

fantastic

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CONTENTS

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ANGELS IN THE JETS	
By Jerome Bixby.....	4
I'M LOOKING FOR JEFF	
By Fritz Leiber.....	16
THE SIN OF HYACINTH PEUCH	
By Eric Frank Russell.....	28
THE STAR DUMMY	
By Anthony Boucher.....	46
THE SEX OPPOSITE	
By Theodore Sturgeon.....	66
BEATRICE	
By Dean Evans.....	91
MAN IN THE DARK	
By Roy Huggins.....	108
CLASSIC SHORT STORIES:	
MIRIAM	
By Truman Capote.....	141
THE TELL-TALE HEART	
By Edgar Allan Poe.....	154

SPECIAL FEATURE:

FAMOUS FANTASY MASTERPIECES	
By Heinrich Kley.....	61

Front Cover: L. R. Summers

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A STORY OF SUSPENSE

MAN IN THE DARK

BY ROY HUGGINS

Whether or not you like *Man in the Dark* will depend on how you interpret the word "fantastic." The fact that a man's wife telephones him two hours after she is reported dead in an automobile accident is certainly fantastic enough. But it need not be, in its strictest sense, fantasy at all. Read Roy Huggins' spine-chilling story of a radio producer who finds himself caught in a situation more incredible than anything he ever helped put on the air. If there are no ghosts around, no "things that go boomp in the night," you can't say it's his fault. Certainly he runs into the raw material ghosts are made of!

SHE called me at four-ten. "Hi, Poopsie." I scowled at her picture in the leather frame on my desk. "For Chrisakes, Donna, will you lay off that 'Poopsie' stuff? It's bad enough in the bedroom, but this is over the phone and in broad daylight."

She laughed. "It kind of slipped out. You know I'd never say it where anyone else could hear. Would I, Poopsie?"



"What's all that noise?"

"The man's here fixing the vacuum. Hey, we eating home tonight, or out? Or are you in another deadline dilemma?"

"No dilemma. Might as well —"

"Can't hear you, Clay."

I could hardly hear *her*. I raised my voice. "Tell the guy to turn that goddam thing off. I started to say we might as well eat out and then take in that picture at the Paramount. Okay?"

"All right. What time'll you get home?"

"Hour — hour'n a half."

The vacuum cleaner buzz died out just as she said, "'Bye now," and the two words sounded loud and unnatural. I put back the receiver and took off my hat and sat down behind the desk. We were doing a radio adaptation of "Echo of a Scream" that coming Saturday and I was just back from a very unsatisfactory rehearsal. When things don't go right, it's the producer who gets it in the neck, and mine was still sensitive from the previous week. I kept a small office in a building at Las Palmas and Yucca, instead of using the room allotted me at NBS. Some producers do that, since you can accomplish a lot more without a secretary breathing down your neck and the actors dropping in for gin rummy or a recital of their love life.

The telephone rang. A man's voice, deep and solemn, said, "Is this Hillside 7-8691?"

"That's right," I said.

"Like to speak to Mr. Clay Kane."

"I'm Clay Kane. Who's this?"

"The name's Lindstrom, Mr. Kane. Sergeant Lindstrom, out of the sheriff's office, Hollywood sub-station."

"What's on your mind, Sergeant?"

"We got a car here, Mr. Kane," the deep slow voice went on. "Dark blue '51 Chevrolet, two-door, license 2W78-40. Registered to Mrs. Donna Kane, 7722 Fountain Avenue, Los Angeles."

I could feel my forehead wrinkling into a scowl. "That's my wife's car. What do you mean: you 'got' it?"

"Well, now, I'm afraid I got some bad news for you, Mr. Kane." The voice went from solemn to grave. "Seems your wife's car went off the road up near the Stone Canyon Reservoir. I don't know if you know it or not, but there's some pretty bad hills up —"

"I know the section," I said. "Who was in the car?"

"... Just your wife, Mr. Kane."

My reaction was a mixture of annoyance and mild anger. "Not my wife, Sergeant. I spoke to her on the phone not five minutes ago.

She's at home. Either somebody stole the car or, more likely, she loaned it to one of her friends. How bad is it?"

There was a pause at the other end. When the voice spoke again, the solemnity was still there, but now a vague thread of suspicion was running through it.

"The car burned, Mr. Kane. The driver was still in it."

"That's terrible," I said. "When did it happen?"

"We don't know exactly. That's pretty deserted country. Another car went by after it happened, spotted the wreck and called us. We figure it happened around two-thirty."

"Not my wife," I said again. "You want to call her, she can tell you who borrowed the car. Unless, like I say, somebody swiped it. You mean you found no identification at all?"

". . . Hold on a minute, Mr. Kane."

There followed the indistinct mumble you get when a hand is held over the receiver at the other end of the wire. I waited, doodling on a scratch pad, wondering vaguely if my car insurance would cover this kind of situation. Donna had never loaned the car before, at least not to my knowledge.

The sergeant came back. "Hate to trouble you, Mr. Kane, but I expect you better get out here. You got transportation, or would

you want one of our men to pick you up?"

This would just about kill our plans for the evening. I tried reasoning with him. "Look here, Officer, I don't want to sound cold-blooded about this, but what can I do out there? If the car was stolen, there's nothing I can tell you. If Mrs. Kane let somebody use it, she can tell you who it was over the phone. Far as the car's concerned, my insurance company'll take care of that."

The deep slow voice turned a little hard. "Afraid it's not that simple. We're going to have to insist on this, Mr. Kane. Take Stone Canyon until you come to Fontenelle Way, half a mile or so south of Mulholland Drive. The accident happened about halfway between those two points. I'll have one of the boys keep an eye out for you. Shouldn't take you more'n an hour at the most."

I gave it another try. "You must've found *some* identification, Sergeant. Something that —"

He cut in sharply. "Yeah, we found something. Your wife's handbag. Maybe she loaned it along with the car."

A dry click meant I was alone on the wire. I hung up slowly and sat there staring at the wall calendar. That handbag bothered me. If Donna had loaned the Chevvy to someone, she wouldn't have gone off and left the bag.

And if she'd left it on the seat while visiting or shopping, she would have discovered the theft of the car and told me long before this.

There was one sure way of bypassing all this guesswork. I picked up the receiver again and dialed the apartment.

After the twelfth ring I broke the connection. Southern California in August is as warm as anybody would want, but I was beginning to get chilly along the backbone. She could be at the corner grocery or at the Feldmans' across the hall, but I would have liked it a lot better if she had been in the apartment and answered my call.

It seemed I had a trip ahead of me. Stone Canyon Road came in between Beverly Glen Boulevard and Sepulveda, north of Sunset. That was out past Beverly Hills and the whole district was made up of hills and canyons, with widely scattered homes clinging to the slopes. A car could go off almost any one of the twisting roads through there and not be noticed for a lot longer than two hours. It was the right place for privacy, if privacy was what you were looking for.

The thing to do, I decided, was to stop at the apartment first. It was on the way, so I wouldn't lose much time, and I could take Donna along with me. Getting an explanation direct from her ought

to satisfy the cops, and we could still get in a couple of drinks and a fast dinner, and make that premiere.

I covered the typewriter, put on my hat, locked up and went down to the parking lot. It was a little past four-twenty.

II

It was a five-minute trip to the apartment building where Donna and I had been living since our marriage seven months before. I waited while a fat woman in red slacks and a purple and burnt-orange blouse pulled a yellow Buick away from the curb, banging a fender or two in the process, then parked and got out onto the walk.

It had started to cool off a little, the way it does in this part of the country along toward late afternoon. A slow breeze rustled the dusty fronds of palm trees lining the parkways along Fountain Avenue. A thin pattern of traffic moved past and the few pedestrians in sight had the look of belonging there.

I crossed to the building entrance and went in. The small foyer was deserted and the mailbox for 2C, our apartment, was empty. I unlocked the inner door and climbed the carpeted stairs to the second floor and walked slowly down the dimly lighted corridor.

Strains of a radio newscast

filtered through the closed door of the apartment across from 2C. Ruth Feldman was home. She might have word, if I needed it. I hoped I wouldn't need it. There was the faint scent of jasmine on the air.

I unlocked the door to my apartment and went in and said, loudly: "Hey, Donna. It's your ever-lovin'."

All that came back was silence. Quite a lot of it. I closed the door and leaned against it and heard my heart thumping away. The white metal Venetian blinds at the living room windows overlooking the street were lowered but not turned and there was a pattern of sunlight on the maroon carpeting. Our tank-type vacuum cleaner was on the floor in front of the fireplace, its hose tracing a lazy S along the rug like a gray python, the cord plugged into a wall socket.

The silence was beginning to rub against my nerves. I went into the bedroom. The blind was closed and I switched on one of the red-shaded lamps on Donna's dressing table. Nobody there. The double bed was made up, with her blue silk robe across the foot and her slippers with the powder blue pompons under the trailing edge of the pale yellow spread.

My face in the vanity's triple mirrors had that strained look. I turned off the light and walked out of there and on into the bath-

room, then the kitchen and breakfast nook. I knew all the time Donna wouldn't be in any of them; I had known it from the moment that first wave of silence answered me.

But I looked anyway. . . .

She might have left a note for me, I thought. I returned to the bedroom and looked on the nightstand next to the telephone. No note. Just the day's mail: two bills, unopened; a business envelope from my agent, unopened, and a letter from Donna's mother out in Omaha, opened and thrust carelessly back into the envelope.

The mail's being there added up to one thing at least: Donna had been in the apartment after three o'clock that afternoon. What with all this economy wave at the Post Offices around the country, we were getting one delivery a day and that not before the middle of the afternoon. The phone call, the vacuum sweeper, the mail on the nightstand: they were enough to prove that my wife was around somewhere. Out for a lipstick, more than likely, or a carton of Fatimas, or to get a bet down on a horse.

I left the apartment and crossed the hall and rang the bell to 2D. The news clicked off in the middle of the day's baseball scores and after a moment the door opened and Ruth Feldman was standing there.

"Oh. Clay." She was a black-haired little thing, with not enough color from being indoors too much, and a pair of brown eyes that, in a prettier face, would have made her something to moon over on long winter evenings. "I thought it was too early for Ralph; he won't be home for two hours yet."

"I'm looking for Donna," I said. "You seen her?"

She leaned negligently against the door edge and moved her lashes at me. The blouse she was wearing was cut much too low. "No-o-o. Not since this morning anyway. She came in about eleven for coffee and a cigarette. Stayed maybe half an hour, I guess it was."

"Did she say anything about her plans for the day? You know: whether she was going to see anybody special, something like that?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Hunhuh. She did say something about her agent wanting her to have lunch with this producer — what's his name? — who does the Snow Soap television show. They're casting for a new musical and she thinks that's why this lunch. But I suppose you know about that. You like to come in for a drink?"

I told her no and thanked her and she pouted her lips at me. I could come in early any afternoon and drink her liquor and give her a roll in the hay, no questions asked, no obligations and no recriminations. Not just because it was me, either. It was there for anyone who was friendly, no stranger and had clean fingernails. You find at least one like her in any apartment house, where the husband falls asleep on the couch every night over a newspaper or the television set.



I asked her to keep an eye out for Donna and tell her I had to run out to Stone Canyon on some urgent and unexpected business and that I'd call in the first chance I got. She gave me a big smile and an up-from-under stare and closed the door very gently.

I lighted a cigarette and went back to the apartment to leave a note for Donna next to the telephone. Then I took a last look around and walked down one flight to the street, got into the car and headed for Stone Canyon.

III

It was a quarter past five by the time I got out there. There

was an especially nasty curve in the road just to the north of Yestone, and off on the left shoulder where the bend was sharpest three department cars were drawn up in a bunch. A uniformed man was taking a smoke behind the wheel of the lead car; he looked up sharply as I made a U turn and stopped behind the last car.

By the time I had cut off the motor and opened the door, he was standing there scowling at me. "Where d'ya think you're goin', Mac?"

"Sergeant Lindstrom telephoned me," I said, getting out onto the sparse sun-baked growth they call grass in California.

He ran the ball of a thumb lightly along one cheek and eyed me stonily from under the stiff brim of his campaign hat. "Your name Kane?"

"That's it."

He took the thumb off his face and used it to point. "Down there. They're waitin' for you. Better take a deep breath, Mac. You won't like what they show you."

I didn't say anything. I went past him and on around the department car. The ground fell away in what almost amounted to a forty-five-degree slope, and a hundred yards down the slope was level ground. Down there a knot of men were standing near the scorched ruins of what had been an automobile. It could have been Donna's Chevvy or it could

have been any other light job. From its condition and across the distance I couldn't tell.

It took some time and a good deal of care for me to work my way to the valley floor without breaking my neck. There were patches of scarred earth spaced out in a reasonably straight line all the way down the incline where the car had hit and bounced and hit again, over and over. Shards of broken glass lay scattered about, and about half way along was a twisted bumper and a section of grillwork. There was a good deal of brush around and it came in handy for hanging on while I found footholds. It was a tough place to get down, but the car at the bottom hadn't had any trouble making it.

A tall, slender, quiet-faced man in gray slacks and a matching sport shirt buttoned at the neck but without a tie was waiting for me. He nodded briefly and looked at me out of light blue eyes under thick dark brows.

"Are you Clay Kane?" It was a soft, pleasant voice, not a cop's voice at all.

I nodded, looking past him at the pile of twisted metal. The four men near it were looking my way, their faces empty of expression.

The quiet-faced man said, "I'm Chief Deputy Martell, out of Hollywood. They tell me it's your

wife's car, but that your wife wasn't using it. Has she told you yet who was?"

"Not yet; no. She was out when I called the apartment, although I'd spoken to her only a few minutes before."

"Any idea where she might be?"

I shrugged. "Several, but I didn't have a chance to do any checking. The sergeant said you were in a hurry."

"I see. . . . I think I'll ask you to take a quick glance at the body we took out of the car. It probably won't do much good, but you never know. I'd better warn you: it won't be pleasant."

"That's all right," I said. "I spent some time in the Pacific during the war. We opened up pill boxes with flame throwers."

"That should help." He turned and moved off, skirting the wreckage, and I followed. A small khaki tarpaulin was spread out on the ground, bulged in the center where it covered an oblong object. Not a very big object. I began to catch the acrid-sweetish odor of burned meat, mixed with the faint biting scent of gasoline.

Martell bent and took hold of a corner of the tarpaulin. He said flatly, "Do the best you can, Mr. Kane," and flipped back the heavy canvas.

It looked like nothing human. Except for the contours of legs and arms, it could have been a

side of beef hauled out of a burning barn. Where the face had been was a smear of splintered and charred bone that bore no resemblance to a face. No hair, no clothing except for the remains of a woman's shoe still clinging to the left foot; only blackened, flame-gnawed flesh and bones. And over it all the stench of a charnel house.

I backed away abruptly and clamped down on my teeth, fighting back a wave of nausea. Martell allowed the canvas to fall back into place. "Sorry, Mr. Kane. We can't overlook any chances."

"It's all right," I mumbled.

"You couldn't identify . . . her?"

I shuddered. "Christ, no! Nobody could!"

"Let's have a look at the car."

I circled the wreck twice. It had stopped right side up, the tires flat, the hood ripped to shreds, the engine shoved halfway into the front seat. The steering wheel was snapped off and the dashboard appeared to have been worked over with a sledge hammer. Flames had eaten away the upholstery and blackened the entire interior.

It was Donna's car; no doubt about that. The license plates showed the right number and a couple of rust spots on the right rear fender were as I remembered them. I said as much to Chief

Deputy Martell and he nodded briefly and went over to say something I couldn't hear to the four men.

He came back to me after a minute or two. "I've a few questions. Nothing more for you down here. Let's go back upstairs."

He was holding something in one hand. It was a woman's bag: blue suede, small, with a gold clasp shaped like a question mark. I recognized it and my mouth felt a little dry.

It was a job getting up the steep slope. The red loam was dry and crumbled under my feet. The sun was still high enough to be hot on my back and my hands were sticky with ooze from the sagebrush.

Martell was waiting for me when I reached the road. I sat down on the front bumper of one of the department cars and shook the loose dirt out of my shoes, wiped most of the sage ooze off my palms and brushed the knees of my trousers. The man in the green khaki uniform was still behind the wheel of the lead car but he wasn't smoking now.

I followed the sheriff into the front seat of a black and white Mercury with a buggy whip aerial at the rear bumper and a radio phone on the dash. He lit up a small yellow cigar in violation of a fire hazard signboard across the road from us. He dropped the match into the dashboard ashtray

and leaned back in the seat and bounced the suede bag lightly on one of his broad palms.

IV

He said, "One of the boys found this in a clump of sage halfway down the slope. You ever see it before?"

"My wife has one like it."

He cocked an eye at me. "Not like it, Mr. Kane. This is hers. Personal effects, identification cards, all that. No doubt at all."

"... Okay."

"And that's your wife's car?"

"Yeah."

"But you say it's not your wife who was in it?"

"No question about it," I said firmly.

"When did you see her last?"

"Around nine-thirty this morning."

"But you talked to her later, I understand."

"That's right."

"What time?"

"A few minutes past four this afternoon."

He puffed out some blue smoke. "Sure it was your wife?"

"If I wouldn't know, who would?"

His strong face was thoughtful, his blue eyes distant. "Mrs. Kane's a singer, I understand."

"That's right," I told him. "Uses her maleden name: Donna Collins."

He smiled suddenly, showing good teeth. "Oh, sure. The missus and I heard her on the "Dancing in Velvet" program last week. She's good — and a mighty lovely young woman, Mr. Kane."

I muttered something polite. He put some cigar ash into the tray and leaned back again and said, "They must pay her pretty good, being a radio star."

"Not a star," I explained patiently. "Just a singer. It pays well, of course — but nothing like the top names pull down. However, Donna's well fixed in her own right; her father died a while back and left her what amounts to quite a bit of money. . . . Look, Sheriff, what's the point of keeping me here? I don't know who the dead woman is, but since she was using my wife's car, the one to talk to is Mrs. Kane. She's bound to be home by this time; why not ride into town with me and ask her?"

He was still holding the handbag. He put it down on the seat between us and looked off toward the blue haze that marked the foothills south of Burbank. "Your wife's not home, Mr. Kane," he said very quietly.

A vague feeling of alarm stirred within me. "How do you know that?" I demanded.

He gestured at the two-way radio. "The office is calling your apartment at ten-minute inter-

vals. As soon as Mrs. Kane answers her phone, I'm to get word. I haven't got it yet."

I said harshly, "What am I supposed to do — sit here until they call you?"

He sighed a little and turned sideways on the seat far enough to cross his legs. The light blue of his eyes was frosted over now, and his jaw was a grim line.

"I'm going to have to talk to you like a Dutch uncle, Mr. Kane. As you saw, we've got a dead woman down there as the result of what, to all intents and purposes, was an unfortunate accident. Everything points to the victim's being your wife except for two things, one of them your insistence that you spoke to her on the phone nearly two hours *after* the accident. That leaves us wondering — and with any one of several answers. One is that you're lying; that you didn't speak to her at all. If that's the right answer, we can't figure out the reason behind it. Two: your wife loaned a friend the car. Three: somebody lifted it from where it was parked. Four: you drove up here with her, knocked her in the head and let the car roll over the edge."

"Of all the goddam —!"

He held up a hand, cutting me off. "Let's take 'em one at a time. I can't see any reason, even if you murdered her, why you'd say your wife telephoned you afterwards. So until and unless some-

thing turns up to show us why you'd lie about it, I'll have to believe she did make that call. As for her loaning the car, that could very well have happened, only it doesn't explain why she's missing now. This business of the car's being stolen doesn't hold up, because the key was still in the ignition and in this case."

He took a folded handkerchief from the side pocket of his coat and opened it. A badly scorched leather case came to light, containing the ignition and trunk keys. The rest of the hooks were empty. I sat there staring at it, feeling my insides slowly and painfully contracting.

"Recognize it?" Martell asked softly.

I nodded numbly. "It's Donna's."

He picked up the handbag with his free hand and thrust it at me. "Take a look through it."

Still numb, I released the clasp and pawed through the contents. A small green-leather wallet containing seventy or eighty dollars and the usual identification cards, one of them with my office address and phone number. Lipstick, compact, mirror, comb, two initialed handkerchiefs, a few hairpins. The French enamel cigarette case and matching lighter I'd given her on her twenty-fifth birthday three months ago. Less than a dollar in change.

That was all. Nothing else. I shoved the stuff back in the bag and closed the clasp with stiff fingers and sat there looking dully at Martell.

He was refolding the handkerchief around the key case. He returned it to his pocket carefully, took the cigar out of his mouth and inspected the glowing tip.

"Your wife wear any jewelry, Mr. Kane?" he asked casually.

I nodded. "A wristwatch. Her wedding and engagement rings."

"We didn't find them. No jewelry at all."

"You wouldn't, I said. "Whoever that is down there, she's not Donna Kane."

He sat there and looked out through the windshield and appeared to be thinking. He wore no hat and there was a strong sprinkling of gray in his hair and a bald spot about the size of a silver dollar at the crown. There was a network of fine wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, as there so often is in men who spend a great deal of time in the sun. He looked calm and confident and competent and not at all heroic.

Presently he said, "That phone call. No doubt at all that it was your wife?"

"None."

"Recognized her voice, eh?"

I frowned. "Not so much that. It was more what she said. You know, certain expressions nobody else'd use. Pet name — you know."

His lips quirked and I felt my cheeks burn. He said, "Near as you can remember, tell me about that call. If she sounded nervous or upset — the works."

I put it all together for him, forgetting nothing. Then I went on about stopping off at the apartment, what I'd found there and what Ruth Feldman had said. Martell didn't interrupt, only sat there drawing on his cigar and soaking it all in.

After I was finished, he didn't move or say anything for what seemed a long time. Then he leaned forward and ground out the stub of the cigar and put a hand in the coat pocket next to me and brought out one of those flapped bags women use for formal dress, about the size of a business envelope and with an appliquéd design worked into it. Wordlessly he turned back the flap and let a square gold compact and matching lipstick holder slide out into the other hand.

"Ever see these before, Kane?"

I took them from him. His expression was impossible to read. There was nothing unusual about the lipstick tube, but the compact had a circle of brilliants in one corner and the initials H. W. in the circle.

I handed them back. "New to me, Sheriff."

He was watching me closely. "Think a minute. This can be important. Either you or your

wife know a woman with the initials H. W.?"

" . . . Not that I . . . Helen? Helen! Sure; Helen Wainhope! Dave Wainhope's wife." I frowned. "I don't get it, Sheriff."

He said slowly, "We found this bag a few feet from the wreck. Any idea how it might have gotten there?"

"Not that I can think of."

"How well do you know these Wainhopes?"

"About as well as you get to know anybody. Dave is business manager for some pretty prominent radio people. A producer, couple of directors, seven or eight actors that I know of."

"You mean he's an agent?"

"Not that. These are people who make big money but can't seem to hang onto it. Dave collects their checks, puts 'em on an allowance, pays their bills and invests the rest. Any number of men in that line around town."

"How long have you known them?"

"Dave and Helen? Two-three years. Shortly after I got out here. As a matter of fact, he introduced me to Donna. She's one of his clients."

"The four of you go out together?"

"Now and then; sure."

"In your wife's car?"

" . . . I see what you're getting at. You figure Helen might have

left her bag there. Not a chance, Sheriff. We always used Dave's Cadillac. Helen has a Pontiac convertible."

"When did you see them last?"

"Well, I don't know about Donna, but I had lunch with Dave . . . let's see . . . day before yesterday. He has an office in the Taft Building."

"Where do they live?"

"Over on one of those little roads off Beverly Glen. Not far from here, come to think about it."

With slow care he pushed the compact and lipstick back in the folder and dropped it into the pocket it had come out of. "Taft Building, hunh?" he murmured. "Think he's there now?"

I looked at my strapwatch. Four minutes till six. "I doubt it, Sheriff. He should be home by this time."

"You know the exact address?"

"Well, it's on Angola, overlooking the southern tip of the Reservoir. A good-sized redwood ranch house on the hill there. It's the only house within a couple miles. You can't miss it."

He leaned past me and swung open the door. "Go on home, Kane. Soon as your wife shows up, call the station and leave word for me. I may call you later."

"What about her car?"

He smiled without humor. "Nobody's going to swipe it. Notify your insurance agent in the morn-

ing. But I still want to talk to Mrs. Kane."

I slid out and walked back to my car. As I started the motor, the black and white Mercury made a tight turn on screaming tires and headed north. I pulled back onto the road and tipped a hand at the deputy. He glared at me over the cigarette he was lighting.

I drove much too fast all the way back to Hollywood.

V

She wasn't there.

I snapped the switch that lighted the end-table lamps flanking the couch and walked over to the window and stood there for a few minutes, staring down into Fountain Avenue. At seven o'clock it was still light outside. A small girl on roller skates scooted by, her sun-bleached hair flying. A tall thin number in a pale-blue sport coat and dark glasses got leisurely out of a green convertible with a wolf tail tied to the radiator emblem and sauntered into the apartment building across the street.

A formless fear was beginning to rise within me. I knew now that it had been born at four-thirty when I stopped off on my way to Stone Canyon and found the apartment empty. Seeing the charred body an hour later had strengthened that fear, even

though I knew the dead woman couldn't be Donna. Now that I had come home and found the place deserted, the fear was crawling into my throat, closing it to the point where breathing seemed a conscious effort.

Where was Donna?

I lighted a cigarette and began to pace the floor. Let's use a little logic on this, Kane. You used to be a top detective-story writer; let's see you go to work on this the way one of your private eyes would operate.

All right, we've got a missing woman to find. To complicate matters, the missing woman's car was found earlier in the day with a dead woman at the wheel. Impossible to identify her, but we know it's not the one we're after because *that* one called her husband *after* the accident.

Now, since your wife's obviously alive, Mr. Kane, she's missing for one of two reasons: either she can't come home or she doesn't want to. "Can't" would mean she's being held against her will; we've nothing to indicate *that*. That leaves the possibility of her not wanting to come home. What reason would a woman have for staying away from her husband? The more likely one would be that she was either sore at him for something or had left him for another man.

I said a short ugly word and threw my cigarette savagely into

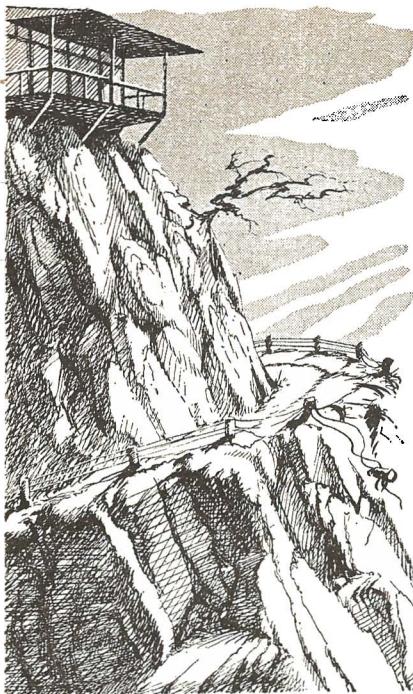
the fireplace. Donna would never pull a stunt like that! Hell, we'd only been married a few months and still as much in love as the day the knot was tied.

Yeah? How do you know? A lot of guys kid themselves into thinking the same thing, then wake up one morning and find the milkman has taken over. Or they find some hot love letters tied in blue ribbon and shoved under the mattress.

I stopped short. It was an idea. Not love letters, of course; but there might be something among her personal files that could furnish a lead. It was about as faint a possibility as they come, but at least it would give me something to do.

The big bottom drawer of her desk in the bedroom was locked. I remembered that she carried the key in the same case with those to the apartment and the car, so I used the fireplace poker to force the lock. Donna would raise hell about that when she got home, but I wasn't going to worry about that now.

There was a big Manila folder inside, crammed with letters, tax returns, receipted bills, bank books and miscellaneous papers. I dumped them out and began to paw through the collection. A lot of the stuff had come from Dave Wainhope's office, and there were at least a dozen letters signed by him explaining why he was sending her such-and-such.



The phone rang suddenly. I damned near knocked the chair over getting to it. It was Chief Deputy Martell.

"Mrs. Kane show up?"

"Not yet. No."

He must have caught the disappointment in my voice. It was there to catch. He said, "That's funny. . . . Anyway, the body we found in that car wasn't her."

"I told you that. Who was it?"

"This Helen Wainhope. We brought the remains into the Georgia Street Hospital and her husband made the I.D. about fifteen minutes ago."

I shivered, remembering. "How could he?"

"There was enough left of one of her shoes. That and the compact did the trick."

"He tell you why she was driving my wife's car?"

Martell hesitated. "Not exactly. He said the two women had a date in town for today. He didn't know what time, but Mrs. Wainhope's car was on the fritz, so the theory is that your wife drove out there and picked her up."

"News to me," I said.

He hesitated again. ". . . Any



Illustrator: Gaylord Welker

bad blood between your wife and . . . and Mrs. Wainhope?"

"That's a hell of a question!"

"You want to answer it?" he said quietly.

"You bet I do! They got along fine!"

"If you say so." His voice was mild. "I just don't like this coincidence of Mrs. Kane's being missing at the same time her car goes off a cliff with a friend in it."

"I don't care about that. I want my wife back."

He sighed. "Okay. Give me a description and I'll get out an all-points on her."

I described Donna to him at length and he took it all down and said he'd be in touch with me later. I put back the receiver and went into the living room to make myself a drink. I hadn't eaten a thing since one o'clock that afternoon, but I was too tightened up with worry to be at all hungry.

Time crawled by. I finished my drink while standing at the window, put together a second and took it back into the bedroom and started through the papers from Donna's desk. At 8:15 the phone rang.

"Clay? This is Dave — Dave Wainhope." His voice was flat and not very steady.

I said, "Hello, Dave. Sorry to hear about Helen." It sounded pretty lame, but it was the best I could do at the time.

"You know about it then?"

"Certainly I know about it. It was Donna's car, remember?"

"Of course, Clay." He sounded very tired. "I guess I'm not thinking too clearly. I called you about something else."

"Yeah?"

"Look, Clay, it's none of my business, I suppose. But what's wrong between you and Donna?"

I felt my jaw sag a little. "Who said anything was wrong?"

"All I know is, she was acting awfully strange. She wanted all the ready cash I had on hand, no explanation, no —"

My fingers were biting into the receiver. "Wait a minute!" I shouted. "Dave, listen to me! You *saw* Donna?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. She —"

"When?"

". . . Why, not ten minutes ago. She —"

"Where? Where was she? Where did you see her?"

"Right here. At my office." He was beginning to get excited himself. "I stopped by on my way from the Georgia —"

I cut him off. "Christ, Dave, I've been going nuts! I've been looking for her since four-thirty this afternoon. What'd she say? What kind of trouble is she in?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't tell me anything — just wanted money quick. No checks. I thought maybe you and she had had a

fight or something. I had around nine hundred in the safe; I gave it all to her and she beat —”

I shook the receiver savagely. “But she must have said *something*! She wouldn’t just leave without . . . you know . . .”

“She said she sent you a letter earlier in the day.”

I dropped down on the desk chair. My hands were shaking and my mouth was dry. “A letter,” I said dully. “A letter. Not in person, not even a phone call. Just a letter.”

By this time Dave was making comforting sounds. “I’m sure it’s nothing serious, Clay. You know how women are. The letter’ll probably tell you where she is and you can talk her out of it.”

I thanked him and hung up and sat there and stared at my thumb. For some reason I felt even more depressed than before. I couldn’t understand why Donna wouldn’t have turned to me if she was in trouble. That was always a big thing with us: all difficulties had to be shared. . . .

I went into the kitchen and made myself a couple of cold salami sandwiches and washed them down with another highball. At nine-twenty I telephoned the Hollywood sub-station to let Martell know what Dave Wainhope had told me. Whoever answered said the chief deputy was out and to call back in an hour. I tried to leave a message on what it was

about, but was told again to call back and got myself hung up on.

About ten minutes later the buzzer from downstairs sounded. I pushed the button and was standing in the hall door when a young fellow in a postman’s gray uniform showed up with a special-delivery letter. I signed for it and closed the door and leaned there and ripped open the envelope.

A single sheet of dime-store paper containing a few neatly typed lines and signed in ink in Donna’s usual scrawl.

Clay darling:

I’m terribly sorry, but something that happened a long time ago has come back to plague me and I have to get away for a few days. Please don’t try to find me, I’ll be all right as long as you trust me.

You know I love you so much that I won’t remain away a day longer than I have to. Please don’t worry, darling, I’ll explain everything the moment I get back.

All my love,

Donna

And that was that. Nothing that I could get my teeth into; no leads, nothing to cut away even a small part of my burden of concern. I walked into the bedroom with no spring in my step and

dropped the letter on the desk and reached for the phone. But there was no point to that. Martell wouldn't be back at the station yet.

Maybe I had missed something. Maybe the envelope was a clue? A clue to what? I looked at it. Carefully. The postmark was Hollywood. That meant it had gone through the branch at Wilcox and Selma. At five-twelve that afternoon. At five-twelve I was just about pulling up behind those department cars out on Stone Canyon Road. She would have had to mail it at the post-office instead of a drop box for me to get it four hours later.

No return address, front or back, as was to be expected. Just a cheap envelope, the kind you pick up at Woolworth's or Kress'. My name and the address neatly typed. The "e" key was twisted very slightly to the right and the "t" was tilted just far enough to be noticeable if you looked at it long enough.

I let the envelope drift out of my fingers and stood there staring down at Donna's letter. My eyes wandered to the other papers next to it. . . .

I said, "Jesus Christ!" You could spend the next ten years in church and never say it more devoutly than I did at that moment. My eyes were locked to one of the letters David Wainhope had written to Donna — and in

its typewritten lines two individual characters stood out like bright and shining beacons: a tilted "t" and a twisted "e"!

VI

It took some time — I don't know how much — before I was able to do any straight-line thinking. The fact that those two letters had come out of the same typewriter opened up so many possible paths to the truth behind Donna's disappearance that — well, I was like the mule standing between two stacks of hay.

Finally I simply turned away and walked into the living room and poured a good half inch of bonded bourbon into a glass and drank it down like water after an aspirin. I damned near strangled on the stuff; and by the time I stopped gasping for air and wiping the tears out of my eyes, I was ready to do some thinking.

Back at the desk again, I sat down and picked up the two sheets of paper. A careful comparison removed the last lingering doubt that they had come out of the same machine. Other points began to fall into place: the fact that the typing in Donna's letter had been done by a professional. You can always tell by the even impression of the letters, instead of the dark-light-erasure-strike-over touch you find in an amateur job. And I knew that Donna had

never used a typewriter in her life!

All right, what did it mean? On the surface, simply that somebody had typed the letter for Donna, and at Dave Wainhope's office. It had to be his office, for he would hardly write business letters at home — and besides I was pretty sure Dave was strictly a pen-and-pencil man himself.

Now what? Well, since it was typed in Dave's office, but not by Dave or Donna, it would indicate Dave's secretary had done the work. Does that hold up? It's got to hold up, friend; no one else works in that office but Dave and his secretary.

Let's kind of dig into that a little. Let's say that Donna dropped in on Dave earlier in the afternoon, upset about something. Let's say that Dave is out, so Donna dictates a note to me and the secretary types it out. Very simple. . . . But is it?

No.

And here's why. Here are the holes: first, the note is on dime-store paper, sent in a dime-store envelope. Dave wouldn't have that kind of stationary in his office — not a big-front guy like Dave. Okay, stretch it all the way out; say that Donna had brought her own paper and had the girl use it. You still can't tell me Dave's secretary wouldn't have told her boss about it when he got back to the office. And if she

told *him*, he would certainly have told *me* during our phone conversation.

But none of those points compares with the biggest flaw of them all: why would Donna have anyone type the letter for her when a handwritten note would do just as well — especially on a very private and personal matter like telling your husband you're in trouble?

I got up and walked down the room and lighted a cigarette and looked out the window without seeing anything. A small voice in the back of my mind said, "If all this brain work of yours is right, you know what it adds up to, don't you, pal?"

I knew. Sure, I knew. It meant that Donna Kane was a threat to somebody. It meant that she was being held somewhere; that she had been forced to sign a note to keep me from reporting her disappearance to the cops until whoever was responsible could make a getaway.

It sounded like a bad movie and I tried hard to make myself believe that's all it was. But the more I dug into it, the more I went over the results of my reasoning, the more evident it became that there was no other explanation.

You do only one thing in a case like that. I picked up the phone and called Martell again. He was

still out. I took a stab at telling the desk sergeant, or whoever it was at the other end, what was going on. But it sounded so complex and confused, even to me, that he finally stopped me. "Look, neighbor, call back in about fifteen-twenty minutes. Martell's the man you want to talk to." He hung up before I could give him an argument.

His advice was good and I intended to take it. Amateur detectives usually end up with both feet stuck in their esophagus. This was a police job. My part in it was to let them know what I'd found out, then get out of their way.

That secretary would know. She was in this up to the hilt. I had seen her a few times: a dark-haired girl, quite pretty, a little on the small side but built right. Big blue eyes; I remembered that. Quiet. A little shy, if I remembered right. What was her name? Nora. Nora something. Campbell? Kenton? No. Kemper? That was it: Nora Kemper.

I found her listed in the Central District phone book. In the 300 block on North Hobart, a few doors below Beverly Boulevard. I knew the section. Mostly apartment houses along there. Nothing fancy, but a long way from being a slum. The right neighborhood for private secretaries. As I remembered, she had been married but was now divorced.

I looked at my watch. Less than five minutes since I'd called the sheriff's office. I thought of Donna tied and gagged and stuck away in, say, the trunk of some car. It was more than I could take.

I was on my way out the door when I thought of something else. I went back into the bedroom and dug under a pile of sport shirts in the bottom dresser drawer and took out the gun I'd picked up in San Francisco the year before. It was a Smith & Wesson .38, the model they called the Terrier. I made sure it was loaded, shoved it under the waistband of my slacks in the approved pulp-magazine style and left the apartment.

VII

It was a quiet street, bordered with tall palms, not much in the way of street lights. Both curbs were lined with cars and I had to park half a block down and across the way from the number I wanted.

I got out and walked slowly back through the darkness. I was a little jittery, but that was to be expected. Radio music drifted from a bungalow court and a woman laughed thinly. A couple passed me, arm in arm, the man in an army officer's uniform. I didn't see anyone else around.

The number I was after belonged to a good-sized apartment building, three floors and three

separate entrances. Five stone steps, flanked by a wrought-iron balustrade, up to the front door. A couple of squat Italian cypresses in front of the landing.

There was no one in the foyer. In the light from a yellow bulb in a ceiling fixture I could make out the names above the bell buttons. Nora Kemper's apartment was 205. Automatically I reached for the button, then hesitated. There was no inner door to block off the stairs. Why not go right on up and knock on her door? No warning, no chance for her to think up answers before I asked the questions.

I walked up the carpeted steps to the second floor and on down the hall. It was very quiet. Soft light from overhead fixtures glinted on pale green walls and dark green doors. At the far end of the hall a large window looked out on the night sky.

Number 205 was well down the corridor. No light showed under the edge of the door. I pushed a thumb against a small pearl button set flush in the jamb and heard a single flatted bell note.

Nothing happened. No answering steps, no questioning voice. A telephone rang twice in one of the other apartments and a car horn sounded from the street below.

I tried the bell again, with the same result. Now what? Force the door? No sense to that, and

besides illegal entry was against the law. I wouldn't know how to go about it anyway.

She would have to come home eventually. Thing to do was stake out somewhere and wait for her to show up. If she didn't arrive within the next half hour, say, then I would hunt up a phone and call Martell.

I went back to the stairs and was on the point of descending to the first floor when I heard the street door close and light steps against the tile flooring down there. It could be Nora Kemper. Moving silently, I took the steps to the third floor and stood close to the wall where the light failed to reach.

A woman came quickly up the steps to the second floor. From where I stood I couldn't see her face clearly, but her build and the color of her hair were right. She was wearing a light coat and carrying a white drawstring bag, and she was in a hurry. She turned in the right direction, and the moment she was out of sight I raced back to the second floor.

It was Nora Kemper, all right. She was standing in front of the door to 205 and digging into her bag for the key. I had a picture of her getting inside and closing the door and refusing to let me in.

I said, "Hold it a minute, Miss Kemper."

She jerked her head up and

around, startled. I moved toward her slowly. When the light reached my face, she gasped and made a frantic jab into the bag, yanked out her keys and tried hurriedly to get one of them into the lock.

I couldn't afford to have that door between us. I brought the gun out and said sharply, "Stay right there. I want to talk to you."

The hand holding the keys dropped limply to her side. She began to back away, retreating toward the dead end of the corridor. Her face gleamed whitely, set in a frozen mask of fear.

She stopped only when she could go no farther. Her back pressed hard against the wall next to the window, her eyes rolled, showing the whites.

Her voice came out in a ragged whisper. "Wha-what do you want?"

I said, "You know me, Miss Kemper. You know who I am. What are you afraid of?"

Her eyes wavered, dropped to the .38 in my hand. "The gun. I —"

"Hunh-uh," I said. "You were scared stiff before I brought it out. Recognizing me is what scared you. Why?"

Her lips shook. Against the pallor of her skin they looked almost black. "I don't know what . . . Don't stand . . . Please. Let me go."

She tried to squeeze past me. I reached out and grabbed her by

one arm. She gasped and jerked away — and her open handbag fell to the floor, spilling the contents.

She started after them, but I was there ahead of her. I had seen something — something that shook me like a solid right to the jaw.

Three of them, close together on the carpet. I scooped them up and straightened and jerked Nora Kemper around to face me. I shoved my open hand in front of her eyes, letting her see what was in it.

"Keys!" I said hoarsely. "Take a good look, lady! They came out of your purse. The keys to my apartment, my mailbox. *My wife's keys!*"

A small breeze would have knocked her down. I took a long look at her stricken expression, then I put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her ahead of me down the hall. I didn't have to tell her what I wanted: she unlocked the door and we went in.

When the lights were on, she sank down on the couch. I stood over her, still holding the gun. My face must have told her what was going on behind it, for she began to shake uncontrollably.

I said, "I'm a man in the dark, Miss Kemper. I'm scared, and when I get scared I get mad. If you don't want a mouth full of busted teeth, tell me one thing: *where is my wife?*"

She had sense enough to believe me. She gasped and drew back. "He didn't tell me," she wailed. "I only did what he told me to do, Mr. Kane."

"What *who* told you?"

"David. Mr. Wainhope."

I breathed in and out. "You wrote that letter?"

". . . Yes."

"Did you see my wife sign it?"

She wet her lips. "She wasn't there. David signed it. There are samples of her signature at the office. He copied from one of them."

I hadn't thought of that. "What's behind all this?"

"I — I don't know." She couldn't take her eyes off the gun. "Really I don't, Mr. Kane."

"You know a hell of a lot more than I do," I growled. "Start at the beginning and give it to me. All of it."

She pushed a wick of black hair off her forehead. Some of the color was beginning to seep back into her cheeks, but her eyes were still clouded with fear.

"When I got back to the office from lunch this afternoon," she said, "David was out. He called me a little after three and told me to meet him at the corner of Fountain and Courtney. I was to take the Hollywood street car instead of a cab and wait for him there."

"Did he say why?"

"No. He sounded nervous,

upset. I was there within fifteen minutes, but he didn't show up until almost a quarter to four."

"Go on," I said when she hesitated.

"Well, we went into an apartment building on Fountain. Dave took out some keys and used one of them to take mail out of a box with your name on it. Then he unlocked the inner door and we went up to your apartment. He had the key to it, too. He gave me the keys and we went into the bedroom. He told me to call you and what to say. Before that, though, he hunted up the vacuum cleaner and started it going. Then I talked to you on the phone."

I stared at her. "You did fine. The cleaner kept me from realizing it wasn't Donna's voice, and I suppose at one time or another Helen must've found out Donna called me 'Poopsie' and told Dave about it. Big laugh! What happened after that?"

Her hands were clenched in her lap, whitening the knuckles. Her small breasts rose and fell under quick shallow breathing. Fear had taken most of the beauty out of her face.

"Dave opened one of the letters he had brought upstairs," she said tonelessly, "and left it next to the phone. We went back downstairs and drove back to the office. On the way Dave stopped off and bought some cheap stationery. I

used some of it to write that letter. He told me to mail it at the post office right away, then he walked out. I haven't seen him since."

"Secretaries like you," I said sourly, "must take some finding. Whatever the boss says goes. You don't find 'em like that around the broadcasting studios."

Her head swung up sharply. "I happen to love Dave . . . and he loves me. We're going to be married — now that he's free."

My face ached from keeping my expression unchanged. "How nice for both of you. Only he's got a wife, remember?"

She looked at me soberly. "Didn't you know about that?" "About what?"

"Helen Wainhope. She was killed in an automobile accident this afternoon."

"When did you hear that?"

"David told me when he called in around three o'clock."

I let my eyes drift to the gun in my hand. There was no point in flashing it around any longer. I slid it into one of my coat pockets and fished a cigarette out and used a green and gold table lighter to get it going. I said, "And all this hocus-pocus about signing my wife's name to a phony letter, calling me on the phone and pretending to be her — all this on the same day Dave Wainhope's wife dies — and you don't even work up a healthy curiosity? I

find that hard to believe, Miss Kemper. You must have known he was into something way over his head."

"I love David," she said simply.

I blew out some smoke. "Love isn't good for a girl like you. Leave it alone. It makes you stupid. Good night, Miss Kemper."

She didn't move. A tear began to trace a jagged curve along her left cheek. I left her sitting there and went over to the door and out, closing it softly behind me.

VIII

At eleven o'clock at night there's not much traffic on Sunset, especially when you get out past the bright two-mile stretch of the Strip with its Technicolor neons, its plush nightclubs crowded with columnists and casting-couch starlets and vacationing Iowans, its modernistic stucco buildings with agents' names in stylized lettering across the fronts. I drove by them and dropped on down into Beverly Hills where most of the homes were dark at this hour, through Brentwood where a lot of stars hide out in big estates behind hedges and burglar alarms, and finally all that was behind me and I turned off Sunset onto Beverly Glen Boulevard and followed the climbing curves up into the foothills to the north.

The pattern was beginning to form. Dave Wainhope had known

his wife was dead long before Sheriff Martell drove out to break the news to him. I saw that as meaning one thing: he must have had a hand in that "accident" on Stone Canyon Road. He could have driven out there with Helen, then let the car roll over the lip of the canyon with her in it. The motive was an old, old one: in love with another woman and his wife in the way.

That left only Donna's disappearance to account for. In a loose way I had that figured out too. She might have arrived at Dave's home at the wrong time. I saw her walking in and seeing too much and getting herself bound and gagged and tucked away somewhere while Dave finished the job. Why he had used Donna's car to stage the accident was something I couldn't fit in for sure, although Sheriff Martell had mentioned that Helen's car hadn't been working.

It added up — and in the way it added up was the proof that Donna was still alive. Even with the certainty that Dave Wainhope had coldbloodedly sent his wife plunging to a horrible death, I was equally sure he had not harmed Donna. Otherwise the obvious move would have been to place her in the car with Helen and drop them both over the edge. A nice clean job, no witnesses, no complications. Two friends on their way into town, a second of

carelessness in negotiating a dangerous curve — and the funeral will be held Tuesday!

The more I thought of it, the more trouble I was having in fitting Dave Wainhope into the role of murderer at all. He was on the short side, thick in the waistline, balding, and with the round guileless face you find on some infants. As far as I knew he had never done anything more violent in his life than refuse to tip a waiter.

None of that proved anything, of course. If murders were committed only by people who looked the part, there would be a lot more pinochle played in Homicide Bureaus.

I turned off Beverly Glen at one of the narrow unpaved roads well up into the hills and began to zigzag across the countryside. The dank smell of the distant sea drifted in through the open windows, bringing with it the too-sweet odor of sage blossoms. The only sounds were the quiet purr of the motor and the rattle of loose stones against the underside of the fenders.

Then suddenly I was out in the open, with Stone Canyon Reservoir below me behind a border of scrub oak and manzanita and the sheen of moonlight on water. On my left, higher up, bulked a dark sharp-angled building of wood and stone and glass among flowering

shrubs and bushes and more of the scrub oak. I followed a gravelled driveway around a sweeping half-circle and pulled up alongside the porch.

I cut off the motor and sat there. Water gurgled in the radiator. With the headlights off, the night closed in on me. A bird said something in its sleep and there was a brief rustling among the bushes.

The house stood big and silent. Not a light showed. I put my hand into my pocket next to the gun and got out onto the gravel. It crunched under my shoes on my way to the porch. I went up eight steps and across the flagstones and turned the big brass door-knob.

Locked. I hadn't expected it not to be. I shrugged and put a finger against the bell and heard a strident buzz inside that seemed to rock the building.

No lights came on. I waited a minute or two, then tried again, holding the button down for what seemed a long time. All it did was use up some of the battery.

Now what? I tried to imagine David Wainhope crouched among the portieres with his hands full of guns, but it wouldn't come off. The more obvious answer would be the right one: he simply wasn't home.

I wondered if he would be coming home at all. By now he might be half way to Mexico, with a

bundle of his clients' cash in the back seat and no intention of setting foot in the States ever again. He would have to get away before somebody found Donna Kane and turned her loose to tell what had actually happened. I had a sharp picture of her trussed up and shoved under one of the beds. It was all I needed.

I walked over to one of the porch windows and tried it. It was fastened on the inside. I took out my gun and tapped the butt hard against the glass. It shattered with a sound like the breaking up of an ice jam. I reached through and turned the catch and slid the frame up far enough for me to step over the sill.

Nobody else around. I moved through the blackness until I found an arched doorway and a light switch on the wall next to that.

I was in a living room which ran the full length of the house. Modern furniture scattered tastefully about. Sponge-rubber easy chairs in pastel shades. An enormous wood-burning fireplace. Framed Greenwich Village smears grouped on one wall. A shiny black baby grand with a tasselled gold scarf across it and a picture of Helen Wainhope in a leather frame. Everything looked neat and orderly and recently dusted.

I walked on down the room and through another archway into a

dining room. Beyond it was a hall into the back of the house, with three bedrooms, one of them huge, the others ordinary in size with a connecting bath. I went through all of them. The closets had nothing in them but clothing. There was nothing under the beds, not even a little honest dirt. Everything had a place and everything was in its place.

The kitchen was white and large, with all the latest gadgets. Off it was a service porch, with a refrigerator, a deep freeze big enough to hold a body (but without one in it), and a washing machine. The house was heated with gas, with a central unit under the house. No basement.

Donna was still missing.

I left the lights on and went outside and around the corner of the house to the three-car garage. The foldback doors were closed and locked, but a side entrance wasn't. One car inside: a gray Pontiac convertible I recognized as Helen's. Nobody in it and the trunk was locked. I gave the lid a half-hearted rap and said, "Donna? Are you in there?"

No answer. No wild drumming of heels, no threshing about. No sound at all except the blood rushing through my veins and I probably imagined that.

Right then I knew I was licked. He had hidden her somewhere else or he had taken her with him. That last made no sense at all,

but then he probably wasn't thinking sensibly.

Nothing left but to call the sheriff and let him know how much I'd learned and how little I'd found. I should have done that long before this. I went back to the house to hunt up the telephone. I remembered seeing it on a nightstand in one of the bedrooms and I walked slowly back along the hall to learn which one.

Halfway down I spotted a narrow door I had missed the first time. I opened it and a light went on automatically. A utility closet, fairly deep, shelves loaded with luggage and blankets, a couple of electric heaters stored away for use on the long winter nights. And that was all.

I was on the point of leaving when I noticed that a sizable portion of the flooring was actually a removable trap door. I bent down and tugged it loose and slid it to one side, revealing a cement-lined recess about five feet deep and a good eight feet square. Stone steps, four of them, very steep, went down into it. In there was the central gas furnace and a network of flat pipes extending in all directions. The only illumination came from the small naked bulb over my head and at first I could see nothing beyond the unit itself.

My eyes began to get used to the dimness. Something else was down there on the cement next to

the furnace. Something dark and shapeless. . . . A pale oval seemed to swell and float up toward me.

"Donna!" I croaked. "My good God, it's Donna!"

I half fell down the stone steps and lifted the lifeless body into my arms. Getting back up those steps and along the hall to the nearest bedroom is something I would never remember.

And then she was on the bed and I was staring down at her. My heart seemed to leap once and shudder to a full stop and a wordless cry tore at my throat.

The girl on the bed was Helen Wainhope!

IX

I once heard it said that a man's life is made up of many small deaths, the least of them being the final one. I stood there looking at the dead woman, remembering the charred ruins of another body beside a twisted heap of blackened metal, and in that moment a part of me stumbled and fell and whimpered and died.

The telephone was there, waiting. I looked at it for a long time. Then I took a slow uneven breath and shook my head to clear it and picked up the receiver.

"Put it down, Clay."

I turned slowly. He was standing in the doorway, holding a gun

down low, his round face drawn and haggard.

I said, "You killed her, you son of a bitch."

He wet his lips nervously. "Put it down, Clay. I can't let you call the police."

It didn't matter. Not really. Nothing mattered any more except that he was standing where I could reach him. I let the receiver drop back into place. "Like something left in the oven too long," I said. "That's how I have to remember her."

I started toward him. Not fast. I was in no hurry. The longer it lasted, the more I would like it.

He brought the gun up sharply. "Don't make me shoot you. Stay right there. Please, Clay."

I stopped. It took more than I had to walk into the muzzle of a gun. You have to be crazy, I guess, and I wasn't that crazy.

He began to talk, his tongue racing, the words spilling out. "I didn't kill Donna, Clay. It was an accident. You've got to believe that, Clay! I liked her; I always liked Donna. You know that."

I could feel my lips twisting into a crooked line. "Sure. You always liked Donna. You always liked me, too. Put down the gun, Dave."

He wasn't listening. A muscle twitched high up on his left cheek. "You've got to understand how it happened, Clay. It was quick,

like a nightmare. I want you to know about it, to understand that I didn't intend . . . ”

There was a gun in my pocket. I thought of it and I nodded. “I'm listening, Dave.”

His eyes flicked to the body on the bed, then back to me. They were tired eyes, a little wild, the whites bloodshot. “Not in here,” he said. He moved to one side. “Go into the living room. Ahead of me. Don't do anything . . . foolish.”

I went past him and on along the hall. He was close behind me, but not close enough. In the silence I could hear him breathing.

I sat down on a sponge-rubber chair without arms. I said, “I'd like a cigarette, Dave. You know, to steady my nerves. I'm very nervous right now. You know how it is. I'll just put my hand in my pocket and take one out. Will that be all right with you?”

He said, “Go ahead,” not caring, not even really listening.

Very slowly I let my hand slide into the side pocket of my coat. His gun went on pointing at me. The muzzle looked as big as the Second Street tunnel. My fingers brushed against the grip of the .38. A knuckle touched the trigger guard and the chill feel was like an electric shock. His gun went on staring at me.

My hand came out again. Empty. I breathed a shallow breath and took a cigarette and

my matches from behind my display handkerchief. My forehead was wet. Whatever heroes had, I didn't have it. I struck a match and lighted the cigarette and blew out a long plume of smoke. My hand wasn't shaking as much as I had expected.

“Tell me about it,” I said.

He perched on the edge of the couch across from me, a little round man in a painful blue suit, white shirt, gray tie and brown pointed shoes. He had never been one to go in for casual dress like everyone else in Southern California. Lamp light glistened along his scalp below the receding hairline and the muscle in his cheek twanged spasmodically.

“You knew Helen,” he said in a kind of far-away voice. “She was a wonderful woman. We were married twelve years, Clay. I must have been crazy. But I'm not making much sense, am I?” He tried to smile but it broke on him.

I blew out some more smoke and said nothing. He looked at the gun as though he had never seen it before, but he kept on pointing it at me.

“About eight months ago,” he continued, “I made some bad investments with my own money. I tried to get it back by other investments, this time with Donna's money. It was very foolish of me. I lost that, too.”

He shook his head with slow regret. “It was quite a large sum,

Clay. But I wasn't greatly worried. Things would break right before long and I could put it back. And then Helen found out about it. . . .

"She loved me, Clay. But she wouldn't stand for my dipping into Donna's money. She said unless I made good the shortage immediately she would tell Donna. If anything like that got out it would ruin me. I promised I would do it within two or three weeks."

He stopped there and the room was silent. A breeze came in at the open window and rustled the drapes.

"Then," David Wainhope said, "something else happened, something that ruined everything. This isn't easy for me to say, but . . . well, I was having an . . . affair with my secretary. Miss Kemper. A lovely girl. You met her."

"Yes," I said. "I met her."

"I thought we were being very — well, careful. But Helen is — was a smart woman, Clay. She suspected something and she hired a private detective. I had no idea, of course. . . .

"Today, Helen called me at the office. I was alone; Miss Kemper was at lunch. Helen seemed very upset; she told me to get home immediately if I knew what was good for me. That's the way she put it: 'if you know what's good for you!'"

I said, "Uh-hunh!" and went

on looking at the gun.

"Naturally, I went home at once. When I got here, Donna was just getting out of her car in front. Helen's convertible was also in the driveway, so I put my car in the garage and came into the living room. I was terribly upset, feeling that Helen was going to tell Donna about the money.

"They were standing over there, in front of the fireplace. Helen was furious; I had never seen her quite so furious before. She told me she was going to tell Donna everything. I pleaded with her not to. Donna, of course, didn't know what was going on.

"Helen told her about the shortage, Clay. Right there in front of me. Donna took it better than I'd hoped. She said she would have to get someone else to look after her affairs but that she didn't intend to press charges against me. That was when Helen really lost her temper.

"She said she was going to sue me for divorce and name Miss Kemper; that she had hired a private detective and he had given her a report that same morning. She started to tell me 'all the things the detective had told her. Right in front of Donna. I shouted for her to stop but she went right on. I couldn't stand it, Clay. I picked up the poker and I hit her. Just once, on the head. I didn't know what I was doing. It — it was like a reflex. She died on the

floor at my feet."

I said, "What am I supposed to do — feel sorry for you?"

He looked at me woodenly. I might as well have spoken to the wall. "Donna was terribly frightened. I think she screamed, then she turned and ran out of the house. I heard her car start before I realized she would tell them I killed Helen.

"I ran out, shouting for her to wait, to listen to me. But she was already turning into the road. My car was in the garage, so I jumped into Helen's and went after her. I wasn't going to do anything to her, Clay; I just wanted her to understand that I hadn't meant to kill Helen, that it only hap-

pened that way.

"By the time we reached that curve on Stone Canyon I was close behind her. She was driving too fast and the car skidded on the turn and went over. I could hear it. All the way down I heard it. I'll never get that sound out of my mind."

I shivered and closed my eyes. There was no emotion in me any more — only a numbness that would never really go away.

His unsteady voice went on and on. "She must have died instantly. The whole front of her face. . . . My mind began to work fast. If I could make the police think it was my wife who had died in the accident, then I could hide Helen's



body and nobody would know. That way Donna would be the one missing and they'd ask you questions, not me.

"The wreckage was saturated with gasoline. I—I threw a match into it. The fire couldn't hurt her, Clay. She was already dead. I swear it. Then I went up to the car and looked through it for something of Helen's I could leave near the scene.

"I came back here," he went on tonelessly, "and hid Helen's body. And all the time thoughts kept spinning through my head. Nobody must doubt that it was Helen in that car. If I could just convince you that Donna was not only alive *after* the accident, but that she had gone away . . .

"It came to me almost at once. I don't know from where. Maybe when staying alive depends on quick thinking, another part of your mind takes over. Miss Kemper would have to help me —"

I waved a hand, stopping him. "I know all about that. She told me. And for Christ's sake stop calling her Miss Kemper! You've been sleeping with her — remember?"

He was staring at me. "She told you? Why? I was sure —"

"You made a mistake," I said. "That note you signed Donna's name to was typed on the office machine. When I found that out I called on your Miss Kemper. She told me enough to get me

started on the right track."

The gun was very steady in his hand now. Hollows deepened under his cheeks. "You — you told the police?"

"Certainly."

He shook his head. "No. You didn't tell them. They would be here now if you had." He stood up slowly, with a kind of quiet agony. "I'm sorry, Clay."

My throat began to tighten. "The hell with being sorry. I know. I'm the only one left. The only one who can put you in that gas chamber out at San Quentin. Now you make it number three."

His face seemed strangely at peace. "I've told you what happened. I wanted you to hear it from me, exactly the way it happened. I wanted you to know I couldn't deliberately kill anyone."

He turned the gun around and reached out and laid it in my hand. He said, "I suppose you had better call the police now."

I looked stupidly down at the gun and then back at him. He had forgotten me. He settled back on the couch and put his hands gently down on his knees and stared past me at the night sky beyond the windows.

I wanted to feel sorry for him. But I couldn't. It was too soon. Maybe some day I would be able to.

After a while I got up and went into the bedroom and put through the call.