

## Chapter 1

The July nights are long sticky nightmares. The street noises come in past the motionless curtains, police sirens wailing in the distance. In the theaters the silver faces of Myrna Loy, Dick Powell, Loudon and Gable flicker in front of a handful of people slumped in the plush red seats, too exhausted to return to reality, thankful for the fans spinning slowly overhead. Lone cigarettes burn in dark hotel rooms through the hot wakeful hours.

The air has been weighing heavily upon the days. The crisp whispers of dead plants hang stiffly in the windows. The air ripples over the gaping hoods of overheated cars blocking traffic. The men sit silently downtown, occasionally mopping their brows with gray handkerchiefs, trying to salvage some comfort from the shade of the tall concrete buildings behind their backs. The past and future seem remote this summer, the fourth since the Crash; the men on Sixth no longer remember a time when there was purpose. There has been nothing but the heat which keeps them rooted to the sidewalks, immobilized and silent.

The first drops come at dusk, trickling thickly down, and evoke a sense of hope as they pull the scent of ozone out of the

sun-baked sidewalks. The rain brings with it a faint breeze, reminiscent of a past when life was not stifled. The change gives the men hope and they hear the jazz playing over the radio and feel better than before.

The drizzle lasts through the night, making the streets slick and shiny. Sometimes it becomes so fine as to almost stop and creates a heavy moist veil casting silver spheres around the street lights. The dark cars moving through the very late hours of the night make a smooth hissing noise as they spin down Melrose or up Highland. The windshield wipers keep some of the mist away. The buildings loom on the sides of the street.

The black Packard turns left on Sunset. Its headlights peer ahead, the whitewalls grasping the wet pavement. Lights and drops of water slip off the rounded hood. The news on the radio announces the death of John Dillinger, shot by federal operatives outside a theater in Chicago. Dust storms continue to sweep the southwest. And Busby Berkeley is rumored to be planning a spectacular including sixteen twenty-foot mirrors which will make one hundred girls look like sixteen hundred. Sam Goldwyn says to hell with the cost as long as it's good. The time is 5:30. The Packard moves along the road alone. Behind its oval taillights, the clouds are lifting slowly.

The car turns right at Laurel Canyon Boulevard and begins the long winding ascent into the hills. The shadows of the homes get larger as the road becomes darker and narrower. Thick drops from the pines smatter the windshield.

The man driving lights a cigarette. The flare from the match illuminates the young angularity of his face, the straight

eyebrows and intent gray-green eyes. They are sharp eyes, quick to move and difficult to read. The hard lines of his cheekbones are accentuated as he inhales the smoke. The lips are full, possibly sensuous, but tonight they are set with a rigid purpose. He drives the big car deftly around the curves, his eyes flicking occasionally like a snake's tongue.

From Laurel Canyon he turns left onto Lookout Mountain Road. The city lays sprawled below him, the black shapes emerging into gray as the dawn nears. The clouds are now high above the basin but remain bunched around the mountains. He turns onto Wonderland Avenue and puts out his cigarette. The windshield wipers squeak the moisture away monotonously.

The car pulls up in front of an immense iron gate. The man pulls on the brake and the engine idles smoothly while he gets out. He opens the gate with a skeleton key pulled from his dark gray overcoat pocket. It moves back silently. The man gets into the Packard and drives it through and around the circular drive.

The house is a large Spanish-style hacienda, two stories high with a red tile roof. Small amber lanterns light up the second floor balcony which runs the length of the building. A stairway leads diagonally up the face of the house. Large ferns in clay pots sit on every third step, reaching through wrought iron balusters. The man walks quickly up the stairs, his black satchel slung diagonally over one shoulder. He goes to a door left partially open onto the balcony and enters the house.

His eyes adjust to the dimness of the small spare bedroom he has entered. He moves through it quickly and reaches the hall-

way. A forgotten light burns in the stairwell. The thick carpet under his feet makes his steps completely silent. He walks down the hall and comes to a closed door. He opens it and walks inside.

The room is stale, smelling of bad dreams and old alcohol. The dim light reveals the shape of a chair, a fluffy pink dressing gown tossed carelessly over the back. A small slipper lays on its side in the middle of the room. Soft breathing from the wide bed in the corner stirs the air. The man approaches.

The woman is sprawled naked in the bed. Her forehead is damp with tiny beads of perspiration, a few strands of blond hair clinging to her temples. Her hair streams across the satin pillow like a soft fan. Her mouth is slightly open, revealing small white teeth. Flat champagne lies at the bottom of a crystal glass on the nightstand by her head. The sheet half covers her body. Her arm hangs off one side of the bed limply. The nipple of her revealed breast tightens slightly in the cooling breeze from the window. The man stands over her, studying her form.

He pulls out a gun from his satchel and holds it with a gloved hand. He weighs it for a second, feeling its deadly precision locked inside the smooth heavy metal. He holds it up to her temple, waiting.

Something about the nearness of death stirs the woman deep within her opaque dreams. Her mouth murmurs a silent half sentence, she unconsciously pulls the sheet up around her shoulders. Her blue eyes open, fixing uncomprehendingly upon the face of her murderer.

He fires before the scream occurs.

His work begins. He quickly reaches into his satchel and pulls out a large sheet of canvas and spreads it on the floor. He strips the bedspread off the bed and disentangles the sheets. Wrapping the body in the bedclothes, he lays it down upon the <sup>CANVAS</sup> plastic. From his bag he pulls out two linen sheets and remakes the bed rapidly. He takes a small cloth and wipes a couple drops of bloods from the headboard. He tosses the cloth on top of the body and surveys the scene. All is as it should be. He wraps the heavy canvas sheet around the body and ties the ends tightly. He hoists it over one shoulder and leaves the room.

He walks heavily down the staircase in the center of the house and crosses the dimly shining floor of the front hall. He lets himself out the front door, locking it behind him.

He throws the body into the back seat of the Packard and gets in front. The car starts with a smooth hum and moves around the driveway and through the gate. Stopping the man closes and locks the gate after himself. He drives the car down the road. The sun is just rising. The sky is again clear and hard.

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The incinerators at the El Segundo City Dump begin belching their fumes at 6:45. At 7:00 the black Packard stops at the foreman's shack. The foreman pays no particular attention to the man in the car.

"How much you got, Mister?" he asks, putting down his cup of murky coffee.

"Just a bag full of old newspapers, odds and ends from the garage. Missus won't take it any longer."

The man grunts. "Know how that is. Five cents, Mister."

The man pays and drives the Packard down the road towards the pit. The incinerators make a loud din. The man pulls the canvas bundle out of the back of his car and throws it in, watching as it falls amongst the rusty spokes and piles of stinking garbage. He stares at it briefly with a peculiar expression on his face and then returns to the car.

He passes through the entry. The foreman looks up briefly and return's the man's wave. He looks back to the morning paper. John Dillinger has been shot by federal operatives outside a theater in Chicago. Betrayed by a woman in red.

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The blond woman sleeps thickly upon the hard pillow. Her hair is matted with the restlessness of the night. An empty bottle lies on its side by the bed. The door springs open, letting in the bright light of morning. She opens her eyes painfully to see the man's sillouette in the doorway.

"Hello, blue eyes. Sleep well?"

She nods, trying to remember. She suddenly jumps out of bed and hugs the man.

"Did you do it?"

He nods, amused at the simple excitement of women. Over such a simple thing. "It's all ours now, Baby." He pushes her aside lightly and reaches for a cigarette. "Now all we worry about is McNaire."