused. 'About the only thing we have in common is that we both like you.'

It was a heavy remark, and it embarrassed us both into an awkward silence, the kind of silence that goes on just long enough to make you realize that your shoes are too tight. I was having trouble getting my bearings with the situation. It was unclear to me why she had come, and I was too tired to apply myself to the problem. The best thing I could do, I decided, was to play the scene out.

'Now that you're here,' I said, 'you might as well get a chance to taste some of the treasures of my wine cellar. I have a bottle of Bordeaux and a bottle of Bordeaux. Which would you like?'

'The Bordeaux, of course,' she said without hesitating. 'It sounds considerably better than the Bordeaux.' We smiled at each other, and things were back on an even keel.

I retreated to the kitchen for the wine and a pair of glasses. When I returned to the living room she was standing by the table smoking a cigarette and looking around.

'I like your apartment better than your office,' she said. 'It shows another side of you, and I think I like this side more than the other.'

'It's just your average bachelor digs. Underfurnished, a bit ratty, and generally a mess. But this is elegance compared to when I first started living alone again. It used to be the New York version of the San Francisco earthquake.'

We sat down at the table and started drinking the wine. It was a good bottle, and I was glad I had saved it.

After a few minutes of inconsequential talk, Judy said, 'I didn't know you had been married.'

'I guess we all have our little secrets from the past. There's a nine-year-old boy in my life, too.'

She seemed very interested by this, as if it somehow made me more tangible to her. Until now I had been a rather enigmatic figure, a mysterious investigator who did mysterious things, a man without a life. Suddenly I was a real person. It was a little like a school kid running into his science teacher at the movies on a Saturday night. It comes as a jolt to discover that he's just like anyone else, that he has a wife, a

couple of kids, and that he enjoys eating popcorn. We get so used to seeing only parts of people, the parts we come into contact with, that it's almost as if they cease to exist as soon as they're out of sight.

She asked me about my marriage, and I told her about Cathy and how things between us had gradually fallen apart. She said that Cathy sounded like a good person, and I said that she was, that the divorce had been basically my fault. Then she wanted to know about Richie, and I talked about him for a while and explained how I tried to see him at least once a week. Judy seemed happy listening to me go on about these things, and I sensed it put us on a new footing. She had been attracted to me the first time we met, but now she was beginning to like me. It was an important distinction. The clever sexual jousting of our first few conversations had been replaced by something more straightforward and honest. We were getting to know each other.

I realized that she hadn't come to my apartment for anything more than a little company. She wanted to forget the things she had been through in the past two days, but she couldn't really turn to anyone else without having to talk about it. I was the one person who knew enough about her situation not to have to ask questions. She had probably come to my place in order to sleep with me, expecting nothing more than a kind of oblivion, a release from all her troubles. But it turned out to be one of those heart-to-heart conversations that creates a deeper intimacy than blind physical contact. Real talk is a kind of embracing of another person, and from the moment the first word was spoken I had the feeling that we had already begun to make love.

We moved on to the second bottle of Bordeaux. Judy kept asking me questions about myself, and I went on answering them. It puzzled her why I had given up being a lawyer to go into investigative work. She didn't know anyone who had deliberately thrown away a safe career, and I tried to explain it to her.

'I ran up against the old conflict between law and justice,' I said.

'I don't understand.'

'The conflict between doing what someone tells you to do and doing what's right. When I was a young kid and decided to become a lawyer, I thought I was being an idealist. I was going to help people in trouble and put a lot of bad men in jail and in the end the world would be a better place. But then I learned that being a lawyer has nothing to do with solving real problems and treating people as human beings. It's a game, with its own set of rules and procedures, and the only thing that matters is winning. I finally realized that I was wasting my time, throwing away my life.'

'You're just not the type to play along. Most men would be lost without a system to fit into. But you want to take risks. It makes you a kind of outsider.'

'I suppose so. But I like to think it gives me a better chance to get close to the people I deal with. I move in and out of other people's lives a lot, and I usually have to move quickly. If I don't have much now, it's because I don't want to have anything to lose. It frees me to commit myself to the people I work for.'

'You have your life to lose. Why put yourself on the line for people you hardly even know?'

'Because they need me. Because they have problems they can't solve by themselves.'

Judy paused for a moment and looked away. 'You mean people like me, don't you?'

'Yes. People like you.'

'But what do you get out of it? How does it help you?'

'I'm not sure. Maybe just that I'm able to live with myself. And maybe knowing that gives me a reason to get out of bed in the morning.'

'It's more than a job for you, isn't it?' she said softly. 'You really believe in it.' She turned away again, as if suddenly embarrassed. 'I think I could start falling in love with you, Max.'

I lit a cigarette, paused for a few moments, and then smiled at her. 'That's just the wine talking. It's going to your head and blurring your vision.'

'No, it's me talking. I feel safe with you. You're the first man I've met who doesn't want to use me.'

'But I am using you. I'm using you to stay on the case. And once it's over we'll probably never see each other again.'

'Only if you want it to be that way, Max. But if you let me walk in, I'm not going to walk out unless I'm asked.'

'The door was opened the first time we met,' I said. 'I suppose it's too late to do anything about it now. You're already in.'

Time went by, and the thing that had been trying to happen for the past three days finally happened. We had both been through the ritual before, but this time neither one of us acted from memory. Shuddering in the darkness of each other's bodies, we reached a point where everything became new again, and even as it was happening we sensed that it had to be savoured beyond measure. We had left ourselves behind.

It was after four o'clock. Judy and I were sitting up in bed smoking cigarettes. We weren't saying anything, but just letting ourselves be close, letting our exhausted bodies relax before floating off to sleep.

'There's something I've got to tell you,' I said. 'I might never get another chance, and I want you to hear it from me.'

It took her a while to answer. I felt that she was reluctant to break the mood of our silence, unwilling to clutter the room with words. She put out her cigarette and then lay down with her head on my chest.

'Don't talk that way, Max. It frightens me.'

'It doesn't have anything to do with us. It's about five years ago. I finally found out what really happened.'

And then I told her about Chapman and what he had done to provoke Contini into arranging the accident. Judy was surprisingly unresponsive when I explained it to her. I couldn't tell if she had reached the point where nothing could shock her any more, or if Chapman had come to mean so little to her that in the end she didn't care. One way or the other, I hadn't expected her to be indifferent.

'Let's not talk about these things any more,' she said after I

was finished. 'The only thing I want to talk about is tonight, about you and me. George is dead, and it doesn't matter any more what he did when he was alive. What matters is what we do, that we go on loving each other.'

After a long silence I said, 'In spite of everything, it's hard to believe that George's death doesn't touch you. You don't have to hide your feelings from me, Judy. I'll listen if you want to talk about it.'

'It does touch me. But in my own way, and for my own reasons. I can't pretend to grieve for a man who took my life away from me for ten years. I know it sounds horrible, but I think I'm actually glad George is dead. It's liberated me. I'm going to be able to start all over again.'

'The irony is that even in death George is still calling the shots.'

'I know. But that's only for the time being. I feel confident now. I think everything is going to work out. I know it is.'

'I do too.'

'And when it's all over, I'm going to love you so hard, Max, that it will make up for all the years we wasted by not knowing each other. I'm going to cook for you and sew for you and have babies with you and make love to you whenever you look at me.'

She was so serious, so ardent, that I couldn't help laughing a little. 'That hardly sounds like the life of a liberated woman.'

'But it is. Only a liberated woman can make choices. You have to be free before you can know what you want. I can't help it if you're what I want, I've made my choice. I want you to be my man.'

'I'll be your man,' I said, 'if you'll be my woman. And you don't have to do my laundry, either. We can send it to Mr Wei around the corner. He needs the business.'

Ten minutes later we were asleep. Our arms and legs were knotted together, and my last thought before drifting off was that we were trying to become one body, that for this one night we wanted to believe we could no longer exist as separate beings. Somewhere in the distance a clock struck five. The cow jumped over the moon.

EIGHTEEN

It was nine thirty when I woke up. By the time I remembered where I was and what had happened during the night, I realized that Judy was gone. She had decided to spare us from the morning-after. It was too soon to confront each other again, and she needed time to be alone with her feelings, to assimilate the emotions we had lived through only a few hours before. For a moment I was disappointed not to find her there beside me, but then I understood that it was better this way. I needed time too.

I felt remarkably refreshed for so little sleep. For the past few days I had been running on a nearly empty tank, and sooner or later it was bound to go dry. I wondered how much longer my body would accept the demands I made on it, how many more beatings and sleepless nights it could take before it gave out on me. I was thirty-three, and most of the time I felt the same as I had at twenty. But I knew that one day in the not too distant future I would wake up in the morning and discover I had entered middle age. It wasn't that I was afraid of it, I just wanted to be prepared.

I took a shower, climbed into a pair of blue jeans and a sweater, and then made myself a big breakfast of juice, scrambled eggs, toast, the whole works. At ten fifteen I was on my second cup of coffee, sitting at the living-room table and reading the book of Donne's *Devotions* that Judy had taken down from the shelf last night. I had not looked at it for more than ten years, and the power of it unsettled me. One passage struck me in particular: 'We have a winding-sheet in our mother's womb which grows with us from our conception, and we come into the world wound up in that winding-sheet, for we come to seek a grave.' I took it to mean that we

live under the eyes of death and that no matter what we do, there is no escape. We do not meet our deaths, as the saying goes, but death is within us from the very beginning and goes with us wherever we go. It made sense to me to think of it this way. There is no escape. I understood that.

I was brooding over this when the door buzzer rang. I pushed the intercom button and asked who it was. Chip Contini's voice answered me. The intercom hardly worked any more, and I had trouble understanding what he said. His voice sounded as though it were coming from a thousand miles away, wailing on some lonely heath in the middle of a storm like something from an ancient recording of *King Lear*. The only thing I could be sure of was that he urgently wanted to see me.

I walked around the living room, waiting for him to ride the elevator up to the ninth floor and ring my bell. I assumed he either wanted to talk to me about the case or about my conversation with his father yesterday. Probably his father, I decided, which meant that he really wanted to talk about himself. It seemed that I had triggered off some kind of crisis for Chip by forcing him to bring his father into the Chapman business. He was too old to be going through an adolescent trauma. But like an adult who unexpectedly comes down with a childhood disease, he was being hit hard by it.

He knocked – quickly, impatiently – and I opened the door. There was no time even to say hello. He burst through in a rage, pushed me in the chest with both hands, and sent me reeling back into the living room.

'You bastard,' he said. 'You goddam filthy bastard, I could kill you with my bare hands.'

He made a move to come at me again, and I backed away. 'Sit the hell down and cool off, Chip. I'm not going to fight with you no matter how much you want to. Just sit down and tell me what it is.'

This stopped his momentum a bit, but it did nothing to squelch his anger. I had never seen him act violently before, and it was clear that he didn't know how to deal with the hurricane that had broken loose inside him. He was contend-

ing with raw, untempered emotion for the first time in his life, and it had turned him into someone I hardly recognized.

'It's my father,' he said, his face boiling with fury. 'My father's dying. And you did it, Max, you're the one who killed him.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about. Sit down and start from the beginning. I'm not going to listen to you unless you try to make some sense.'

'I swear, Max, if he dies, I'm going to come back here and kill you with my own two hands. I don't care what happens to me. I'll kill you, I swear I will.'

It was getting to be a little too much, and I ran out of patience. I shouted at him the way a drunken farmer shouts at his dog. I pointed to a chair, and I told him to sit. The loudness of my voice stunned him, and he just stood there staring at me. I shouted at him again, and he sat.

I went off to the kitchen and poured three or four ounces of Cutty Sark into a glass. I came back to the living room and found him sitting in exactly the same position, as if he had gone into a catatonic trance.

'Here, drink this first,' I said, handing the glass to him. 'Then we'll talk.'

He drank down the Scotch as though it were water, and it hardly affected him at all. He was somehow outside himself, and he was no longer reacting normally to things. His body was wound up as tightly as a watch, and his mind was off somewhere else, burrowing into the anguish that surrounded him like a visible aura. I realized that he was exhausted. He was wearing the same clothes I had seen him in yesterday, and he needed a shave. I doubted if he had had any sleep in the past twenty-four hours.

'Now tell me about it,' I said. 'When I left your father yesterday he was fine.'

'Well, he's not fine now,' Chip mumbled, full of self-pity. 'He's in an oxygen tent in the intensive care unit at Lenox Hill Hospital, and he's dying.'

'Cut the melodrama, Chip,' I said sharply. 'I know he's dying, you told me that before. Just tell me what happened.'

'It's what happened after you left. My father and I had an argument, a horrible argument. It was the worst thing I've ever been through. Screaming, shouting, terrible insults on both sides. At some point things calmed down a little, and we decided to leave the office and take an early train out to Westport. He had a heart attack right in the elevator.' Chip stopped and looked up at me on the verge of tears. There was such defeat in his eyes that I had to turn away. 'It's all your fault, Max. You never should have asked me to arrange that meeting.'

'What was the argument about?'

'I wanted to know the truth. I wanted to know why my father had lied to me.'

'Did you find out?'

'Part of it. The rest I was able to figure out for myself.'

Now that he was beginning to talk about it, I could feel him relaxing into a kind of grim fatalism. Describing what had happened out loud to someone else had the effect of putting the events into the past. They were placed out of reach and were made unalterable. They had to be accepted because they could no longer be changed.

I said, 'It was you who introduced Chapman to your father, wasn't it?'

Chip nodded. 'I didn't want to. But George kept insisting. He seemed so curious about my father. George was fascinated by all forms of power, and he wanted to get as close to it as he could. Eventually I gave in and had them both out to Westport for dinner.'

'Was Judy Chapman there too?'

'No. She and George were in one of their bad periods. They hardly ever went out together.'

'You knew about Briles back then?'

'I knew about Briles, and I knew about the others, too. George would tell me. He liked to confide in me about his personal life.'

'How did he feel about Judy? Did he try to make it work with her, or was he satisfied with a marriage of convenience?'

'No, he hated her. He hated her so much that sometimes I thought he would kill her. George was my good friend, but I

never felt I understood him. He didn't have the same kinds of emotions as other people. There was something hard in him, as if he was all burnt out inside. He used to hire detectives to follow her around and find out who she was sleeping with. You could understand it if he was planning to divorce her, but he never had any intention of doing that. He used to say that he was just collecting evidence. I never knew exactly what he meant.'

'What's your opinion of Judy Chapman?'

'I think she's a good person. A little weak, but then she had to put up with an awful lot. I don't know how she took it for so long.'

'Do you think she was capable of killing Chapman?'

'No. She's innocent. She never could have done anything like that.'

I held out my cigarettes to him, but he shook his head. I lit up and asked, 'Did Chapman and your father talk about gambling that night at your house?'

'No. It was a proper social occasion. There was nothing but small talk.' He paused and looked at me with a puzzled expression. 'Why would they have talked about gambling?'

'Didn't your father tell you yesterday?'

'Tell me what?'

I missed a beat, realizing that Chip's father had held back as many details as he could. 'Obviously he didn't,' I said.

And so I told him the story, the same story I had told Judy last night. Chip took it much harder than she had. His mouth literally dropped open when I explained the arrangement Chapman had made with his father. After I had finished, he got up from his chair and walked around the room several times in silence. Whatever else he was, Chip was also a decent man, and nothing in his life had prepared him to contend with the revulsion he now felt. It was as if I had just given him his first glimpse of hell.

'My father told me it was business,' he said quietly. 'But I didn't know what kind of business.' He sat down on the couch, took off his glasses, and buried his face in his hands. 'I can't believe such evil,' he said over and over again, 'I can't believe such evil.'

'And then, when Chapman refused to pay up,' I said, 'your father invited him to the house in Millbrook for a conference. But of course, Chapman never made it. It was attempted murder. Although Chapman managed to survive, the effect was almost the same as if it had worked. He was finished. And your father, being the sporting gentleman that he is, decided to let the matter drop there. After all, he hadn't lost anything.'

It had finally become too much for Chip. His big, bulky body started to quake with sobs, and the apartment filled with the noise of his misery. I didn't try to console him. He was mourning his father, mourning the loss of his own innocence, and nothing I said would have mattered. He had to let it out. There could be no more lies, no more escapes. The tears he wept were bitter, but they were necessary. They lay between him and his manhood.

When the onslaught was over I led him to the bathroom, gave him a towel, and told him to wash up. I went into the kitchen and did the breakfast dishes. Fifteen minutes later Chip appeared in the doorway and gave me a feeble smile. He was still red around the eyes, but he looked a little better. I noticed that he had used my razor to shave with and that he had cut himself on the chin. A blood-soaked patch of tissue paper stanched the wound.

'Come on,' I said. 'I'll walk you back to the hospital.'

We went east on Seventy-second Street towards Central Park. It was another good day; somewhat chillier, the air clear, and the streets filled with a light that made strong, clean shadows. Until we reached the park, neither one of us said anything. It had been humiliating for Chip to break down in front of me, and he couldn't be sure if I wasn't secretly laughing at him for his show of weakness. I wasn't. But I had no intention of telling him that. He would have to figure it out for himself.

When we crossed to the other side of the stone wall that separated the park from the street, he began to talk. It was as though he found the grass and trees a more congenial audience for his thoughts. Lumbering along in his stolid

cordovan shoes and wrinkled business suit, he looked like a displaced person in this land of cyclists, ball players, and joggers. But it hardly mattered where he was. He was oblivious to everything around him.

He talked about his father. His memories came at random, and he skipped back and forth across the years as the past came rushing over him. He went from his first day at college at Dartmouth to a Labrador retriever given to him when he was eight and then forward again to the birth of his youngest daughter. In each instance, his father had been present. There was nothing I hadn't heard before. In some sense, everyone's memories are the same. The events that give rise to them might differ, but the qualities we invest them with are the same. They are our lives, and we treat them with a respect accorded only to the most sacred things. Chip spoke of his father's generosity, his sense of humour, his love for his children. It was as though he were delivering the eulogy over his father's grave, and he said nothing that might have revealed the brutal reality of the man. The truth hovered like an avenging angel in each of his words, but for now he chose not to acknowledge its presence. He would have the rest of his life to wrestle with that angel. This was his farewell to the father he had pretended to have, and he said goodbye gently, with infinite kindness, in the way one dismantles a doll house.

When we reached the front door of Lenox Hill Hospital, I said, 'Maybe he'll surprise you and pull through it.'

'Sure,' Chip said. 'And maybe tomorrow is Christmas.'

'You never know. He's a pretty tough old guy.'

'You don't have to try to be nice, Max. It really doesn't matter any more. I almost hope he's dead when I walk up there now. It would make things much simpler.'

'Death is never simple.'

'I know.' He looked away from me and stared through the glass door. 'It's just that I don't ever want to talk to him again.'

As it turned out, he never did.

NINETEEN

Richie was waiting for me in the lobby of the East Eighty-third Street building. It was a little after one o'clock and he had been waiting a long time. Dressed in his blue baseball cap with the famous NY logo, a yellow tee-shirt that had his name printed on the front, blue jeans, and a pair of white and green track shoes, he was sitting in an armchair large enough to hold five of him and quietly pounding his right fist into his baseball glove. A Pan Am flight bag lay at this feet with a folded copy of the *Sporting News* on top of it. His skinny body was so hunched up as he concentrated on the pocket of his glove that it seemed to have taken on the form of a question mark.

'Boy,' he said when he looked up and saw me, 'are you late. The game's probably in the third inning already.'

'No, we still have almost an hour. We'll get there in time if we step on it. Do you have a sweater?'

'In my bag.'

'OK, let's go.'

I knew that I probably shouldn't be going off for an afternoon at the ball park when I was still in the middle of a case. But I needed some time to think, to step back a little from the whole business and look at it with fresh eyes. I also felt that nothing was as important as spending these few hours with Richie. I wanted to give him a good day, a day he would remember.

Cathy had sent him down to wait in the lobby, which was her way of saying that she didn't want to see me. I assumed this meant she had made her decision. I assumed she would be moving to New Hampshire.

Walking into a major league stadium is an experience like no

other in the world. You've been in the subway, crowded into narrow spaces, surrounded by metal and machinery, and then you've gotten out to find yourself in yet another landscape of bricks, stones, and urban blight. You've circled the stadium with a few thousand other people looking for the right gate, given your ticket to a guy in a uniform, gone through the turnstile, and entered the gloom of bare concrete tunnels, echoing voices, and jostling bodies. It makes you feel you've come all this way just to become part of a dream sequence in a Fellini movie.

But then you walk up the ramp, and there it is. It's almost impossible to take it all in at once. The sudden sense of space is so powerful that for the first few moments you don't know where you are. Everything has become so vast, so green, so perfectly ordered, it's as if you've stepped into the formal garden of a giant's castle.

Little by little you begin to adjust. You notice the lesser details, the tiny things that help to create the overall effect. You admire the pristine whiteness of the bases, the symmetry of the pitcher's mound, the impeccably tended dirt of the infield. You see the enormous electric words and numbers on the scoreboard and slowly take in the crowd, starting with the strangers around you and then going off into the distance where the people are just a blur of colours and noise. For the next two or three hours the geometry of the field in front of you will hold your attention completely. In the middle of the city you will find yourself enveloped in a pastoral universe watching a white ball fly around in space and dictate the actions of eighteen grown men. Nothing will matter to you more than that ball. It will hold you so completely that when you at last file out and return to the normal world, it will stay with you like the afterglow of a flashbulb that's gone off in your eyes.

Our seats were between home plate and first base on ground level about half-way back, and we got to them just as the managers were walking out to consult with the umpires and exchange line-ups. I was glad we hadn't missed any of the game. Until now the only baseball Richie had seen was on

television, and the crazy, foreshortened perspectives of the camera have never done the game justice. It was important for him to understand that baseball is not a constant stream of words from the mouth of a play-by-play announcer punctuated by between-innings beer commercials. I wanted him to see the whole thing with his own eyes.

For the first few moments he was out of his skin. He had always been a rather secretive kid, not given to displaying his emotions, but this time he reacted the way any nine-year-old would have. He gawked, looked in every direction at once, and had trouble staying in his seat. What seemed to impress him most was the fact that the American players were not two-dimensional black-and-white shadows, but flesh and blood human beings. It overwhelmed him to realize that his heroes actually existed.

As the Americans took the field and everyone stood for the national anthem, Richie tugged at my sleeve and said, 'When can we come back again, Dad?'

'The game hasn't even started yet. Why worry about next time?'

'Because I don't want to think that if I have to go to the bathroom or something I'll never get another chance. What if I miss a home-run? I'd never forgive myself.'

'Does that mean you have to go to the bathroom now?'

He was embarrassed and looked down at his feet, afraid to meet my eyes. 'Yeah, I guess so.'

'Come on, then. Nobody's going to hit a home-run.'

We left our seat at 'twilight's last gleaming' and went off to the urinals. The men's room was crowded, and Richie seemed a little intimidated by the commotion and cigar smoke. I stood next to him as he waited his turn. Every time a noise erupted from the stands, he wanted to know if I thought it was a home-run. I said no, probably only a good pitch or a nice play in the field, but he didn't believe me. By his count five home-runs were hit in our absence.

When we returned to our seats Detroit had two outs and a runner on first. It was still the top half of the first inning. There were no hits or errors on the scoreboard, so I told Richie

the man had reached base on a walk. His look told me he had already figured it out for himself. Marston was on the mound for the Americans, a big mustachioed right-hander who had won eighteen games last season. He struck out the Detroit clean-up hitter with a very sleek breaking pitch low and away, and Richie concluded seriously that he had 'good stuff'.

He was right. Marston was sharp, and so was Amado, the Detroit pitcher, a veteran left-hander who had won over two hundred games in his career. The game quickly settled into one of those classic pitchers' duels, the kind of game that gets decided by a broken-bat single, an error, or a bases-loaded walk. After three innings there was no score; Detroit had one hit and New York none.

Cathy had packed the flight bag with sandwiches, instructing Richie not to let me buy any hotdogs until all the sandwiches were gone. I didn't want to be held responsible for giving him a stomach ache, so I made him stick to the bargain. He seemed satisfied to be indulged with a bag of peanuts and a couple of cokes. Ten minutes after each soda we made another trip to the men's room.

I was impressed by the way Richie concentrated on the game. Sitting in one place for more than an hour can tax a nine-year-old's patience, but Richie was too absorbed to get restless. About the only thing that distracted him were the foul balls that came our way every now and then. At anything hit even remotely near us he would stand up, pound his glove, and shout, 'Here I am!' Once or twice he became so interested in seeing who finally got the ball that he lost track of what was happening in the game. But the rest of the time he was right there.

In the fifth inning the Detroit short-stop led off with a double, a clean shot into the right field corner. Marston stomped angrily around the mound, picked up the resin bag and threw it down in a cloud of white dust. Then he bore down and got the next two batters on pop flies to the infield. That brought up Hillman, the young Detroit third baseman who was leading the league in both home-runs and strike-

outs. Without any fanfare he calmly stroked Marston's first pitch into left centre for a single, and Detroit was on the board. It stayed one to nothing for the next three innings. Amado's strange, twirling delivery, which resembled the motions of a mechanical toy, continually had the New York hitters off stride. Everything was working for him. His fast ball was humming, his curve ball was dipping, and the Americans couldn't touch him. The only difficult moment for him came when Webster, the Americans' right fielder, hit a bullet to the deepest part of right-centre field that looked like it would fall for a sure triple. But Green, the swift centre fielder for Detroit, ran at least thirty yards to make a diving, acrobatic catch in the cinders of the warning track. After eight innings New York had managed only two base-runners, both on walks. Amado was breezing along on his way to a no-hitter.

In the top of the ninth Detroit came up with a single, a sacrifice bunt, a ground-out that advanced the runner to third, and then a scratch hit to take a two-to-nothing lead. Marston had pitched admirably, giving up only five hits, but apparently it wasn't going to be enough. When Amado took the mound in the bottom of the ninth there probably wasn't a single person in the Stadium who didn't think he would get the no-hitter. After the first batter struck out on three pitches, Richie shook his head morosely and said it was in the bag. But then the second baseman Royce came up – a good singles hitter but never much of a power threat – and everything suddenly changed. Trying to protect the plate, he stuck out his bat at a tough one-and-two fastball down and away. The ball blooped off the wood towards right field and just kept carrying, making it into the first row down the foul line for the shortest possible home-run in the park. As Royce trotted around the bases there was bedlam in the house, a wild roar that went on so long that he had to come out of the dug-out to tip his hat to the crowd. I liked the way Amado reacted. He simply held up his glove, got another ball from the umpire, and started rubbing it down in the same way he had rubbed down every ball he had ever held. Slowly, methodically, a bored expression on his face. It was all in a day's work.

Webster, the next batter, singled to centre, and the tone of the game changed. Not only had Amado lost the no-hitter, but now he was in danger of losing the game as well. When Turner followed with a hit that was misplayed by the right fielder into a double, putting runners on second and third, Amado was gone. Wilton, the lanky Detroit relief pitcher, trotted in from the bullpen to face Costello, New York's hottest hitter at the moment. Richie was on his feet, screaming along with 40,000 other people as if his very life were at stake.

What happened was totally unexpected. I had seen the play only once before, fifteen years ago when I was playing for my high school team and we lost an important game when the other team pulled it on us. The key is to have your best runners on second and third, and when it works it's fast as lightning. The moment Wilton went into his delivery to throw the first pitch, you could see it happening. Webster and Turner took off like a pair of gerbils on the base-paths, and Costello squared around to bunt. It was the suicide squeeze, and when it's executed properly there's no way to stop it. Costello laid down a good bunt to the right of the pitcher's mound. By the time Wilton picked up the ball, Webster was crossing the plate with the tying run. Wilton's only choice was to throw to first to get Costello out, and he made a leisurely toss that beat him by three or four steps. What he didn't realize, however, was that Turner had never stopped, and by the time the first baseman saw Turner flying around third on his way home, it was too late. There was a throw, there was a slide, there was a cloud of dust. But Turner was safe, and the game was over. A double suicide squeeze. Three-two Americans and kiss it goodbye. They would be talking about that play for the rest of the season.

The subway back to Manhattan was too crowded for anything but holding your breath and hoping you wouldn't get stepped on. I managed to find Richie the narrowest of seats, and he immersed himself in the *Americans' Yearbook* I had bought for him at the game, poring over the statistics and

pictures with the unbroken concentration of a medieval scholar in the Princeton library. I stood in the middle of a pack of sweating, beer-breathed fans, not bothering to reach for a pole, since there was no way I could possibly fall with so much flesh padded up around me. We rode that way for three quarters of an hour.

It was on that subway car that everything finally became clear to me. An odd scrap of memory lodged in my mind, a few loose stones fell out of the wall I had been staring at for the past four days, and suddenly I was looking at the daylight on the other side. I had come to it so obliquely that at first I wasn't even aware of it. I had gone all around the world, and now that I was back I saw that my starting place had been my destination all along. I had ventured out looking for pious truths and all-encompassing answers, and I had discovered that the only things that really mattered were of no apparent consequence – the remarks of a ridiculous cab driver and a piece of unorthodox strategy in a baseball game. Everything I had struggled to find out, all the supposedly important information I had fought for and risked my neck for, turned out to be mere details. The lessons I needed to learn had been given to me free of charge. J. Daniels had proved to me that things are sometimes only what they seem to be, and the double suicide squeeze play had demonstrated how the bunt can sometimes be as powerful as the home-run. It had taken me a while to decipher these messages, to read them correctly as metaphors of the case. I had wanted facts, nothing but cold, hard reality, and now I had understood the most important fact of all – that reality doesn't exist without the imagination to see it. I didn't have to go any further. It would all be over by the time I turned in for the night.

The game had been played in a little over two hours, and it was only ten past five when I got Richie back home. Cathy asked me in for a drink, but I told her I would have to pass. I knew she wanted to talk, I knew what she was going to say, and I knew I could change her mind if I wanted to. She had made her decision, but I could tell from the look in her eyes that she was begging me to talk her out of it. This was my last

chance, and for a fleeting instant I was tempted to walk through the door and tell her I was moving in. Richie stood there between us, looking back and forth at our faces, realizing that something important was happening but not quite understanding what it was. It flashed through my mind that this was the one moment he would remember from our day together. When Cathy invited me in again and I turned her down a second time, I saw something fall apart inside her. Her mouth tightened, her eyes became hard and she stared at me as if I had just slapped her across the face. We were right back to where we had been five years ago.

'That was a cruel thing you did Wednesday night, Max,' she said. 'I'll never forgive you for it.'

'I'm not asking for forgiveness, Cathy. I'm only asking that you do what you have to do.'

We looked each other in the eyes, and then she collapsed into angry, devastated tears. She swore at me in a voice that was out of control, raging at me incomprehensively in a stampede of bitterness. A second later she slammed the door shut. I stood there for a full minute listening to the sounds of her moaning from inside the apartment and Richie shrieking at her in his high-pitched voice asking her what was wrong. I didn't knock again.

As I walked towards the elevator, I started thinking about my gun. Losing it had been a stupid mistake, and I cursed myself for it. It was the one thing I needed to have with me now.

TWENTY

Briles lived in a co-operative apartment building on the corner of 116th Street and Morningside Drive. Nearly everyone who lived there was connected with Columbia in some way, and the block stood as a kind of fortress on the Heights, dividing the university community from the rest of the world below it. On the other side of the street was Morningside Park, an abrupt cliff of weeds and granite outcroppings that descended into the flatlands of Harlem and down through the endless neighbourhoods of the poor. If you didn't know what was out there, you could stand on Morningside Drive, take in the panorama, and admire it all as scenery. But everyone knew what was there. It wasn't a neighbourhood that attracted many sightseers.

As I was walking up the steps toward the entrance-way, I saw an old man with a cane inching his way out of the building. He opened the door from the inside, and I rushed in to hold it for him. I had been hoping to enter the building without ringing the buzzer to Briles's apartment, and I took it as a good omen. The old man smiled up at me benevolently and said hello. It was Edward Bigelow, an economics professor who had been my teacher in the first semester of my freshman year. He must have been at least eighty now, and I found it hard to believe that he had recognized me. My face had been just one of thousands belonging to students of his over the years and I remembered distinctly that I had never once uttered a word in his class. The apparent recognition in his eyes had been nothing more than a reasonable guess. There were even odds that anyone under fifty he encountered in this neighbourhood had once been a student of his. If they were at all like me, not one of them knew a thing about economics.

Briles lived on the fourth floor, and I decided to take the stairs up. The bell in the green door of his apartment made a dull 'ping-pong' noise when I pushed it. A few moments later the peep-hole slid open and an eye stared out at me. Another few moments passed before the eye spoke.

'What are you doing here?' Briles said from behind the door.

'I've come to apologize.'

'For what?' His voice was still hostile. It sounded as if the chip on his shoulder had grown into a two-by-four.

'For the flare-up we had yesterday. I don't want there to be any hard feelings.'

'All right. No hard feelings.'

The peep-hole slid shut, and I heard him walk away from the door. I put my finger on the bell and punched it in and out for the next thirty seconds. At last the peep-hole opened again.

'Why don't you go away, Klein?' Briles said. 'I'm trying to work, and you're beginning to be a nuisance.'

'This is important. I've come up with information that might be enough to get Judy Chapman off the hook. But I need your help. If we get together on this thing, I think we can crack it. I know you don't want to see her go down the tubes, Briles. She means too much to you. Just let me in so we can talk about it.'

The peep-hole slid shut once again, there was a long pause, and then the door opened. Briles was dressed in brown corduroys, a green-and-white-striped soccer shirt, and the kind of work boots that have become fashionable in intellectual circles. He held a book in his left hand, marking the place with his index finger. It was true that he had been working. His face, however, looked haggard, weary under the eyes, and he was showing his age. Briles was at the point in life where his looks depended on the amount of sleep he had had and the degree of tension he was under. On his good days it was possible for him to look like a young man. But this wasn't one of his good days.

He led me into a living room that featured a set of french

windows which opened on to a small balcony and a view of the outlying areas below. It was a comfortable room furnished in modest good taste. This was where Briles did his entertaining, and there were no books or papers in the room, nothing connected with his work. Briles sat down in an upholstered tweed armchair on one side of the windows. A large liquor cabinet made of lacquered bamboo stood against the wall to his left. I took a seat on the blue sofa on the other side of the windows. We studied each other across the early twilight that lay between us.

'You mentioned information,' he said tightly. 'I'd like to know what it is.'

'It concerns a whole range of things.' I didn't want to commit myself with too much too soon. 'Most of it I've learned since our conversation in your office on Wednesday. I see now that it was a mistake to try to pressure you then. I suspected you were hiding something from me, but I didn't know it was something you weren't free to talk about.'

'I assume you're referring to my relationship with Judy.'

'That's right, with Judy. But also with George. I came in talking about him, and naturally he was the last person in the world you wanted to discuss. You thought I knew about your affair with Judy and that somehow I was planning to make use of it for my own purposes.'

Briles tried to wave me off with his hand. 'All right, so we were both wrong about each other that first day. But that's not important any more. Everyone knows about my involvement with Judy now. It's one of the things they're using to slander her with.' He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. 'My God. I still can't believe she's been accused of murder. It's absolutely incredible.'

'You still love her, don't you?' I asked.

His head was tilted back, looking up at the ceiling, and his eyes were still closed. I could barely hear him when he spoke. 'Yes, I still love her. I still love her very much.'

I fought back my disgust, trying to keep my emotions under control. I didn't want to repeat the scene we had played in Judy's apartment yesterday. No matter how much I

despised him, it was important for me to stay calm. 'I wouldn't worry about the murder charge against her,' I went on. 'I have enough to know that she didn't do it. With a little more, I think I can prove it. The case will never even go to court.'

Briles opened his eyes and looked at me with a half-formed expression, as though wavering somewhere between hope and suspicion. He wanted to believe me, and yet he wasn't sure if I was leading him into a trap.

'Are you certain?' he asked. 'What have you found?'

'George Chapman wasn't murdered by his wife. In fact, he wasn't murdered by anyone. He commited suicide.'

It took a moment for my words to register with Briles. He had been so afraid of what I was going to say that at first it seemed he hadn't even heard me. Then his face lost its colour, he let out a deep breath, and slumped back in his chair. 'He was insane,' he said to himself. 'He was even more insane than I thought.'

'Knowing it was suicide is one thing, but proving it is another. This is where it all starts getting complicated. To get Judy off without a trial, the burden of proof falls on me.'

'You must have some ideas. You couldn't have come this far without a fairly clear picture of the situation.'

'I have a hundred ideas, and they all branch out in different directions. What I have to do is gather them all together in a tidy little package to put on Grimes's desk. Otherwise he's not going to want to talk to me. As far as he's concerned, the case is already over.'

'That doesn't sound very encouraging.'

'Until yesterday it looked almost hopeless,' I said. 'Every time I thought I was getting close to an answer, something strange would happen. A letter would be missing from my safe, or a man would be murdered in New Jersey, or I would get a threatening phone call, or someone would try to gun me down – odd little things like that. It was enough to make me want to pack in the whole business and become a claims adjuster for an insurance company. But then I got some help from an unexpected source.'

Briles looked at me curiously, still wanting to play along, but somehow knowing that I wasn't going to let him. 'What source was that?'

'A very interesting one. Yesterday afternoon I went into a bookstore and bought several excellent works that gave me some fresh insights into the criminal mind. You're a very good writer, Professor Briles. I admire the precision of your style. It shows a remarkably clear intelligence.'

'I'm flattered that you think so highly of my work,' he said, standing up from his chair and walking over to the liquor cabinet. 'But this kind of praise always tends to make me embarrassed. And when I'm embarrassed I seem to get thirsty.' He gave me a falsely ingratiating smile. 'Would you care to join me in a drink?'

'No, thanks,' I said. 'I'm still in training for my next fight.'

Briles opened the double door of the cabinet and crouched down among the bottles and glasses. When he stood up again he wasn't holding anything to drink. There was a gun in his hand, and he was pointing it at my stomach. It was a forty-five, probably the same gun that had been used to kill Pignato. Briles grinned at me stupidly. He looked very nervous, as if the gun in his hand was a small and vicious animal he wasn't sure he could control.

'Please tell me more, Klein. It was just beginning to get interesting.'

'You're not thinking clearly any more, Muffle Mouth,' I said. 'By putting a bullet in me, you'll cancel out any chance Judy has of getting off. I'm the only hope she's got.'

'Don't worry about that. Everything is going to work out just fine. Just go on with your story. I want to hear exactly how much you know before I get down to the other business I'm planning to take care of.'

I decided to talk. My voice was the only thing that could keep me alive, and the longer I went on the better my chances would be of walking out of there when it was over. I thought of Sheherazade, the woman who distracted the king with stories in order to delay the moment of her execution. She had been able to keep it going for a thousand and one nights. I

didn't feel so optimistic. I was hoping for just a few more minutes.

'It was all in your books,' I said. *'The Gangster in the Gray Flannel Suit*, for example. There was an interview in it with an unnamed party, a big shot who co-operated with you because – as he put it – he wanted to set the record straight and make people understand that the underworld had changed. No more Al Capone stuff, he said, he was just a businessman. Seeing that I've met the man myself and know some of his pet phrases, it wasn't too difficult for me to figure out his identity. Victor Contini is unmistakably himself, even on the printed page. The link between you and Contini was all I needed to get you into the picture. And then there was the matter of how the safe was broken into. If you had just forgotten about that idiotic letter you sent to Chapman, chances are nothing would have come of it. Grimes wasn't interested in it, and it never figured in the case he was building against Judy. But then the letter disappeared. It was such a clean job: no forcing, no tools, just a textbook lesson in how to crack a safe combination. I knew that no professional was even remotely involved in this business for himself, which meant that he had been hired by someone to retrieve the letter. I knew it had to be you. You wrote a whole goddam book about a safe-cracker.'

Briles couldn't help from grinning at the thought. It amused him to realize how clever he had been. 'Willie Shaw,' he said, 'the very best in the business. After the book came out he said that I'd turned him into a star. The man worships me. When I called him the other day and asked him to do that little favour for me, he considered it a great honour.'

'You're a curious man, Briles. On the one hand, you live a very safe and comfortable life. You're a distinguished professor at a famous university, and you spend your time writing books and teaching classes. But at the same time you're almost mesmerized by your obsession with dirt, with evil, with the freaks from the sewers of society. You remind me of those proper Victorian gentlemen who would indulge their passion for sin on a regular basis and then return smiling

to their proper families. Everything went along fine for all these years. You managed to turn your obsession into a respectable career, to fit all the parts of yourself into neat compartments that never overlapped. You got your thrills by being close to the lawlessness that fascinated you, but you were still on the other side, a peeping Tom looking in through the window. But then you got involved with a woman who was too much for you to handle, didn't you? Judy Chapman is a wicked little tramp with a perverse mind, and you grovel at her feet. You can't get enough of her.'

'Don't talk that way about Judy. It's not true, and you know it. I won't let you say those things.'

'Come off it, Briles. She's a slut, a cheap tart with a pretty face and nice-looking clothes, and she sucked you all the way down into the slime. She'll crawl into bed with anything in pants, and it drives you crazy, doesn't it? She'd fuck a dog without batting an eyelash. There's not an easier goddam lay in this whole town. Why don't you call her up and ask her where she spent last night?'

'I know where she spent last night, you foul-mouthed bastard,' Briles shouted. 'Now just shut up. Shut that mouth of yours or I'll kill you.'

'It all got to be too much for you, didn't it, Briles? You wanted her all for yourself, and when Chapman refused to give her a divorce, you knew that you had to do something to get him out of the way. Getting to know Contini gave you your chance. You found out about Chapman's gambling, and when Contini told you what he was planning to do about it, you said nothing to warn off George. It made you a part of the whole conspiracy.'

Briles stared at me with wild eyes. It was agony for him to hear me talking about the things he had kept secret within himself for so long. But at the same time, he couldn't stop listening. It brought it all back again, and he stood in a kind of innocent wonder over the things he had done. At that moment I probably could have taken the gun from him without a struggle, but I didn't realize it until later, until it was too late. The scene was too charged with sudden shifts of

emotion for me to make a move. Briles was going to crumble, but I didn't know how long it would take.

'And then George gradually recovered,' I said, going on with the story. 'Almost unbelievably, things returned to the way they had been before. And then they got worse. Judy began to lose interest in you. You had reached your peak with her the night Chapman's car went skidding into Pignato's truck, and it was all downhill after that, the tedium of an affair that had run itself out. Six months ago she finally dumped you. And that was the thing that undid you, Briles. You came apart at the seams.'

'It wasn't fair. After all I had done for her, all the risks I had taken, it just wasn't fair. She owed me some loyalty.'

'But you didn't give up. Her rejecting you only made you more determined to win her back. It was still George who stood in your way. So for the second time you went about trying to destroy him, and this time you were much more thorough. You weren't content to sit back passively and watch it happen, you concocted the whole scheme yourself. It all started with the security check the Democrats ran on Chapman. Wallace Smart came to talk to you, and suddenly you saw a way to get the machinery rolling without even dirtying your hands. You gave Smart the story behind the accident and told him to go with it to Light. Smart was happy. He was able to retire on his profits from the transaction. Light was happy. Now he had what he needed to destroy Chapman. And you were happy – at least for a while. The trouble was that Light was sitting on the information, biding his time until the campaign, and you began to get impatient. So you wrote the letter to Chapman. You wanted to confuse him, to start putting the pressure on him by letting him know the secret was out. But George outsmarted you. No matter how crazy he might have been, he was also a man with guts. He realized that if the secret became public, his career in politics would be over just as it was starting, and he would be ruined. Nothing was more important to him than his reputation, not even his life. He went out like a Roman statesman in order to protect the secret. I think he knew all along that the

crisis was bound to come. It was just a matter of doing as much with his life as he could until then, and when the moment finally came he was prepared. He mapped out his strategy very shrewdly, turning your letter to his own advantage. That's the reason I was hired. He wanted to establish the fact that someone was planning to murder him, and I was his witness. Now that he knew he was going to die, he was planning to take Judy down with him. He arranged his suicide to make it look like he had been murdered by her. He allowed himself to die a nightmare death just for revenge – he hated her that much. And he was so sure of himself that he didn't even feel he had to be around to see if his plan would work. He knew it would. And it did – to perfection. He died with his reputation intact, and his wife was accused of murder.'

'George was a madman,' Briles said. 'If I hadn't sent that letter, he would have wound up killing Judy. You can see that for yourself. I did it to protect her from him. I wanted to save Judy.'

'But there was no need for you to kill Pignato. He was just an innocent bystander. If you were so eager to hide your role in the accident five years ago, why didn't you go after the big man, Contini himself?'

'Because Contini never would have talked. But Pignato talked to you. I saw it with my own eyes. I followed you to New Jersey and saw you in that bar with him. He had to die. I didn't want him to be in a position to tell anyone else what he knew. I couldn't let my name get mixed up in it. It would send the police straight to Judy, and she wouldn't have a chance. They'd send her to prison for the rest of her life.'

'As it is, she's probably going to prison anyway.'

'No, she's not. You're going to get her off.'

'I can't very well do that after you've killed me with that gun.'

Briles looked down at the gun in his hand as if he had forgotten all about it. He was drained, paralysed from exhaustion. He sat down in the chair across from me and said, 'I'm not going to kill you, Klein. I tried to kill you yesterday, but that was only because I was angry at you. I don't want to

kill you any more. You're the one person who can help Judy, and I want you to do that.'

His mood had slowly diminished into an almost wistful regret. It was as though time had backed up on him and he had become very young again, a little boy who realized he wasn't strong enough to go on playing adult games.

'What are you going to do now?' I asked.

'I don't know. I think I'll just sit here for a while.' He was staring down at the floor between his feet.

'Don't you think you should give me the gun? You don't want it to go off accidentally.'

He looked at the gun again, turning it around in his hand in the same way an infant examines a new object. 'I don't want to give you the gun, Klein. This gun has been a good friend to me. I want to keep it.'

Before I had a chance to say another word, Briles raised the gun and studied it at eye level. For a moment his face was blank. And then his eyes opened wide, as wide as the universe. There was nothing left in him but fear. He had suddenly found himself staring straight ahead at an onrushing truck, and there was no more time for him to get out of the way. He put the barrel of the gun into his mouth and squeezed the trigger.

TWENTY-ONE

Grimes came. The Smiths came. The lab men came. And then Briles's body was carried out in a plastic bag. It took me almost an hour before I could talk to anyone. I had seen men die, and I had even killed a man myself. But Briles's death had been the worst. There was no way it was ever going to leave me.

From Morningside Drive we went downtown to the police station. Grimes led me into his office, switched on the tape recorder that sat on his desk, and told me to talk. I went on for about forty minutes, and when I was finished Grimes had a sergeant come in with a sandwich and a cup of coffee for me. I took one bite from the sandwich and put it aside. I managed to drink down the coffee. Grimes then opened a drawer in his desk, took out a bottle of Jack Daniels, and poured some of it into my styrofoam cup. I drank that down too. Then Grimes told me to go through the whole thing again, and I talked for another hour. Grimes hardly reacted to what I said. He sat leaning back in his chair with his eyes half-closed, and every once in a while he would nod his head or let out a little grunt. I felt like a primitive story-teller recounting an ancient myth to the tribal chieftain. Every detail of the story was familiar to us, and we both knew that none of it could ever change. But it wasn't so much the story that was important, it was the telling of it, the act of living through it again that mattered. None of it made Grimes very happy, but I could see that he accepted it. He really didn't have much of a choice. He knew the case was over.

When I finished for the second time, he said, 'Contini's dead, you know. He died in the hospital this afternoon.' I didn't have anything to say about it, so I kept quiet. Grimes leaned forward with his arms flat on the desk and scowled at

me impatiently. 'It seems nearly everyone you've met this week has managed to make a quick departure from the stage, Klein. You must have some kind of magic touch. Everything you get close to just rolls over and dies.' Again I said nothing. It was a thought that had occurred to me several times in the past few hours, and I didn't see any way to make the facts more palatable. Circumstances had turned me into a bringer of death, and now I was surrounded by the ghosts I had created. 'They're all gone now,' Grimes went on. 'Chapman, Pignato, Contini, and Briles. I don't care if the story you've told me is true. There's no one left to talk about it any more. It's going to be almost impossible to prove.'

'You don't have to prove it,' I said. 'The only thing you have to do is convince the DA to drop the charges against Judy Chapman.'

'You're thinking about the DA's office you used to work in. This new guy Simmons is different. He's committed himself too far on this Chapman thing already. He'd rather see it through to the end than admit he made a mistake.'

'He'll be a lot more embarrassed in court when Burleson starts making his case look like a leaky rowboat,' I said. 'The whole story will come out and Chapman will wind up looking so bad that no jury would ever convict her. Simmons might be an ass, but he's smart enough not to risk making himself look like one in public. He's out on a limb because you put him there, Lieutenant, and he can back off gracefully by claiming new evidence has been discovered. Since you're the one who discovered it, he'll shake your hand for saving the people's money and cleaning up this complex and disturbing affair before it ever had to go to trial. You'll both come out looking good. The public will mourn George Chapman and his tragic suicide, and everyone will walk out of the theatre wiping away the tears with a handkerchief.'

'And what about you, Klein? You just get up on your horse and ride into the sunset?'

'That's right. With some sad harmonica music playing in the background.'

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The necessary calls were made. Grimes got in touch with his Chief, who told him to handle it himself, and then Simmons was contacted at his apartment. The District Attorney had gone to bed early with a cold and was none too pleased to be woken up by Grimes's rasping voice at eleven o'clock. But he would come. As soon as he learned what it was about, he said he would be there in an hour. I called Burleson at his house in Westchester and gave him the news. It would take him under an hour and a half to get to the city. After that I tried to reach Dave McBell, but he wasn't in. I made a mental note to invite him to lunch some day next week.

Simmons and Burleson both arrived in business suits. In spite of the late hour, they had come to work, and neither one of them would have felt comfortable out of uniform. I was still wearing the same blue jeans I had put on at the beginning of the day and felt a little like a ditch digger who had been invited to a haberdashers' convention by mistake. But Grimes didn't look much better. The knot of his tie had wandered around the collar of his wash-and-wear shirt, and his jacket was showing as many wrinkles as a piece of crushed aluminium foil. The four of us made an unlikely combination. But we managed to do what needed to be done.

I let Grimes do most of the talking. I wanted it to be his show, and as he went back over the events that had led to Chapman's suicide, Simmons listened carefully with a grim face, gradually realizing that he was never going to get a chance to go up against Burleson in court. It took nearly three hours to work out the details, but in the end I got what I wanted. The charges against Judy Chapman would be dropped.

As we were walking out of the station, Burleson stopped me on the steps to shake my hand and congratulate me for the job I had done. But I was beyond caring any more. Too many things had been destroyed for me to feel any satisfaction. I just wanted to get away from there.

'Why don't you call her,' I said to Burleson, 'and give her the good news.'

'I will,' he answered. 'First thing in the morning.'

'I mean now. She's not asleep anyway. If you told her she's off the hook, maybe she'd be able to get some rest. It's been a pretty ugly stretch of days for her.'

Burleson was reluctant to call anyone at three o'clock in the morning, but I insisted and he finally agreed to do it. We re-entered the building and he made the call from one of the pay phones in the lobby. I told him not to let her know I was with him and then went outside to wait for him. He came through the door ten minutes later with a smile on his face.

'You were right,' he said. 'She wasn't sleeping.'

'How did she react when you told her?'

'With enormous relief. She couldn't believe that it was over.'

'Did you mention Briles?'

'Only after I had given her the good news first.'

'What did she say?'

'She didn't say anything. It was probably too much for her to take in all at once.'

'Did she ask to speak to me?'

'Of course. But I told her I didn't know where you were.'

Burleson pointed to a light-blue Cadillac parked on the other side of the street and asked if he could drop me anywhere. I told him not to bother, I felt like walking. Once again we shook hands, and once again he thanked me for all I had done. I stood there watching him as he crossed the street, climbed into the big car, and started the engine. When he drove off I found myself glad to be alone again. But that feeling lasted only a moment. By the time I couldn't hear his car any more, I was back inside the desolation of my own thoughts.

I went through the next few hours in a blur. Instead of going back home to get some sleep, I tried to fight off my numbness by walking. I prowled the empty streets, keeping company with the sound of my own steps. I didn't see anyone except a few people straggling home drunkenly after a big Saturday night and one solitary bum poking his head into a garbage can. It was the one moment when things stop

moving in New York. No longer night and not yet morning. Limbo. I felt that I belonged there.

Just after sunrise I went into an all-night Village restaurant for breakfast. Someone was reading the Sunday *Times* at the counter and I saw that there was an article about Victor Contini's death on the front page. It occupied the same space that had been devoted to Chapman's accident five years earlier. Now they were both dead, and it was as if they had cancelled each other out. I wondered if Chapman's reputation would survive after the real story of his death broke on Monday. Not that it could have mattered to him. Wherever he was now, he could go on dreaming his big dreams. He and Briles and Contini, they could all go on dreaming for the rest of time.

At a certain point during my meal in that restaurant I decided that I should get rid of the money Chapman had given me on Wednesday. I realized that I didn't want his cheque to be feeding me and buying me cigarettes for the next few weeks. It would make me feel I was still connected to him, that I somehow still owed him something. He had used me as a pawn in his strategy to do away with himself, and I wanted to undo my part in it. Maybe Richie could use the money to buy a fleet of sleds for his new life in New Hampshire. He would never have to know where it came from. I paid for the breakfast and then started out on the long walk down to my office to get the cheque. I was glad to know what I was doing again, glad to be walking with a purpose. The early morning sun climbed up over the buildings like the enormous, bleeding eye of a Cyclops.

Judy Chapman was sitting in my office when I got there. She was dressed in a pair of white slacks and a turquoise print blouse and was absently flicking her cigarette lighter on and off as she stared into the soot of the blank windows. Each time I had seen her this week she had been wearing a different outfit, and everything had looked good on her. It was impossible for her to look bad.

She turned around when she heard me enter and gave me

one of those smiles that makes you feel it will never rain again for the rest of your life. This was the morning-after we had missed out on yesterday. I smiled back at her and sat down in the chair behind the desk. I was so worn out, I hardly knew I was there. Even as it was happening, I felt that I was living through a scene from the past, that it had all taken place before.

'It's all over now,' I said. 'No more police, no more lawyers. It's finished.'

'I know,' she said. 'Burleson called me a few hours ago. I tried to reach you at your apartment, and when you weren't there, I thought I might be able to find you here. I couldn't wait to see you again.'

'Briles is dead.'

'I know. Burleson told me.'

'He shot himself while I was sitting no more than three feet away from him.'

She shuddered. 'I had no idea you were there.' The thought of seeing the suicide seemed to horrify her more than the act itself.

'I was there. And before it happened Briles and I had a long talk. He was still in love with you, you know. Desperately in love with you.'

'It wasn't anything I wanted. You know that.'

'You were wrong when you told me he wasn't capable of jealousy. He was mad with jealousy, and he turned himself into a murderer and a criminal because he thought it would win you back.'

'Let's not talk about it, Max. It's too awful. I don't want to have to think about it any more.'

'But I want to talk about it,' I said. 'It's important that we go over it one last time.'

She looked at me in a kind of panic. It wasn't going as she had thought it would, and she couldn't understand why I was pushing so hard. I was wounding her just when she was recovering from other wounds, and I could read the hurt in her face.

'Please, Max,' she said. 'I'd rather not. I want to make plans

with you, go off somewhere away from the city, just the two of us. I have to recuperate from this . . . this ordeal.'

'There are a few things I'd like to clear up first. I have this funny notion, you see, that Briles didn't quite tell me everything, and before we go anywhere together I have to be sure of what I'm getting into. I mean, isn't it a little odd that all the men in your life seem to wind up committing suicide?'

She stared at me for a long moment, not wanting to believe what I had said. And then she started crying, silent tears that brimmed out from her eyes and washed down her cheeks, creating a network of tiny prisms that gleamed in the light of the room.

'How can you be so cruel, Max? Don't you think I have any feelings?'

'You have feelings, all right,' I said, 'but they're all for yourself.'

'But what about Friday night? Doesn't that mean anything to you?'

'That's dead history. It means about as much as what the dinosaurs were thinking when they sank into the tar pits.'

My bitterness shocked her into another silence, and then she began to cry more violently, as if she finally realized she had nothing to hide from me any more. 'I could have have loved you so much, Max,' she said. 'I would have made you so happy. And now you've ruined everything.'

'You were in on the scheme from the beginning, weren't you?' I said. 'You used Briles to get rid of George for you. And you knew that even if Briles got caught, he would never tell about your part in it. You could count on that, couldn't you? He was so crazy about you, all you had to do was say jump and he would jump. He killed himself less than twelve hours ago to protect you, and your only reaction is to say you don't want to talk about it. Well, I do want to talk about it, and you're going to listen. You were the one who told Briles to send Smart to Charles Light, and you were the one who persuaded him to send George the letter when things didn't happen fast enough. You promised Briles that you would go back to him, and he believed you. But of course he was

expendable. The only thing that really mattered was to get George out of your life, once and for all. You even let George know what you were up to. In fact, that was the essence of your plan. You worked at it so hard that in the end he had only two choices: either kill you or kill himself. If it had been me, I probably would have strangled you with my own hands. But George was too much of a gentleman, and you knew it. Whatever he did, he realized he was finished. It was quite a battle of nerves, wasn't it? You kept telling him how you were going to expose him and how he should hurry up and kill you before it was too late. And then Briles sent the letter, and George knew the time had come. He told you what he was going to do, how he was going to kill himself in a way that would make it look as though you had done it, and you dared him to do that, too, didn't you? You sat there in the kitchen and watched him drink down the poison, and then you walked out calmly into the Lexington Avenue sun and did some shopping. There were some rough days after that, but now it's all over and you're in the clear. George is dead, Briles is dead, and you can do whatever you damn please. Just tell me what it was like watching George drink down the poison. I want to know what you felt, what was going through your mind at that moment.'

As I spoke, she kept shaking her head back and forth, sobbing uncontrollably. It was as if part of her wanted to deny the anger of my accusation and another part of her was weeping because she knew that was impossible. She was drowning in her own wretchedness, swallowing down the thing she had done to her life, and she was learning that it tasted of venom. She would go on tasting it for as long as she lived. I kept my eyes fixed on her, unable to look at anything else. This was the face of death that had been stalking me from the very start, and it was beautiful beyond all imagining. No matter what happened to her, she would always be beautiful.

'You don't understand,' she said when I had finished. 'You don't understand, Max. It was horrible. I couldn't stand to see him do it. I had to run away from it all. It was a nightmare.'

She covered her face with her hands and went on crying for a long time. When the siege was over, she gradually composed herself, took a handkerchief from her purse, and dried her face.

'I don't suppose you want to hear my side of it, do you?' she asked quietly.

'No. I don't want to hear another word about it.'

'It doesn't matter to you that you're wrong, that you've made a terrible mistake?'

'No. It doesn't matter.'

She stood up from her chair and said in a subdued business-like voice, 'Just send me a bill for your services, Mr Klein. I'll mail you a cheque.'

'You don't owe me a penny,' I said. 'We're even up.'

She looked at me with hard, determined eyes, searching my face for an opening, a sign of encouragement. I didn't give it to her.

'If you ever want to know the truth,' she said, 'just let me know. I'll be happy to tell you.'

And then she walked out. For several minutes I just sat there looking at the door, not daring to move from my seat, not daring to breathe. Then I glanced down at my desk and saw that she had left her cigarette lighter behind. It was as if she were telling me that part of her was still there, that I could still keep the flame burning if I wanted to. I picked up the lighter and turned it on. The little yellow fire gave off a pale glow in the early morning light of the room. I watched it for a long while, staring at it so hard that eventually I couldn't see it any more. Then the metal began to heat up in my hand. When it became too hot for me to hold any more, I let the lighter drop to the desk.

It was the last time I ever saw her.