

MONTEZUMA'S REVENGE

by HARRY HARRISON

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Montezumds Revenge

HARRY HARRISON

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To ANTHONY BURGESS,

Gratitudoinsly

72 -J-/fff

He weren't no saint—but at jedgment

I'd run my chance with Jim, 'Longside of some pious gentlemen

That wouldn't shook hands with him. He seen his duty, a dead-sure thing,—

And went for it thar and then; And Christ ain't a-going to be too hard

On a man that died for men.

john hay, *Jim Bludso*

Self-sacrifice enables us to sacrifice other people without blushing.

Bernard shaw, *Maxims for Revolutionists*

ONE

From a pigeon's eye view, and there are pigeons enough in our nation's capital, fed and fat from tourist popcorn and sandwich crusts, the National Gallery looked just as it always has done. White marble, domed and impressive, a suitable repository for the finest art from all over the world displayed for the pleasure of the American citizenry. Here the sweat-soaked sons of Kansas and California, Texas and Maine sought welcome relief from the steam-bath heat and shattering glare of a Washington summer, wallowing in wide-eyed wonder before the fleshy expanses of the Rubens matrons, shuffling glazed-eyed past the exuberances of the impressionists, while all of this time they were unaware of the human drama being played out in their midst.

If their attention had not been elsewhere they might have noticed him standing to one side in the book and art shop, a man with a decidedly worried expression that kept slipping back to his face no matter how he tried to dispel it with a professional smile. He was thin, of medium height, tanned and jet haired, his nose slightly too large for his face although he was not unhandsome for all of it, his smoothly pressed suit was beige and unassuming, his neatly knotted tie of an austere tone; he stood erect yet at ease with his hands clasped behind him, master of all he surveyed—which was indeed the case.

"Mr. Hawkin," a rounded, pink sort of girl said, trotting up to him with a thick book extended before her. "A gentleman wants this but there's no price in it . . ."

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"Master Drawings of Degas, second edition, eight ninety-five plus tax."

She thanked him breathlessly, impressed by this feat of total recall, eyes swimming moistly like fish behind their thick lenses, and hurried back to her customer. All appeared to be as it should be, postcards, books, prints, colored slides selling briskly, a run on Ingres items, which was to be expected with the loan exhibition upstairs of the artist's Roman sketches, but said run craftily countered by preordering of Ingres items so that the racks stayed full and the profits mounted. Yet, despite all this, all was definitely not as it should be as Hawkin's quick glance at the heavy-set man in

the black suit proved. While ostensibly displaying an intense interest in the file of Fragonard prints he was in reality staring intently at Hawkin who caught a quick glint of those deep-set eyes and turned hurriedly away, the smile slipping from his face yet one more time, pushed from position by memory of those same eyes and even colder voice earlier that morning.

"Be available at noon," he had said, nothing more, then moved silently away among the racks.

Hawkin's first reaction had been anger; who was this stranger to come here and speak to him in this manner? The security office was close by and Legree, the chief, was luxuriating there in his rolls of fat and keeping them firm with coffee and cake to tamp his ample breakfast down.

"Just be available," he ordered in his calorie-rich voice. "If the man says be there, then be there. I know him. He's government."

Government. They were all federal employees, but *government* piped in this respectful tone of voice meant something above them, another agency, the weight of authority visited. So Hawkin had waited and it had done his temper no good at all. Normally a peaceful man, a relatively happy individual secure in his position and getting pleasure from his work, he had now been rudely shocked from his complacency and he did not like it. All morning the man from *government* had been in sight and, more often than not, showing a greater interest in the manager than in the **goods displayed, with those eyes of his, not unlike spotting** scopes half hidden under the jungled ledge of his brow, radiating a

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peculiar piercing power that was continually disturbing and eventually caused Hawkin to brood uneasily and to wonder what crimes he might secretly be guilty of. As noon approached the tension grew and he welcomed the minor relief of correcting an overring on one of the registers. But as he turned away from the machine he started visibly when he discovered the thickset man now standing no more than a foot away from him.

"Your office," was all that was said and Hawkin led the way in silence, almost eagerly now that the moment had arrived.

"Cigarette?" Hawkin asked, sliding the box across the desk, then withdrawing it and lighting one himself at the solemn shake of the other's head. "Now what is it I can do to help you?"

"My identification." With grim precision he extended his hand and flipped open the leather case to disclose the glittering badge inside, a gesture quite familiar to anyone who has so much as ever glanced at a television, then snapped it shut again almost instantly. "Davidson, Federal Bureau of Investigation. I am here on a matter of great importance."

Behind his calm expression Hawkin's subconscious hauled up a number of criminal possibilities, visions of all traffic violations, stop lights passed, unthinking expectorations on sidewalks. No, this was foolish, the agent could not be here for minor items like these. Didn't the FBI handle only major offenses? This thought simply changed the internal display to kidnapped babies, bombed airplanes, stolen cars streaking across state lines, a ghastly parade speeding through his mind. What could he possibly be guilty of?

"Do you mind if I see that badge again?" he asked. Closer examination of the shield, heavy golden metal, deeply embossed, federal bureau of investigation, number 32786, helped not in the slightest and he watched it disappear from sight a second time still no wiser. "Might I ask you what your business is, Mr. Davidson? Something about the staff perhaps?" Hopefully.

The FBI man ignored this weak gambit and removed a sheaf of papers from an inside pocket which he held to the light and proceeded to read from in a cold and courtroom witnessish manner.

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Souvenir Shop to be opened in the lobby of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Building."

"Thank you. I appreciate the offer but I am afraid I must decline."

"That is unacceptable. Transfer papers are being drawn up—"

"What do you mean unacceptable? I am an adult American and cannot be coerced against my will. I may have been born an Indian but my father left the reservation and saw to it that I received a good education and was drafted early

like any other American boy. I've done my service. And I like it here." Volubility drove him to recklessness. "I appreciate the offer but tell J.E.H., thanks a lot, but no thanks."

Davidson leaned forward slowly, his mouth a tight-clamped slash, his eyes arctic and devastatingly penetrating. "Have you ever been investigated?" The words dropped crackling from his lips, frigid as glacial ice. "That is what you are requesting. A man who rejects an opportunity like this must have something to hide and, I can assure you, we are specialists in uncovering what men have hidden. *Everything*. Are you concealing something, Mr. Hawkin?"

Tony's heart gave a great leap in his chest, plunging up against the base of his throat so he could not swallow, had trouble breathing, while at the same instant a speeded-up film of the transgressions of his life rushed by the eye of memory. A seedy hotel in Nome with his captain's wife, torn-up parking tickets, certain exaggerations and interesting omissions on his income tax returns, unpaid and long forgotten utility bills, a gap in the barbed-wire fence around Camp Upton much used after hours because of its proximity to a nearby tavern; these and others of their kind raced by, minor, perhaps, and were he a Catholic they would be worth no more than a Hail Mary or two or a bit of fasting, but looming large to his lapsed Protestant conscience, growing even larger still in the presence of the dark figure of possible disinterment and retribution.

"I'm concealing nothing," he said in a sort of strangling gasp,

forcing the words around his enlarged coronary pump, unconvincing even to himself and a ludicrous prospect to the silent

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watcher. The water carafe gave a moment's respite, but only a moment, for when he poured, the glass rattled, and his upper lip was already damp with sweat before the water reached it. *You can't threaten me* was what he wanted to say but did not, for he had already been threatened, so instead took refuge in dissimulation.

"Don't misunderstand, I do respect this signal honor. But I am really not qualified, you see. I am an art historian by choice and a radar repairman by necessity and know nothing about law enforcement. A fish out of water, you wouldn't want that. So for our mutual benefit . . ."

"If *He* says you can hack it you can hack it."

"I can hack it, I can hack it," Tony muttered, cracking his knuckles on the desk before him in quiet despair. It had been so pleasant here in the National Gallery. The George Graham bracket clock on his bookshelf gently chimed the hour and at the very same instant his telephone rang. Before he could take it up Davidson had reached out and removed the receiver and held it to his own ear.

"Yes, *sir!*" The words were spoken with a warmth of feeling Tony had thought this crag of a man impossible of displaying, and then he had passed the handpiece across the desk. Smiling.

"You can talk now. You are speaking with *Him*?"

Hawkin sighed with resignation and reached for the phone.

TWO

"But isn't it exciting, I mean *really* exciting?"

Sophie had a way of asking questions in a breathless voice as though she just couldn't wait for the answer, and then of clarifying her question almost at once. She was Tony's assistant, the only other employee until the store opened, and he suspected her of being a plant, set to spy on him and report to someone upstairs. Sophie Feinberg, and he also suspected that she wasn't even Jewish, a fake minority informer to gain his confidence as a co-minorityist. Her Yiddish expressions sounded good but they could have been taught. What he needed was a real Jewish friend who could sound her out. Or was he going mad, drinking in the security-laden atmosphere that daily bathed him?

"Exciting? I suppose it is exciting," he mumbled into the stale bread of his tuna fish sandwich.

"You really are the cool one, *boychik*, you really are. I do envy your cool, I really do."

The sandwich was Dead Sea dust in his mouth and he tried to wash it farther down his throat with some of the

ammoniacal and bitter coffee. Sophie was winning this battle too. He wasn't quite sure how she had begun joining him for lunch, a misunderstood invitation perhaps that turned into a steady companionship, and he had started eating here in The Rumbling Turn in the hopes of driving her away. It was perhaps the worst luncheonette in the city of Washington, which was saying a lot in this city scarcely world famous for the quality of its eateries, but the gambit had failed miserably and produced only a continual

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smoldering fire in his midriff. Sophie, exulting in the strength of her duty, ate a far heartier meal than he did and held the entire thing down with a sort of rubberized jello and a wedge of desiccated pie.

"Did any shipments come in this morning?" He groped for a neutral topic that did not involve overriding enthusiasm regarding his position.

"Oh, yes indeed. The G-man badges came in from Hong Kong Novelties. The children will really love them, Fm sure, even adults. And I've finished framing the tinted photographs of the Director. The gold frames on the rush order."

"Tinted? I thought they were black and white?"

"They were, but there was a special directive and the first hundred have been hand tinted and come back. They really are lovely."

"Fm very sure they are. You don't find that gold frames *and* hand tinting aren't, well, a little too much?"

"What on earth *do* you mean?" The smile was there but it had a certain fixed quality that went with a hint of eagerness to her words. Had he transgressed? Tony was almost too depressed to care.

"Nothing, I guess, nothing. Not feeling so well today, maybe a little *schlect*" Her eyebrows lifted slightly and she did not answer. Let her look that up in her Yiddish dictionary! Happy in this minor victory of the greater engagement he took a deep swallow of the coffee and felt the acid bite deep into his insides and was instantly back in the depression that possessed him most of the time. He was scarcely aware of the man who passed their table and stopped a moment to strike a match to light his cigarette who, as he sucked in the smoke, produced a whisper that only Tony could hear.

"At once. Report to room 213\$. This is cm emergency"

After this communication the man was silent, nor did he move on but instead stood rocklike at Tony's shoulder, staring straight ahead, dark-suited and thick-booted. When Tony rose and paid his bill the man was close behind him and even Sophie was silent for

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a change, perhaps aware of something happening, not questioning him when he went to the elevator instead of the office.

Room 2135, unmarked and apparently no different from the others along the corridor, was locked when he tried the handle, although it unlocked swiftly enough when the messenger leaned over his shoulder and rapped a swift coded signal on the wood. Tony stepped through and felt the silent closing of the door behind him and was alone, facing the man who sat behind the expanse of polished government steel desk, the top of which was unmarred and empty save for a single yellow wooden pencil. As though even this were too much clutter the man seized it up and tapped it against his teeth as he waved Tony to the chair opposite him.

"You are Antonio Hawkin, aren't you?" Tap, tap, tap of yellow wood on white teeth in punctuation. Tony nodded. Almost too white, probably artificial, like the overly sincere smile that framed them. A hairline mustache above, the kind race track touts used to wear thirty years ago, a thin nose with a very prying look to it like a fleshy crowbar, eyes lurking unseen behind heavily tinted frameless pince-nez glasses, white skin even whiter than the plastic teeth, a high forehead so high in fact that it rode up over the top of his skull and slipped down the back of his neck while across the summit of this interesting area of bare skin a few long hairs had been stretched and glued into place. "My name is Ross Sones," tap, tap, tap. "Would you mind showing me your ID card?"

"Would you mind telling me why, and what this is all about?"

"In a moment, Tony, let us just get the routine out of the way first. Why, thanks. Not a very good likeness, but they never are, are they, no indeed. Now you wouldn't mind inking your thumb on this pad and pressing it down on this piece of paper. Checks fine against the one on the card, wasn't that easy? Here you can wipe your thumb on the back of the same piece of paper, no waste, save our forests."

"The reason . . ."

"Just a moment." He looked at his watch. "We have just nine minutes left so let us get the details out of the way first."

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He slipped the pencil behind one ear and took a bulky file from a desk drawer and leafed through it. "Here we go . . . I had it a minute ago, right. Your security rating. I see you have been cleared for confidential material, very good, been issued texts on a unit called the Mark IX-37G. But, my goodness, there is no record here of the texts ever being returned." He looked steadily at Tony and was no longer smiling.

"No one ever asked for them back, they were given to me in tech school, in the Army."

"This is quite a serious matter, I am sure."

"Serious! The Mark IX radar has been outdated for ten years now. You can buy them at the war surplus stores if you happen to want an old radar set weighing a thousand pounds. So of what importance are the textbooks?"

Sones considered this in silence for a moment, tapping his teeth again, then making a check mark in the dossier with the pencil.

"I will have to look into this, keep the record open on this point. But still you do have a security rating and that is what counts. I am sure that with the data here we can have it upgraded and updated."

The file of papers was an inch thick. "Is that all about me?" Tony asked.

"Of course. Classified, so I'm afraid you can't look at it. But thorough, very thorough. Well, everything seems to be clarified. We have, ah, three more minutes so if there are any questions . . . ?"

"The same one. What is this all about?"

"Classified information, I'm afraid." Tap, tap. "But they will tell you downstairs, and we had better get going."

With precise movements Sones slipped the dossier into a brief case he produced from the desk, locked it, then snapped the handcuff about his wrist that was attached to it by a chain. Only after this had been safely secured and tested did he touch the button that unlocked the door. They went side by side down the corridor and past the bank of elevators to an unmarked door that Sones unlocked, which opened unexpectedly into a small lobby no bigger than a closet. The far wall was made of gray

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steel and labeled in bold red letters security elevator—do not use without proper clearance. Sones appeared to have the proper clearance for at the turn of another key the wall slid back to reveal the elevator itself, and once inside he pressed the bottom button in the row, all of them labeled with cryptic code groups. Security was obviously very good and Tony was very impressed, although he still wondered what it was all about. The elevator dropped and when the door next opened a hard-eyed man stood before them pointing a large and menacing automatic pistol at their chests.

"Operation Buttercup," Sones said at once and the gun was lowered and they were waved silently on. Another guard, almost a twin of the first in dullness of eye and strength of jaw, opened another door for them and they entered the large conference room where a number of men already waited around the long table. They were uniformly dressed in grayish black suits and dark neckties, white shirts and, presumably, all wore the same kind of shoes though the table prevented the verification of this assumption. Pads and pencils were arranged neatly before each chair as well as little signs at every place, each with a different letter of the alphabet upon it. X sat at the head of the table and looked on severely as Sones led Tony toward two vacant chairs.

"You are J," Sones whispered. "Top security. Sit here."

No sooner had they found their places than X coughed deeply and rapped on the table with his knuckles.

"All right, let's get down to it. K, have you checked J's security?"

"He is clean. He needs upgrading, but he is clean enough for a prelim."

"That is encouraging. Pass me his dossier."

"I do not have the key to this case."

"Who has it?"

"C."

"Then pass the case to C."

"I cannot. I do not have the key to the handcuff. The key is held by . . ."

"I don't care about that" There was the hint of a biting edge of

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exasperation in X's heretofore controlled voice. "Just walk over to C so he can unlock it and give me the dossier."

The others waited in silence while this was done and X flipped through the pages of the file. What he read apparently satisfied him for he closed it and turned to Tony for the first time.

"Welcome to Operation Buttercup, J. You are the man we need." Before Tony could ask the question that hung ready to his lips, X raised his voice and said, "Roll it!"

Instantly a projection screen dropped from the ceiling behind him and a small window opened in the far wall. The lights went out a fraction of a second later and the beam of a projector shot across the room and a colored picture flashed on the screen, a painting.

"Do you know what that is?" X's voice came from the darkness. "I'm talking to you, J," he added when there was no answer.

"Yes, sir, I do, a painting."

"Do you know the identity of this painting?"

There was the sudden feeling of tension in the room and Tony wondered why. There was no secret about it—he even sold prints of this particular canvas in the National Gallery.

"Of course. That is the 'Battle of Anghiari' by Leonardo da Vinci."

The lights blazed on again and the picture vanished; Tony blinked at the sudden glare and became slowly aware that every eye in the room was on him.

"And where is that painting now?" There was a feeling of strain in X's voice as he spoke.

"Nowhere. It was destroyed during the war when the museum in Capitelto, Italy, was bombed during an air raid."

This bit of information, known to any art major who had passed his first year, caused an excited stir in the room as the men shifted in their chairs and one or two murmured to their neighbors. The sharp rap of X's knuckles restored order instantly.

"That is it then, gentlemen. Operation Buttercup is off and rolling. J and E will make the contact. It will be far easier now with one of our own agents on the job—we don't want

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to co-opt outsiders. We all know the trouble that happens when we do."

"Pardon me," Tony broke in. "Would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"Not at all. We have evidence, strong evidence I can assure you, that this painting was never destroyed. There is a man in the country now who is attempting to sell the painting and the whole operation has landed in our laps. And we can handle it. But before we do anything else, we need verification that this is indeed the painting in question and that is where you come in, J. We are putting a specialized team in the field, yourself and E. You are the art man, you let us know if this thing is the real McCoy or not. E is a specialist in keeping his eyes open, he's our bunco operator and knows all the people in the business. Now—get out there and get a report back here as soon as you can. At once, since we are under a bit of time pressure."

"Just a minute! I can't do that. I'm an art historian, a shop manager, not a specialist. I don't know a thing about this kind of work, I've never even seen the painting in question and I don't know about testing the paints and all. . . ."

"You're good enough for us, you're part of the bunch, J, and that is what counts. We can bring in those specialists later, but right now we are in a hurry and we want to keep this right in the shop, so to speak. There are complications, international complications as well as some with other agencies, and we don't want word of what is happening to leak to *anyone*, understand? You'll do the job. E will brief you on the operation."

For the first time Tony looked closely at the man sitting behind the E sign and found him quite familiar.

"Yes, I know him, that is . . ."

"No names!" X snapped and a censorious rumble muttered around the room. "We do *not* break security here. Meeting adjourned."

There was the scrape of chairs and louder voices now as they rose to leave and Tony's protest went unheard. X was already

out of the room through a small door and there was nothing

more that could be done. "Congratulations," Sones said before

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leaving and Tony wondered just what had happened and how he had become involved. Art expert? Well, he certainly knew more about painting than anyone else in this room, and apparently the entire Bureau as well. And perhaps the whole operation wasn't a bad idea after all; he would certainly not mind being away from the gilt G-man badges and the ubiquitous Sophie Feinberg for a while. He had never even had a chance to ask where the painting was supposed to be, maybe it wasn't in Washington, it could even be as far away as New York City where all the big galleries were. It would be pleasant to take a trip. All in all, there was really nothing to complain about. When E-Davidson came up to him he was actually smiling at the prospect ahead.

"Welcome aboard," Davidson said with a hint of equality, almost respect, in his voice. "We'll make this a clean operation."

Once they were sealed in Davidson's office Tony began to have his doubts,

"You have been checked out on weapons?" Davidson asked.

"What weapons! I'm an art historian . . ."

"A good cover, stick to that story. But never forget you are a member of the Bureau with clearance and with that goes responsibility. You were in the Army, good training, mortars and the kind of heavy stuff we don't usually use."

"Mortars? Please, I was a radar technician. Sure, I did the bayonet course and the dummy grenade thing in basic training, you can't avoid it, but the bayonet is not of much use in a radar installation. I barely qualified as low marksman on the Mi."

"We generally carry smaller weapons than a rifle, hard to conceal, but being a military man you will have no trouble changing around. This is our standard weapon, the snub-nose .38 Smith & Wesson."

Davidson did a very quick thing with one hand and a singularly deadly looking revolver appeared, pointing a round eye at Tony who moved back unhappily.

"Let's get down to armaments and check you out on yours," Davidson said, rising, as the gun disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

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"Hold on one second, please. Art specialist is one thing, gunman something else altogether different."

"A good act, keep it up, wonderful cover. A little briefing and you will be all right." He led the way to the door with a friendly hand on Tony's back to keep him moving. "Old Fred will check you out. If there is anything to know about weapons he knows it, a great guy. You being a military man you may have weapon experience that we don't so there is no need to stick with the .38 just because we do. Old Fred will know."

Old Fred, a Michelangelo *sanguine* study in wrinkles, liver spots, drooping eyelids, toothless gums and Punch nose reaching to protruding chin, radiated an aura of palpable disgust the instant Tony gingerly took up the preferred revolver.

"Not with the finger tips, blast it, grab and clutch firmly like you was shaking hands, a real firm handshake. Keep the arm straight with the elbow slightly bent, raise above the head, your profile to the target, drop down onto the target, squeeze your whole hand not just your trigger finger and . . ." BLAM BLAM BLAM ". . . put the slugs right through the blasted bull just like that. Now you try."

Tony took up the still smoking weapon gingerly, then grabbed it too tightly at the growled command so that the first shot went off while it was still pointed at the ground, screaming and ricocheting away down the concrete length of the shooting range, curses muttered in his ear as they grabbed his arm and pointed it in the right direction. His next shot caused the gun to jump in his hand so the web of flesh between his thumb and forefinger tore. This hurt and it distracted his attention so he held the revolver even more loosely for the next shot and this time it leaped from his hand and clattered on the floor. This released him to suck at his wounded member while the morose men looked down in gloom that bordered on despair upon the discarded weapon.

"I can't see how close I came." He peered hopefully over his hand at the distant target.

"One hit the ceiling, one hit the blasted wall," Old Fred said,

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bending arthritic limbs to scoop up the .38. "Probably because you had your eyes closed when you pulled the trigger."

"I know," Tony said apologetically, wrapping his handkerchief around the wound. "But I licked that habit with the Mi. I could show you if you had an Mi one here."

"We do," Old Fred said and, after a measured amount of puffing and clatter, he produced it from a cluttered armory apparently hung with all the weapons of destruction known to man.

"I usually use a sling." Tony took the wood and blue steel weight of the rifle and hefted it gingerly, trying to remember the drill instilled in his youthful synapses so many years earlier. "The clip goes here?"

"That's right, very blasted good, and here's the sling."

"Prone position was the only way I could fire and qualify."

"Prone position," Old Fred agreed in a hollow voice.

It took a while to attach the sling and adjust it to the correct position, to set the sights—Old Fred finally did this himself, muttering under his breath while he did so, load and lock, to sprawl on the hard concrete and keep the wavering target in the sights, to eventually squeeze off the shots at a fresh target. It was with a feeling of satisfaction that Tony climbed to his feet again, rubbing a bit at his sore shoulder. When the target came whizzing back along the wire Old Fred took one look then went into his shop and began rattling tools. Davidson examined it more closely, on both sides in case he had missed something.

"Good?" Tony asked.

"One bullet hit the target, nicked the edge."

"I'm a little rusty. If I had a chance to brush up . . ."

"No, I don't think that is possible. Not enough time. In any case, the old Mi rifle isn't the sort of thing that can be hidden in your hip pocket. Any other weapons you are familiar with?"

"Not really."

"Wait! You're an *Indian*, I almost forgot, probably a gee whiz with the tomahawk?"

"Davidson, please, I grew up on a farm, then in a small town. **The only tomahawks I ever saw were in a western movie.**"

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"The bow and arrow maybe or," still hopeful, "the scalping knife?"

"And maybe the bow and arrow will fit in my hip pocket? The same goes for that scalping knife, which I never heard of before this instant."

"No knife?"

"Not really. I used to whittle . . ."

"That's it, Fred! The French cigar case, that's the one we need."

It dropped onto the counter top with a heavy thud, its weight out of keeping with its innocent appearance. A pocket case of nicely tanned leather, smooth as though from long use. Davidson slipped it open so that the greenish ends of four cigars could be seen and held it out to Tony.

"I normally don't smoke cigars, but . . ."

He pulled at a cigar but it would not come free.

"They are dummies. What you really want to do, as you hold it out, is to press with your thumb here."

There was a nasty snicking sound and a shining blade, at least six inches long, snapped out of the end of the case causing Tony to start and jump back.

"Very handy thing to have." Davidson put the point of the knife on the counter and leaned all of his weight upon the case to force the blade back up into position. "A seventy-five-pound spring behind that blade. Just jam it against your target's side, below the rib cage so it doesn't get hung up in the bones, and press the release. The spring does all the rest. It will give you security."

"I would feel far more secure without it."

This unprofessional remark was ignored and the zip knife-cigar case became his property after he had signed the proper form. Old Fred showed far more enthusiasm as he checked over Davidson's .38 and oiled the springs on the agent's fast-draw holster.

"When do we leave?" Tony asked.

"In about an hour."

"Will I have time to pack a bag?"

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"What for? We are just going across the river to McLean, Virginia, to make our contact."

So much for the travel plans, Tony thought. McLean. The phone rang and Old Fred answered it. In a way it was probably better. Get the matter over with and done and back to work. Fred called Davidson to the phone then entered his shop and closed the door behind himself. Open the G-man badge and fingerprint-kit shop and get it rolling, then ask to be reassigned back to the National Gallery. Anyone could take over once things were rolling, even Sophie for that matter. And it would be a pleasure to see the last of her. Davidson had hung up and stood, frowning with thought.

"McLean has been scrubbed. Our contact took off and they lost him."

Tony could not help but feel a decided sensation of relief, he had never been enthusiastic about any of this, but his relief was instantly dispelled.

"But he did leave a message. We will receive more information when we get there so it looks as though you can pack that bag after all because we are going on a little trip."

"New York?"

"Of course not—what gave you that idea? As soon as arrangements are made we are going to Mexico City."

THREE

With slow majesty the great airplane tilted up on one wing to make the turn. The great bulk of Iztaccihuatl swam into view, the Sleeping Lady, a volcano long dead, guarded by her consort Popocatepetl, a volcano as well but still bubbling with life and sending a thin column of smoke up through the snow about its crater. In grand curves the smooth ash flanks of Popo fell down to the valley of Mexico, the green farms of Morelos on one side with the gritty high plain beyond. More and more of the plain came into view as the dive flattened and the landing gear thudded and humped into position under their feet, the outlying residential areas and factories growing dim in the smog. With a sudden rush the runway appeared before them and Tony drained the last of his Margarita and wished that there was time to order another. It was not that he minded flying, it was just that the landings gave a sort of tweaking sensation to his stomach ever since the time in the Army when a C-57 he had been in had run out of runway and ended up on its nose in the muskeg. No one had been badly hurt but the memory did linger on. It was a welcome relief when they touched down and the reversed jets pressed him hard against his safety belt. No sooner had they cleared the runway and entered the taxiway than the second pilot came into the cabin, nodding and smiling at the passengers. "Hope you enjoyed the trip," he said to Davidson as he passed. This unusual solicitude was explained by the fact that, unseen by anyone but Tony in the adjoining seat, he had slipped a folded piece of paper into the agent's hand.

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"Radio," Davidson said under his voice. "Been expecting this."

Tony was impressed; he had not realized that private messages could be sent to a commercial airplane in flight. Though an FBI communication could hardly be called a private message. Davidson opened the paper inside his magazine, took one look, then slammed it shut.

"Damn!"

"Trouble? Has the bird flown the coop again?"

"Worse than that." He passed the magazine to Tony who found the right page and the slip of paper on which was written Davidson's seat number plus two words. *CONTACT ROOSTER.*

"Code?"

"Clear enough. We were afraid this would happen. Mexico is not our territory, but we gave it the old college try. But *they* found out about it, they always do, so now they want a piece of the action."

"You've lost me. *They?*"

"The CIA. We'll have to work through their local man down here, Higginson. I've met him before and he's a bad one. Remember that name and this phone number, 25-13-17, in case something happens and I'm not there. He will . . ."

"The Higginson I have, but not the number." Tony had his pencil poised expectantly over his note pad until Davidson

reached over and tore out the page.

"Nothing ever written down, remember that. Just memorize the information."

The agent was glum and uncommunicative after this so that Tony turned his attention to the world outside. Not that he minded, in fact he was beginning to enjoy the trip now that they were safely down, looking forward to a paid-in-full holiday. Even though he had grown up on the border he had never visited Mexico very often. Too much of Tijuana of course, but that was more of a *gringo* sin city than real Mexico, and then a couple of weekends in Ensenada. Now, just a few hours from Washington, he was in a new world, standing on the filled-in lake bed where Cortez had trod, coming into Montezuma's capital city. There was the sound of a warmer, softer language around them as they

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disembarked and claimed their luggage, then had hieroglyphics chalked on their sides by stoically bored customs agents with Mongol faces right from the steppes of Asia. There was a general excitement and color to the crowd that was unknown in the north as the first salesmen pressed plaster pigs, tin masks, feather toy fighting cocks upon them. With some effort they made their way through the crowd to the cab rank where the driver, with a solicitude unknown in the north for fifty years or more, loaded in their luggage, ushered them to their seats, then closed the door behind them.

"*¿Pa que rumbo, maestro?*" he inquired with great interest.

"Take us to the Tecali Hotel," Davidson said. No linguist, he referred to it as the 7>&-a-lee, yet the driver grasped his meaning and nodded enthusiastically.

"*Si, maestro, pero si la onda es que es caro. Yo sS de otro hotel que no la muelan y es a todo dar?*"

"Oh, Christ, he doesn't speak a word of English. Look, Jack, the . . . hotel . . . Tecali . . . okay?"

"*Si, ya sepo, el Tecali, con sus pinche precios. Pero si quieres . . .*"

The conversation was getting nowhere. Tony leaned forward and said quickly, "*Escucha carnal, tenemos reservaciones en el Tecali, y no queremos nada que hacer con sus insectos ni in-fecciones de tu casa de putas*"

The driver shrugged and the cab instantly shot forward and forced itself into a place in the moving line of traffic that was no more than four inches larger than the machine itself.

"You had better explain," Davidson said, loudly over the cries of the angry horns.

"He wanted to take us to a different hotel and . . ."

"Not that, I mean this Mexican-speaking thing."

"Spanish. Well, I ought to. Everyone spoke Spanish as well as English where I grew up."

"This is very serious. There is nothing in your dossier about Spanish." It sounded a crime the way he said it.

"Well, you can't blame me. I had nothing to do with writing

the dossier and I certainly don't keep Spanish a secret."

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"This is going to have to be looked into on a high level."

Tony had no easy answer to this and they continued in silence through the maelstrom of hurtling vehicles in the narrow streets. Their driver was touched with the same madness as the others and risked their mutual death many times until he tire-squealed around one last corner onto Mariano Escobedo and braked before their hotel. The door was open even before the cab stopped moving, seized by a grandly uniformed attendant whose gold braid glowed redly in the low rays of the setting sun. More uniforms appeared and their bags were seized. Davidson paid the exact sum on the meter, plus a single grudging peso, then led the way into the soft-lit luxury of the lobby. Tony was

impressed. First class on the plane, he had always flown cattle-car class before, and now this. The agency, flush with the taxpayers' money, evidently did not believe in stinting its workers. A suite awaited them, apparently the only kind of accommodations the establishment had. Tony looked with admiration at the dressing rooms, well-stocked bar, mirrored bathrooms, while Davidson saw the luggage in and passed around clinking pesos.

"You can have that bedroom," Davidson said, locking and double bolting the hall door.

"Very nice indeed." Tony took up his single bag, a little ashamed now of its scratched and scruffy plastic hide, and entered his quarters. "How long do you think this operation will take? Because I believe I am going to enjoy it in Mexico. I wonder if I could take some of my vacation time since I am here? You know, extend, then go back later."

He opened the case and hung his shirts in the closet to take some of the wrinkles out. "What do you think, Davidson?" There was no answer. "Did you hear me?"

Tony went back into the living room of the suite and there, almost exactly in the center of the rug, Davidson lay face down with the thick wooden handle of a butcher knife projecting from between his shoulder blades.

The sight of death is always a little unnerving and Tony, a stranger to sudden violence, stopped as though he had run into an

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invisible wall. His first thought was to help the agent, perhaps he was wounded and not dead, yet even as he started forward he swayed back, pushed by a sudden realization that his personal survival might be threatened as well. Where was the knife man? Standing behind him perhaps! He whirled about, his heart pounding furiously, but the living room was empty. Self-protection was called for now, it would be knife against knife. Where was the cigar knife?; in his jacket pocket in the closet. He started that way and stopped again with the sudden realization that he had not the slightest desire to try his proficiency in a knife duel against the professional who had so silently slid his weapon into the back of an equally professional agent. Some stronger medicine was required. Bending over he slipped his hand under Davidson's jacket until he found the revolver there, then extracted it carefully. Trying to avoid the unmoving shocked gaze of the wide-open eyes. Jesus! He certainly looked dead.

It took a few seconds to fumble off the safety catch and to rotate the chamber to be sure there was a bullet in firing position. Then, with the gun extended before him and his finger trembling on the trigger, he carefully searched the empty suite. Empty indeed, nothing under the beds or in the closets, no one lurking behind the doors. No possible entrance or exit through the windows, which were sealed because of the air conditioning. No one at all. So where was the killer? He went back to the sprawled body and then, for the first time, looked closely at the hall door, the only exit from the suite. The safety bolt that Davidson had closed was now open.

"That's it." Tony breathed deeply and lowered the ready gun. "That's how it was done. The killer was hiding in the apartment when we came in, under the couch or something. As soon as he saw that Davidson was alone he came out . . ." Tony shivered.

What next? He glanced toward the phone. Should he call the police—and if he did what should he tell them? There was still the matter of the painting, the whole operation, and he knew nothing about that at all. Perhaps he ought to contact the Bureau first and ask them what to do. His gaze returned unbidden to the body.

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And maybe, although he certainly looked dead enough, Davidson was not dead but only gravely wounded. That should be checked first.

Tony pushed the safety back on and slipped the .38 into his side pocket, then kneeled again by the still form. How did you tell? Breath on a mirror; he didn't have a mirror. Pulse then. With none too steady fingers he groped for an artery in the cooling flesh of the neck and found nothing. Cold, already chilling down, that certainly meant something. No signs of breathing at all. With his hand pressed against Davidson's back he felt not the slightest motion. Dead then, certainly dead. What next? Tony stood and saw, with a twinge of horror, that his right palm was covered with blood that had soaked into the jacket. He had to wipe it at once, no, much better, he had to wash. The quiet knock on the door came at this same moment.

All reason fled. He had no idea what to do now, none whatsoever, so he did nothing. The knock came again to be followed moments later by the sound of a key in the lock. The safety bolt! If he could close that no one could enter. A fine idea that came entirely too late for even as he entertained the idea the door opened and the bellboy entered, a smiling round-faced young man with a silver tray held before him.

"There was mail for you, *senor*. I thought it best to bring it up."

As he finished speaking he let his eyes drop to the body on the floor, then back up to Tony who was, literally, caught red-handed. The man's smile broadened rather than vanished at the sight of the corpse, as he stepped back swiftly to close the door.

"Very professionally done, *senor*? There were overtones of pure admiration in his voice.

"I didn't do it," Tony choked out.

"Of course not." Glance at knife, glance at reddened palm before it could be put behind back. "You undoubtedly found him this way, a great tragedy. But whoever did this thing knows his business. The slight angle to the hilt signifies an upstroke, the professional blow, up and under, thus penetrating the ribs while the point seeks out the heart hidden within."

"That will be enough."

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"But of course, you grieve. Would you care for me to telephone the police . . . ?"

The bellboy made no move toward the phone as he said this and did not seem surprised in the slightest when Tony said no.

"Understandable. These matters can be embarrassing, even for the innocent. The police value highly the *gringo* tourists and look unhappily upon their deaths when they are here. But other solutions are possible. I have friends on the staff, there is the service elevator, for the very small sum of five hundred pesos your problem is solved. Your friend will have been seen leaving the hotel in the best of health, two, three witnesses will assure the police of that. In the morning you will call and report his absence and that will be the end of it. It is agreed then?"

"It is not agreed, and I did not kill him." Was the smile a little wider at this? "Look, let me think for a second, wash my hands, I'll be right back."

Unlike literary blood, Davidson's did wash away instantly with some soap and water. But what to do? Tony's taut reflection stared back at him from the mirror and provided no answers. He needed help, but there was no time to contact Washington now, not with the bellboy standing by. Local help? The police? *Never*.

Contact Rooster! That's what the message had said. The CIA man here. This was the kind of illegally legal person who would know all about corpses and such. What was the number? There was a quick whiff of panic before it rose up from the depths of memory. 25-13-17. Or was it 18? No, that had to be it. He dried his hands and wrote the number quickly on the mirror with a corner of a fresh bar of soap so he would not forget it. The bellboy first, he had to be eased out of the picture, and the answer to that seemed obvious enough.

"This is an unhappy occurrence," Tony said, re-entering the room and taking his wallet from his pocket at the same time. "Thank you for the offer of help, but I can handle this myself. Of course it would be embarrassing to have people poking about here, so if you would be kind enough not to mention this to anyone I would think that two hundred pesos might be in order."

"Unhappily, absolute silence is not cheap. It would be a sacri-

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flee, I am not a rich man, but I will be happy to do the *senor* the favor for only three hundred pesos." The tray, now empty of mail, was presented. Tony pulled out tattered bank notes.

"It is a pleasure to deal with you. Two hundred and fifty pesos is a great sum I can ill afford but I give it to you

happily."

"An equal pleasure to deal with a gentleman. Two hundred and seventy-five."

"Done."

After further assurances of mutual admiration the bellboy slipped into the hall and vanished. This time Tony bolted the door. 25-13-17 the mirror read. He rubbed it out and called from the bedroom relievedly out of sight of his burden. The phone rang only once before a man answered.

"Coronel Glanders Mississippi Folio Asado. /Que quieres!"*

A fried chicken restaurant? Could this be the right number? The voice questioned him again before he could stammer an answer.

"Quiero cotorrear con Higginson"

"¡El Jefe! Un momentito."

So it was the right number—and Higginson was the boss. The code name Rooster, of course, the restaurant must be a cover for the operations of the CIA in Mexico. The phone rattled as someone else picked it up.

"¿Que pues?"

"You don't know me, my name is Hawkin, but I'm down here with an agent named Davidson whom you might know . . ."

"Why, yes, sir, we do deliver fried chicken. How can I help you?"

"I don't want any chicken I ... oh, I see. There are people there. Sorry, I'm kind of new at this—"

"Just tell me what you want." More than a little acid now.

"I'm sorry. But you see there has been an accident or something. I'm in the hotel room and Davidson is, well sort of—you see, he is dead."

There was a brief silence at this announcement before Higginson spoke again.

"Chicken only, you understand that. We can't help you with that order."

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"Oh yes, you can." Tony was a little desperate now. "You help me or I call the police and tell them everything I know about this entire operation, including your part in it."

"Why of course, sir, we do cater large and important parties. If you give me your address I'll come right over and we can discuss it."

"That's more like it. Suite 560 at the Tecali. And I suggest you make it here as fast as you can."

Fifteen minutes later there was a knock on the door. Tony was waiting for this one and he had the gun behind his back and his foot blocking the door so it could open no more than a few inches.

"Who is it?" he said through the resulting crack.

"Higginson, open up," a gruff voice whispered.

"You better identify yourself before I let you in."

"Listen you . . . ! I can't be seen here. Code name Rooster."

The tall, spare man moved in quickly and Tony locked and bolted the door behind him, then put the gun away. Higginson watched him thoughtfully, hound-dog eyes in a leathery wrinkled face. He was older than he appeared to be at first, particularly when a second look disclosed that his full mop of black hair was only a wig.

"Tell me what happened. Everything."

"Well, you know why we're here. We came to the hotel directly from the airport. I was in the other room, I didn't hear a thing, but when I came out he was like that and the front door was unlatched. I think the killer must have been waiting here before we came. That's all there is to it. I called you." The bellboy incident was forgotten for the moment.

Higginson knelt by the corpse for a quick and professional examination. He straightened up, dusted his knees and fixed a cold and steely eye on Tony.

"Can't the FBI take care of their troubles on their home ground?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play the dummy with me. You people have trouble with a man so you eliminate him in my back yard and leave the dirty

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prehension for the knock on the door, this was when his eyes moved across the bar, halted then quickly returned. A drink, yes, a drink was decidedly in order. There was a fine selection here of most of the distilled biological poisons known to man, the bottles cool, multiformed, and comforting. Tequila? No, Mexico hovered too close as it was. Scotch then, the reassuring malt from the Highlands, memories of peat, heather and kilts in every sip, poured generously over ice cubes, drunk thirstily. A second drink followed the first and the level of the bottle dropped in equal measure as his spirits rose. In this manner the hours passed quickly until the appointed moment of door unlocking. After a certain amount of fumbling with the key and bolt Tony had it open and, no more than thirty seconds later, Higginson came in followed by a second man wearing a white uniform who was pushing a third in a wheel chair. The seated individual wore black gloves, a heavy overcoat turned up at the collar against the cool night, a scarf wrapped around his neck for further protection, dark glasses and a wide-brimmed hat. About all that could be told about him was that he was very old, if the thin white hair splayed across the collar meant anything.

It meant very little. Once the door was closed again a sturdy youth leaped from the chair and very quickly took off coat, hat, scarf, gloves and white wig. He was neatly dressed in sport shirt and dark trousers, and Tony nodded approvingly when he noticed that trousers and shoes resembled the corpse's very closely. Higginson stood by and supervised while his minions did the dirty work. With a proficiency that hinted at long practice they pulled out the murderous knife and slapped a thick towel over the spot to absorb any excess of blood, then dressed the corpse in the thick overcoat. Now, buttoned into the muffling garment, the late FBI agent was propped up in the wheel chair and the rest of the disguise put into place. To a casual examination the same man was still sitting in the wheel chair and would be leaving the hotel after a brief visit.

"Very neatly done," Tony said appreciatingly. Higginson leaned forward sniffing industriously and frowning.

"You have been drinking."

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"A few quickies in memory of our departed friend. Join me?" "I never drink, and if I did drink I would never drink on duty." "Well, I drink and I'm not on duty. Duty done for the day." "You will want this, *senor*," the pseudo attendant said, handing the washed and dried butcher knife to Tony with a certain degree of professional respect, a reminder of what they thought the duty had been. "Put it in my bag, if you please, in that room. Off duty." "No, you're not," Higginson said smartly. "I suggest you drink some coffee and have some exercise. We cannot have alcohol jeopardizing the operation tonight." "Operation? Tonight?"

"Yes, I've made the contact. We'll make the meet at three a.m." "Order some coffee," Tony said, sighing heavily.

FOUR

Memories of old grease hung in the air, aroma of potato and coleslaw long gone, odor of legions of chickens who had passed through and on to alimentary destiny. Tony sat on the high stool, elbows on the well-scrubbed wood of the counter, sipping the latest cup of coffee. The single light above threw long shadows across the empty kitchen and struck plastic highlights from Higginson's wig. He sat across from Tony gnawing away steadily on a leg of cold fried

chicken. Tony nodded over his cup and wished that he had used the hours for sleep rather than the drinking of all the coffee that Higginson had forced on him.

"Three minutes to three," the CIA man said softly. "Get ready."

"I'm ready, I'm ready," Tony muttered wishing, not for the first time, that this were over with and he was nicely asleep in bed. Or better still back in Washington, at his old job away from all this unhappy business.

"Here he is. . . ." It was just three. The unlocked rear door opened silently and a man entered; apparently, the unlocked door gambit was the normal way of doing business in these circles. The newcomer had a shaven head, a broken nose, saber scars on his cheekbones and an outthrust bulldog jaw, all of which identified his nationality long before he opened his mouth.

"Which of you is the painting authority?" he said, or rather tried to say. But his *which* was more like a *vich*, the closer to *der*, and *painting* definitely started with a *b*.

"Your name?" Higginson asked, ignoring the question.

"You may call me Hans."

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"I may call you Kurt, much better. Kurt Robl. Born Gstadt, Germany, in nineteen ten, joined the Nazi party in . . ."

"I know I am in your *verdawrwte* CIA book, so let's get on with the business, Higginson. Is this the art man?"

"He is."

Robl turned his attention to Tony, eyeing him up and down thoroughly before speaking again.

"You are acquainted with this painting?"

"Certainly. One of the more ambitious works of the artist. Completed in 1503, background work undoubtedly by his assistants, but the figures, particularly the superb horse in the foreground, are the work of the master. Berenson rates it among the best of Da Vinci's work and I concur. Furthermore . . ."

"All right." Robl turned his attention back to Higginson. "Here is what we are going to do. In five minutes my car will drive up and park under the street light across the way. The motor will be running. One man—and one man only—will go out this back door and cross the street. He will carry this electric torch and it will be lit. He will open the boot of the car, it will be unlocked, and he will use the torch to examine the painting inside. For two minutes, no longer. He will then come back here. If there is any variation from this order the driver will leave at once. More than one man, anything different, and the entire deal will be off. Others can afford to pay as well for this painting, I assure you."

He passed the flashlight to Tony with a final warning. "The painting is covered with armored glass and bolted down, so do not even consider the smash and grab that is now running through your mind."

"I was thinking nothing of the sort!"

This innocent answer produced only a sneer of contempt from Robl who certainly knew better. He looked at his watch and waved Tony over to the door.

"Get ready. And put this on." He produced a tyrolean hat from his side pocket, complete with a large curling feather, and handed it over to Tony. "If you are not wearing this the driver will leave."

It fitted well enough, the band damply greasy around his head. With the flashlight in his hand, turned on and ready, Tony stood

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before the door, while Robl looked at his watch, and was suddenly very nervous about the entire affair. Though it was altogether too late to consider turning back or getting out of the situation, no matter how much he desired it.

"Now!" The door opened wide and he marched out.

The street was empty and dark between the far-spaced street lights; a car went by on the cross street a block away and the sound of its tires was loud in the silence. Under the light in its appointed place stood a black Mercedes sedan with its motor turning over quietly. Tony walked slowly over to it, showing far more resolution than he felt, aware of the silhouette of the man sitting in the back seat who was watching him intently. The trunk was unlocked, the handle turned easily; Tony took a deep breath and opened it. Inside was a colorful Mexican blanket that had been neatly laid over a bulky rectangular object. The painting. He leaned forward and seized a corner of the blanket and pulled.

Sudden pain struck his head just below the right ear, a very great pain indeed that brought a hoarse cry to his lips that was never spoken, for he fell into black unconsciousness even as he drew in his breath. His last memory was of falling, bumping against the back of the car as it shot out from under him. After that, nothing.

No matter which way he turned his head the annoyance would not stop. The pain in the back of his skull persisted with a steady throb, while the pain came and went on his face; it could not be avoided. After a while Tony realized that his eyes were closed and he might find out more about the pain if he opened them. He did. Everything was very blurry, but at least the pain in his cheeks ebbed away. Realization slowly penetrated that a man was holding him up by the collar with one hand and had been slapping him steadily with the other.

"Stop that . . ." he mumbled and the man hit him again.

"Haben Sie etwas %ou verzollen? Schnell!"

"Can't understand you . . ." Another slap.

Tony tried to swing a fist at his tormentor but it was neatly blocked, As his vision cleared he saw that he was sitting on a cot in a brightly lit room that appeared to be lined with cardboard

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cases. A hard-eyed young man was still holding him by the collar while another stood next to him, tanned and blond-haired, looking very much like the first.

"You know, I think you are making a big mistake," Tony said.

"I think so too," a voice said from behind the two men, and they moved aside to let the newcomer through. He was a different type altogether; middle-aged and plump, with a round red Santa Claus kind of face. A white apron was tied about his midriff, riding high on top of his ample stomach, and he stood at ease with his thumbs tucked into its supporting string. "Just tell us your name, young man, there is nothing to be afraid of." His smile was very Santa-like as well, warm and cheery.

"I am Tony Hawkin, American citizen, and I would like to know just what it is you think you are doing to me?"

"Hawkin, American. Yes indeed, you do certainly sound like an American."

His smile faded as he turned to the younger men and spoke to them in a different language that had far more guttural sounds than the German, but never an umlaut. In a moment he warmed to the occasion, shaking a finger and administering what was obviously a full-scale dressing down to the pair, who wilted beneath the attack and began to look as chagrined as schoolboys. Then they were dismissed with a pointing finger at the door and seemed very glad to leave.

"Have a cigarette," said the plump man, seating himself comfortably on a large box labeled zion salami. He held the pack out to Tony then took one himself. The cigarettes were thin and black and had a rank smell. "*Delicados*" the donor said, "strong but nice." He struck a wooden kitchen match on the seat of his trousers. "I should introduce myself. My name is Jacob Goldstein."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Goldstein . . ." The sentence faded away into a spasm of coughing as the fumes of the rank burning leaf bit deep into Tony's lung. With every cough his head rang as though someone were plying it with a hammer. Goldstein looked on kindly with the smoke trickling unperturbably from his nostrils.

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"The name means something to you?"

"Sorry, no . . . the cigarette's a little strong. If you don't mind." Without waiting for permission he ground the smoldering object out under his heel.

"It would mean nothing to you either if I mentioned another name maybe. A party called Wilhelm Ulrich Vogel."

"Vogel the Vulture, of course." Tony wondered what this was all about. "Captured by Israeli Nazi hunters in Brazil and smuggled back to Germany. I read about it . . ." The hammering had done his head no good at all but his synapses were finally beginning to click on and off again and produce results. "Vogel. Tracked down by the greatest hunter of them all. *Goldstein?*"

Jacob Goldstein nodded his head slightly and drew deeply on the cigarette. For a moment there was a gleam of something deep in his eyes and Tony had the realization that the fat old man outside was just the disguise for the tiger within. He shivered without realizing it.

"Now that we have exchanged names and you know who I am perhaps you will tell me just what your relationship is to Kurt Robl."

"I met him tonight for the first time, honestly."

"Please, be honest, that I appreciate. You met the man for the first time, yet you wear his hat so that my enthusiastic boys mistake you for him, sabras, big on muscles, short on brains, believe me. You wear his hat, you have the key to the trunk of his car . . . ?" The sentence ended with an unspoken question.

"I am being honest. It is, well, a little complicated. A business deal, that's all, the hat sort of identification, nothing else. There was something in the trunk, it was unlocked, that I had to look at, something important, and I must say your sabras wrecked that deal as well as wrecking my head. They are going to be in trouble, Goldstein, you can be sure of that."

The Nazi catcher seemed undisturbed by the threat; he lit a second cigarette from the still glowing end of the first. "What kind of business?"

"That is confidential."

"It should be. Three a.m. meetings with known war criminals

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engaged in with the aid of a well-known CIA man. The law looks dimly upon this sort of monkey business."

"It was entirely harmless, I assure you."

"I find that hard to believe since you were carrying these."

He produced a revolver and the cigar-case knife and held them up for inspection. The gun bore more than a slight resemblance to Davidson's gun that Tony had put in his pocket and forgotten about. He fought a strong impulse to groan aloud.

"That can be explained. Personal protection, nothing more."

"Why did you need personal protection? What is this harmless business you are engaged in that required you go armed?"

"I am afraid I cannot say. A matter of national secrecy, to be exact." He could say that at least, they knew the CIA was involved.

"Since when does the stealing of an Italian national treasure by Nazi crooks become a matter of American national secrecy?"

Tony opened his mouth, then shut it again, started to stand but changed his mind and sat down again. Goldstein smiled warmly.

"That's a good one, isn't it? What used to be called in the good old days of the faked quiz games the \$64,000 question. You think about the answer. I'll make a little *nosh*, give us strength. Nice hot pastrami sandwich and a glass of tea."

He went out, humming to himself, and left the door ajar. After a moment Tony rose, as quietly as he could, and tiptoed

over and peered through the crack. Goldstein was behind the counter of the delicatessen dining room beyond, industriously slicing smoking meat on a whirring machine. Was there another way out of here? Moving quickly he looked behind the tiered boxes and crates until he found the back door. There appeared to be no lock on it but it was closed tight by a large bolt that sealed it to the jamb. A well-oiled bolt he discovered as he eased it over, then turned the doorknob. It was time to leave. The door opened as noiselessly as the bolt and Tony found himself staring into the cold green eyes of one of the sabras. He slammed the door shut and bolted it quickly and went back to sit on the bed again. Goldstein returned carrying a tray with thick sandwiches that were framed in the cool green of sliced pickles, flanked by steaming glasses of tea, each with a wedge of lemon slipped over the rim. Appetite struck with a

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grumble of internal lightning as he realized he had not eaten since the previous afternoon aboard the plane. He ate.

"This is very good. The tea too."

"It should be. The meat is flown in once a week direct from the supplier in Brooklyn. So you have had time to think, so now you can tell me about your dealings with Robl."

Tony had been thinking and had decided that a certain amount of candor might be needed; Goldstein knew a good deal as it was. He was in over his head through no fault of his own and if he had to violate security to get out of this, well, security would just have to enjoy being violated.

"I told you truthfully, I never saw him before this evening. I arrived in Mexico today, right from the United States, about this painting you mentioned. I am, well, an art expert." B.A., San Diego State, they should only know. "I was supposed to look at this painting and identify it, nothing more, and Robl said he had the painting in the back of his car. After that I had no idea what was going to happen, I swear that's the truth."

Goldstein nodded slowly and sipped noisily at his tea.

"Art expert, huh? Possible. Tell me, Mr. Expert, what year was Mr. Michelangelo born?"

"Michelangelo? I'm not good on dates really. Fifteenth century of course. Almost ninety when he died, fifteen sixty something, which would have him born fourteen seventyish. Right?"

"Perhaps. And who painted 'A View of Toledo'?"

"El Greco. Must we do this twenty-question thing?"

"Just one more. Where is Hochhande?"

"All right, so you win. I don't know. And to tell you the truth I don't know if it is a painting or an artist since I have never heard the name before this moment."

"For some reason I believe you, Mr. Hawkin. But I want you to remember that last name and think about it. It is late and you will need some rest. Nahum, who you met outside the back door a few minutes ago, has a car there and will drive you back. Good-by." And just as Tony reached the door, he added, "We'll meet again."

Not if I can help it Tony thought as the cold-faced Israeli pointed to the car. The interview had not been an easy one and he

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felt that he definitely had not gotten the better of it. With a quick rush of hindsight he realized that Goldstein had extracted far more information than he had delivered. Tony, in exchange for being hit on the head, had told almost everything he knew about Operation Buttercup. His career as a secret agent had an auspicious beginning. One thing he hadn't talked about at least was Davidson's death.

Dead. He had forgotten about the murder in the rush of events and he now became thoroughly depressed again. What to do next? Get in touch with the CIA man Higginson and ask for further instructions? Contact the FBI? What about a quick little flight back to Washington to ask for orders on the spot? That seemed like a fine idea, the best produced yet

tonight, and he cradled it to him as the car stopped around the corner from his hotel. Still without a word the Israeli sped away and, coldly lit by the first glimmer of dawn, Tony walked most wearily to the hotel.

Was that a suspicious look the night clerk delivered along with the key? Or were his nerves eroded to the point where all men were suspect? He yearned after the comforts of his bed. The elevator was a long time coming and it only rose one floor before stopping again. A bellboy—no, *the* bellboy got on, smiling warmly, and did something with the controls so that the doors stayed shut but the car did not move.

"I have some free information for you," the bellboy said.

"That's very nice. Could you tell me while the elevator takes us up?"

"Certainly not or it will be known I have talked to you. You have been kind to me so I will be kind to you. There is a police officer now waiting in your room."

"Yes, Christ, that's land of you. I really did need that news. Perhaps I ought to just go back down and make my exit peacefully."

"That is not to be recommended since another officer sits in the lobby and has witnessed your entrance."

"Well, the police don't worry me!" Hollow bravado indeed. "So start this thing up and let me get it over with and get to bed."

"In a little-little moment. First I thought you might be happy to pay some recompense for my continued interest in your security."

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With all the policemen so thickly around my silence is surely appreciated."

"Yes, I think you might appreciate a hundred pesos."

"I would appreciate two hundred more."

Tony paid in silence and watched his grateful employee exit. The elevator rose again, though his spirits fell, and he walked to his room as a man to his execution.

When he unlocked the door and went in he saw the man sitting at ease in the armchair, leafing through Tony's passport and the contents of his attache case. Surprise, which he was prepared to simulate, was replaced by real anger.

"Just who the hell are you and what do you think you are do-ing?"

The man nodded in a most friendly manner, a handsome dark-haired man dressed in a conservative brown suit, putting the papers on the table and rising.

"You are of course the Mr. Tony Hawkin of the photo in the passport. My pleasure. I am Ricardo Gonzales y Alvarez and I am a lieutenant of the police."

"Does being a lieutenant give you the right to enter here and go through my papers without a search warrant?"

"Yes, indeed, it does in Mexico. Particularly when the occupant of the room has been associating with known foreign agents."

What an understatement—he had met more of them in the few hours he had been in the country than he had Mexicans.

"That is a nasty allegation, Lieutenant, and certainly not true."

"I fear it is. For a witness we respect, you would call him an informer, tells us that the agent George Higginson came to your room tonight, more than once, and that you left with him."

"Higginson is not a foreign agent, he's an American."

"Mr. Hawkin, please. In *this* country an American *is* a foreigner. And the CIA a secret foreign organization. Now I would appreciate your telling me just what your business is with this Higginson. Be brief and more important, be

truthful."

"I don't have to answer your questions."

"Of course not. Nor do we have to have you in our country."

"Yes, there is that, I'm sorry. It has been a long night. Been

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drinking, no sleep. Drinking, that's all. Never knew that Higginson was a CIA man, news to me certainly. Friend of my father's, asked to look him up, that sort of thing."

Gonzales was not convinced; he pursed his lips and tapped his fingers on the papers. "Yet isn't it interesting that he is a CIA man and you an FBI agent? A certain suspicion attaches to this relationship, does it not?"

YoiCre fishing, Lieutenant. You know something is going on but not what it is. "Not really. Washington is populated almost completely by government employees, they know one another, they meet when abroad, it is as simple as that. And, if you have gone through my papers as well as you seem to, you will have discovered that I am not an FBI agent but an employee of the agency who runs a souvenir stand there. Will that be all?"

"For the moment." Gonzales stood up and started for the door. "Just one other question. Where is your roommate, Mr. Davidson?"

Tony had been waiting for this question and was not put off by the casual approach. "I'm sure I don't know." True enough! "He is a grown man and undoubtedly can take care of himself. We are just casual acquaintances and sharing the room for economy's sake. We both have separate plans for our vacation, I assure you."

Lieutenant Gonzales looked into his eyes for a long, silent moment before nodding slowly. "That will be all for now, Mr. Hawkin. I will perhaps be seeing you again. For your own sake I hope you are involved in nothing that is in violation of our Mexican laws."

"Good night, Lieutenant."

That was that. At least for the moment. Tony discovered that his hand had a distinct shake to it when he locked and bolted the door. The thought of a scotch whiskey loomed large as a trembler killer. He poured one, a healthy one, drained most of it, then slipped off his jacket and went to the closet to hang it up. Fatigue was clutching at him.

The man who stared back at him from inside the closet was holding a pointed gun in his hand.

"Now *we* can have our talk, *Signore* Hawkin," he said.

FIVE

There was very little Tony could do other than stand and gape, for this encounter was the absolutely final straw, the nightcap to an evening that he would be having bad dreams about for the rest of his life. It was too much. He was too exhausted, too shocked to even be frightened at this point and even had to struggle slightly to hold back what might prove to be an hysterical giggle. There was nothing he could say, nothing he could do; he stood there in a state of semi-paralysis with his eyes wide and round as saucers.

"That is *very* wise," the man said, emerging from the closet, circling warily around Tony who turned his head to watch. He was an individual of advanced middle age with flowing white hair and neatly trimmed white beard and mustache, dressed in a green suit of impeccable cut, wearing a waistcoat under it that appeared to be made of hand-done brocade. His shoes were highly polished as was the nickel-plated barrel of the gun in his hand. Carefully, from behind, he patted Tony quickly and professionally to see if he was armed. Apparently satisfied, he seated himself in the armchair so recently vacated by the police lieutenant and waved Tony toward the couch.

"Please, accommodate yourself, *Signore* Hawkin, so we can have a nice chat."

"Would you mind if I asked just who the hell you are?" Tony dropped heavily onto the couch well aware of the unwinking eye of the muzzle still trained upon him.

"Of course. My name is Carlo D'Isernia. You know of me?"

"No."

"I am surprised. It has been said you are the art authority and it

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is to be supposed that therefore you have heard of the Sapri altar-piece . . . ?"

"Wait, yes of course, you know this is not the first time tonight I've played this twenty-question thing. Famous altarpiece, vanished, sold to Oil-rich sheik, famous dealer involved, Italian Government still looking for him, D'Isernia. You?"

"The name. You *did* remember, that is very nice. I am so sorry you had that little difficulty earlier tonight."

"So am I. Did you arrange that?"

"Quite the contrary. I was driving the car and was forced to leave when there was a sudden rush of tough young men from an alleyway. My associates feel that this has—what is the expression— *blown* the operation. But I think differently. I thought we might have a chat so I could determine what did occur. My belief still is that the Americans can produce the correct sum despite tonight's fiasco."

"I'll be happy to tell you—but how do I know you are whom you say you are?" After the events of the night the security bug was beginning to nibble at Tony as well.

"A fair question. I will use a name. Operation Buttercup. It means something to you? And I will show you this."

He took a photograph from an inside pocket and threw it spinning so it landed near Tony's feet where he could pick it up. A color print of an unframed painting, leaning against what appeared to be a rock wall. The "Battle of Anghiari."

"That looks like it all right. If you were in the car you know more about what happened at that point than I do. I was hit on the head. I woke in the back of a restaurant and was questioned thoroughly about art matters by a man named Jacob Goldstein . . ."

" *Who?*" The gun sagged, forgotten, as D'Isernia leaned forward.

"Goldstein? You know the name? The famous Nazi catcher."

"I have heard the name before. Continue." He appeared as calm as ever; Tony knew that he wasn't.

"He seemed to know more than a bit about this operation and I answered his questions, telling him as little as I could. He seemed satisfied then and they brought me back here."

"That was all?"

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"Just a name that he asked me, I never heard of it before, he told me to remember it and think about it. Hochhande. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Nothing. Well, you seem to have been honest with me, Mr. Hawkin. Perhaps we can resume our business association that was so rudely interrupted. May I presume that if I put my weapon away, you will attempt no violence upon my person?"

"Yes, of course. Why on earth should I?"

"Why? Why does an art expert travel with a large and sharp butcher knife in his luggage?" He pointed to the floor of the closet where the offending weapon could still be seen. "I discovered this in your bag and had removed it but minutes before the police arrived. It was most uncomfortable in there. And the reason you carry this weapon?"

"I don't. I never saw it before this evening and I swear I did not put it in my luggage." All the truth, if slightly bent.

"For some reason I believe you, Mr. Hawkin. You do not strike me as being the murderous type." The gun was slipped into the jacket pocket. "Therefore we open negotiations again. You know the price we are asking for the painting?"

"I was never informed."

"One million dollars. That is agreeable to you?"

"A nice round figure. It seems a steal if the painting is the real one."

"I can assure you that it is. As proof of our good will I offer you this. Your people may examine it and test its authenticity, then return it. Then we will arrange once more for you to see the painting."

This was a flat package wrapped in cloth, which unwrapped to reveal a wooden box no bigger than the average book. Inside the box, which was closed only with a simple latch, well wrapped in cotton wool, was a flat, wooden panel as big as a man's hand, dark with age. Yet the painting upon its surface was as colorful and bright as the day it had been done. A St. Sebastian complete with dripping wounds and sore pricked with arrows. Tony gasped aloud.

"The lost left panel of the Cellini triptych. Also destroyed in the bombing of the Monte d'Capitello Museum." He should rec-

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ognize it; before coming to Mexico he had had a good read through *Lost Masterpieces of Europe*, a beautiful and depressing volume of the art destroyed during the war.

"It is indeed."

"Beautiful . . . priceless . . ."

"All of that. So you will understand the quality of my good will when I entrust it to you and your government, Mr. Hawkin. Today is Wednesday morning and the airplanes fly with great regularity. You will return the painting to me on Friday evening and our interrupted negotiations will be resumed. It is agreed?"

"Of course, yes. But you are leaving this with me?"

"It is my *bona fide*. This and the Da Vinci are the only remaining paintings from the destroyed museum."

"Do you think you could tell me the entire story of this operation?"

"Your government is being overly secretive even with their secret agents? It is the evil of all governments. Well then, you must turn your mind back to the year 1945. The war is almost over, the Germans are on the run, the victorious Allied armies closing in for the death blow. Yet, like cornered rats, the Germans fight on. In order to break their hold a diversionary landing is to be made at Salerno, I am sure you have heard of it. Tons of bombs were dropped on the German gun positions to soften them up for the landings and undoubtedly innocent people were killed who were nearby when the American bombs fell short or over. Not only people. Inland, but still close to the sea, stood the Monte d'Capitello Museum, a pilgrimage spot for the art-minded tourists between the wars. Here, in the midst of an indifferent collection of broken swords, rusting armor and other medieval junk, there rested the two masterpieces we have discussed. National treasures indeed, and they should have been put some place out of harm's way, but who thought that the war would come to this secluded corner of Italy? Boom. The great American bombs land on the Germans and one bomb flies too far and utterly destroys the wing of the museum where these two paintings hang. The gods are laughing, a few feet more and the Renaissance trash would have been blown up instead of these two priceless objects. That is the story that is in the books

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and it is a nice one indeed. The Americans have felt great chagrin about doing this and much money has been subscribed by public-spirited individuals to rebuild the museum. But the paintings, ahh, they could never be restored. But can they? You hold in your hand half of the answer to that."

"They never were blown up at all?"

"Not at all. A little German trick, some insurance in case the war was lost. The guard was killed, the paintings removed, a large amount of dynamite planted under the building. Regular as clockwork the American planes appeared that night,

the third evening in a row and the bombs fell. Boom, boom. A tragedy of war. Then, by a secret route, through Germany to France and Spain and across the ocean to Mexico to a bank vault, these and other valuable objects were smuggled by a trusted officer, a man I think you have met."

"Kurt Robl?"

"None other. Loyal and true he did as he was bid and has been the guardian ever since, for his master, for obvious reasons, could not dispose of the paintings, so his faithful servant guards them year after year."

"Not so faithful if he is trying to sell them now."

"There are limits to everyone's patience. And, since the master can no longer profit from these works of art, the servant must still live so he therefore, reluctantly, puts a small Matisse landscape on the market, trees with bathers in the foreground . . ."

"Hold on, D'Isernia, do you know what you are saying? That Matisse appeared in Argentina a few years back, part of Hitler's own collection that was never recovered. You aren't trying to tell me that the master of this faithful servant Robl is really—"

"I am."

"But Hitler has been dead for more than twenty-five years. You expect me to believe that Robl had these paintings all this time and did nothing?"

"I expect you to believe only facts. The Matisse was sold. You hold the Cellini in your hand. Although Robl engineered the coup at the Capitello Museum it was done for another's benefit. The other, as you have just said, is long dead. The servant still must eat

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so, with great reluctance, he parts with one of the treasures. Unacquainted with the world of art he bungles the sale, is cheated of the money and is almost killed. He does not wish this to happen again. This time he contacts an expert who will arrange the sale to everyone's mutual advantage."

"Yourself?"

"I have that honor." D'Isernia bowed slightly even though he was seated. Tony blinked rapidly in an attempt to clear his muddled thoughts, feeling very much out of his depth.

"You wouldn't like a drink, would you? Sorry, should have offered sooner."

"Perhaps a small vermouth so we can drink to the success of this business relationship. Some money for myself and my client, a small sum, less than the cost of a single helicopter of the kind destroyed every day in your unhappy war. For America the removal of a blot upon her honor and the restoration to Italy of treasures long thought destroyed."

"I'll drink to that, I guess."

Tony placed the painting carefully on the table and went to the bar. They raised their glasses and clinked them and the Italian downed his in a single swallow.

"I will go now, *Signore* Hawkin, and will contact you in this same place this Friday evening. A meeting will be arranged. Please have the money ready."

"I'll do my best."

Once again Tony locked and bolted the door, then stood in silence to admire the panel from the triptych. No matter how strange everything else sounded, this fragile and beautiful piece of art had an unmistakable reality. He blinked wearily. Some sleep was what he needed to sort the entire thing out, just a few hours at least, then a plane to Washington, and what a relief that would be. Safely away from the dangerous insanities of Mexico City. He carefully wrapped the painting, placed it back in its box and put it on the table by his bed. His clothes fell from him almost of their own accord and he was about to drop into the bed when he had a sudden thought. No, it was impossible. Yet once he entertained the idea it would not go away and he knew he would not be able

to get to sleep. Stumbling now with fatigue, naked as the day he was born, he prowled the depths of the suite and looked under every piece of furniture, behind every door and in every closet, until he had assured himself that he was really alone at last. Only then did he close the curtains tightly, turn off the lights and fall gratefully into bed.

With vicious thoroughness the phone call seemed timed to arrive at the precise moment when he had sunk into the deepest depths of sleep, unconscious and unaware. The ringing nagged at him, tugging and jangling, and would not go away no matter how he twisted and pulled the pillow over his head. In the end it roused him, bringing him back reluctantly to semi-consciousness so he could grope and fumble for the offending instrument, knocking the entire apparatus to the floor until he eventually found the handpiece and raised it. Wrong end too. Finally, with growing anger that was beginning to wipe away the dregs of disturbed sleep, he got the right end to his ear and mumbled something into the other.

"Is that you, Mr. Hawkin?" Mumble. "Listen, I must hang up quickly. This is a message from Rooster. He says to tell you that he is very sorry but something has gone wrong, a slight error."

"Wrong? Error? What?"

"Yes. You see the body of your friend Mr. Davidson has just been found in a canal in Xochimilco Park. The police will now be on their way to see you. Good-by."

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For a good sixty seconds Tony just lay there with his tired mind trying to fit all the pieces together. Phone. Who? True? Lies maybe. But if it were true . . . What would happen to him if the police were on the way here now and his roommate had been found dead with a knife wound in his back, while Tony had in his possession a deadly butcher knife that fitted the wound precisely? It was very obvious what would happen to him and as this reality drilled home through his sluggish brain cells he found himself standing beside the bed, covers tossed wide, eyes rolling like a trapped animal. Flight! He had to get out of here.

His fingers fumbled as he pulled on the clothes he had taken off, when?, it seemed like just minutes before. The shirt had a mourning band inside the collar while the pattern of the necktie had been enlivened with a splotch of kosher mustard. Never mind, speed counted, no time to find another. Jacket and trousers rumpled as well; refugee not fashion plate. Could he take his luggage? He considered this while he tied his shoes. No, impossible, there was no time to pack anything. But he must take the painting, get it to Washington, that could go in his attache case with his passport and other papers. Fine, work of a second.

The painting was in the case and the case locked and he had actually started for the door before memory caught him neatly between the eyes so sharply that he skidded to a stop. Hadn't he forgotten something, one little thing?

The knife. How the police would relish finding that here. It was

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still on the floor of the closet where D'Isernia had placed it. Click, open the case and toss it in. Clack, lock it and out the door. *Slam.*

"Good morning. Looks like it's gonna be a nice day."

The voice, close to his ear, jolted Tony so hard he almost dropped the case, but he held it more tightly and turned to face the man just emerging from the next suite. Stetson hat of great expanse, high-heel boots elaborately tooled and decorated, face as leathery as the boots, wrinkled and wattled. Not the police at all, just another tourist, nothing to fear. The sound of his own heart, as loud in his ears as a pile driver, slackened a bit.

"Good morning. Yes, nice day."

They discussed the weather all the way to the elevator while Tony wondered why he was doing this and not just bolting. Act normally, that was the cue. Be calm, talk with this son of the old West, and make his exit gracefully from the hotel. He had definitely decided upon this wise course when he noticed that the indicator showed the elevator rising toward this floor and, clearly as though all were glass, he saw the police who were jammed in it shoulder to shoulder.

"Late, got an appointment, good-by."

Off and running toward the exit sign down the hall leaving Tex gaping behind him, through the door and down the stairs to collide with the bellboy who was coming up them.

"Just the gentleman I was hoping to meet, *senor*. For some inexplicable reason a great number of police have entered the establishment and have been asking for you. They rise now in the elevator." The vision had been true! "I thought perhaps you would care to avoid embarrassment and exit through the service entrance."

"Done! Show me the way."

They clattered down the stairs to the ground floor and along an ill-lit hallway toward an open door and sunlight.

"I cannot thank you too much."

"There is an easy way to express one's gratitude, *senor*"

"I was about to do that. Here, take this for your services." They were at the entrance now, bills changing hands again, when Tony had a second vision, as clear as the one he had had of the police-

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jammed elevator. This involved a man who could be bought, for any man who could be bought would certainly be on sale to others.

"And take this as well," Tony said producing more money and pointing off to the right. "If the police should ask, by all means tell them that you saw me and that I went that way."

"As good as done."

Tony walked quickly off to the left, but no more than ten steps. When he looked back over his shoulder the doorway was empty. He turned and crossed the street and hurried away in the opposite direction. Not too fast, make haste slowly. There were other pedestrians here and he accommodated his pace to theirs while trying to ignore the growing sensation between his shoulder blades, his ears ready for the cries that would stop him, followed by the bark of the volley of bullets. When he reached the corner he could bear it no longer and, as he turned, he risked one long look behind him before the wall intervened. Prophecy again. Burned on his retina was an image of the mark of a bellboy pointing down the street in the direction he had originally taken, while blue-coated figures rushed past him like hounds upon the scent.

A false scent. Now he had to muddle his trail some more while he considered what he should do next. The squeal of protesting brakes sounded in his ear as a battered bus proudly titled "La Dulce Vida" stopped at the curb to disgorge passengers. In an instant Tony was in the midst of pushing figures with baskets, dangling squawking chickens, bags of beans, crates of cucumbers. This wave rushed away and a minor backwash of passengers streamed past to board the bus. It was natural to join them and he swept in, to fumble out the copper coins in payment and to stand, surrounded and lost in the crowd as the vehicle rumbled away.

What next? For the moment he was safe, but the haven was only a temporary one. He searched for an answer but could find none; his mind wasn't working too well, the affairs of the previous night and the resulting fatigue were taking their toll. For the moment it was all he could do to hold to the smooth metal of the pole and jounce along with the other passengers. Soon, he would de-

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cide soon, he held to this optimistic thought as he came as close to sleep standing up as he could.

The rest of the passengers decided for him as the bus ground to a halt one last time. There were shouts of instruction and the wild clucking of suspended hens as everyone exited, Tony as well, carried along with the press. When he was outside and had managed to force his way clear he saw that they were in the open-ended cavern of a bus terminal, Estrella de Oro, a great sign read over the entrance and this star of gold was marked prominently on all of the vehicles here. A column of cities was picked out in red letters against the dirty white of the wall, but they were distant and hard to read. What was close was a rumbling giant of the road, tires as high as his shoulder, with a winding cue of

prospective passengers snaking toward its open door. Without further thought Tony joined the end of the line and others grouped up behind him. They had shuffled forward a few paces before he realized that all the others held tickets, no doubt purchased inside the station. This was not a good thing. He liked the idea of boarding this bus at once, wherever it was going, though he disliked immensely the idea of asking for a ticket, being surveyed by the agent, who would undoubtedly be a man of suspicious manner and keen memory who would later tell all he knew to the police. What could he do? The man ahead of him, a farm worker in simple cotton and wide sombrero, clutched his slip of pasteboard between work-gnarled fingers. Tony leaned forward and spoke quietly into his ear.

"Friend, I am late arriving here and very tired. Would you save me the inconvenience of buying a ticket at the window by allowing me to purchase your ticket from you at a price ten pesos above the sum printed on its face?"

"Done," the man said with instant decision. Money and ticket changed hands and the man hurried away to buy a second ticket. The quick transaction went unnoticed in the crowd. A moment later and he was aboard, taking one of the few remaining empty seats next to a woman of solid girth whose ample flesh lapped over onto his cushion, as did her armload of packages.

"Excuse me," With his solid flank he pushed at her gelled one

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until it jiggled aside and gave him room to sit down. The flank's owner sniffed loudly but said nothing. Within the minute the door closed, to the cries of the outraged ticket holders who could not be jammed in, while the barking exhaust of the bus echoed from the concrete walls and into the street. Safety, for the moment, lay with motion and Tony sighed inwardly, then realized that there was still one important point he was unaware of.

"Would you tell me where this bus goes?" he asked his seat mate. She first delivered a look that made silent comment upon his sanity or the quantity of alcohol he had recently consumed, and only after this message had been delivered did she reluctantly answer the question.

"Acapulco."

Wasn't that nice. Playground of the jet set, and perhaps not a bad choice. There was an international airport there, he knew from the ads in the travel section of the paper, and if he moved fast he might be able to get a plane back to the United States. He hoped the efficiency of the Mexican police did not extend to wiring his description to all airports in the country at once. He hoped. He nodded forward onto the attache case on his knees and dozed off with that hope, jogging and nodding as the bus forced its way through the city traffic, sleeping better once they plunged onto the toll road over the hills. When they made the occasional stop he lifted his head to see brown walls and dusty squares, occasionally a lurch disturbed him and he looked out at the sweep of valley and mountain they rushed through, replaced soon after by the acid green of jungle when they dropped down to the coastal plain. It could not be said that he slept well, but he did feel slightly better when with a great hissing of air brakes they pulled into the Acapulco terminal. This was done by completely blocking the width of Calle Costera Miguel Aleman . . . the handsome boulevard that flanked the shore, then backing into the building. Tony blinked the sleep from his eyes and stepped out into the damp oven of the Acapulco afternoon.

"Pardon me, mister, but I would want to talk with you." This was it; the expected touch on the sleeve, the long arm of the law reaching out for him, the end of the trail. There could be no

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escape now and it would be almost a relief to end this insane chase and be taken into custody.

Almost. While the tired part of his sensibilities wanted to flop down and toss in the towel there was a small hard core of resistance that would not allow it. No. He would *not* give in that easily. All of these conflicting thoughts warred and grappled in the seconds it took him to turn and look at the man behind him. As he did so his face grew slack, his eyes opened wide in simple wonderment.

"*iMande?*" he asked, as bereft of any knowledge of the English language as the simplest peon. His accoster, a man with an exceedingly blue jaw and an official look, responded automatically in Spanish.

"What is your name?"

"Juan Lopez, why do you ask?" Spoken with the most nasal of vowels and elongation of the final syllables.

"A mistake. I am looking for a North American."

Tony shrugged and turned away, walked away with the other man's eyes burning holes in his back. One pace, two, three, five, he was at the curb and the light was green, crossing, halfway over before the cry.

"Come back here! I want to talk to you."

Tony ignored it, walking on faster and faster. The policeman was suspicious, his clothes probably; every stitch radiated *gringo* in opposition to his linguistic cover. A whistle blew shrilly and he ran.

There was a park here, between the road and the water, not large but filled with stands and stalls and vendors of souvenirs for the tourist trade, its alleys and passages forming a maze to faze any minotaur hunter. Tony plunged into it with the thud of heavy feet close behind. Left, right, squeeze between a counter laden with stuffed armadillos, frogs, snakes, deformed foxes, this standing beside a tin-sided booth of postcards, ashtrays, toy *banderillas*, bullfight posters. Out behind the stalls, then down another narrow way.

It worked. Pursuer and pursued were swallowed up in the crowds and stalls. But for how long? This was a limited area and

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already more whistles were sounding in the distance. Tony slowed to a rapid walk with sweat bursting from every pore, his jacket clinging to him like an overcoat. He took a moment to stop at a bench and remove jacket and tie and thrust them crumpled into his attache case, to roll up the sleeves of his shirt. This was a little cooler and altered his appearance slightly. The attache case could not be hidden, but more than one businessman carried this badge of rank even here. With a hunted animal's cunning he circled back and emerged from the maze almost where he had entered, backtracking while the pursuit rolled on. A minibus stopped not ten yards away and disgorged police who rushed into the park. He tried not to look at them as he crossed back over the avenue and strolled away from the scene. Keep moving, a few blocks farther on. Steps led down from the crowded houses on the hillside above and he turned up them, past a *tortilleria* with its patient queue of customers, past an open doorway with an indefinable object hanging above it. He stopped to catch his breath, looking up at the thing. An elongated silver tank of some kind with valves at one end. It had been decorated with snout and ears before, a twist of wire behind in the form of a tail, and lettered in red long porker. This small mystery was resolved by a sign behind it that read long porker diving school, learn to scuba here.

"The class goes out soon, sir, why don't you join us?"

The lounge in the doorway extended the invitation in English so apparently Tony's northern antecedents were still showing.

"I don't have my trunks with me."

"That's all right." The young man straightened up and removed the toothpick he had been worrying, eager now with the possibility of a fresh customer. "We supply everything you will need. Tank, mask, fins, weights, a bathing suit if you want one, good instruction, just one hundred and fifty pesos for everything."

"That's a little expensive," Tony said, completely by reflex.

"For the first time, to show you how much you will like it, we will make a special price of one hundred and twenty-five." He stepped aside and waved entrance; Tony went in more for a chance to sit down in the shade than any desire to enjoy the subaqueous pleasures of the bay.

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"I've never done anything like this before. I'm not sure I'm really interested." Two policemen went past the doorway talking loudly. "But this is too good a chance to miss, so I think I will." He was safe here for the moment, breathing time, thinking time until he figured out what to do next. Somewhere to the rear a small baby cried? He looked around. Tanks, masks and ancillary equipment in racks on the walls, photographs between them of the school's owner diving with various improbable people, yellowed newspaper clippings pushed into the frames for the sake of verity. Vice President Johnson, Grace Kelly, Senator Bilbo. The lure of the sea draws us all. A buxom young woman with long red hair came out of the rear room buttoning her blouse, her other hand securing an infant in burping position at her

shoulder.

"Underwater," she said, "we cannot talk. Therefore we communicate with hand signals. When we want you to come up we put our thumbs up like this, when we want you to go down we put our thumbs down like this. Do you understand?" The baby blipped a milky bubble.

"It seems simple enough. But how do I breathe?"

"You have already paid?" There seemed a limit to free information.

"No. Sorry. Here you are. The man said you have swimming trunks?"

"These should fit you." The money went into the front of a drawer from the nether reaches of which was produced a sort of knitted wasp costume of alternate black and yellow bands, large buttons on the front, long in the leg, neck high.

"If you have a place I can put this on?"

"In the back, the bathroom. You can leave your things back there too. They'll be safe, there's always someone here."

The bathroom opened off the smallish room to the rear that was cluttered with tools and workbench, a throbbing compressor in one corner, cluttered shelves above. Tony entered and locked the door behind him and sat down on the commode in tiled white solitude and wondered just what to do next.

Up until now it had been simple flight with the hot breath of the police on his neck all of the time. He had no idea they were so

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shoes and unlocked the door. The girl was putting the sleeping baby in a plastic carrier under the workbench.

"You can put your clothes on that rack," pointing. Yankee English twanged from the other room and she went out to care for the newest customers.

As Tony hung his clothes from the hook and pushed his shoes against the wall he saw the shelves and the boxes above the bench, cigar boxes for the most part, many of them dust coated, rarely touched. Spare parts, old nuts and bolts. Yes, of course, a box could probably stay here for years without being noticed. The voices were busy outside, the rustle of money. Quietly as possible, Tony lifted the pile on the top shelf and slipped the box with the painting in under them. It vanished as easily as a pebble tossed among its fellows on the beach.

Heat shimmered in the air outside the open window while he tried to keep his attention on the new skill of scuba diving. A finger across the throat, I am running out of air. To clear water from the mask, seal the exhaust valve with the palm, lean backward, blow out through the nose. Trees and high-rise hotels fringed the sand along the great arc of the bay, all the way up to the hills beyond. Sport fishing boats bobbed at the wharf; the deep blue of the water did not look inviting. The lesson ended as sturdy, damp men in bathing trunks carried in tanks and equipment, seizing up filled tanks for the empty ones. The six new students were herded together; a very schoolteacherish pair of girls plunking away at the nasal cords of their New England voices, a newly wed couple playing constant handsies with each other with grim continuity as though they would be parted forever if flesh no longer touched flesh, a pimply youth and Tony. Carrying their breathing masks, goggles, fins, towels, weights, they straggled down the steps and across the road following the school employees with the tanks. Tony came last, biting into his mouthpiece and holding his goggles to his eyes as they passed the police car at the curb. He was ignored. They were too much a part of the ordinary Acapulco scene. As they walked along the stone at the water's edge Tony looked down at the debris-strewn surface, the murky depths. As good a place as any, probably better. A few feet down nothing could be

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seen. He walked slower until all of the others were ahead, then fumbling so he did not drop anything else, he eased the knife from its nest inside the towel and let it fall. A silver shimmer, a slight splash, it was gone.

Behind him there were high-pitched shouts and a larger splash. The boy kicked a brown leg and went deep, surfacing a moment later, blowing and smiling and holding up the knife. Horrified, Tony took it back and put it away quickly, nodding thanks with ill grace, ignoring the waterfront urchin whose smile turned to an angry scowl as he cried out for some reward for retrieving the dropped knife. Tony tried to pantomime that he had no money with him, hard to do

since there were no pockets in the trunks to turn out empty, and in any case the boy was having none of it. He swam alongside shouting for money for the knife while the student divers looked on with interest. Tony stared straight ahead, walking swiftly. A moored boat intervened and the shouts died away; were the others looking at him suspiciously? He cursed silently to himself.

An incongruously small outboard was clamped to the transom of the battered, twenty-foot boat. A faded awning gave some relief from the blowtorch sun. A small boy with a coffee can worked industriously to bail out the brimming bilges. The divers found their seats, the tanks were passed in, the outboard fluttered to life and they moved slowly out onto the swelling waters of the bay. The pimply youth at Tony's side began to grow palely green and Tony pointed over the side, not feeling so well himself.

"How far out do we go?" Tony asked the man at the tiller.

He smiled and shook his head, the other employee in the bow nodding equal linguistic ignorance. No matter, it was all cutting throats with fingers and thumbs up under water, the same in Spanish and English. The boat putted up and down over the rollers, Tony nodded half asleep, the speckled youth made retching noises over the side. When the others looked away in embarrassment Tony came quickly awake and slipped the knife from the towel, waited for a shuddering moan to cover the splash, then let it slip from his fingers, this time vanishing for good. It was a marked relief to have it gone.

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It took the struggling boat over half an hour to round the point and reach an anchorage in the lee of the rocky walls of Isla la Roqueta. Here, away from the silt and floating debris of the harbor, the water was incredibly clear, limpidly blue. One by one the novices followed their instructors over the side, sitting on the gunwale and falling backward, dropping into the soft embrace of the sea. Tony was amazed how easy it all was once he sank beneath the surface. Another world of different dimensions with a new-found freedom. Silent too, other than the whistling of his breath as he sucked at the tank, comfortable and calm.

When he became more secure in this new medium, Tony dived deeper along the rope secured to the bottom. The instructor floated over and made a circle of his thumb and forefinger with the other fingers raised, reminiscent of a television beer ad but meaning underwater *Are you OK?* Tony returned the same signal signifying that indeed he was. A school of small fish moved past him, turning together on some secret signal. On the bottom among the rocks there was an aureate glint. Gold perhaps, lost treasure? He kicked down to it but the treasure was only a discarded beer can. His cares were lost for the moment in the depths of the sea.

But, when his air finally ran out and he had to surface, memory and reality returned. What next? He was still on the run and in addition, he realized with the onset of a stabbing complaint in his middle, he was very hungry. Other than the nocturnal pastrami he had had no food in—how long?—twenty-four hours at least. Flight was important, but hunger became of more overwhelming urgency as the ancient boat struggled slowly toward the land. When they finally did touch shore he was first off, even before the painter was tied, rushing to the Long Porker premises and changing quickly out of his wet trunks. His wallet and papers were intact, the redhead and infant had been on guard all the time, and when he unlocked the bathroom door he could see the box with the painting still safely buried under the pile on the shelf.

Food! The sun was nearing the horizon, the search would have moved out of this area by now. So, close by would be safest—

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as well as the quickest way to get some nourishment. He climbed the steps to the first cross street on the hill and there, like a beckoning beacon, the sun reflected from a pendant sign before an open door, el restaurante italiano. Acapulco had German, French, Chinese restaurants, so why not Italian as well? His stomach signaled with a growl that anything would do for the moment and he hurried toward it, pushing into the dim and cool interior. Checkered tablecloths and the mandatory candles in wax-laden bottles. A waiter emerged from the back after Tony had seated himself at the nearest table and tapped a coin against the bottle, bringing the menu and digging out a match to light the candle. Even before he had done this Tony had opened the menu, glanced at the first item, then closed it.

"Spaghetti and meatballs, a glass of red wine now, and some bread please."

"Sisisignore"

He sipped at the wine and had demolished the entire plate of bread long before the spaghetti came. An older man, the owner presumably, came out of the back, polished a glass or two at the bar, nodded at him gloomily and vanished again. In the distance could be heard a radio playing a constant string of commercials interrupted by an occasional brief selection of music. Then the spaghetti arrived, steaming and saliva producing, heavy with the spheres of the meatballs. Tony ate, half aware of the four men who came in and sat at the table across the room. Then two more at a different table. The food was very good.

Tony blinked and realized he was very tired, his head almost nodding. The owner was back, arms folded behind the bar, looking his way. The waiter joined him in the silent perusal. All that was missing was the cook—was he on display here! Only the great fatigue prevented him from getting angry. And the men at the other tables, weren't they looking at him too? They were speaking to each other, the words somehow strange—not Spanish at all.

His vision blurred and it was as though the film had been spliced in a projector. These men weren't Mexicans at all—they were all Italians!

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With this realization came another and more disturbing one. His head was lying on the table. It took a great effort to raise it, bobbing from side to side. The fork was still in his hand and he let it drop, horrified, into the remains of his meal.

"They've . . . they've drugged the spaghetti!" he said hoarsely.

This time when his head dropped and rested among the crumbs on the cloth it remained there. He snored peacefully.

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The swell of conversation broke in waves over his head and surged away in bubbles of words. None of them comprehensible. All of the speakers sounded very excited and appeared to be talking at the same time. With his eyes closed Tony puzzled away at this mystery until he realized that the language was Italian, and with this revelation memory returned. He opened his eyes and examined his surroundings.

It was a good while before anyone noticed that he was conscious, so concerned were they with the discussion. This was a large room, perhaps a dormitory since there were at least six beds visible other than the one Tony was lying on. There were no windows, or rather there was something that was probably a window high on the wall, its true nature concealed by the fact it was covered with heavy boards. A table, around which most of the men sat. A single door, closed. Two large wardrobes against another wall, a single light bulb dangling on a length of wire in the center, a few unframed religious pictures all mul-tichrome, glowing halos, streaming rays, Jesus with radioactive heart, were pasted directly to the yellowish plaster of the walls. There was an overriding damp coolness, like a cellar or a cave, sealed away from the Acapulco sun.

"So you are awake I see."

The speaker was the solidly built and middle-age man whom Tony had assumed was the owner of the restaurant. The one who had spiked the spaghetti.

"Poison in the pasta," Tony said, hoarsely.

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"A simple sleeping potion, harmless, you will be thirsty. *Un bicchiere da vino qui!* You are a dangerous man, Mr. Hawkin, and we do not enjoy violence."

"You don't know anything about me. Why have you done this?" One of the scowling young men came up with a glass of wine that Tony gulped at thirstily, apparently the same acid red he had had for his last supper, if this meant anything.

"On the contrary, we know a good deal, yes we do. We have your full description, a photograph, word of your activities, so you cannot lie to us but will please everyone by stating the simple truth. We of the Agenzia Terza know a good deal as you can see."

"I never heard of you."

"I am not surprised. Everyone knows of the French Deuxieme Bureau, or the British Secret Service, their cover is blown as you might say, but the Agenzia Terza is another matter." He sounded defensive; Tony decided not to push the point.

"You have taken all my clothes!" He had suddenly realized that he was lying on the bed dressed only in his white underwear shorts, while his clothes and the contents of his pockets were spread across the table.

"A precaution, you are a dangerous man."

"I've done nothing—"

"Nothing?" The interrogator's eyebrows lifted slowly, his nostrils widened, he permitted a slight upward roll of the eyeballs. "I would not call it nothing, the man you killed would not call it nothing. But that is not our concern. I want you to tell me instantly where you have put a certain piece of property belonging to the Italian Government."

"I have no idea of what you are talking about."

Again the eyebrow, eyeball, nostril gesture signifying a certain lack of credibility to the statement. "No games, if you please. I want the Cellini 'San' Sebastiano."

"That painting was destroyed during the war, that is all I know about it."

"Hardly. We have collected strong evidence that it was *not*

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destroyed and furthermore that it has come into your possession. Produce it or things will go very hard with you."

"Listen, mister ... I don't even know your name so how can I talk to you?"

"You may call me Timberio."

"Timberio, you must be confusing me with someone else. I walked into your restaurant for dinner, nothing more; as you can see, I have no paintings with me. The rest is all your doing."

"Don't think we haven't considered that." Timberio paced back and forth quickly, one hand in the small of his back, the other raised before him with its fingers making little grabbing motions as though to seize facts from the thinness of the air. "You are a very devious man, indeed you are. While the police of the entire country look for you you walk casually into the known headquarters of La Agenzia Terza."

"I thought your existence was a secret?"

"Do not seek to confuse! What are we to believe—that this ruthless killer is surrendering meek as a lamb? No! That he does not know where he is? Laughable! He knows. Then what? The answer is obvious because he wished to betray his own FBI and therefore wants it to look as though he has been apprehended by us and the hiding place of the painting forced from him, when in reality it is the doublecross in action and he wishes to sell the painting. Well, we will not pay, Mr. Hawkin, we will not play your game, we do not pay for what is rightfully ours, and we will hold you until the painting is returned."

"Ten million lire?"

"Too high."

"Make me an offer."

"I have no authority."

"I want to go to the toilet."

"Luigi, Alfredo. // *prigioniero aV gabineto?*

One of the men unbolted the door while two others seized him each by an arm and walked him across the room. Chances were not to be taken. The door opened into a dimly lit hall that smelled strongly of grease. He was pulled sharply left by his guards, though not before he noticed the stairway to the right

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rising up to a dimly outlined door. The way out? With firm grips he was propelled into the gloom in the opposite direction to a more humble doorway that was opened to reveal the ghostly porcelain form of an ancient piece of plumbing, wooden box above, newspaper- and cigarette-butt-strewn floor below. His arms were released and he was urged forward.

There was no escape in there and escape was what he greatly desired. With the word came a memory of an orientation lecture in the Army, one of the few he had not managed to sleep through, all about imaginative ways to escape if one were taken prisoner of war. One point had been stressed; the earlier the escape attempt was made the greater chance of success it held. Like now?

With thought came deed. He stepped forward—and threw his weight suddenly against the open door, crashing it into the man who was standing next to it. As the door moved so did he, ignoring the sharp cry of the second man, bouncing off the door and running back down the hall, past the still open door of the room and bounding like a gazelle up the stairs.

Before he was halfway up the entire pack was in full cry after him, men fighting and cursing as they jammed in the doorway, pounding full tilt in his wake. But fear lent a certain bounce to his run, unencumbered by weighty clothes or shoes, so that he sprang up the last steps and slammed bruisingly into the door at the top which, providentially, was unlocked. It burst open under his onslaught and he staggered through into a large kitchen. There was only the briefest image of white hats, black stoves, shocked faces, as he raced the length of it and through the swinging door there, his arrival coinciding exactly with that of the taciturn waiter entering with a tray of dirty dishes.

Momentum counted and Tony kept on going, though staggered still more now by the impact, while the encounter had a far more dramatic impact upon the waiter. Backward he went, emitted a single high-pitched shriek, and into a table which collapsed under his weight. This drew the undivided attention of all the diners in the room, which attention was instantly repaid by the sight of a nearly naked man running the length of the restaurant and out of

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the front door followed closely by a shouting pack of men. It was very dramatic.

Tony appreciated neither the drama nor the scene and was already beginning to feel very tired, still partially suffering the effects of the drug. Unthinkingly, pulses of red fire being driven into his temples, he retraced the course he had taken earlier on his way to the restaurant, scarcely aware that night had fallen and people were emerging in the cool of the evening. Down the street and down the steps, gravity now lending speed to his plunge, brushing by surprised couples, hearing the enraged shouts of his pursuers. Down and down past the now dormant Long Porker and the still active *tortilleria*, across the sidewalk—the road miraculously empty of traffic at that moment or he would have been struck by instant death since he was unable to stop-across the flagstones to topple headlong into the dark waters beyond.

The sudden wet shock had an instant restorative effect, cooling and soothing him. Though his lungs ached he stayed under as long as he could, swimming steadily out to sea. When he finally did surface, gasping in the welcome air, he was beyond the pool of illumination thrown by the light and could tread water for a moment to catch his breath. And admire the turmoil on the wharf. His pursuers had been joined by an interested crowd of spectators and more were hurrying up. A policeman was listening to the spirited explanation of one of the men while two others tried to untie the rope securing a rowboat to the land. Some people pointed and shouted at things in the water, but no one was pointing in his direction. Slowly, so as not to splash, Tony swam away from the busy scene and toward the line of deep-sea fishing boats now secured for the night.

Escape was time consuming but simple enough. There was much flashing of lights into the water, but there was too much area to cover, too many dark spots under the counters of the boats and between their hulls. Twice Tony had to dive and swim underwater when the lights approached, but eventually he outdistanced them. By the time he reached the commercial dock and the bulk of a dark freighter most of his pursuers had been left

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far behind. There was activity now aboard the freighter, people on the bridge, and eventually the searchlight there was manned and put into action sweeping the water's surface. But Tony had paddled farther out to sea by this time and the light never came close. He lay on his back and floated, kicking gently, paralleling the lights and the shore and moving steadily away from the center of town toward the towers and battlements of the tourist hotels along the bay.

What next? There was plenty of time for thought now as he paddled along and very few of the thoughts were at all cheering. Escape had been spontaneous and cumulative, one thing leading naturally to another until it had brought him here. But where was he? In the middle of Acapulco Bay in his undershorts, getting tired and slightly chill, bereft of money, clothes, friends, succor, den or destination. It was all very, very depressing. What could he do? The mental request for information went out but no answer was returned. He swam on, angling slowly toward shore so he would not be too far out when total exhaustion did finally strike. Or perhaps he should simply swim in the other direction? Out into the sunset and eternity and end this grim farce once and for all. This solution was tempting until a wave broke over his face and he surfaced coughing and spitting and not feeling in the slightest like continuing his impromptu dive into the dark depths.

Now the towers of the hotels were beginning to drift by, their brightly lit windows twinkling a warm welcome that he yearned to submit to. But how? Crawling out of the sea like some dripping monster and writhing damply into the lobby? Impossible. He swam on, ever slower but ever on, until a larger and darker tower came into view with the magic calligraphy of HILTON shining high above it.

Hilton, how he longed for its familiar American embrace. If there were an American heaven to go to it would be a big Hilton in the sky; what more could one ask? Warmth, luxury, bloody steaks and chill ice water, baked beans and brown bread, breakfast in bed and the home-town newspaper on the tray, hurrying

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waiters, man-sized drinks, hospitality and home. He yearned painfully for the Hilton.

Happy cries delivered the message to his soggy brain cells that perhaps he would not yearn in vain. Under the great orange globe of a newly risen moon, some happy Hilton denizens were disporting on the beach. Children for the most part, though a few nubile girls pranced at the ocean's edge for the pleasure of their male counterparts. Slowly Tony beached himself away from the small crowd, his knees and hands fumbling at the novel surface of solid land. At first he could do no more than sit in the water while the small waves foamed around him, gaining enough strength to stand and walk without staggering to the welcome shelter of a lounge chair, beneath the mushroom shadow of a palm-thatched umbrella. His undershorts were swimming attire in the night and he drew no attention, no attention at all. Collapsed onto the lounge his strength slowly returned.

Being an FBI agent was rapidly becoming more of a liability than an asset. With a sneer, invisible in the darkness, he recalled his own naive attitude of, when?—just a few days ago. Then he had been looking forward to the excitement of a free trip to New York City as an art authority. He had come a bit farther than New York and the excitement was now of a far more drastic nature. Two days out of Washington and he was a wanted murderer, an art thief, an acquaintance of international spies and thieves, an indecent exposé in public places, a passportless, moneyless, paperless refugee. Was there no end to all this? Could there be anything except an unhappy end to his insoluble situation? He had visions of sudden death, a lifetime prison sentence, quick disappearance. He sighed into the darkness, immensely refreshed by the moments of indulgence and rampant self-pity.

Now, what next? Surrender would be simple enough. All he had to do was let exhaustion and the warm evening take over and go to sleep right here in the chair. His unusual attire would be observed in the morning and he would awake to see a squad of police eager to rush him to prison. He let his eyes close for a moment to determine how it felt, it felt very good, but after a short space of time he struggled the lids open again.

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After all that he had gone through to get here the idea of meek surrender just did not have that much appeal. Since he was still free he had at least an outside chance of getting the painting into the hands of the correct authorities—whoever they might be—and of hopefully clearing his name. This last became more and more difficult as the list of his crimes mounted, but at least it was a remote possibility. So—what to do?

Be a criminal. Everyone thought he was one, a dangerous and murderous agent, a man greatly respected by that sinister branch of the Italian Government, the Agenzia Terza. Respected even more now after his dramatic escape from

their drugged, spaghettilike embrace. Now, without being apprehended, he had penetrated the guarded fortress of the Hilton, playground of happy, loaded Americans. There must be some way he could capitalize on the situation. What he needed most were clothes and a little money, and here he was surrounded by luxuries of clothing and gobs of greenbacks. All he had to do was lay his hands on a bit of it. A little scouting was in order.

His first theft was an infinitesimal one, a towel, no theft at all until he left the premises with the hotel property. It had been thrown carelessly onto a table and as he passed his fingers scraped it up. Wrapped around his waist it supplied a far greater feeling of security than his drawers ever had. That this ruse was effective was proven when he met a couple coming down the path from the hotel, the male similarly garbed, while a hotel employee passed all three without a nod. What next though? The cliff of the building rose up and a plan did not present itself. There was no point in entering the lobby unless he had some destination in mind. Should he just ask for a key by number? This could work—then again it could fail just as easily and his freedom would be over. Best to exhaust the other possibilities first.

Almost instantly a possibility presented itself. A swimming pool that was both inside the building and out. He sat on the edge, the towel dropped coyly behind him as he slid quickly beneath the surface. Breast stroking slowly so he could look around, Tony bobbed his way into the dim-lit premises.

This pool was the complete Venice of swimming pools, ap-

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parently designed exactly to his specifications. It wound about inside the hotel, encircling a herbaceous dining area that was connected by a bridged canal. Although it was far better lit than he really desired, he made his way along the canal looking up at the infrequent diners and imbibers and seeking some opportunity.

There was nothing. He completely encircled the area, swam back outside, then returned. The pool was almost empty, as were the tables, in this interim hour between day and evening pleasures. This little tour could not go on forever, fatigue was creeping up again and he was getting a generally waterlogged feeling. Once more around and back to the towel and other plans. Perhaps this time someone would leave a purse or a key at the pool's edge and he could indulge in a bit of piracy. There was one newcomer at a poolside table, a thin man wearing dark glasses, against the actinic dangers of the candles perhaps. Glasses? Glasses! Glasses like that, seen somewhere before, the pimp's mustache below the prying nose, the last dying survivors of a head of hair glued down on the skull above. A familiar combination, very familiar indeed. Tony dived and surfaced at the tiled edge.

"Sones," he whispered, "Ross Sones."

The FBI agent was sucking at a straw that projected up from what appeared to be an entire coconut, and he kept on sucking, evidencing by not the slightest twitch of a muscle that this aquatic encounter was in any way out of the normal. Only when he lowered the nut did he permit his eyes to flicker down once and away.

"I have been looking for you, Hawkin."

"Well that's just fine because I have been looking for you as well. What on earth is that thing you are drinking from?"

"You are in trouble you know. A *coco preparado*, sometimes called a *coco-fuerte*. It is a green coconut with the top sliced off and the milk inside laced with rum and chilled with ice."

"It sounds like just what I need, please pass it down."

"You know that—"

"I know that I say nothing until I get a drink. Give."

Sones looked casually about, then quickly slipped the coconut into Tony's waiting hand. He rested it on the tile and sucked

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deep. Wonderful. A purple flower tucked into the top of the coconut added a touch of gay color, the rum in the drink pumped the juice of life into his veins.

"When I say trouble, Hawkin, I mean big trouble. The CIA has leaked a report at a very high level that you murdered Davidson. Not only that but you exceeded orders and obtained a certain painting and the people who supplied it are very annoyed since they thought they were giving it to us."

"Now just a minute. Us, we, the FBI do have it since, as far as I know, I am still an employee. As to the murder thing, it's a frame."

"There is a witness . . ."

"I know, and he's rich with my money too. But . . ."

"You wish another drink, *senor*, since I see you have finished?" The waiter appeared silently out of the darkness and hovered expectantly. "What, yes, I suppose so." For a fraction of a moment there Sones had lost his cool, but it was quickly re-established.

"The same? And your friend in the *piscina*—would he like one too?"

"Yes, by all means," Tony said, the last dregs slurping in his straw. "I will join my friend."

Sones nodded and waited until the waiter had withdrawn before he spoke. "You have the painting?"

"I know where it is. But if I am fired because I'm a murderer I am holding onto it."

"I didn't say . . ."

"Yes you did. Look, is there any reason why I should have killed Davidson? The idea is madness. Someone was waiting in the room when we got there, knifed him and went out the front door. Period. I didn't do it and I know nothing else about it. That two-timing CIA man Higginson knows a lot more. He's the one who framed me by seeing to it that the corpse was found instead of making it vanish."

"Yes, I can believe that. The CIA, I should have known. Though there is also the matter of your giving information to the Israelis."

"What information? I was hit on the head and shlepped off by them. I didn't tell them a thing that they didn't know already."

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What they were really interested in was this contact man, Kurt Robl, and Goldstein mentioned the name Hochhande, which means nothing at all to me. As to the paintings, they seemed to know all about them and couldn't care less."

"Our security cover has not been tight on this operation."

"You can say that again—the understatement of the ages. And for your information a sinister group called the Agenzia Terza has also moved in."

"I would not worry too much about them if I were you. They are not what you would call a major threat."

"Major or not they caused me enough trouble. And they seem to have a point there about the paintings belonging to them."

"In the long run the art will be returned to Italy, but when it goes it will be donated by the American Government. There has been trouble for years over this Monte Capitello thing and we want to clean the slate once and for all. Bring in the evidence that the entire mess was a Kraut plot and they blew up the museum and stole the paintings and here we are bringing them back after all these years to set the record straight. And when credit is given it will be seen that the FBI really carried the ball."

"Great. Which raises a very important point. Come on, tell me quickly. Am I still a trusted employee of the Bureau or not?"

"There have been no orders about a change in status."

"Exactly. And I *do* have the picture."

"You are still with us."

"Fine. Order up a couple more of these, they're really good." The second coconut was soon empty and as he cleaned up the few drops that hung to the meat inside, the rich fumes of the rum rose to his brain and, in a single flash, revelation came to him, an idea that his subconscious had been nurturing for a long time, awaiting only unlocking by

an alcoholic key. "Then here is the plan. I'll meet you wherever you want and bring the painting, and we'll take up our former relationship where we left off."

"This hotel is watched closely. Therefore downtown . . ."

"Negative. I don't mean here. Give me at least a day and I'll bring the painting wherever you want in the Republic. But

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not in Acapulco. I want to get out of this city and leave everyone still here looking for me. Understand?"

"It could be dangerous and I doubt if we can get you out of the city easily."

"I'll get myself out."

"It would be best if I took the painting with me."

"Negative again, Sones old boy. You know and I know and we both know the other knows that that painting is my ticket back to the job. My, but the coconut was good!" He sipped deep of the newly arrived one while Sones sat quietly in thought.

"All right. I can see no other way. We are making our contact in Cuautla, that is in Morelos south of Mexico City. There is a resort, Cocoyoc, that is close by. We are in *casita* seven."

"I never heard of the place."

"It is not far from Cuernavaca."

"Well, I've heard of that so I should be able to find it. With some luck I'll be there tomorrow. Thursday, but not before night. And D'Isernia said that he had to have the painting back by Friday night or the whole deal was off. He also said that he would contact me at the hotel in Mexico City, which is impossible now because of the police. So how do we find him?"

"No problem, in fact he has been in touch with us, very annoyed about your having the painting. We guaranteed the Friday delivery in Cuautla."

"Very nice of you considering you had no idea where it was. That still doesn't leave very much time to get it to Washington and back and have it checked for authenticity."

"That has been considered as well. We have co-opted a specialist from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I will arrange for the specialist to meet us in Cocoyoc. All of this is of course dependent upon your being there with the painting. You can do that?"

"Don't worry, in the bag. But I'll need your help."

"How?"

"Loan me a pair of your swimming trunks and a sport shirt. And make sure there is at least a thousand pesos in the pocket."

"What are you going to do?"

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"Have another drink while you're getting them and keep my plans to myself. Security is very loose on this operation as you said yourself."

Sones hesitated, but apparently realized that there was no other way. He left without another word—so that Tony had to call the waiter and order himself—but returned quickly with the garments wrapped in a towel.

"The money's there?" Tony asked, with a new-found suspicion inculcated by the past days' events.

"A thousand, like you said."

"Okay. I'll swim out and you follow. Leave it by the pool outside and be on your way. See you in Cocoyoc."

"What are you going to do?"

"That's my secret."

Tony smiled and laid one finger beside his nose and stifled a small belch. That *was* his secret, by God, and no one was ever going to find out.

EIGHT

With the towel-wrapped bundle under his arm Tony walked into the sea. It was cooler than the pool had been and quite pleasant. Police at the airport, bus terminal, Hilton, everywhere. Hah! They couldn't stop him. They thought they could but they couldn't. He walked on, knee deep in the water, and waved amicably at the private policeman who stood at the end of the beach where a subtle breakwater and not too subtle barbed wire separated the playground of the tourist from the plebeian strand beyond. The man waved back amicably, for his duty was to prevent illegal entry and it was no concern of his if a guest chose to leave in this fashion. For love perhaps, or the absence of it, the *gringas* were not at all like Mexican wives; he could think of many reasons why a quiet exit could be undertaken for the heady joys of the fine city beyond.

The waves came only as high as Tony's waist as he rounded the barrier; he held his bundle above out of harm's way. There were couples beyond enjoying the cool of the evening on the beach and he continued past them until he found a secluded spot in the lee of a sign that proclaimed the value of *cerveza Carta Blanca*. Here he stripped off and discarded the sodden shorts and replaced them with the slightly baggy and overly colorful trunks. The shirt matched, a jungle of wild blossoms now happily black in the shadows, and in the pocket was a crisp bundle of notes. Wonderful! Now the metamorphosis began. He strolled out onto the avenue, lost in the crowd of identical and even more exotic garb, and wandered toward the center of the city.

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His first purchase was a pair of sandals from a curb-side vendor. There were ten one-hundred-peso notes in the bundle and the small merchant grumbled at the size of the bill but managed to have it changed in a store when Tony suggested he was moving on without buying. Before he left he asked directions to the central market where he would disappear.

The heat of the day still lingered in the streets, intensifying the thirst that dried his throat and settled a chalky deposit over his teeth. In an attempt to allay these symptoms he stopped at a stall for a bottle of cold beer which helped a good deal, if only temporarily. The master spy, what was his name?—Timberio— had mentioned a thirst after the drugging and he certainly was right. Temporarily fortified, Tony left the main streets and plunged into a narrow corridor that led to the lights and bustle of the market.

Mercado central. The central market. There is one in every Mexican city large enough to be called a city. Each one different, all very much the same. Open on a seven-day-a-week basis, with certain days the most popular. Stands, stalls, counters, corners, merchants, mendicants, noise, music, *mariachi* bands, beggars, something for everyone, everything for sale. Fruit stands piled high with tropical color; yellow, green and red bananas, black *zapote*, yellow-orange mango, purple cactus fruit. The herb merchant with his dried and aromatic wares carefully labeled each for its medicinal qualities; this coarse powder for gout and backache, that miraculous flower for cancer, the other to make tea for liver pain. A great bustle and air of excitement everywhere, odor of fresh meat at the rows of butcher stalls, newly dead carcasses flayed and hung, starvation-ribbed dogs under foot snatching at scrap, dodging the angry kicks. Just beyond, in logistic proximity, the food stalls and al fresco restaurants, meat steaming on embers before the consumers' eyes, great caldrons of beans, hot crispness of tortillas, customers standing or sitting on stools, backs to the crowd.

Everything for sale; knives, *machetes*, mattresses, mattocks, harnesses, whips, brassieres, bicycles, all there, all could be bought. And in between the grander merchants the single salesmen, the

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man sitting on his heels with a handful of limes held out before him, the woman with the wooden box spread with the cigarettes from a single packet to be sold one at a time, next to her the *chirmoles* vendor packing tiny paper cones with the living contents of these wood grubs so favored as a sauce ingredient.

Into this exciting atmosphere Tony plunged, rubbing shoulders and treading on heels as his were tread upon. First the hat vendor with his rising rows of somber *sombreros*, endless theme played upon wide brim and high crown. A purchase, simple white straw, press on. A beer to wet the throat. White pants, white shirt, the daily dress of the field worker, the farmer. These carefully wrapped in newspaper, a *machete* added for authenticity, the bundles then stuffed into a straw *morral*, the bag carried or worn over the shoulder. Tony winked at no one in particular and went, by a circuitous route to be sure he wasn't followed, in the direction of *hombres*, the cavernous concrete public toilet. Here, in a metal-sided booth, he effected the change. All traces of the Yankee tourist who had entered vanished, were wrapped in paper and stuffed into the *morral*, and a man of the people emerged, one more of Mexico's teeming masses. Now he was invisible.

A small celebration was in order and the swinging, slatted doors of a cantina named La Cucaracha drew him on. His skin was tanned enough, his hair dark enough, his Spanish good enough for this guise. The police would never see him, not notice the *gringo* spy within the simple farmer. It was a ploy that could not fail. Smoke and loud music from the juke box washed over him and he pushed to the wood bar and called out.

"Beer."

"The beer here is too warm and I would not recommend it."

The man who said this stood at Tony's side, tall, wide shouldered, dressed in the same manner, a tiny glass clutched in his great hand, a look of eternal unhappiness drooping his hanging mustaches even lower.

"What would you recommend?" Tony asked with eager anticipation.

"*Mezcal*? Gloomily, but it was his natural manner; he was enjoying himself greatly. "The kind from Tequila."

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"A very good idea. Will you join me?"

"I accept with pleasure. I am called Pablo."

"Antonio."

With slow anticipation each licked the base of his thumb so the salt would adhere when they shook it on, seized up lime wedges between salty thumb and forefinger, raised the glasses with the transparent distillate of the cornucopious maguey in the other hand, then performed the pleasurable ritual of a lick of salt, a drink of *tequila*, a bite of lime, to blend all the flavors in the mouth at the same time in the indescribably fine combination that, according to those who know, is the only way to take *tequila*.

"Now I will buy you a drink," Pablo said.

"You will not feel insulted if I disagree. The uncle of my wife who recently died left in his will a small sum of money which I now have. He was a good man, this uncle, and liked to drink, so I will buy a bottle with uncle's money and we will drink to him."

"That is a very fair and loyal idea. I can tell he must have been a fine man." Pablo rapped loudly with the thick glass and the bartender hurried with their order.

When the level of the bottle had crept lower, at the end of an interesting anecdote involving some stolen chickens, Tony mentioned a certain feeling of hunger and Pablo nodded solemn agreement and rapped again with his glass.

"Two sandwiches."

Tony watched, with a measured amount of trepidation, as the bartender cut two rolls in half and from a hulking glass crock removed two very green, large, and exceedingly hot peppers, each of which he mashed into one of the rolls. Then, as a further savory, he poured some of the pickling sauce from the crock over the bread, this sauce being a little bit hotter than the peppers themselves, before placing the finished product on the wood before them. Pablo ate his in regular bites, masticating each mouthful with bovine thoroughness before swallowing, and when he was finished he licked the last drops of flavor from his finger tips. Tony ate his as well, enjoying every bit of it although tears streamed from his eyes all the while; he was out of practice. They sipped at the *tequila* to hold the nourishing sandwiches down.

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Farther down the bar a very drunken man loudly proclaimed that Jalisco was the finest city in Mexico and all other towns made of goat droppings, which is not the truth, and when he became too pushing in his claims someone hit him and he was thrown into the street, so naturally the topic turned to place of birth. Pablo was from the village of Tenoztlan here in the state of Guerrero, not far distant, and he knew, since he cared about these things, that Antonio was not from Guerrero but from a more distant state.

"You are correct. I am from California."

"That far! But at least we are upon the same sea."

He assumed that by California the state of Baja California was intended and not the North American state above it, but before Tony could correct him, or decide if he should correct him, another man standing close by spoke first.

"My village is Cuajiniculpa which the uneducated call Cuijla which you can tell by looking at me."

Pablo nodded agreement but, squint as he may, Tony could see no reason for this interesting statement. This man looked very much like all the others in the cantina, though his skin was darker than usual, so he was moved to ask why.

"You are not from these parts so your ignorance is understandable. Many years ago when slaves were brought to this country from Africa a very proud tribe would not be enslaved, they were called the Bantu. They captured the ship on which they were imprisoned, killed their captors, horribly with great justification it is said, then landed and escaped and founded our village. It is a very old story."

"They were very big for slaves in those days," Pablo said as they all drank in the memory of the escaped slaves. "What they tell you in the schools is garbage. The Spaniards made slaves of all the Indians."

"When they did not want slaves they killed the Indians," Tony said. "I should know since I am an Indian."

"I am an Indian too."

"I am a Bantu."

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"My tribe would never be enslaved. Have you heard of the Apache?"

"I have. They live far to the north in Chihuahua."

"Exactly, and in Sonora as well and in the states of North America. We were never enslaved. We fought and we died but we were never enslaved."

"But we are enslaved now," Pablo said with deep bitterness, his continual expression of gloom intensifying. "They say the revolution is still being fought but it is not. What we need is a new revolution and get rid of the old party of the revolution. They have all the money and we have nothing."

"None of that kind of talk in here!" the bartender called out. "Outside with that kind of thing."

"I talk the way I please," Pablo said as, with a very swift motion, he seized the almost empty bottle of *tequila* by the neck and broke the bottom off against the edge of the bar adding another deep scratch to the others, also possibly caused in this same manner.

The bartender was however well prepared for this eventuality and raised the long-barreled revolver he already held and ordered him out. Pablo tossed the bottle aside in disgust, there was no loss of maleness in not fighting a man with a gun, and left. His friends went with him calling back graded insults that described the unusual sex life of the bartender's female relatives in great detail. Tony stumbled on the rough footing outside and held to the rocklike form of Pablo for support, as did the Bantu since they were all brothers now, and they progressed in this manner, arms about one another, looking for another place to drink. They entered Sal Parado si Puedes singing "Guadalajara" to show they were of a revolutionary bent of mind, and the owner here was either more lenient, or shared their political sympathies, because they were invited to a table while a fresh bottle of *mezcal* was brought. This was not the effete Joseph Crow the Redheaded Woman from Tequila that they had been drinking, but the authentic *hornitos* with the little maguey worm coiled in the bottom to prove its authenticity. It was very good to drink and the worm undoubtedly added something to the flavor, and someone commented that was it not interesting that there was a big worm in the big

bottles while

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small worms rested in the smaller ones. The others had never noticed this amazing fact and bottles of different sizes were sent for and, sure enough, in the very small bottle, containing but a single drink, the worm was no bigger than a small fingernail. Since the bottles were already there, Tony insisted on paying again and two new friends joined them, they must be finished of course. It was about this time that Tony became dimly aware that reality was skipping like a broken and mended movie film. Highly amusing. He attempted to explain it to the Bantu but time skipped again suddenly so that the man who was sitting by his side was now a moment later sleeping peacefully with his head on the table.

An indefinable measure of time passed and they were in a different bar although Tony had no memory of going there. It was during this mysterious transition that Pablo vanished, as well as the Bantu who was undoubtedly still asleep at the last table. However, there were new friends to share a new bottle and when Tony had trouble pouring from it they were only too ready to oblige. About this time he also discovered that sleeping on the table was a very good idea and he did this, occasionally waking to listen to the friendly hum of conversation, then drifting off again.

When he awoke next it was to brush at the flies that were walking on his face, stirred into activity by the low rays of the rising sun that were burning through the open door. He blinked at this then screwed his eyes shut again instantly since the light pierced through them and directly into his brain like a heated needle. Sleep battled with discomfort and discomfort won. His arm was asleep where he had been lying on it, while a sore ache spread through his midriff. With a great deal of effort he managed to roll over and pull out the *morral* that was digging into his side. But the flies and sun were inescapable and eventually, groaning weakly, he opened his eyes and tried to understand where he was. On the floor. In a bar. Alone. The owner, who was sipping a cup of coffee behind the bar, wished him a good morning when he saw that he was awake. Tony could only produce a groan in reply.

It was terrible. Sleep has its own physiological rules, the engines of the body idle while the internal chemistry operates at a reduced level. Now, awake, the messages of distress were starting to

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come in. The needle of pain that had shot through his eye into his brain stayed there and even grew in intensity while at the same time, he had never had a dual headache before, a sort of clamp of anguish encircled his skull whenever he attempted to move it. In addition to this torment there were internal agonies that came and went with some regularity. Not to mention the nausea, the all-embracing, world-trembling nausea such as he had never experienced before. Another groan, rich with feeling, was dragged protesting from his lips, cracking its way through his dry throat. "Water . . ." he said in a hoarse whisper and the bar owner nodded with understanding.

"Here, a large glass, drink it all down."

Tony managed to sit up and to take the cloudy glass, but his hand shook so that the water slopped over the edge and he had to seize it with both hands, canceling the vibration of one out with the other. The effort exhausted all the energy he had available so he sat, slumped, against the wall, the glass on the floor beside him, and tried to force coherent thought through the alcohol-numbed channels of his brain. With some reluctance memory returned. The Hilton, yes it had all started there with those damn loaded coconuts aswim with rum. He must have been half-crooked by the time he left the hotel and what followed, followed quite naturally. People always said Indians shouldn't drink. He normally didn't, not since the Army where the numbness of drink substituted for despair. It was foolish, but it was at least over and he could go back to his plan, weaker, poorer, but wiser. How poor exactly? Trembling fingers searched his pockets.

Poor nothing, broke. Whether his drinking companions had rolled him or simply drank his substance was not important. It was gone, all of it, gone. A few copper centavo pieces, almost worthless, were all that remained. Gone.

With this discovery came an overwhelming depression that sank him into even deeper misery, full distance from the elation of the previous evening. Master spy, that's what he was, the super foreign agent who could do anything. And failed completely inside of one day. All gone, every bit of the money, and with it any chance of success. A total failure.

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"After the water," said the bar owner, "you must have a hair from the dog that has bitten you. This will also help the tremors of the hand, *telegrafista* it is called, as in the motion of the fingers of a telegraph operator at the key, a symptom of *tequila* drinking. It will pass. Here."

A smaller glass appeared almost under Tony's nose, filled to the brim with the transparent and deadly liquid that brought about his downfall of the previous night. Its sharp cactus-needle odor assaulted his nostrils and bitter bile rose up into his mouth at the same time in response. He could not.

"Drink it, it is the only way." Spoken from the source, the man who knew.

Tony realized that he had to do it, had to sober up and look for a way out of this mess of his own creation, but forcing his traitor hand to seize the glass was a totally different matter. He assembled the shattered shards of his will and tried, driving that vibrating member up to seize the glass and hurl the contents down his throat before nausea reversed direction.

Down it went, burning like lava, searing a track that led straight to his interior where it exploded; he shuddered as with the ague. But the burning died down, carrying with it most of his worse symptoms, permitting a measure of intelligible thought at last. The owner nodded with approval. He should nod, a good part of Tony's money now rested in his ancient cash register. Payment in advance for drink, floor space and eye opener. Perhaps more.

"Would it be possible to use your premises to wash?" Tony asked. His hand grated over a chin like coarse sandpaper. "And to shave as well?"

Without too much reluctance a towel and razor were supplied: the hard cake of yellow soap would have to do for everything. Once washed, cooled, shaved, nicked, and blood-spotty Tony had to admit that he did feel a little bit better. The next thing was money. With much greater reluctance the owner permitted him a single phone call, his credit was obviously running out, which had only even more depressing results. Mr. Sones had checked out of

the Hilton earlier that morning, undoubtedly while he lay snoring

in a drunken stupor, and by now was halfway to Mexico City.

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With shuffling tread Tony exited, wincing at the searing light, his feet automatically taking him downhill to the shore. There was a concrete bench here under a palm tree and he slumped onto it and tried desperately to see a way out of this dilemma, but he could not. A charter boat thud-thudded out to the open sea and far off a ship's whistle hooted. He sank deeper into black depression. Someone sat on the bench next to him and he was not even aware of it until the newcomer spoke.

"Listen, Joe, you got contacts here, you look like a guy what knows his way around. If you can put me in the way of some good grass, couple of lids or more, I'll make it worth your while. Whaddaya say?"

The speaker was American, camera-hung, gaily dressed and eager.

"No spik English."

Disgruntled, the prospective pot purchaser walked away. Tony felt a measure of disgust. So that was what he looked like? A marijuana pimp or something. He had indeed sunk about as far as could be sunk.

No! A rush of indignant self-assurance booted him in the rump. Never! He was a well-disguised international agent, that was all. A beautiful disguise that worked to perfection, a disguise improved by a night on a bar floor; he might even have done that on purpose for authenticity's sake. Foreign agents brook no bounds when it comes to doing their job. All right, he had one or two too many (one or two what? Bottles?), but that was a mistake he would not repeat. His cover had not been blown, he was still relatively intact and on the job. Just a little bit lighter in the pocket, that was all. How much was it? Eighty dollars, no more, a minute fraction of what the government was spending on this operation. All he needed was some more money and he would be back on the job crossing swords with the best of them in this dangerous game of wits.

With this came the first glimmerings of an idea. Not the best idea so he filed it away for consideration after he had worked on other and more secure schemes. Except none of these came to mind easily, or at all for that matter, so with a great deal of reluctance he

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had to return to his first brainstorm which revolved around the fact that the only people he was acquainted with in Acapulco, other than his drinking companions of the previous evening and the departed FBI agent, were the members of the Italian Agenzia Terza. Could that acquaintance be turned to his advantage? He had one important thing going for him, the fact that they considered him a dangerous and intelligent agent for the opposition, a false belief admittedly but one now even more strongly rooted since his dramatic escape from their clutches. What was needed was a plan that would enable him to take advantage of this belief without putting him in the way of bullets or spiked spaghetti. And it wasn't as though they were enemies since the paintings would go to Italy in the end. Grunting with the effort he cudgeled his brain.

No more than half an hour later he took the first step away from the bench, starting on the path which he hoped would lead to success; in any case he had very little to lose at the moment. Perched in sun-baked solitude by the shore was the concrete blockhouse of a public convenience and, as he pushed open the *caballeros* sign one more time, the thought came unbidden that being a secret agent meant spending a lot of time in this sort of locale. There were no horsemen in the gloomy interior, or occupants of any kind, and he quickly changed clothes, putting the peon into the *morral* and taking out the Yankee. A little creased by being slept on, but the creases were well disguised by the active floral pattern. There was a discarded newspaper in the corner that he could put to good use, though the headline that caught his eye was far from reassuring, murder in Mexico: death by violence. He read quickly about the hapless North American tourist murdered in a singularly brutal fashion, no details given, by his roommate who was now fleeing justice although the police were closing in. It did not make inspiring reading. Smoothing out the newspaper, with the damning headline facing inward, he used it to wrap the clothes, *machete*, hat, into a not too untidy bundle. He slicked his hair back with some water, then, one at a time, put his feet into the sink and washed them and the sandals free of dust and grime. The reflection in the mirror was that of a seedy *gringo*, but at least a *gringo*. Now the next step.

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The door to El Restaurante Italiano was already gaping open. This time, however, with very little effort, he resisted its gastronomic blandishments, memories of his last visit being still quite clear. Instead of entering he leaned in through the doorway blinking at the sudden gloom, and spotted the waiter setting a table to the rear.

"Hey, you. Tell Timberio that I want to see him out here. Now."

The waiter looked up at the hail and dropped a plate that shattered into fragments on the floor, then stood with mouth open and eyes bulging. Very satisfactory if this is what they thought of him. Tony broke the paralysis by waving his bundle in the man's direction with a certain threat in the gesture so the waiter jumped back, then ran into the kitchen. Tony strolled the few feet to the corner where he could see people approaching from any direction, then leaned against the wall and tried to adopt a sinister air. A hung-over expression asserted itself instead and he twisted his lips in what he hoped was a cold sneer.

Within seconds Timberio popped from the door, and vanished just as precipitously when he saw Tony nearby. The second time he peered out cautiously in all directions before sidling carefully down to whispering distance.

"What is it you want?"

"To talk business just as I did last time." Sneer. "Before you blew the whistle with that drug attempt."

"I am sorry, it was a mistake."

"You had better believe it was. I only came back—and this is your last chance—because money talks. Talk money."

"I am sure that something can be arranged."

"Name a figure."

"Five hundred thousand lire."

Tony reached inside his bundle and seized his hat, then poked the entire thing in Timberio's direction. "I have a gun in here and I am a deadly shot, so no more tricks. Say a million."

Timberio shied back, beginning to sweat. "Yes, a million, it can be arranged."

"That's better. I don't have the painting with me."

"Payment on delivery."

"Of course. Give me a thousand pesos now and the balance when I hand the painting over. I need it for the man who is holding the painting for me—and also as a symbol of your good will." A globe of fiery gas rose at this instant from the churning vat of his stomach and Tony laughed to cover the sound of the eructation. Necessarily, the laugh that emerged had a singularly artificial and echoing quality which Timberio misunderstood as the laugh of a cold killer, for he stepped back again, eyes on the bundle.

"No need for guns . . ."

"There had better not be." He removed his hand and tucked the parcel back under his arm.

"I will give you the thousand now on one condition. I and one other operative will come with you." Tony chewed this one over but could see no way out of it.

"All right, we'll do it that way."

Timberio went back to the restaurant but returned fairly quickly with a solid young man who had a scar that half closed one eye and muscles that strained his thin shirt—a suspicious bulge at the waist as well, which was surely a concealed gun. Well, he had no choice. Timberio looked around carefully before passing over a green wad of bills. Tony ruffled them with his thumb, it seemed ample enough, before putting them away.

"Here we go," he said and started down the hill with his watchdogs close behind. "Wait here," he said in front of the Long Porker. "If anyone is with me the message will not be passed to release the painting, that has been arranged. You can see there is no other exit."

Timberio nodded reluctant agreement then stood back against the opposite wall to watch, while his operative joined the line at the *tortilleria* where he had a clear view through the door. Strong in his *gringo* personality, Tony entered the establishment. Redhead and baby sat talking to a prospective customer; she looked up and nodded.

"Come back for another lesson?"

"I just might, But I want to look in the back room, think I left a towel there."

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She waved a languid agreeing hand and he passed by. The workroom was empty, the bathroom door locked and emitting the sound of rushing water. Someone there, he must do this quickly. The box was still in its place beneath the others. He stood on tiptoe, pulled it out, clutched the tottering pile in fear as it all threatened to fall on him, restored its balance and had just pushed the boxed painting inside his parcel as the door opened and the man who had first drawn him to the establishment emerged. He looked suspicious.

"You want something?"

"Just to check in there, think I left a towel yesterday. Nope,

doesn't look like it, be seeing you."

Followed by a rapid exit to be joined quickly by his bodyguard.

"Did you see me pass the message? Everything is arranged. I will

be met at the rendezvous in ten minutes by a messenger with the

package."

"What rendezvous?"

"There," Tony said, pointing at the familiar whitewashed blockhouse around which so much of his activity seemed to rotate. "He will meet me there."

Neither representative of the Agenzia Terza seemed surprised at the choice of location, perhaps it was a common locale for agent-ing gambits, but followed quietly instead.

"Stay here," Tony ordered, stopping outside the door. "The contact will be a man in a black suit carrying a tightly rolled umbrella." Where on earth had that idea come from? The hang-over must still be operating. "Allow him to come in. Then I will bring out the painting."

"I will check inside," Timberio said, starting through the door. "He may be there already."

"No," Tony said loudly, his voice cracking. One look inside and his whole plan was destroyed. "That will ruin everything." As indeed it would.

Timberio withdrew reluctantly and took up station a few feet away as did his aide. Tony entered slowly and, as soon as he had passed from sight, burst into frenzied activity. He had to effect the change quickly or not at all. A button popped as he tore the shirt

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from his back, then stripped off the trunks. There was a startled grunt from an old man who was emerging from the last cubicle, the only other occupant.

"It's a fine morning," Tony said as he hopped about on one foot pulling on the white trousers. The old man watched in wide-eyed astonishment as Tony completed the rest of his metamorphosis, clapped the hat on his head, wrapping painting and clothes hurriedly in the crumpled paper and stuffed them into the *morral* which he hung over his shoulder, handle of the *machete* projecting upward as he started for the door.

He emerged with a slow shuffle, head down, the wide brim of the sombrero shading his face, shoulders bent to make him appear shorter. At the last moment he even managed a slight limp to aid in the transformation. He held his breath as he walked past Tim-berio, visible only as trouser legs and a pair of highly polished and pointed shoes. Then past the other agent—and still no cry of alarm. They were both looking outward for the dark-clad, umbrella-bearing messenger and paid no heed at all to the simple peasant who passed. Ten feet, then twenty, thirty, almost to the corner—when an anguished cry sounded. Tony took one look back to see the old man talking to the Italian agents, then he began to run. Around the corner and down the street, ignoring the hammers inside his head.

Faster still to escape the sound of pursuing feet.

NINE

Tony vanished in the crowd, another drop of water in the ocean of Mexican citizens, his clothes neutral, his wide-brimmed hat like all the others. A turn into a side street, a small market with stands along the sidewalk and in the road. When he stopped running, and even walking, slowed to a reluctant halt by the savage blows of his waning hang-over, his pursuers had vanished. A nearby stall dispensed the cooling drink of pineapple juice, papaya juice, coconut milk—no rum this time!—and orange juice all whipped to a froth in a blender. He ordered a large one of these and while drinking it thought he saw one of the distraught Italians run by, but it was only a glimpse and he couldn't be sure.

Refreshed, his throat cooled, the hang-over under control, he penetrated deep into the market that he had visited the day before and followed his nose to the food stalls where a booming morning trade was in progress, sliding onto a stool as its previous owner vacated it. There was the quick gush of saliva in his mouth at the richness of the odors, accompanied by a stabbing pang of hunger. A brace of goat enchiladas smothered in rich red gravy and flanked by a healthy portion of fried beans did a good deal toward alleviating this sensation.

"The sauce if you please," his companion at the narrow board said. They sat shoulder rubbing shoulder, leaning forward so that the parcels of the people pushing by behind did not jar into them. Tony slid over the requested dish swimming with fresh chopped chilies, tomato, garlic and onion, then helped himself as well as soon as the other had done.

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"I am looking for the little town where my cousin lives," he told his eating companion who was diligently pursuing the last drops of goodness around his metal plate with a half tortilla. He was a gaunt old man, somewhere between fifty and ninety years of age, with a few white wisps of beard. He nodded at the interesting information so freely given, but felt no real need to comment. "He said it is on the road to Chilpancingo just outside of Acapulco."

"That will be Las Gracias."

"No, that is not the name I remember."

The old man swallowed the last of his tortilla, wiped his finger tips gently on the side of his pants leg, then counted on his fingers, worn scarred and permanently hooked from a lifetime of labor.

"That is first. Then you find El Quenado and El Treinta."⁵

"The last, that is the very name. Do you know where the bus stops for this place?"

"Two blocks down and one to the right."

"A thousand thanks for the information."

Feeling a good deal better, Tony strolled the two blocks down and the one right and was greeted by the sight he had hoped to see. A small crowd of farmers returning from the market, parcels and crates of unsold chickens held high, milling slowly toward the entrance of the third-class bus, a venerable, rusty, dented, crack-windowed, smooth-tired veteran of a fading lifetime of service proudly bearing the name La Nave del Olvido. Tony joined the crowd and became a part of it, swimming with it toward the bus and aboard.

The life line of Mexico; the third-class bus. They went everywhere that there were roads, paved or unpaved, or a mixture of both. They connected every small town with the larger cities at infinitesimal fares to enable the farmers to bring their corn, eggs, chickens, pigs, beans to the markets and return with cloth, salt, *rebozo* coffee, nails. Given diligence and a great deal of patience, as well as a total indifference to discomfort, a man could travel the length and breadth of Mexico in these buses for their trails cross everywhere. What better way to leave Acapulco than in this manner! Lost in the crowd, one more simple farmer, rattling out of the city at a spanking twelve miles an hour, past the keen-eyed

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servants of the law who were searching for the murderou American, grinding up the hills in low gear and away.

Within the hour the bus squealed to a halt in El Treinta and Tony stepped shakily down. If there had been any police at the city's exits they had been invisible from his position within the vehicle between an armful of pendant, fearful-eyed chickens, and two men who argued the entire time about the local football team and attempted to involve him in the discussion. It had indeed been an adventure and he walked with unsure step toward the nearest *miscelanea* that bordered the road. Bottles were ranked neatly on the shelves inside and he let his eyes flit quickly over the *mezcal* and *tequila*, enough of that, thank you, to last quite a while, to settle on the *aguardiente*. This is a transparent, dangerous distillate of sugar cane, potent beyond belief. He selected a medium-sized bottle sealed with a black cork, paid for it and sampled its fiery potential before leaving the premises, the storekeeper nodding with approval at his happy sigh and pleasurable wipe of the back of his hand across his lips.

Outside the April sun burned with the heat of August. The town was stretched along the highway on both sides, two-dimensional, two single rows of buildings. Glittering tourist cars and smoke-belching diesel trucks thundered by on the pavement; children played unheeding on each side on the packed dirt that was the only street of the town. A palm-leaf-covered stand sold bright tropical fruit and an American couple was haggling over the price of mangoes in high-school Spanish. They reduced the asking price considerably and carted their bargains away in triumph as Tony bought the same fruit at a quarter of the price; all parties concerned were happy. The *machete* carved sweet slices of the mango, w blended very well indeed with the *aguardiente*. The wait the next bus arrived was pleasant, the bus itself not crowded so that he actually found a seat. The man who joined him also joined him in drinking from the bottle and in return shared still-warm tortillas stuifed with beans from his bag. Upward, grinding in low about the turns, the jungle falling away on each side, plunging into the clouds that hung like fog across the road, they made i way. The bottle was soon finished and the two travelers slept

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peacefully, leaning one against the other. So did the morning pass and a good deal of the afternoon. Mountains and road and the stop at every village, or *parada*, where the waiting customers waved their hands. Over the highest pass finally and the steady drop into the immense bowl and high plain of the state capital, Chilpancingo.

It was here that Tony decided that he had had enough of this rustic form of travel. Not to complain, he had had many interesting conversations, shared more than one bottle and enjoyed some excellent home cooking in exchange. But his feet hurt and his fundament had been battered into black and blue surrender; these vehicles were never intended for extended voyaging. Surely there could be no police here on the alert for him. In any case they would be watching the cars and the first-class buses, if at all, while the second-class buses were comfortable and speedy enough. Since the Cuernavaca bus he wanted did not leave for an hour he strolled through the market until it was time to depart. This gave him the opportunity to make a few purchases, a razor and ancillary equipment, a large red handkerchief, a paperback book of witch's dream analysis that promised frightening insights, a pack of cigarettes, a box of wax matches, and finally a plastic airline bag to hold everything. It was in good condition, hardly used at all, and he wondered what chain of circumstances had brought this memento of the Czechoslovakian State Airlines to such a remote corner of Mexico. Perhaps it was best not to know, even the dream book said that there were many mysteries for which answers should not be sought. When the bus pulled out he had a cozy window seat and was deeply involved in the true meaning, at last, of snakes and umbrellas in the same dream.

This was a time-consuming, though secure, way to travel. After Cuernavaca he continued on the local bus to Cuautla which let him off at the little village of Cocoyoc just after midnight. The town itself dozed, a solitary light in front of a bar under which sat a single man in a chair, drinking alone, but the Hacienda Cocoyoc blazed welcoming beacons a short way down a side road. Antonio the peasant walked with shuffling pace toward it, at least until he was out of possible sight of any watchers in the village. This was irrigated farm land and the road crossed the dark waters of a canal

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on a bridge, under which he took refuge, beside the canal, from where, a short time later, the *gringo* tourist Tony emerged. Feet clean and squelching in the damp sandals, the peasant outfit, cane knife, and painting all in the airline bag. Shoulders back lie marched with firm pace toward the ornate iron arch of the entrance and received the salute of the guard there with an airy wave of his hand.

Inside was luxury. The modern hotel had been built in and around the ancient sugar hacienda, a venerable array of thick-walled buildings dating back to the sixteenth century. Arched aqueducts still carried whispering water through the grounds, hidden lights played on purple-blossomed jacaranda trees backdropped by the dark stones of the walls. Tony took a path that led off through the smooth grass and airborne perfume of the gardens, away from the main building. For most of the day, as his transportation carried him closer to Mexico City—now just fifty miles away—he had become more and more conscious of the police and the grim fate they wanted to apply to him. Even in his pastoral guise he had rolled his eyes suspiciously at every badged officer and now, Yankee once again, he walked in no small amount of fear. Even the thought of bright-lit lobbies and argus-eyed clerks gave him the shakes. Sones had said they would be in *casita* seven, whatever that was, so he began prowling the extensive and complicated grounds, peering at indistinct numbers on doorways. The inevitable happened and, while lighting a match to read a gnomonic inscription, a uniformed figure came around the corner.

"May I help you, sir?" the man said.

A hot rush of fear was allayed slightly when Tony realized that the uniform was one of hotel service, not of the law, and he swayed forward again, having leaned backward at the sudden startling appearance. The match burned his fingers and he dropped it with a muffled oath. His inquisitor waited. Sway and mumble brought quick memories of the previous night's condition and he simulated it now in instant disguise.

"Can't find room—went to zha bar and can't get back. Want to find *cazhetta* number seven." Another sway to add verisimilitude to the words.

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"If you will be so kind as to follow me."

Well trained, thou good and faithful servant; he trod in the other's footsteps and dug out peso notes to overtip him when they reached a small building with a gilt seven under an iron-caged bulb. Money rustled, thanks were murmured, and he tried the knob with his face carefully turned from the light. The door was thankfully unlocked and he pushed through into the darkness beyond, closed it and fumbled at the wall looking for a light switch. As he did this something very hard was pushed deep into his side and an even harder, high-pitched voice hissed in his ear.

"Move or even twitch and you are a dead man."

With a great effort he controlled the tendency to leap into the air generated by this shocking suggestion and stood stock-still instead. The hard object ground deeper into his kidney and the voice, apparently satisfied by his response, spoke again, this time calling out shrilly.

"All right, open up."

The response was immediate. The inside door to the entrance hall was thrown wide and lights blazed. Tony blinked at them, then, through slitted eyes, looked at his captor. The hard object was a gun as he had suspected, a very large, blue-black, and deadly looking device. The young man who held it, while pink not blue-black, looked just as deadly, freckled, blank-faced redhead with his block-shaped head sat squarely on a weight-lifter's thick neck of columnar muscle. Equally large muscles bulged his shirt and rose in corded knots from his forearm to thicken at his wrist: If he squeezed the trigger it appeared he would crush the gun like licorice.

"Put it away, Schultz, he is all right," a familiar voice said. FBI agent Ross Sones rose from behind an overstuffed chair and holstered an equally impressive hand weapon.

"I thought you were expecting me?" Tony asked, angry now.

"Never hurts to take precautions. Agent Schultz, this is Agent Hawkin."

"Name's Billy," Schultz said in his surprisingly tiny voice while extending a bulging and deadly looking hand. Tony took it gingerly, expecting to have his pulped, and it was like squeezing a log

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of wood. "You must be the Tony Hawkin we have been hearing so much about back in the Bureau."

"I suppose I must be," Tony answered, suddenly very tired. He dropped gratefully into the soft chair as Sones sidled out from behind it, letting his airline bag slide to the floor. Sones looked down at it.

"Is the Cellini painting there?"

"It is. Make me a drink, large scotch and soda, plenty of ice, and I'll dig it out for you."

They exchanged favors, each more happy to receive than to give. Sones unwrapped the box while Tony drank deep.

"And don't think it was easy bringing that thing here."

"I am sure that it was not. How did you manage to get by the police?"

"Professional secret. What is more important at this moment is how are you going to get this to Washington, get the authenticity checked, then have it back here in time to deliver to D'Isernia by tomorrow night?"

"Have you been drinking? I told you in Acapulco that we were getting a specialist down here."

"Yes, of course, forgot in the rush of events." Forgot in the rush of drink was more truthful. Sones was pretty close to the target there; the entire evening still had a number of blank spots.

Sones carefully took the painting from the box and held it to the light, with Billy looking over his shoulder.

"Simply amazing color," the muscular agent said in his tiny voice.

"And what are the other arrangements?" Tony finished the last of the drink, gratefully, and chewed an ice cube.

"We have brought the specialist here."

"Who is it? Billy Schultz?"

Billy smiled happily with the assumption and Sones brushed it off.

"No. He is our operational backup man. A specialist. The painting authority is in the other room."

"And wondering very much when you were going to let me out," the husky voice said from the doorway.

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"Come in, I was just going to call you. The 'St. Sebastian' is here."

She entered. A wide-hipped, long-legged, short-skirted young woman with a wealth of blond hair that dropped well below her shoulders. Her face was full-featured and attractive, in a large Slavonic way, her bosom full, also in the Slavonic way, so much so that the top button of her white blouse had opened under the strain. She looked dark-eyedly at Tony from under long lashes, one eye closed halfway because of the smoke that rose from the cigarette that projected straight up from a silver holder shaped like a small pipe that she held between her teeth.

"I am Lizveta Zlotnikova." Her accent was Russian, slight but still irrevocably there.

"Tony Hawkin." He thrashed slightly as if wanting to rise but did not, extending his hand upward instead. She seized it and shook it twice, and strongly, from the elbow, as though she were pumping water.

"Miss Zlotnikova is our authority," Sones said, handing the painting to her. "Co-opted from the Metropolitan Museum in New York. An authority on restoration and dating. Is the painting real?"⁵

She took it from him with great respect and held it under the light tilting it backward and forward slowly. The smoke curled up into her eye and, around the silver holder, she whispered, "*Boshe-moir*"

"What did you say?"

"That was merely an expletive of appreciation drawn out of me involuntarily."

"Then this is the authentic thing?"

"I cannot tell truthfully until I have examined samples of the wood and the paint chemically and by spectroanalysis. Also X-ray plates must be made. These assure positive identification."

"Which we will want. But can you tell us something, a rough professional guess or the like that we can operate on?"

"I can do that. The color is incredible, the brushwork that of a genius. If it is a forgery it is so exceptional that the forger must be a master."

"Good enough. Do you agree, Hawkin?"

"I do. Completely!"

Lizveta Zlotnikova put the painting carefully back into its case and turned to face Tony, her open eye sighting across the tip of her cigarette as though the holder itself were a gun. "I did not know that you were an expert too, it was not told me. What museum are you associated with?"

"It's not that simple—"

"Indeed? Please explain."

"Enough of that," Sones broke in. "There is no need for you to have that information on a classified operation. Why don't you start work on the analysis now?"

"It is very late."

"Stalin used to work all night," Tony said brightly. "Did his best work then they say."

"What is the meaning of that?" The cigarette gun aimed again, more deadly than ever. "Are you insinuating that I am an unconverted Stalinoid cult of personality non-revisionist?"

"No, of course, nothing of the sort. Just that, you know, it seems to be in the Russian personality, night work, you know . . ." His voice ran down into silence under the arctic stare of those pitiless dark eyes.

"I am not here to be insulted. I am Georgian not Russian as you seem to think. A legitimate refugee from artistic persecution, now alien resident in the United States of America. Apologies are in order."

"I apologize, sincerely, no insult intended."

"The analysis if you do not mind." Sones was being firm. Lizveta Zlotnikova considered the apology, accepted it in the end with a disdainful sniff, then took the painting into the other room and slammed the door.

"What did you do that for?" Sones asked.

"I didn't *do* anything, just made a comment. What is everyone being so touchy about anyway?"

"She thought you were accusing her of being a Soviet agent."

"Well, I wasn't, probably the last thought from my mind considering the fact that the FBI brought her here."

Sones bent over the chair and cupped his hand, whispering,

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"See that you do not do it again, we do not want her suspicious. It so happens that she *is* a Soviet agent."

"And you brought her down on *this* operation!"

"Not so loud. Yes, it was all planned in advance. We do not want it known we have blown her cover, so we are letting her get information here that is of no importance to the Soviets."

"Why not? Everyone else seems interested."

"In this way the next information that we send through her they will assume is true but will in reality be false. So no more remarks about Stalin if you do not mind."

"Could I please have another drink?"

"I'll get it," Billy squeaked.

"Join me?" Tony asked, ever the host since the previous evening.

"Never drink on the job, thanks."

Well he certainly did, almost continuously it seemed. Not since the Army, either. He sipped deep. Was there meaning or a message in that? If there was it evaded him.

"How do I get the painting back to D'Isernia?" he asked.

"Arrangements are being made. Tomorrow . . ."

The crash of breaking glass in the other room was clearly audible through the door.

Tony was nearest and the sudden noise sent him springing from the chair, whiskey sloshing, grabbing the handle. The other two agents were at his shoulder when he threw it wide; all of them were spectators of a silent tableau.

The window had been broken, it lay in slivers on the floor, and Lizveta Zlotnikova stood before it. Passing the painting through the raw opening in the glass.

There was a quick view of a man's face on the other side. Then painting and face were gone.

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"Keep her here, Hawkin," Sones ordered, turning, bounding away, drawing his gun at the same time, following Billy Schultz who already had the outside door open.

They exited very fast, guns awave, while Tony turned to look at Lizveta Zlotnikova who showed no signs of any attempted escape. Instead she was wringing her hands before her, bending back and forth in the grip of strong emotion, gulping in breath after deep breath—so deep in fact that the heaving of her impressive bosom had burst another button from the moorings of her blouse—while a great tear formed at the corner of each eye.

"What happened?" he asked, but she only shook her head, the motion dislodging the burgeoning tears which ran slowly down her cheeks. They stood in this manner, facing each other across the room, until Sones returned, closing the door behind him but keeping the gun ready in his hand.

"Got away clean, no trace at all. Schultz is still looking, not that it will do much good." There was anger behind every gas chopped-off word, the first emotion Tony had ever seen him display. "Now you, tell us who he was, why did you do it, speak up?"

Lizveta Zlotnikova brushed the tears away fiercely, no doubt angered at her display of weak emotion before a brace of Amen fascist swine, then stamped over to the end table and lighted a cigarette before she answered.

"I do not know the man and it is insult of you to suggest it. I passed the window and the glass broke, he must have been or

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watching me and waited for the moment when I was close, the painting in my hand. He ordered me in Russian to hand it over. I had no choice."

"You could have refused, he would not have killed you, it would have gained him nothing."

She drew herself up, jetting twin streams of angry smoke from her nostrils.

"You insult! To save this beautiful painting I would not mind to die. But he said he would shoot the *painting* first, then shoot me. I said I had no choice."

Sones chewed at his lower lip, considering this. Billy Schultz returned and squeaked, "He got away." Both men became aware of their guns at the same time and slid them out of sight, acknowledging at least temporary defeat.

"I think she is telling the truth," Tony said. "Anyway, I recognized the man outside."

Sones's fingers twitched toward his gun again, then dropped reluctantly away. "You would not happen to care to tell me who it was—no, wait. Come with me."

As he drew Tony into the next room he gave a quick nod to the other agent while jerking his thumb in Lizveta Zlotnikova's direction. Schultz nodded in return and remained behind with the girl. Sones carefully closed the door before resuming the questioning, waiting impatiently while Tony replaced his spilled drink and sank back into the chair.

"I only had a glimpse, mind you, but I should remember the man. His name is Nahan, Nahum, something like that. He's a sabra, works with Goldstein."

"How do you know this?" Most suspiciously.

"How do I know this? You know how I know this!" Fatigue, alcohol, and the waning echoes of the morning's hang-over were taking their toll. "He was one of the men who grabbed me, very likely the one who hit me on the head. A toughie. Worked me over until Goldstein stopped him, then he dumped me back at the hotel. I have good reason to remember him."

"What would he want with the painting?"

"Nothing, that's the strange part. I told you, Goldstein is inter-

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ested in Hochhande, whoever or whatever that is, I told you all about that. His men grabbed me by mistake, thinking I was Kurt Robl. He knew all about the painting deal, I didn't have to tell him. He's a Nazi hunter, not a painting thief."

"He did steal the painting though—unless this man did it on his own."

"No, I don't think so. These people have other things on their minds. Goldstein wants something from us, that's

obvious. He is using the Cellini as a tool for bargaining. Get in touch with him and ask him. The phone's right over there."

"Security matters are *not* transacted on the public telephone. Someone will have to contact Goldstein, you are correct in that. I am heading this operation now, I cannot expose myself. This is not Schultz's line of work. The contact is up to you."

"Not me! The instant I show up in Mexico City the police grab onto me and that is the end of that. Have you forgotten the murder charge?"

"There are ways of getting around that." He looked at his watch. "The operation is on for oh-eight-hundred in the morning. Get some sleep now, there is another bedroom through there. I want to talk to the girl some more."

Tony downed the rest of the drink and went looking for the bed. Sleep, now that was a very good idea. They couldn't force him to go into the city, that would be suicide, tell them that in the morning. But sleep first. He was dragging his clothes off as he thought this, falling backward with great pleasure into the bed, asleep as his head hit the pillow.

Waking up, it seemed like only instants later. The imperative hand of Sones was on his shoulder, dragging him back up to the surface from the deep pleasures of unconsciousness. Light burned in through the open window, loud birds called outside. His watch, when he had blinked enough sleep from his eyes to make it out, read seven o'clock.

"Eat your breakfast. You have ten minutes."

He went out and Tony looked blearily at what appeared easily to be a one-hour breakfast. Pot of coffee, halved rolls backed with

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layered beans and cheese, eggs in hot green chili sauce, napkin-wrapped steaming tortillas, guava, melon, orange juice, too much. Though he should eat a little. He ate a lot, making up for a number of missed meals, meals drunk instead of ate. The breakfast demolished, he showered, shaved, dressed and emerged feeling much, much better, ready to tell Sones that he would not go into Mexico City.

"You will be disguised, no one will recognize you. You told me you speak Spanish. Well enough you think to pass as a Mexican instead of an American?"

"Possibly." Sones should only know.

"It had better be positively. This part of the operation *cannot* fail or everything is down the drain. That painting has to be back here by six tonight. D'Isernia will contact me then with the final arrangements. Let me have the photograph, Schultz."

The agent had opened a large suitcase that contained nothing but boxes and drawers. From one of these he took out a photographic print which he handed to Sones. Tony looked over his shoulder at a picture of himself, a candid snap, slightly downshot, very clear.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

"The same place everyone else did, from the Chinese. This is the pic the police have. We have to change your appearance as much as possible from this. Being Mexican I think we can use the mustache gambit, don't you think so, Schultz?"

"Yes, sir," he piped in cheerful response, pulling out a drawer like a hairy nest. "Something thin and dark, not unlike yours."

"Mine is an American mustache. We want a foreign one for him."

"What do you mean Chinese?" Tony broke in. "What have they got to do with this?"

"They have an agent here, he lives right across from the Coronel Glanders Mississippi Fried Chicken place. He takes pictures of everyone who goes in there. A lot of people are interested in the CIA operation. He sells to whoever wants. We buy a lot from him. That is why you should not have gone near the place."

"I'm afraid they polished off Davidson before he could tell me

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that. This is the photo the police have? And the Israelis, the Italians—everyone else? I'm surprised the People's Republic of China would sell to them and us as well."

"Not them, the other lot, Taiwan. They are always interested in what the CIA is doing. Here, try this on."

It was too shaggy. However, there were many more and eventually Billy came up with one that matched Tony's hair and had enough of a droop to the ends to satisfy Sones's nationalistic preconceptions. With this essential prop in place Billy, who appeared to be a skilled disguise artist, took care of the further transformation. Adroitly applied pencil accentuated the lines around his mouth; inserted pads held in place by stickum changed the shape of his cheeks and lips.

"Taste funny," Tony said, muffledly.

"You'll get used to them in no time at all. Now let me use this hot comb to bulk your hair up, change its shape, then put on a nice oily dressing."

"You're not overdoing it?"

"Not a bit. You just relax and wait and see."

It had to be admitted that the final result was not bad, not bad at all. Tony admired the stranger in the full-length mirror. B pointy shoes, the kind he would never wear, full-kneed pinstriped trousers draped over a full, middle-class stomach—courtesy of a hotel pillow taped about his waist. One of Sones's acetate sport shirts of a subtle dayglo orange, green "RS" initials on the pocket. A different face stared back, full-cheeked and oiled-haired, nostrils opened by ring inserts, a stranger's smile emblazoned with two gold teeth, eyes hidden behind silver-mirrored sunglasses, the case for same at his belt.

"All right, listen closely, here are your instructions." Tony felt a sudden rising panic. Everyone assumed he was going and it was too late now to file his protest. Sones handed him a piece of paper. "Walk out the front gate here. There is a car and driver waiting, this is the license plate number. Get in and tell him to take you to Mexico City. Don't give him this address until after you are there. This last number is the phone you can reach the driver at when

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you want him to pick you up. Memorize this information now and wash the paper down the sink, it dissolves on contact with water."

Tony memorized, all too quickly; then it was time to go. Billy was peeking out the front door to be sure his exit was unobserved.

"See that the painting is not damaged, I beg. For it is the true original, passes all the tests," Lizveta Zlotnikova said with real emotion. Tony felt put upon.

"Is it okay if I'm not damaged either? It's my neck in the noose, you know."

"Now," Billy piped. "No one in sight."

"Do not let us down again," Sones ordered.

Tony slipped out wondering when he had let them down before. Not for the first time he yearned for the cool serenity of the National Gallery. This Mexican thing kept rolling downhill like a runaway trolley. Getting him involved more deeply all the time. The guard at the gate saluted him out, otherwise no one else saw him, then held the door open on the black Cadillac with the memorized number. The guard was also close enough to hear the spoken destination, which proved, if nothing else, that Sones at least knew the mechanics of his job. The trip on the toll road was swift, fine views of the valley and mountains far away, closer view of the nape of the uniformed chauffeur's neck and the dandruff on his shoulders. All too soon they were in the automotive inferno of Mexico City and stopping close to the multifunctional delicatessen. Not a word had been exchanged, other than the issuing of the two orders. Tony watched the car pull away, took a deep breath, then walked toward his destiny.

Ornate gold letters on the plate-glass window read tolteq kosher delicatessen. Clearly visible seated inside was an elderly gentleman in dark coat and wide-brimmed hat who was straining soup through his full beard. At a longer table nearby an entire family was eating from plates of various sizes, apparently enjoying themselves, while toward the back a tourist couple sipped at beers and looked expectantly toward the glass-fronted delicatessen

counter. A round young lady in white was dishing up portions of

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potato salad, coleslaw, hot chilies, while a familiar figure assembled thick sandwiches from smoking meat. He looked up when Tony came reluctantly through the door and nodded pleasantly.

"Buenos tardes, señor. Agui hay una mesa para tiP"

Tony nodded, impressed with the success of the disguise for the first time, remembering full well that the genial fat man had the keen eye of the spy catcher. Seating himself at a table away from the others, Tony read the menu with interest, breakfast, large as it had been, seemed to have slipped away leaving a vacancy. Jacob Goldstein brought over a glass and bottle which he set before Tony, smiling benevolently.

"Be with you in a moment, Hawkin. Meanwhile, have a celery tonic on the house. That's not too bad a disguise, all things considered."

No, not bad at all, Tony thought gloomily, sipping at the strangely flavored beverage. Instantly penetrated. Would the police see through it as easily as well? Goldstein reappeared, slapping down a glass of tea and dropping into the chair opposite.

"Very nice of you to come by and see an old man, seeing how you are so busy these days. Our Italian friends are very hurt by your actions and say you stole some money from them."

"I did not! It was freely given—and how do you know about that anyway?"

"Word travels. We help each other. There are a lot of Nazis they have no love for either. I hear also you bumped off this Davidson because of a feud between the CIA and the FBI!"

"That's not true!"

"I thought not, nice fellow like you would have a better reason."

"Listen, Goldstein, let us get one thing clear. I did not kill Davidson. He was knifed while I was in the other room. I have no idea who did it or why. I have been framed."

Goldstein nodded benevolently as he sipped his tea, spoon in glass threatening his eyeball. "You been pretty busy, like I said."

"That is all beside the point. I'm here because of what you have done. You told me you weren't interested in the paintings at all, yet you had one of your muscle-bound sabras steal it from us. Why? Or are you going to deny the whole thing?"

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"Me, deny? Of course not. A very nice painting and it is put away in a safe spot."

"Give it back, you crook."

"Crook, surely, return painting, perhaps. That depends upon you."

"I had that feeling all along. What can I possibly do for you?"

"We'll get to that in good time, but first I have a little story to tell you."

"Could you tell it to me while I'm eating? It is lunchtime." Rich odor of pastrami, salami, corned beef, pickles, peppers,

salad, rye bread, onion rolls, gave sweet torture to his nostrils. Goldstein nodded with sympathetic understanding and called out a rapid order to the girl behind the counter, then sipped his tea until a great sandwich had arrived, and Tony had worried a delicious corner off it, looking on with appreciation at his healthy appetite. The girl called for assistance as another table filled and by the time Goldstein had returned the plate was empty and Tony dabbing the last crumbs from his lips.

"I'm glad you ate first, because what I got to tell you won't help your appetite, young and healthy as it is. It's not a nice story about a man by the name of Hochhande."

"So it is a man, the name I mean, I wondered."

"Perhaps man is too nice a word to apply to Hochhande, you will judge when I am finished. I ask you to turn your mind back to a period that, to one your age, is becoming a part of history. Except that all the players have not yet vanished from the stage. The time is during what we call the Second World War, which the English more personally refer to as the Hitler War, in the south of Italy, the province of Salerno. There was a prison camp there outside the city of Sapri, commanded by one Kapitan Hippolyt Hochhande, known as Hippo to his close friends of which he had very few. Hochhande did such admirable work in this camp that toward the end of the war he was called back hurriedly to Germany by none other than the Fiihrer himself, with whom he had a slight acquaintance due to a mutual interest, and was given the immense responsibility of running an extermination camp. You have heard of these camps? I see by your complexion that you have.

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In Gelsenkirchen, as in the other camps, the civilized Germans did their best to preserve the cultural world image of their nation by killing off all the victims who knew better. Hochhande, ever the efficient man, did away with over three hundred thousand people before he fled ahead of the advancing Allied armies. Most of the dead were Jews which explains, in case you are interested, why I have come here and now labor in the guise of a smiling delicatessen man. Enjoyable in many ways, except I am putting on weight, and far better than the time in Argentina when for three years I worked out of a hay, grain and feed shop."

"I'm sorry, but I don't see the connection between Gelsenkirchen and Mexico."

"I'm coming to that. The mutual interest that Hochhande shared with Adolf was art, Hochhande having been the operator of a Munich art gallery before the war. It is known that Hochh; actually obtained some paintings for Adolf, and for Goring as well. It is also recorded that he visited Monte d'Capitello many times to admire the paintings there, it is just a few kilometers from Sapri."

"I'm beginning to see . . ."

"I thought you might. The museum is destroyed, the pain vanish, presumably destroyed with it. Now strange things begin to happen. A Matisse painting from the Hitler collection reappears on the world market after many years. The Capitello paintings also come to light. I detect the spoor of Hochhande here. I will sniff him out."

"But Kurt Robl is the man who is doing everything, that is what I was told. Is he Hochhande?"

"He is the jackal, not the man, Hochhande's creature, someone unimportant. When Hochhande was recalled to Germany it was Robl who took over his command of the Sapri camp. He is small fry, like many others, and it is the big fish we are after. But since Robl is the pilot fish for the shark we seek, we make a point of keeping track of him, of furnishing information on his whereabouts to the CIA and others so they can watch him too. This has gone on for many years, patient waiting, until now when our watching seems to be paying off at last."

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"You are going to get Hochhande?"

"I am, if he is still alive, and I feel he is. This entire matter has his smell to it. His jackal is not smart enough to do what is being done; he is just a jackal. He has not the intelligence to find a man of international repute like D'Isernia to work with him, to arrange matters as well as this. He is being worked by strings, I know it, my instincts tell me so, and it is the puppet master I am after. And now we come to your role in this little drama."

"Mine? It has nothing to do with me. I am an art authority, nothing more. All I want is the painting back."

"Patience, you will have it. But you must aid us. Your part had become a very big one and it shall be larger still. You are going to work for me and help uncover Hochhande."

"Look, Goldstein, let us be reasonable." Tony sucked too deeply at the last dregs of his celery tonic so they went up his nose and he had to cough enthusiastically. He ignored this, wiping at his streaming eyes with his napkin. "How can you ask me to do a thing like that? I'm a federal employee, a drafted FBI agent, a loyal American. I can't work for a foreign government at the same time, be an Israeli agent."

"Patience, my friend, and listen closely. I ask you for nothing that will compromise your loyalties. You will leave here with the painting and return to your job. You will be involved in the transactions to purchase the painting of the 'Battle of Anghiarf' and will do all that you are paid for and more. You will not be compromised. At the same time you will be reporting to me everything that occurs to enable us to apprehend Hochhande. This will not interfere with your work, it might even aid it because I have various resources that will be at your disposal, and it will aid us in what is an effort to bring a great criminal to justice."

"I'm sorry, I just can't do it."

"Think again. You are a minority member yourself, a descendant of the few survivors of the Indian slaughters of the past hundred years. You are talking to another minority descendant, except my slaughters are more recent. You must know what it feels like to be in our unenviable position. So I ask you to join me, help right one wrong of which there have been so many."

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Unordered, a glass of tea appeared at Tony's elbow and he sipped at it, burning his mouth on the hot brew. There had to be a way out of this impossible situation.

"What if I refuse to co-operate?" he asked.

"Then I keep the painting, it is as simple as that. I play for keeps, Mr. Hawkin, as I am sure you are aware of." The implacable hunter once more appeared in his voice, no longer concealed in the g of the pleasant old man. Tony shivered.

"I guess you would do that. So what if I take the painting back, what assurance do you have that I will help you?"

"None whatsoever—other than your word. When you play for high stakes, men's lives, you are forced to understand people and to trust a very few. I think I understand you. You are essentially a man of peace, who will keep his word once freely given. The choice is yours."

"Some choice," Tony muttered into the tea, then looked up at Goldstein and smiled wryly. "You are a great chess player, aren't you, Goldstein?"

"For you, you can call me Jake."

"Every move planned from the beginning, Jake, pawns moved the way you want them, the checkmate clearly seen."

"I bet you play a good game yourself, Tony. So—what's the decision?"

"Did I ever have a choice? You are looking at the first American Indian Jewish agent. What will my friends think?"

"They'll never know unless you tell them. This is strictly between you and me, a one-time arrangement, and none of it even goes in the record unless you want it to. But believe me, let me at least drop a word in the Top Secret files. That way when things work out as we hope and you ever make a trip to Israel, boy, have you got a great reception waiting!"

"Shalom," Tony said, smiling broadly now, reaching out to take the agent's hand.

"Shalom."

"You have my word. As long as it doesn't interfere with the work I am here to do I'll do everything I can to help you get your hands on Hochhande."

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"I never for a moment doubted you, Tony. Here, just a minute, finish your tea while I fetch a package I got for you from the back room."

Tony sat, slightly dazed, still not sure how he had gotten this deeply involved. Everything had happened with a sure inevitability, but it was still hard to visualize himself as both an agent of the FBI and the Israeli underground. Goldstein returned with a large book, *Terry's Guide to Mexico*, which he handed over.

"Don't try to open it, all the pages are glued together and it's hollowed out. Something better to carry around than a package, people notice. Just pry open the front cover to get the painting out. A very pretty hunk of art I must say."

"You seem to have forgotten one thing." Tony turned the book over and read "Capsule Guide to Cash and Communication for the Tourist in Mexico." "What do I tell Sones, my boss here for the FBI? I just walked in and you handed the painting back? Or better I had a shoot-out and took it away from you?"

"A cover story is what you're talking about, and a cover story is what you got. Sones thinks we are trying to get Robl, that idea was planted with you the first time we met—we wanted you, not Robl, we knew who you were—as well as with some other people. So tell him that you promised to finger Robl for us in exchange for the return of the painting, he'll believe that and will probably arrange to help you with the job once your painting business is finished. He has no love for these vermin and dislikes doing business with them. He'll go along with the idea."

"It gets very complicated."

"It always does. How are you getting back?"

"I have to phone for a car."

"Very good. You can always get in touch with me here, but I'll have people close by keeping an eye on you. If anyone gives you the password *gornischt*, you answer *hilfen*. Then pass messages or ask for any help you might need. My people are very capable."

"They certainly are. Your ape really frightened that poor Russian girl, Lizveta Zlomikova."

"That poor Russian girl—but Georgian please, not Russian—is

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reporting straight to Moscow about your operation—or didn't you know that?"

"Of course I knew that." Smugly, a big international agent knowing the workings of all the cogs and wheels.

"Well, maybe then you didn't know that she is in reality a double agent for the Albanians who pass the word directly to China. Let Sones know about that at the right time and it will get you in big, further your career."

The ride back was very much like the ride out, silent and swift, Tony held tightly to the book and wondered just where it all would end. He was in this introspective mood when he emerged at Cocoyoc, accepted his salute, then found his way to *a seven*. The door was unlocked and he pushed it open and waJ through into the living room of the suite.

Sones, sitting on the couch, looked up at him, frowning fiercely. Sones's visitor, seated in the overstuffed chair, turned around looked at him as well. He had a familiar face.

Police Lieutenant Ricardo Gonzales y Alvarez.

ELEVEN

It was a neat enough tableau that might well have been entitled "The Criminal Brought to Bay" or perhaps "Justice Triumphant." The witness, Sones, twitching with apprehension, the detective ready with gun and handcuffs, the victim limp before his fate. Tony stayed in the doorway no more than a few seconds, the victory smile with which he had entered fading slowly from his face, then he started to back out, waving his fingers in a twitching gesture that was meant to indicate sorrow at interrupting, but please excuse.

"Be with you in a few minutes," Sones called out. "A little busy right now."

"No, do not disturb yourself," Lieutenant Gonzales said, his cold, carnivorous eyes still on Tony, eating up every detail of his disguise which had suddenly become very transparent. "I will be leaving now, please have the gentleman come in."

Tony had no choice. Clutching his book he entered the room with a great reluctance that he hoped did not show, flashing his two gold teeth in a very unrealistic smile. Gonzales's eyes followed him about the room, tracking him like a gun turret.

"Do I know this gentleman?" the detective asked.

"I am sure you could not," Sones replied, his eyes blinking at the RS of his own initials on the pocket of Tony's borrowed shirt: He rose to the occasion. "This is an associate of mine who has just arrived, Mr. Raul Sanchez. Sanchez, this is Lieutenant Gonzales of the Metropolitan police."

"*jEres Mexicano?*"

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"*Claro que no, Buey. Soy Puerto Riqueno*" As he said it he tried to empty his voice of all nasal Mexican sounds and replace them with the staccato echoes of Puerto Rico. What was a P Rican accent like? In the panic of the moment he could not remember at all. The large caliber guns of the policeman's eyes one last salvo through Tony before he turned away.

"Then I know I can count upon your co-operation and the co-operation of your department, Mr. Sones?"

"At all times, Lieutenant."

"Very good. This man Hawkin is one of your employees, though of course on vacation in Mexico as are you and, I assume, your other associates, including Sanchez here. Hawkin must be taken questioned since he is the prime suspect in the slaying of *another* of your associates in this country. I hope nothing irregular is happening. We are both aware that the FBI has no jurisdiction out of the borders of its country, and my country would take a very harsh view indeed of any irregularities."

"I am a servant of the law, Lieutenant, and I do not break It."

"Very good. I will contact you again."

Gonzales left, after sending one last ocular shell in Tony's direction, and Sones quickly locked the door, put his finger to his lips for silence, then waved Tony ahead of him into the back bedroom, Billy Schultz and Lizveta Zlotnikova were sitting there in tense expectation.

"I guess he didn't recognize me," Tony said, once the door was closed.

"Of course he did, you fool, walking in like that! Schultz, get the M35 working on that window."

"If he saw through the disguise why didn't he arrest 1

"The painting, it is inside that book yes?" Lizveta Zlotnikova asked.

"Yes, it's in here, but why—"

"Why? Because he did not wish to be involved personally in sticky international situations. Inside of two minutes uniformed police will be here for a routine passport check and they will be the ones who will grab you. You have to get out."

"Good-by," Tony said, starting for the door.

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"Not that way, the door is watched, of course. Open yet, Schultz?"

"Just about."

The agent had produced a chunky hydraulic jack from his bag of equipment and fastened it to the window frame. Now, energized by the powerful pumps of his bulging biceps, the extending piston was quietly pushing the iron window bars from the wall. Sones nodded approval and turned back to Tony.

"Get out of here fast, and out of the hotel as well. We will cover for you as long as we can, run the shower, let them think you are in there, we can give you five minutes. You are to go to Cuautla and exactly at six this evening you will enter the drugstore there named Farmacia los Volcanes and will ask the clerk at the cash register for some Enterovioform."

"In Spanish or English? It's Enterovioforma, the specific for the Aztec Two-Step, as it is known, or Montezuma's Revenge . . ."

"Shut up. The instructions did not specify language. You will be informed then how to make contact." There was a brisk knock at the front door. "Now out, out!"

Tony outed. The jack was removed and he slid easily through the gap and into the prickly hedges outside. Lizveta Zlotnikova, with a deep look of regret, passed him down the book and his Czechoslovakian airline bag, while Billy Schultz seized the bars and, with a single contraction of those great muscles, bent them back into place. Tony saw no more for, like a thief in the night—or rather the afternoon—he was fleeing for his life.

At a slow walk, for he dared do nothing to attract attention, he strolled through the parklike grounds toward the entrance. Happy couples beginning their weekend early came by arm in arm. Children laughed and ran, the sun shone with warm Mexican brilliance; Tony walked beneath a cloud of personal gloom. The welcoming arch of the gate lifted up before him, neatly framing the two police officers who were talking to Lieutenant Gonzales who, incredibly luckily, had his back turned at that moment. Without breaking pace Tony made a right angle turn and headed in the opposite direction. What now—over the wall? It was high and impassable looking wherever he could see; after dark perhaps, but

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certainly not now. And spacious as the grounds were, he certainly could not hide out all afternoon. The path he was following took him toward the entrance to the lobby of the Hacienda Cocoyoc where people were descending from cabs and cars, snapping fingers for bellboys and calling loudly one to the other. An empty cab pulled away down the drive and Tony, throwing a quick glance over his shoulder to be sure the trees were between himself and the entrance, stepped out before it and raised his hand in desperate improvisation.

"Yes?" the driver said, stopping the cab.

"You are for hire?"

"With great certainty."

"I would like to go to Cuernavaca," fumbling for his money, "but there is, what might be called, a little difference of familial opinion. There is a certain woman involved . . ." He let his eyelid droop and raise slowly in a terribly conspiratorial manner while passing over a hundred-peso note at the same time. "This is of course in addition to the fare."

"Command me!"

"I simply wish to dispose myself upon the floor of your fine vehicle until we are out of sight of the hotel. My wife . . ."

"Understood, everything, enter please, we leave for Cuernavaca."

Tony slid in through the open door and lay flat, knees tucked, up, an empty package of Alas cigarettes under his head. The cab lurched into motion and ground its way toward the gate, speeding up—then instantly slowing almost to a stop while Tony's heart behaved in an identical manner.

"Your fly-infested burro is a blight to the eyes and a hazard upon the road," the cab driver called out cheerily toward an uns party.

"Keep this moving," an ofEcial voice said just outside the window, almost stopping Tony's heart completely. Then the cab moved on.

Done. He lay on the floor a bit longer until the weakness had drained away, then crawled up onto the seat.

"Simple enough," the driver said, dodging around a wooden oxcart that rode upon automobile wheels and tires, narrowly missing

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explosive destruction against the grill of a truck coming in the opposite direction, both drivers blowing their horns steadily *in* chivalristic challenge. "Is there a particular address you wish to go to?"

"There is, but I prefer to get out in the town square."

"A wise man needs no instructors!"

The driver lifted both hands skyward in a gesture of appreciation irregardless of the fact that the cab then proceeded to slew across the road in the direction of an irrigation ditch, regaining control only at the last instant. In this heartily enthusiastic manner they proceeded to Cuernavaca where Tony paid and tipped again, then sought the solace of the nearest bar for a large brandy. There were some hours yet before he had to be in Cuautla, which necessitated passing the entrance to Cocoyoc again, so prudence dictated that he remain here as long as possible. It was not hard to do. The bartender produced a gratuitous plate of *cacahuates picantes*, peanuts rolled in red pepper, which did fine things for his thirst necessitating beer as well as brandy to slake the fires below. As the sun crept down toward the mountainous horizon his spirits rose in counterpoint until, when he went to find the Cuautla bus, he was feeling no pain at all. The trip was an easy one, and even had one moment of bittersweet pleasure when they stopped at Cocoyoc and he peeked out at the stir and bustle of police cars from behind the security of *Terras Guide to Mexico*. Lieutenant Gonzales must be very annoyed.

Cuautla was bursting with people as the siesta ended and the sleepers emerged for the joys of evening. Without much difficulty he located the drugstore of the two volcanoes, early as it proved, leaving more than enough time for another brandy. At six precisely he walked through the wide-open front of the store and addressed himself to the gray-haired woman with the purple birthmark who sat behind the cash register.

"Enterovioform, if you please."

She coughed moistly in response, took the slim white package from the shelf behind her without rising, then wrapped it in a

square of brown paper. "Six pesos, fifty."

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He fumbled for his money, not realizing beforehand that a 1 mate purchase would be involved, paid and left with his regulatory prize. Farther down the street he found a doorway in which he could unwrap the box, nor was he very surprised to find writin the paper.

WALK NORTH ON AVENUE FIFTH OF MAY

Since he was already on that street, proceeding in the indicated direction, he continued on his way, pills in pocket, bag in hand, book clamped under arm, feeling that unseen eyes were following his every motion. As indeed they were. Two blocks farther on he crossed a street, sealed off for vehicular traffic by an excava and stacked pipes, where a firm hand seized his arm and an e firmer voice grated in his ear.

"Into that car, *schnell!*"

As they jumped in, the black Packard pulled out, even before the doors were closed. A neat ploy, anyone following on foot would be left behind, while there was no way for a pursuing car to follow at all. Tony glanced sideway at a familiar bulldog jaw, scarred cheeks, shaven head.

"Is the painting in there?" Robl asked, jerking a thick thumb at the airline bag.

"No. Inside this book. You want to see it?"

His only reply was a negative grunt as the car squealed around a corner and out of the back streets, sped down the highway and across a bridge spanning wide sandy flats cut by a small stream in the middle, then rushed through the

outskirts of town. It v faster now through the cornfields, then spun left at a fork where a sign indicated the road to Agua Hedionda. Stinking water? Tony remembered, sulphur baths here, favored spot of the Aztecs, Spanish spa, still valued by the tourists, great curative powers theoretically lurking in their sulphurous depths.

"*Nummer?*" the driver asked, turning his head to throw the word over his shoulder, as solid-necked and shaved-headed as Robl; only his scars were in different places.

"Dm?"

This information was received with a Teutonic grunt of affirmation and the car passed through the public parking lot of the baths

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and went on to a smaller lot labeled *albercas privadas, clientes solamente*, this sign being set next to a high wall pierced with numbered doors. Robl pushed Tony ahead of him when they stopped outside number three, reaching over his shoulder to knock loudly on the door. It opened a crack while a dark eye looked them over, then it swung wide.

Inside was a private swimming pool, rentable by the hour for those who took no pleasure in sharing their bath water with the common masses. It was equably suitable for clandestine meetings. D'Isernia, who had admitted them, slipped his shiny revolver inside the towel he was carrying and sprawled back comfortably on a lounge chair. He was dressed for the occasion in swimming trunks patterned with multichrome seashells; the white hair on his chest and legs matching in quantity that of his full beard and flowing locks.

"Join me, if you please, *Signore* Hawkin. Many things have happened since we last met. Is the door secured, Kurt? Good. Now, sit here by me. Might I assume that the book you are carrying contains the Cellini painting?"

"Yes. You get it open by prying the front cover, carefully though."

"Your knife, Kurt."

Robl produced a large knife from his hip pocket which snicked open wickedly when he pressed a button. With a delicate touch D'Isernia worked the point around the cover until it was free and he could open it. Inside, on a bed of soft cloth, lay the wooden panel of the painting.

"Lovely, simply lovely. I am really quite relieved to see it again, since for a while there I was afraid that it and you were both gone forever. You were not exactly frank at our last meeting, were you, Hawkin?"

"I didn't hide anything."

"I beg to differ." Behind him Robl snorted and smiled coldly. "As our friend here suggests, concealing the fact that you killed your associate Mr. Davidson is more than a little something. Had I known that within hours you would be a fugitive from the police I would never have entrusted this valuable painting to you."

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"Look, I did *not* kill Davidson, and I wish people would stop thinkng that I did." He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. Though it was almost dark the walled enclosure still held the heat of the day. "And I did return the painting as promised and on time."

"Wearing the disguise of a Mexican *bourgeois*? But, that is all beside the point, and the painting is here as I said. My duty is not to enforce the Mexican law and you may decimate your FBI ranks completely with your knife work for all I care. But please wait until our little business deal is completed. While you have been playing your games with the police I have been dealing with your associate, Mr. Sones, and we have agreed upon terms. He will provide a million dollars in used bank notes of v denominations; in exchange for this you will receive the painting of the heroic and historical 'Battle of Anghiari.'"

"And what about the painting here, the Cellini 'St. Sebastian'?"

"I will retain possession of it until the other sale is completed. A hostage to good fortune, you might say, just to make sure that nothing goes wrong. Then this will be sold to your government as well. Sones and I are still discussing the price, which shall be high. But the first transaction is what we care about now. Yon will examine the painting to assure

your superiors of its authenticity."

"Did Sones say I should do that?"

"Reluctantly, I assure you. He had another authority he wanted to send instead, a Lizveta Zlotnikova . . ."

"Rote Schweine! Kormnunistr Robl banged one hard fist into his open palm angrily, a fine spray of saliva blowing out with every word. "We will not have her."

"There seems to be some belief in certain quarters that she is a Soviet agent, and we did not feel it would be wise to inform the U.S.S.R. of our activities at the present time. However, we will permit you to take samples of the paint and canvas for her examination. Ours is a straightforward business deal and we take pride in our product and want to have only satisfied customers."

"What next then?"

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D'Isernia waved his hand at the door. Robl took his knife back and began to stolidly clean his nails with the point.

"The car is waiting outside to take you to a local hotel, the Vasco. A room has been reserved for you in the name of John Smith-"

"Oh, that's really original."

"You will wait there until we send for you. And while you are waiting you will contact your associates to determine if the money has arrived, for we will not proceed until we know it is here. If all is as it should be you will examine the painting tomorrow so that tomorrow night the exchange will be made. Do you understand that?"

"It sounds simple enough." He was hot and very thirsty and it was not that simple, and the sight of the German whittling his cuticles with the knife also did nothing to make him feel any better. "Can I go now?"

"Any time you wish. But stay in your room until we call. I do not wish the police to pick you up at this time."

"Your concern for my welfare is touching. I'll see you."

The same car was waiting outside, the bullet-headed Teutonic driver still planted solidly behind the wheel as though he were bolted in place.

"Do you know where to take me?"

Another great conversationalist. What next? He had to find some way of contacting Sones without being grabbed by the police, and could think of no way. Yet he did not dare admit this to his hosts since it might jeopardize the entire operation. More and more he was beginning to feel that he was not cut out for this kind of thing; the buoyancy of the alcohol had worn off and had been replaced by depression.

They ground up the road away from the resort and when they were on the highway again, with no other cars in sight, the driver turned around and looked sternly at Tony.

"Gornischt" he said.

TWELVE

The suddenness of this revelation took Tony off guard and he gaped speechlessly while trying to get his thoughts into gear as the driver went slower and slower and his scowl deepened.

"Gornischt, that's right," Tony said. "No names, right. But You Know Who told me that I'm supposed to answer, give me a second." He raked through his memory desperately until the countersign finally surfaced.

"Hilfen!"

"Correct. But you should be more alert, Hawkin, if you wish to remain alive in this business."

"Listen, I don't want to remain in this business at all. But you knew the password—then you're not a renegade Nazi like Robl?"

"Hardly. I am an Israeli now, but it was my dubious privilege to be born in Germany. I was happily teaching chemistry at the University of Tel Aviv until that Goldstein talked me into helping out here. Like you I wish only to see this matter finished, and to return to my laboratory."

"Amen!"

"I agree. But for the moment I am Heinrich. Too newly arrived to be in the center of German expatriate matters here, they trust no one, but familiar enough now to be hired to do odd jobs like chauffeuring. As long as I am here I am your contact. Do you have anything to report to Jacob?"

"No more than you know, probably. I've made the contact with Robl and D'Isernia. There has been no mention of Hoeh-hande or anyone else involved in this matter. I'm supposed to

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stay at this hotel until they contact me again so I can examine the painting."

"All right, I'll take you to the hotel now. You must let me know at once if you have any more information."

The car moved forward quickly again and Tony called out.

"Wait, slow down. Can you contact Goldstein right now?"

"Assuredly."

"Fine, then listen, tell him where I am staying and ask him to get a message to Sones in *casta* seven at the Hacienda Cocoyoc. Let Sones know where I am and have him get in touch with me at once. But the phone is surely tapped and Sones is being watched closely, so he will have to do this contact in an undercover fashion."

"As your American expression goes, do not teach your grandmother to suck eggs. It will be done."

The Hotel Vasco was on the highway, cryptocolonial architecture, red-tiled roof, palm surrounded. Tony signed "John Smith" on the register under the indifferent eye of the clerk, filling in the other spaces on the form with information created on the spot. The room was large, airy, cool, comfortable, and Jacob Goldstein worked very fast indeed. After a short nap Tony found his appetite had returned, but before he ordered anything something had to be done about the elements of his disguise that were becoming decidedly uncomfortable. The rings that widened his nostrils slipped out easily enough, but taking out the pads in his cheeks and behind his lips was something else again. The adhesive was indeed adhesive and the inside of his mouth was sore before he had worried the pads out. But food would take care of that. Discomfort was forgotten as he ordered up a small dinner of *guacamole* salad, turkey *mole*, % small portion of chicken enchiladas and beef tacos, along with a half bottle of a red Santo Tomas wine, followed by a pastry so sweet it hurt his teeth. This all went down quite easily and he was lighting a large La Prueba cigar, dark aromatic leaf of Veracruz, when there was a soft sort of subservient knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"I have come for the tray, *senorP*

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"Just a moment."

He unlocked the door and Sones pushed in with finger to lips, frowning fiercely, making hushing motions with his other hand. Tony stood aside and gaped in silence while Billy Schultz followed, winking conspiratorially and carrying with great ease I immense suitcases. He was followed by a stranger, a large, hulking man wearing a lumpy brown suit and carrying yet another suitcase in one hand, a drawn automatic pistol in the other. I bag carriers placed their burdens down without a sound and sat on them; Sones rattled the dishes loudly as he loaded the tray and put it out in the hall.

"Thank you, *senor*" he said, closing and locking the door from the inside and waving Tony after him to the bathroom.

He closed this door behind them as well, made a quick search of the and electrical fittings, then flushed the toilet.

"We got your message," he whispered. "I have no idea you arranged it but it showed good thinking, you know, how it arrived. You're shaping up a bit better."

Tony nodded and waved his hand in a dismissing motion, taking silent credit for Goldstein's work. It was about time someone gave him credit for something, even though undeserved.

"What's this with all the people and bags?"

"We are moving our base. Too much surveillance now at Cocoyoc. We will stay at this hotel."

"Why are we whispering in the toilet?"

"Electronic bugging, of course. I am surprised at you, Hawkin. Schultz is checking the other room now."

The roar of the toilet gurgled and stopped and Sones flushed it again. Steam rose from the bowl and he stepped back, eyes wide.

"I wondered too," Hawkin said. "The waiter told me they laid the water pipes wrong before they poured the concrete slab. It was easy enough to fix the faucets, just change the handles around, but the toilets would have been . . ."

"All right now. If this place is bugged, as I am sure it is, **I will go out and come in again and talk to you and you play along.** I want to feed some false information to those people."

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When they emerged, the stranger was still sitting on his bag, gun in hand, but Billy was standing on the bed pointing to the light fixture on the ceiling. Tony could see nothing of interest, but Sones stood on tiptoe and peered at it and nodded under-standingly. He went to the door and knocked. Tony joined him there, feeling slightly foolish at the play acting, while Sones opened the door, rattled the knob, and closed it again quickly,

"Hello," was all he could think of.

"Hello. I received your message."

"That's nice." Would this sort of thing fool a five year old?

"The money is on the way from Washington and will be here in the morning, all used small bills, unmarked, just as they asked."

"That's good."

"I have a room down the hall. Why did you pick this hotel for a rendezvous?"

"I didn't. They made the reservation for me."

"What! You did not tell me that in your message. The room must be bugged. We do not want them listening to us. Let me look, aha! there it is, there on the light. I will pull it down."

He waved to Billy who reached up with a wire cutter and clipped an invisible strand then took something from behind the fixture and handed it down to Sones, who nodded approvingly.

"Swiss, the Steinhager 31, the same kind we use." The metal button, no bigger than a dime, rested innocently on his palm. "Retail cost three hundred and eighty-seven dollars. We can turn this in, it will look good on the budget. Hawkin, this is Stocker, he is from Treasury."

"Pleased tuh meet you," Stocker said, making no effort to rise, to extend his hand or to put his gun away. He was big, solid, suspicious, noncommittal; his pale-blue eyes had no more expression or warmth than those of a lizard.

"Pleased to meet you too." Tony lowered his half-raised hand. Sones pointed to the suitcase Stocker was using for a chair.

"Treasury always sends their own men on these kind of money transactions, people experienced in handling large sums and taking

care of them. Stocker is a specialist. There is a million dollars in bills in that bag."

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"And A'hm keeping an eye on it."

Stocker smiled, for the first time, wintry as it was, and took a grenade from his pocket and bounced it happily on his palm. So that was why his pockets bulged so! What could possibly be in all the others? Tony took a reflex step backward, not really wanting to know.

"Now here is the drill," Sones said, once more in command. "Schultz and I are down the hall, in fourteen, we've signed in. No one—and I repeat, *no one*—knows that Stocker is here, nor will they find out about it. Lizveta Zlotnikova is in the room next to ours, fifteen. We are leaving our heavy equipment here and Stocker will stay here with the money."

"Well, that's fine by me," Tony said. "But there is only the single bed."

"Ah don't sleep."

"So that takes care of that. Put a do not disturb sign on the door when we go and leave it there. Even when you go out. If you want to get back into this room, and that goes for all of us, knock twice, wait, once more. When the door opens say, 'Horsefly.'"

"If yo don't, yo're liable to be dead."

"Right. Any questions?"

"Just one. What happened after I left Cocoyoc? There seemed to be a lot of police around."

"Lieutenant Gonzales was very annoyed. And that means he is annoyed at us too and keeping an eye on our operation. This is a handicap."

"Well, you talk like it was my fault! Look, I didn't kill Davidson, so you can't blame this on me. That CIA man Higginson is the one caused all the trouble by dropping the body like that."

"A report will go in on him to his superiors, not that it will do any good. They never listen to what *we* say. But until the murderer is discovered you are Gonzales's only suspect. And you have made him angry."

There was very little that could be answered to that and Tony locked the door behind them with a feeling of intense gloom. In order to dissipate it he called room service and ordered a bottle

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of Madero brandy and some ice. Stocker followed his every motion with his cold, transparent eyes.

"Have a drink?" Tony asked, pouring the amber painkiller over the ice.

"Ah don't drink on duty." He had actually moved to the armchair, but the suitcase was tucked under his legs and he held the gun ready on his lap.

"Well, I'm not on duty, not yet, so if you don't mind . . ."

"Go raht ahead. Ah enjoy a little old panther sweat mahself from time to time."

Tony retired early, knowing not what the morrow would bring, and sought solace in his panther sweat to help him get to sleep. The brandy worked wonders and he drifted off easily, but woke up a number of times during the night. Whenever he did he could see the dark outline of the Treasury man in the chair, the glint of steel in his hand, a shine of light from his eyes—or was he just imagining that. Sunlight and the ringing of the phone woke him early. He groped for the receiver and a voice growled in his ear.

"The car will be outside in thirty-five minutes. Be there."

The line went dead before he could answer and he rose, yawning and scratching, to the sight of Stocker still in the chair, watching him as intently as he had the previous evening.

"You really don't sleep, do you?"

"Ah make up for it 'tween jobs."

Tony showered and shaved quickly and then, with some reluctance, dressed again in the same clothes that were now beginning to show marked signs of wear, as well as exhibiting a few food and drink stains down the front. But they were good enough for at least one more day, and skulking around with a crooked Italian art dealer and an ex-Nazi could not be called a major social occasion in any case. Stocker was standing by the door, gun ready, as always, in his hand.

"Ah'U just lock this behind you."

"See you later. Try to get some sleep."

The only answer was a wintry, disdainful smile. Tony exited

and the lock ground behind him. He needed coffee badly but he

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had to first tell Sones what was happening. What room had he said he would be in? Fourteen? Thirteen? He should have made a note, but note-making was one thing that was strictly forbidden in this work. Fourteen, it must have been fourteen. He tapped lightly, then louder when there was no response. There was a certain sadistic pleasure in waking up Sones. The safety chain rattled and clattered and the door opened. Sleepy-faced, long blond hair covering one eye, Lizveta Zlotnikova looked out at him, blinking in the light of the hall, then smiling warmly.

"Tony! I was worried about you, it is good you woke me up, come in."

Protest died as she opened the door wide and pulled him inside, closing it behind his back. She was dressed in a thin silk gown which covered, obviously, nothing beneath, so that when she took a deep breath and sighed, the top of the gown rose up toward him, parting under the pressure, jiggling tremendously. He tore his eyes away, smiled, coughed, groped for the door handle behind him.

"Have to go, see the painting maybe, tell you first . . ."

"How considerate, how I worry about those paintings. I worry about you too, you are not hard like the others, a man of art I think." She moved closer, her voice huskier. "We are the same kind of people."

"Must report to Sones. Car waiting . . ."

"I will be waiting too. Waiting here for your safe return. Come to me and tell me what has happened. Go safely." Her hands went behind his head and her lips engulfed his in a warm and exceedingly rich kiss. It lasted a long time and eventually, short of air, he pushed away, though it was hard to push her wit! pushing silk and full-rounded flesh. Once out of the room he found he was sweating, though the hallway was cool. Now which was Sones's room, fifteen perhaps, the one next to Lizveta Zlot-nikova's. She had a nice name, with a certain richness to it. She had a certain richness herself which had not been obvious at first. The door in front of him opened suddenly, startling him,

and Sones peered out.

"Why are you just standing there in the hall? What do you want?"

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"To report. They are sending a car for me, someone phoned me, sounded like Robl, that's all he said. It will be here, I hadn't realized, look at the time, it's here now."

"Then get down there—and better not fumble this one, Hawkin. There is a lot riding on it. You better do a lot better

than you have done up to now."

Hurried on by this enthusiastic praise, Tony went to the lobby and was leaning toward the dining room and a quick cup of coffee, which he was yearning after more and more, when he saw Heinrich at the front door, jerking an impatient thumb. He sighed for thoughts of coffees lost, and changed direction.

"You are late."

"I thought some coffee . . ."

"There is no time."

The dark bulk of the Packard hulked outside the entrance, Robl and D'Isernia both in large black hats peering at him from the back seat.

"You are late," Robl said when he joined them.

"It couldn't be helped. Are we going to see the painting now?"

"Later. We go to Mass first."

"Today is April thirtieth," D'Isernia said, and both men nodded gravely. They were wearing almost identical dark suits and as soon as the car had left the city they took out black armbands and pinned them to their sleeves. What could it possibly mean? Tony cudged his brain for holidays he might have forgotten, could think of none, Mexican or American. Easter was over. Mass? On a Saturday?

"You wouldn't mind telling me what this is all about?"

"You will understand later," D'Isernia said sternly, pinning a black rosette to his pocket.

"Can you at least tell me where we are going?"

"To the Hacienda Pantitlan. It is in ruins, burned during the revolution, but the chapel is intact. It suits our needs."

They turned off the paved road onto a dirt track between the fields of high sugar cane. There was another car ahead of them, Heinrich slowed so the dust would settle before they reached it, and at least one other vehicle was visible through the cloud behind them. Very quickly the vine-covered walls and crumbling

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brick chimneys of the hacienda came into view ahead. Hein turned off into the grassy field and parked the Packard next to the other cars there, fifteen at least, and still more arriving. The occupants, all middle-aged or older, were proceeding slowly toward the chapel, mostly men, a very few women, all dressed in mourning, black clothes and sable armbands.

"We will wait until the others are inside," D'Isernia said, looking at Tony's lime-green shirt and shaking his head. "You cannot go in dressed like that. Stay back with Heinrich and you may observe from the rear. There is a small room there where you go after the services. We will join you there. Do you understand?"

Tony nodded gravely as though all this made any sense, and attempted to assume as morose an air as the others while t waited. The last car arrived, the last party of funereal septuagenarians tottered into the chapel, then they followed. It was dark inside the church, dimly illuminated by candles on the altar, and the atmosphere was more redolent of goats and hay than ecclesiastical incense. The rustle and whispering stopped as a man in dark suit and dog collar rose and began to speak in quavering German. Heinrich pulled Tony's sleeve and they moved off to one side where they could watch but not be observed themselves,

"Would you mind telling me what is going on?"

"It is a commemorative Mass as you can see." He snorted with some feeling and spat noisily on the first floor. "The Spaniards have held this kind of a service before in Madrid, with plenty of Germans and Italians, of course. First time in this country. Dead, twenty-seven years ago today."

"Who?"

"*Nummer Eins*. Number one. Hitler, Adolf, born Schickl-gruber."

"You have got to be kidding!" The massed voices rose in prayer before them.

"I wish I were. Old memories die hard, good or bad. I had no inkling of this before today. I left a message for Jacob Goldstein and I pray he gets it on time. There should be people here he is interested in."

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"Hochhande?"

"Who knows. But nothing is to be lost by finding out just who the *momsehrim* are who attend an obscenity like this."

It did not last long, as though the attendees having made their appearances were eager to disperse back to the seclusion from whence they had come. There was a lot of German spoken, a quick litany or two in Latin, one brief and slightly hysterical paean in Italian, a mumbled Spanish speech about glories past, unscalable heights, victories, defeats, and then it was all over. Tony and Heinrich withdrew to the room to wait, sniffing at the air much thicker now with goat, crunching the caprine pellets underfoot. They left the door partly open and Heinrich, displaced German, Israeli chemist, stared with burning eyes at every attendee that went by, locking their faces in his memory. D'Isernia and Robl were last, closing the doors behind the tail of the processional.

"Heinrich, get the car when all the others are gone," D'Isernia ordered. "Back it by the front door and keep the motor running. You come with us, Hawkin."

Clatter of their footsteps down the nave, muffled echoes back from the cobwebby rafters above. Dust motes glinted thickly in the ray of morning sunlight that sliced in through a glassless window high on the wall and Tony resisted the urge to sneeze as his nose was assaulted. As though to a dark wedding they paced to the empty altar and around it to the door inset in the wall. Was the door open and had it just closed? It was hard to tell in the half light now that the candles had been snuffed. Robl went first and pushed hard on the heavy wood until the door reluctantly moved, then squealed open.

"In," he ordered, taking a flashlight from his pocket and lighting the way.

Tony went in with the others behind him, feeling a sudden trepidation. Stolen paintings, million-dollar ransom, hardened criminals; if anything were to go wrong now he had the feeling that

his life would be very much in jeopardy. The dusty floor

was thick with male footprints mixed with narrow tire tracks.

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"Over there," Robl said, his flash illuminating the far wall and a cloth-draped bulk that stood against it.

The painting? Tony went to it slowly and took up the of the cloth. With none too steady hands he raised the layers of thick burlap to disclose the "Battle of Anghiari." Stained and dusty, much dirtier than the reproductions in the books, but undoubtedly the painting in question.

"I am afraid the best care was not taken," D'Isernia said. "But nothing drastic, simply surface dirt and discoloration, looks like carbon as well, from smoke of some kind. Who knows where it has been? But the restorers can take care of that easily eno correct?"

"Yes, I'm sure they can. But you must understand—not that I'm doubting your word—although it *looks* like the right painting to me, I can't be sure without laboratory examination. I just can't go back and say pay the million bucks, the thing looks okay to me."

"That is well understood, *Signore* Hawkin, there is no need to apologize. I have here a palette knife, some glassine envelopes, a knife with the blade of a razor. May I suggest you take samples of the paint and canvas from an inconspicuous place, perhaps slivers of the wood as well, take them yourself so you will know there is no attempt at deceit. Have them analyzed, and then we will talk business."

"Talk, talk, too much talk already." Robl grated the words angrily, stepping forward with the knife in his hand, the blade springing into place; Tony shied back. "This running about must be finished, *kaputt*. Here is a sample to take back to your Russky that will tell her if the painting is real or not!"

Tony cried out and would have jumped forward if D'Is had not stopped him.

Robl jammed the blade into the corner of the priceless pai* then with a swift motion accompanied by the rip of canvas, cut a ragged triangle out of one corner. With more heart-stopping ripping sounds he tore it free at the edges and dropped the fragment into Tony's hand.

"Here. Examine that."

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D'Isernia nodded at Tony's shocked stare.

"I understand your feelings, *Signore* Hawkin, and do commiserate. Friend Robl is a bit impetuous and, perhaps, slightly coarse as well. But he is right. Skilled craftsmen can repair this little act of destruction so that the vandalism will never be seen. And it does give us something solid to base our negotiations on. Submit this to all examinations, and if you are satisfied and have the money the exchange will take place. Inform Mr. Sones that I will telephone you at four this afternoon to discuss the matter. Here, let us wrap this piece of canvas and protect it from further damage."

He took his handkerchief from his breast pocket, shook it out and draped it across his palm. Tony put the piece of the painting on it gently, then folded the handkerchief around it. D'Isernia nodded approvingly.

"So. Preliminaries finished, we can go. But before you do, perhaps you would take some pleasure in meeting our principal, the man who owns this painting. When you meet him you will perhaps understand why, at least for Robl and myself, this morning's ceremony had certain overtones of humor."

The circle of light from the flash moved across the floor to an alcove, following the narrow tracks to the wheels that had made it. The wheel chair that stood there, the dark figure seated in it, gray blanket draped over legs and feet, old, clawlike hands clasped together on the blanket. Slowly upward the light moved, over the baggy brown jacket and yellowed shirt, the badly knotted black tie in the too-loose collar about the scrawny neck.

An old man's face. A wrinkled, dewlapped face that despite its age seemed familiar, the face of someone younger.

The lock of hair now thin and white that hung over the forehead. The toothbrush mustache, white as well—had they both once been dark?—on that thin upper lip.

"Is it . . . ?" Tony asked, choking out the words. The head nodded.

"I am."

THIRTEEN

"How do you do?" Tony managed to say after a considerable time had passed during which he considered saying *Pleased to ? you*, but he wasn't, really. The man in the wheel chair nodded happily, and proceeded to take Tony's greeting literally, answering him in English with a thick German accent.

"I do quite well, really, all things considered, my age, I'll be eighty-three years old soon, just think of that. My appetite is not good, too much wind in Mexican food, and I have trouble walking, as you see. The old trouble coming back, paresis they call this stage, the folly of youth. But you did not come here to talk about me. The painting, the best in my collection, you like it. *Jar*

"Excellent, the finest of its kind, Da Vinci never did another like it."

"The horse filled with the battle lust, you see. The heroic killing and dying. But it is obvious why. Research has proved that Da Vinci is a corruption of da Von Giesel, that is of the family of Von Giesel, a Gothic family from Germany, so the man is proven of good Aryan stock."

"I hadn't heard that—"

"You doubt what I am saying? You think I He!" The old man's hand pounded the arm of the chair; spittle dribbled unnoticed down his chin. "What do you, a mongrel *Amerikaner* dog, know about great art?"

"I know enough about it to pay a million dollars for it!"

The thought of this money had a quieting effect. He sat back

in his chair, rubbing at his mouth, then almost smiled. "Quite right, a million dollars. No less for this, the pride of my collection. In fact, finish this deal and I might just offer you a bargain of equal worth. Look at this." He fumbled under the blanket and brought up a creased roll of heavy paper which he flattened on his lap to disclose a watercolor painting. "I have been dabbling a bit, still. An original of mine, quite valuable in certain circles, I can assure."

Robl held the flashlight and Tony looked at the painting. It was a badly executed view of a Bavarian or Austrian village, done in the worst possible taste, the perspective haphazard, the washes muddy. The initials in the corner, A.H., were picked out daintily in brown.

"We cannot stay any longer," D'Isernia said. "It is not wise."

The watercolor vanished back under the blanket, and with Robl's firm guiding hand under his elbow, Tony was moved quickly out of the room and rushed back up the aisle of the church. The Packard was waiting at the portal as ordered, rear doors open and motor muttering, and it moved swiftly away as soon as they were inside.

"You are a very lucky young man," Robl said, giving Tony a comradely pat on the knee at the same time. "He usually never sees strangers, you can understand why."

"Yes, sure." There was very little else he could say. Holding the wrapped fragment of painting carefully in both hands, Tony stared out unseeingly at the mountainous landscape moving by, the twisting road that crossed and recrossed the narrow gauge railroad tracks. He blinked at it, then glanced back over his shoulder with apprehension.

"Aren't we going in the wrong direction?"

"That might be said," D'Isernia answered. "What we are doing, if you do not mind, is going for a little drive toward Amecameca so that our mutual acquaintance can leave safely. A little precaution. As I am sure you can understand, he does not go out much, and when he does it is with trepidation and the utmost caution. He Could not resist attending the ceremonies today, so with a

single stone we killed two birds, enabling you to meet him as well."

The car pulled off the road under the giant pines and they smoked cigarettes while they waited. An occasional car passed on the road behind them, the only sound other than the wind stirring the pine needles high above. Across the valley below the lower slopes of the dormant volcano Popocatepetl rose up to the distant summit with a banner of cloud flying from it. Robl consulted his watch and the return trip began. There was no conversation. D'Isernia looked out at the scenery and whistled an aria from *Madama Butterfly*, Robl stared sternly ahead, Tony guarded the sundered piece of painting. They halted finally a block from the Hotel Vasco.

"Emerge now," Robl ordered. "Have the examination made. The money is here?"

"It should be here this afternoon."

"It had better be. Remember, you will be contacted at four this afternoon. If all is well the exchange will be made tonight.⁵⁵

They were all waiting in Sones's room when Tony returned, all except Stocker that is, who was undoubtedly still sitting in-somniacly over his charge.

"Report," Sones ordered.

"I saw the painting, it looked authentic enough." Tony opened the folded handkerchief while he talked. "I was going to scrapings but Robl thought some kind of butchery was more in order. He cut a corner from the painting."

Lizveta Zlotnikova looked at the fragment as at a fresh-slain corpse and screamed shrilly. "Beasts, swine," she snarled through her teeth as she gently took up the canvas, adding even more insulting-sounding terms in richly throbbing Russian. Bearing the sundered canvas like a newborn, she left the room.

"They will be contacting me at four this afternoon to make sure that the money is here by then, I didn't let them know it had already arrived. If the painting checks out the exchange will be made tonight. And there is one other thing . . ." He hesitated,

"What?"

"I met—the man who owns the painting. He said it was from

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his collection. And there was a memorial Mass there, sort of funny, because he wasn't dead and . . ."

"Have you been drinking, Hawkin?"

"No I haven't, not a drop, nor have I had coffee or breakfast either." His stomach emitted a dreadful growl at this realization. "I'm going to order something up now."

"Not before you explain just what it is you are talking about. Or who. What man?"

Tony clenched his fists at his side. "Adolf Hitler, that's who. I've been talking with him. The picture is from his collection, you told me so yourself. He's alive and well in a wheel chair."

A thoughtful silence fell. Billy Schultz gaped. Sones opened his eyes wider and wider nor did he take them off Tony who crossed to the phone and contacted room service fairly swiftly, then ordered a club sandwich with turkey, a side of fried beans, a large *guacamole* salad with *tortillitas*, a jug of coffee and a bottle of Bohemia ale.

"Just repeat that," Sones said when he hung up.

"Adolf Hitler. I have been talking with him about the purchase of one of his paintings."

"He's supposed to be dead," Billy squeaked.

"The reports must have been exaggerated."

"You are sure of this, Hawkin? Washington will want to know everything."

"I'm not sure of anything. He had a little white mustache and hair over his eye. And he offered to sell one of his own watercolors. It was bad enough to be real."

"I must contact Washington."

"In school, you know, they told us he was dead."

"I hope this is the food," Tony said, hurrying to the door to answer the knock, saliva beginning to flow in anticipation.

"Absolutely authentic," Lizveta Zlotnikova said, coming in, doing some quick work with her handkerchief at her reddened eyes. "The pigments, canvas, characteristic of the period. The brush strokes even more evidence, the hand of the master, what sureness. What kind of creature could deface such a masterpiece?"

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She raised the sodden handkerchief again and Tony felt back a sudden desire to comfort her, perhaps hold her to his manly bosom, sudden warm memories of her female one burning strongly before him.

"Then the meet is on. Get back to your room, Hawkin, and tell Stocker about this. And if I were you, I would not mention to *anyone*, repeat *anyone*, about whom you met today.⁵"

Tony opened the door, then closed it again and turned. In the rush of the morning's events he had completely forgotten what he had been told earlier.

"I'm sorry, but what was the password to get back into my room?"

"Two knocks, space, one more knock. Password Horsefly. You had better shape up, Hawkin, start catching on to things."

Good news in the form of a tray-bearing waiter appeared in the hall outside and Tony intercepted his lunch, stopped, tipped and dismissed the man, then went through the ritual of admittance to his own quarters. The chill eye at the crack in the door accepted "Horsefly" and let him in. The curtains were drawn, the room dark, the bed unmade.

"Want some of this?" Tony asked.

"Don't drink on the job, nor eat either."

Thus admonished, Tony sat down to clear the platter himself, attempting to ignore the watchful eyes and ready gun. "The painting had been authenticated. The exchange will probably take place tonight."

"Ahm ready."

Tony chewed over thoughts of responsibility with his food* He had made certain promises to Jacob Goldstein when the Cellini had been returned to him. He had no information about Hochhande yet, but, somehow, he felt the Israeli underground might be just as interested in Adolf's return. Yes, he would positively have to report this to Goldstein, who would also be interested in the attendees at the commemorative Mass. Finishing the last of the beer he belched lightly with satisfaction.

"I'm going down for cigarettes. Do you want some he asked, and framed the answer to himself as the other spoke.

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"Don't smoke on the job."

"Be just a few minutes."

Everlasting suspicion if not vigilance seemed to be the motto of the foreign agent, at least that much had been proven to him by the past days' activities. Since the other side had arranged his stay at this hotel it could safely be assumed that someone in the establishment—everyone in fact for all he knew—was in contact with Robl or D'Isernia, and would report and probably listen to any phone calls he made from the premises. The sun was hot, the air clear and cool as always, when he left the Vasco and strolled down Avenida Reforma. A neon-tubed cocktail glass, international symbol, beckoned over a doorway and he entered and ordered a Margarita and obtained permission to use the telephone, all charges going on his check, happily, *senor*. It rang a long time before it was answered, lunchtime, waiting appetites, mounds of meats being sliced, and Goldstein himself spoke.

"Toltec Kosher Delicatessen."

"Operator X-o here."

"I'm busy, Hawkin, so make it quick."

"Now wait a minute, I don't have to call, you know. I have information I want to give you. Did you hear about the commemorative services for Adolf?"

"I got the word, but too late to do anything about it. Were you there?"

"I was, and your man Heinrich too. He took a long look at everyone and if he remembers faces he has a lot to tell you."

"A fine memory, a scholar, we'll show him our photographs. Anything else?"

"Just one tiny thing." Smugly. "Hitler was there himself, I talked to him."

"By, by, I got to go to work and no time for jokes."

"But I mean it, Jake, really. He was there with the painting, an old man in a wheel chair, and he even offered to sell me one of his watercolors."

"That one again. Don't worry too much about him. He is a nut case by the name of Jakob Platz, though I guess in some ways he is Stupid like a fox. He commanded an SS panzer corps on the

eastern front, not a nice man but there are worse. We ran across him some years ago. Apparently he wasn't a big enough wheel to steal much money, so he does this Hitler thing and sells his true-life stories to journalists, they always need copy for their magazines. All those alive-and-well stories, they come from him. Anything else."

"Nothing, I guess, except the exchange for the painting may come off tonight."

"Good luck. Don't trust these bums too far. Keep in touch,"

"By," Tony said into the dead receiver, then hung up. Well, he had reported, done his duty. A fake Hitler. Well, it had to be. But it would have been nice to have a real one. Not nice, but interesting. He should tell Sones about this, but where would he say he got the information? A second Margarita produced no answers, so he bought his cigarettes, paid his bill and went back to his room. Knock-knock, knock, "Horsefly," and the constant gaze of the guardian.

Precisely at four the phone rang.

"Did you find the painting was authentic?" D'Isernia's voice asked.

"It is."

"You have the money?"

"Yes."

"Bring it to the front door of your hotel now and you will receive further instructions." The line went dead but rang again as soon as he had hung up. This time it was Sones who spoke.

"We heard all that. Just hold there and wait for us."

Tony did not bother to ask by what devious bit of electronic horseplay they had tapped his phone, but instead bent to put his shoes on.

"Is this it?" Stocker asked, eagerly alert.

"It certainly is. The time is now."

They were all crowded into the room which necessitated an appreciable amount of milling about which disturbed Stocker so that he moved back against the wall, suitcase behind him, gun ready, eyes darting from one to the other. Billy Schultz went directly to one of the heavy suitcases which, when he opened

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it, proved to contain a small armory. Pistols, grenades, entrenching tools, tear-gas bombs, thermite charges, knives, land mines. Stocker patted the lumps in his suit at the sight, no doubt reassuring himself that he had a better selection about his person.

"Thirty-eight or forty-five?" Sones asked Tony.

"I'm really not much of a pistol shot."

"Take the forty-five then. Hit a man anywhere and you stop him."

"I do not wish a weapon," Lizveta Zlotnikova said.

"I had no intention of offering you one."

Billy Schultz and Sones managed to distribute a good portion of the suitcase's contents about their persons. Sones buttoned his jacket over his bulging waist and snapped orders with a military precision.

"Schultz, take point. I will ride shotgun on Stocker's left flank to keep his gun hand clear. Hawkin, rear guard. The lady will stay well back but first I would like to check your purse if you do not mind."

"I mind," Lizveta Zlotnikova said. "I do not carry weapon."

"Right, you do not," Sones said as, ignoring her protests, he rifled quickly through the contents of her largish bag. "Move out."

For public appearances Stocker kept his gun in his jacket pocket, still clutched in his hand, but there could be little

doubt of what he had there. In fact, all of them generated an aura of hostility, moving down the hall and through the lobby, half crouched, eyes busily everywhere. Mexico, and this state of Morelos in particular, being no stranger to violence, all present quickly detected that something was afoot and guests left abruptly while the clerks decided that they had business in the office with the door closed. This happened very quickly until the only one left was D'Isernia at the front door, casually smoking a cigarette.

"You see, I present myself as hostage of fortune. If we might go in your automobile I will issue instructions as we proceed."

"The car, Schultz," Sones said out of the corner of his mouth, not taking his eyes from D'Isernia.

It arrived quickly. Lizveta Zlotnikova rode in the front seat with

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Billy, while D'Isernia sat in the middle of the back seat flanked by the ominous forms of Stocker and Sones. Tony had the dubious pleasure of the jump seat where he could rub knees with the others. The suitcase was hard-clamped between Stocker's knees and he had now, in the security of the Cadillac, drawn his gun and had it trained on D'Isernia.

"South out of the city on the Oaxaca road," the Italian said, seemingly unimpressed by the threatening weapon. "If it is not asking too much I would like to check through the contents of the suitcase. A necessary prelude to any negotiations, you admit?"

"Any cars following us, Schultz?" Sones asked.

"No, sir."

"All right. Open it up, Stocker."

With great reluctance the Treasury man pocketed his gun and withdrew a four-sided key of complex design. Setting the suitcase upon his knees he unlocked it and threw the top open under Tony's nose, disclosing the solidly packed bundles of greenbacks inside. Stocker's big automatic appeared again and was trained on D'Isernia as he took a bundle out, counted it, rummaged through the other piles to make sure that it was money all the way down, then restored it to its lucrative nest.

"Very much in order," he announced as Stocker closed the case far more readily than he had opened it. "I'll have the key, if you please."

"Give it to him," Sones ordered, beating down the Treasury man's obvious reluctance.

They traveled for about an hour, doubling back on their tracks at times, then hurtling down dirt roads that had the Cadillac billowing upon its shock absorbers like a ship upon the waves,

"I wish to be sure we are not followed," D'Isernia said. "I wish to be sure we meet at the appointed place at the correct time with just this car, no police or helicopters or such devices,"

"We would not consider such a thing," Sones said.

"I would in your place, so let us not be hypocrites. Very soon now."

The sun was a dusty orange disc burning on the horizon when

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they came to a medium-sized village, Yecapixtla, the sign by the roadside read, memorializing the memories of departed Aztecs. Men in wide-brimmed sombreros were here in great numbers, accompanied, a dutiful two paces behind, by *re bozo-wrapped* wives who led the larger children by the hand, carried the smaller ones. The car slowed, going in the same direction as the growing crowd, toward a small grandstand and fenced ring.

"A provincial bullfight," D'Isernia said. "A simple spectacle enjoyed by a simple people. Turn right down that track there. Now, stop here. Please to turn the vehicle about and back it toward that fence visible beyond the burros."

On both sides the rural population of Yecapixtla moved slowly by, only the children noticing the large black car in their

midst, the adults practicing a stern indifference. One of the burros onnk-ahnked a long and loud cry before growing silent, then peering sideways at the car out of a suspicious eye.

It was dusk now, but the other car could clearly be seen on the far side of the barbed-wire fence, also backing slowly into place behind them.

"Take positions," Sones snapped the order. "Schultz, right flank, Hawkin, left, Stocker, shoot through the back window if you have to. I will negotiate. Move."

"If I might go to the other car . . . ?" D'Isernia asked, not moving until he had received Sones's abrupt nod.

They walked to the fence together and D'Isernia lifted the strands delicately and slipped through. Lizveta Zlotnikova shrank down, just her eyes visible over the back of the front seat. The agents waited, watching, hands heavy in pockets. A few of the local citizenry still passed, the scene was peaceful.

Robl emerged from the rear of the enemy Packard where someone else was visible, a wrapped and heavily hatted form. The solid bulk of the driver's head suggested Heinrich, but Tony could not be sure. Robl and D'Isernia conferred briefly and the Italian returned to the fence to face Sones.

"Here is what I suggest. Your man will bring the money out of the car. When he does Robl will bring out the painting. We will both approach the fence at the same time. Be careful

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with your guns, there are innocent people about, as you can see. Let us keep this exchange an honest one. When the money is put down, the painting will be put down. The exchange will take place. We will both leave in opposite directions. Is it agreed?"

"Go ahead."

Slowly, as in some exaggerated mating dance, the exchange proceeded. Bag and bearer emerged, painting and porter followed suit. Hands were tense on guns. Step by step they approached, facing each other, staring at each other, slowly placing their valuable charges on the ground, rising once again.

"Stop there!" a female voice cried out and in the instant six guns sprang into view, perhaps a seventh shimmered in the rear window of the Packard. Lizveta Zlotnikova emerged. "I wish to examine painting."

"She is right," Sones said. "How about it."

Was there a reluctance in Robl's voice when he agreed? The guns slid reluctantly from sight as the girl strode forward. Tension crackled in the air like heat lightning before an approaching storm. Every eye was on her as she knelt on the ground. Robl threw back the cloth on a corner of the painting and pushed it under the lower strand of wire.

With slow precision Lizveta Zlotnikova drew a flat pa» from her purse and unwrapped it to disclose the sundered corner of the canvas. She laid this on the frame, took out a large magnifying glass and a flashlight and bent forward.

"Quickly!" Robl ordered. "We cannot be about this all day."

"The cut threads match, the flakes of painting as well . . ."

"Enough," Robl ordered, throwing the cloth back over the painting again. "We must do this now."

"We will do it, but slowly. Wait until the girl is back in the car," Sones said. "Good. Now, push that painting forward—slowly—no fast motions. You do it the same way, Stocker. Don't let go of the bag until you have your hands on the painting."

They faced each other like two gladiators in the arena, tensed for instant battle. Forward, forward, Stocker reluctantly abandoning his hold on the pocketed gun to grab the painting. There

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was a silent tug of war for a moment, each pulling on painting and case, then giving way, the exchange made.

"Good, good-by," Robl said, pulling the bag to him as Stocker snatched in the painting. He dived for the open door of his car, D'Isernia climbing into the other, the Packard shooting forward in a cloud of dust while their legs were still

protruding, its headlights sending yellow beams through the dusk. Stocker rushed to the safety of the car with the painting, his gun out now, as were all the others.

The crowd had dispersed, there seemed no danger, the Packard disappeared around a turn, the alert agents relaxed though their guns were still ready.

Lizveta Zlotnikova screamed loudly, again and again; the guns reappeared on the instant.

She had thrown back the cover and her light was on the picture.

"A fake!" she shouted. "A phony! a forgery!"

The dust cloud settled; the other car was gone.

FOURTEEN

"Schultz, turn the car around ram this fence what do you mean it is a fake?" Sones was shouting, his cool very definitely gone. Billy jumped into the car while the others huddled around Lizveta Zlotnikova who had the painting flat on the ground and was kneeling by it with the flashlight.

"Look, so easy to see with all the covering cloth removed. ! scrape away the paint here, so, and it is obvious that a corner of the real painting was attached to this forgery. See where the edge of the original has been shaved down, then glued on. The whole thing is a fake. Not only that but a *real* art authority/⁵ she blazed a glance in Tony's direction, "would have seen at once that this is an inferior forgery."

The events of the past few days suddenly became very, very clear to Tony. The entire slow build-up with all the suspense of foreign intrigue, the refusal to let a real expert examine the painting, the careful timing to enable him to witness the com-memoratory rites, the darkened room, the man in the wheel chair to get his mind off the things it should have been on. Then the doubtlessly well-rehearsed bit of acting, the artistic Italian, the barbarian German, the flash of the knife that removed almost all of the original fragment of painting for examination and authentication. They had been conned, fooled, deluded exceedingly well, all of them, in a highly professional manner.

A continuing sound penetrated his depressed aura of gloom, making itself known to all of them about the same time. They looked up, looked at the car, listened to the grind-grind-grmcl of

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the starter turning over and over with no result. The engine would not start.

"The light," Sones growled, tearing it from Lizveta Zlotnikova's hand and throwing open the hood. Inside, even to the unmechanical eye, things were not quite as they should be. Torn ends of wires gleamed, half of the cables to the spark plugs were pulled loose and hung in a tangle. Sones reached in and pulled out a hooked length of heavy metal rod, of the kind used to reinforce concrete. "While we were all looking the other way someone crawled under the front of the car and pulled the wires loose with this thing. Fix it, Schultz."

"Yes, sir."

"Treasury is not gonna like this."

"No one likes it, Stocker." Sones controlled his temper with an effort and rounded on Hawkin who raised his hands.

"Now don't start on me, Sones. I'm no more to blame than anyone else here. We were conned, but good. So now we have to go after these people and get the money back."

"Thu only way."

It took Billy Schultz ten long minutes to jury rig enough of the wires so the engine would start, though at least two cylinders kept missing and banging, while only one headlight came on, and it was frozen in the low beam position.

"Go," Sones ordered. This was, as were all of his recent orders, issued through tight-clenched teeth.

They went. The Cadillac tore through the thin strands of barbed wire and lumbered down the dirt track that twisted through the outskirts of the village, ending at the graveled shoulder of the highway.

"Which way?" Billy asked. There was no answer. Tony saw that there were people sitting outside the nearby house and he opened the door.

"I'll ask them."

Instead of running he forced himself into a slow stroll, feeling the daggers of the impatient eyes behind him burning into his back. But he could not rush; there is a different pace for all things in Mexico. As he drew close he saw the women and

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children withdraw within the mud-brick walls of the adobe house. Only the man remained, his face a dark blur under the wide brim of his hat, leaning against the pole that supported the roof.

"Good evening," Tony said.

"Good evening."

"It should be a pleasant night."

"It usually is."

"Cigarette?"

"It will be a pleasure."

They lit the cigarettes and Tony pointed back down the way they had come.

"There was a little accident there and the wire fence was torn near the bull ring. If I gave you money for its repair would you be so kind as to pass it on?"

"But why not."

Tony paid him, then started away—only to call back over his shoulder.

"The other car that went by a few minutes ago, did you happen to notice in what direction it went?"

"I did. It went that way, toward the south."

"Adios."

"Adios."

"Well?" Sones's temper had not improved with the delay.

"South."

"You are sure?"

"There is one way to find out."

They rushed on through the night, tearing down the dim yellow column of the single headlight, dark shapes of cactus swirling by on each side. There was a figure ahead, a solitary hitchhiker who turned and jerked his thumb in anticipatory gesture. Billy swung out to go around him, not slowing.

"Stop the car!" Tony shouted and Billy hit the brakes, sending them into a long squealing bucking slide.

"Explain, Hawkin, it had better be good."

"That man, he's their chauffeur."

They burst out of the car, running as they hit the ground,

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weapons in their hands, Stacker even ready with a tear-gas grenade. Their prey stood silently, hands at his side as they surround him and the muzzles of guns prodded from all sides.

"I am simple driver," he said solemnly. "Hired, perhaps because of my German nationality, to do driving. I do as I am told. I am told to leave car and walk back to town. I leave car and walk back to town."

"The truth now, or else . . . !"

"Let me have him for ten minutes!"

"There is sodium pentothal in the bag."

Tony drew a reluctant Sones away from the seekers after truth. "I can make him talk," he said.

"How?"

"Simple enough, if you must know. You see he is, well, my contact with the Israelis. If I found out anything about Robl I was to tell Heinrich here."

"A *Kraut!*"

"He's Jewish, a chemist. Let me get him aside where the others can't hear."

"Do you trust him?"

"Do we have a choice? Don't forget the million . . ." Sones's teeth could be clearly heard grating together.

"Do it, fast, do it."

The flashlight was trained on them, guns clearly visible beneath it, as Tony took Heinrich over to the side of the road.

"Would you please tell me what is happening."

"Just what I said, with the exception that I stopped your car. I was supposed to get off the road. They are on the run. They paid me off."

"Do you know where they are going?"

"No. About that they were very closemouthed. But perhaps I can help you, but I will have to telephone Jacob Goldstein first. And don't ask!" He raised his hands, palms outward. "Nothing more can I say until I talk to Jacob."

Tony waved Sones over to join them.

"This man may be able to help us, but he has to make a phone call first,"

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"I do not like this, Hawkin."

"Do you have any better ideas? Short of torturing him, is there anything else we can do?"

Sones ruminated all the way to Cuernavaca while Heinrich sat stolidly in their midst ignoring the guns that pressed into him from both sides. When the first street lights appeared Sones straightened up and looked around, then tapped Billy Schultz on the shoulder and pointed to the sign that read taller mecanico.

"Pull in there, I want this car fixed up before we go any further." He glowered a final glower at Heinrich. "You, get on the phone, but we will be with you all the time."

"Ah don't like this." Stocker was unhappy, caressing his gun.

"Well, I do. And this is my operation. If you want that bundle back for Treasury you will do as I say."

Tony dialed the number himself while the others surrounded the driver. A familiar voice answered.

"There has been some trouble. Heinrich is here and wants to talk to you."

"We all got troubles. Put him on."

The conversation was in guttural and incomprehensible Hebrew which Sones did not enjoy hearing. Tony went to talk to the master mechanic, who was shaking his head in amazement at the wanton damage, and encouraged him to do both rapid and excellent repairs. Lizveta Zlotnikova sat in the back of the car with the forged painting, examining it and muttering over it.

"It could still be restored," she said; there were tears in her eyes, "If we could find the rest of the painting. Why would they do a thing like this?"

"I have no idea," Tony said. "Maybe they want to pull this confidence racket three more times with the other corners of the painting." They shuddered together at the thought. "Or maybe that corner of the painting was all they had."

"That does not make sense."

"Very little of what has been happening makes much sense."

Sones called to him and he joined the huddled group in the small office. A year-old calendar on the wall proclaimed the virtues of General Popo tires, the illustration of the General himself, his

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body apparently constructed out of tires, backing up these assertions. Euzkadi tires had a stronger argument with a calendar of the current year as well as a colored photograph of a young woman naked except for an Aztec headdress. Heinrich blew his nose in a large red handkerchief and, when examination of the results satisfied him, spoke.

"I have a message from Goldstein. He says he is happy to cooperate with the FBI and the Treasury Department of the United States to enable them to track this car and the men in it. He will be here within the hour."

"And what does he think he can do?" Sones asked, gun ready in pocket.

"Lots. On his instructions I installed a device under the frame of the car that is attached to the radio. My understanding is that it is a high-powered transmitter that emits a very strong signal."

"Do you know the wave length?"

"My knowledge ends there. All I know is that it is turned on. For the rest, ask Goldstein."

Waiting was not easy for any of them other than Heinrich who fell quietly asleep in the rear of the car. Tony felt a preliminary rumble of hunger in his stomach, he had been eating an awful lot in Mexico, must be the altitude, so he went to a nearby restaurant and bought a bag of sandwiches. They were received with little enthusiasm by the others, yet were still eaten. The repairs were finished and the bill discussed in detail, then paid, Heinrich slept on, snoring quietly; a truck pulled up in the street blocking the driveway, panaderia la aquila, the ornate lettering on the side read, decorated with a colorful portrait of the eagle himself bearing off a great loaf of bread in his talons as he would a lamb. Goldstein climbed down from the front seat.

"Well, gentlemen," he said to the hard-eyed men who slowly surrounded him, "I guess introductions are in order, but first let me guess. Tony I know, a nice boy. You must be Sones, the man in charge. And you are probably Stocker of the Treasury. That was a good job you did on those two gentlemen in the Liberia exchange."

"Ah had no choice, the little one went for his gun."

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"Enough of this," Sones said. "Are you tracking the car in question?"

"Why should I tell you?" Hands flashed to hidden weapons, "Now don't get me wrong, trouble I am not looking for. What I am looking for is the truth, a rare commodity in our chosen field of endeavor. Then we co-operate. We are interested in the same people but for different reasons. If we work together we all make out. If you will tell me everything that has happened so far, be frank since I know a good deal of it already, I will be happy to tell you all I know, and aid you in finding the car and its occupants."

They all looked at Sones who was grinding his teeth again, weighing all the factors.

"A million dollars," Tony said, just as a gentle reminder.

"All right. We will do it."

"A wise decision. The radio equipment is in the truck. We triangulated from Mexico City and from here. The car is to the south, at least sixty miles away, and still moving. Either on 95D or the old road to Taxco."

"Schultz, start the car."

"A moment please. I suggest that your car follow behind the truck with the detection gear. I also suggest that my associate Heinrich be permitted to leave now. This is not his kind of operation. Then I can travel with you and we can chat."

"The Russian girl is in our car."

"No problem, she can travel in the truck so we can enjoy absolute candor in our conversation."

"Stay with her, Hawkin. Keep an eye on her."

The seating arrangements were getting complicated with much changing about and slamming of doors. Heinrich went by, yawning, and Tony waved.

"Good luck. I hope you'll be teaching again soon."

"And the same to you. You and I, both. Even the Arabs will look good after some of these people. My students should only know. They think I'm on a sabbatical at MIT. Hah!"

Tony helped Lizveta Zlotnikova into the truck, still carrying the painting, and she stopped dead. "You!" she shouted.

Nahum, the sabra agent, looked up from the radio apparatus and

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smiled, waving them toward the bench. "Get comfortable. The car we follow is still moving. *Dobriy vyechyer, tovarisch oche chornya?*

"*Svinya!*" Lizveta Zlotnikova hissed in return. "What is this about? Who are these people? What is happening?"

"Patience, patience," Tony said, suddenly weary, sitting down and taking the painting from her. "You know, it is still not obvious this is a forgery. Not to a quick examination with all this dirt on it The brushwork—"

"Ignore the brushwork." She hurled a last daggerlike glance at the smiling Israeli, then stabbed a finger at the painting. "It is stamped forgery all over. These fly specks, coffee grounds. The stained canvas, tea. It is more like a cheap menu than a painting," She lurched against him, a gentle collision, as the truck started.

Very quickly excitement gave way to fatigue; it had indeed been a long and trying day, and even thoughts of the million dollars could not keep Tony awake. He found his head falling onto Lizveta Zlotnikova's shoulder, she made no protests, where he dozed fitfully. There were stops and starts and shouted instructions that woke him, and after that a continuous run that lulled him deeply asleep. It wasn't until light poured in through the open rear door that he woke again, blinking and chomping, slowly becoming aware that he was sweetly entangled with Lizveta Zlotnikova who was still asleep.

"A pleasant rest, I hope?" Jacob Goldstein said from the doorway.

"Where are we?" Tony asked, looking out at dawn haze and green trees with the sun just glancing through the tops of them.

"We'll be coming into Acapulco soon. Your friend Sones, and very agreeable he is once he relaxes, would like to see you. Anything new, Nahum?"

The Israeli shook his head. "On the road ahead, strong signal." He had been at the set all night yet was as wide awake and alert as ever.

Tony disentangled the long blond hair from the buttons of his shirt and slipped from the enjoyable embrace. Yawning and Stretching himself awake he walked back to the Cadillac, which

was parked on the shoulder of the road behind them. To his left, beyond the row of painted white stones that inadequately took the place of a guardrail, the hillside fell away in jungled curves to a distant river and the roofs of a habitation, morning fires sending up thin vertical columns of smoke. Three pairs of bloodshot eyes stared back at him from the shaded interior of the car.

"Take the wheel, Hawkin," Sones ordered. "Schultz is bushed."

"Othuh car still there?"

"Right ahead, signal loud and clear."

Billy Schultz slid over, folded his arms, closed his eyes, and instantly went to sleep. Tony started the engine and pulled out when the truck moved away. There was silence from the back seat, either from sleep or sorrow, and Tony didn't try to find out. He was still only half awake himself and needed all that const fraction of his consciousness for the road ahead, fiendishly snakelike, twisting and turning, with occasional rocks that had fallen from the cliffs above during the night.

Coming around a blind hairpin turn he saw the truck ahead, stopped dead in the road before him. He stabbed the brakes in instant fear, locking them, skidding with a great shrieking of peeled-off rubber to collide lightly with the rear of the truck. There were muffled curses from the back seat, but before they could be amplified the back door of the truck swung open and Goldstein stuck his head out.

"The radio signal has gone dead," he called out. "Completely dead. I think we have lost them."

FIFTEEN

Tony went in alone, carrying the forged painting, while the others waited outside in the car. The waiter, who had been indifferently sweeping the floor when he entered, took one look at him and instantly vanished into the kitchen. Very quickly a number of men, in shirtsleeves and bearing guns, rushed in and took up various positions of vantage around the dining room, behind chairs and tables, one to each side of the entrance, all of them giving him dark angry looks. When they were in position, Timberio himself appeared, unshaven and angry, his suspenders hanging from his waist, his collarless striped shirt looking as though it had been slept in. He placed his knuckles on the table and looked over Tony.

"You are in very bad trouble now, you know that," he said, his breath rich with overtones of garlic and last evening's meal.

"I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble, Timberio, and I admit that I was wrong—"

"Trouble *and* money, stealing Italian national treasures."

"Let me talk, please. You'll get the money back, and let us not forget as well that you have my wallet with all my papers, as well as my airline ticket."

"They are being held to insure your good faith, and will be returned when the thousand pesos is returned."

"All right, fine, you'll get the money, I promise, I just don't have it on me at the moment. But there is something more important. Here is the Da Vinci 'Battle of Anghiari.' It's a forgery."

"What is this all about?" Timberio examined the painting, eyes wide, fingering the cut corner. "A fake."

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"Absolutely. I have an expert to prove it if you are in any doubt. I don't know where the real painting is, but the men who do know are right here in Acapulco now. And they have the Cellini 'San' Sebastiano' with them as well. Now will you listen?"

"I listen, I listen. But the story should better be better than last time."

"I give you my word, and my boss's word too, and I had some job convincing him that we should let you in on this. But it's either you or the police!"

"No police!"

"That's just what he said, in the same tone of voice too. We're on the same side now, working together to get the paintings back for Italy, that he agreed on. You can have them. These people have something else of ours, a little bit of money in a bag, ha-ha."⁵¹

"Start from the beginning, tell everything, you are confusing me."

"The beginning you know. A man by the name of D'Isernia offered to sell the two paintings."

"Carlo D'Isernia? He is wanted in Italy on a number of charges."

"Look, if you are going to interrupt, how can I tell it? And do you think I could get a cup of coffee? Something spooked D'Isernia and he moved the operation to Mexico. Then it turns out that a Kurt Robl is involved. I was given the Cellini painting—as you know—to test for authenticity. It's real. But we had to return it to finalize the arrangements. Then came the exchange when we paid over a small deposit in cash for the Da Vinci. By the time we found out this was a fake the others were gone, but we traced them here by the hidden transmitter that was attached to their car."

"Someone was showing good sense."

Tony refrained from telling just whose good sense it was and sipped at the bitter brew of the black cup of espresso that had been placed by his elbow; grimaced and poured a number of spoonfuls of sugar into it. "It made sense all right and we followed them this far, but the transmitter conked out. Not an hour ago. That's why we need help. We're short of manpower and people who know the city."

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"And just who, might I ask, are the *ive* you talk about?"

"Well, the FBI, and then there's the U. S. Treasury Department."

"No CIA?"

"Not now. They were in the deal but there was trouble along the line and they sort of vanished. But the Israelis are helping."

"Not Jacob Goldstein and his bunch?"

"Yes, do you know them?"

"You should have told me this earlier. Jacob and I have a number of interests in common. Where are all these people?"

"In the car, outside."

"Get them in and we'll talk."

He shouted something very fast in Italian and the guns vanished. Tony went for the others and in a few minutes they were sitting around the table drinking the powerful coffee and were watching Timberio and Goldstein embracing and slapping each other on the back.

"Now to work," Timberio said, joining the Americans at the table. "How many people you looking for, who are they, what kind of a car?"

"A black Packard," Sones said. "Three men. Carlo D'Isernia, Kurt Robl, Adolf Hitler."

Timberio's eyebrows climbed up higher and higher and his hand dropped casually toward his pocket; Sones and Stocker dropped theirs as well.

"Patience," Goldstein said. "Before we get started let's not finish. This fake Hitler is a real Jakob Platz whom we know about. So let's continue. We followed them here, then lost them. My man Nahum is at the airport in case they are thinking of leaving that way. He's a good boy and he can stop them, so we have plugged one hole. How else can they get out of town?"

"Back the way you came?"

"The truck and driver are there keeping an eye on that. We're in touch by radio."

"South on the coast road to nowhere, a couple of villages and the road ends. North, there's a good road to Zihuatanejo and there's an airfield there where I happen to have a man working. He'll be

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alerted. And then, of course, you got the port and the whole Pacific Ocean waiting outside of it."

"My thought exactly," Sones said, sipping at the coffee and grimacing. "If it was just an airfield they wanted they could have been at the Mexico City one in less than an hour after the exchange and clear out of the country by now. But they did not go there. Instead they drove all night, something one does not do in Mexico without a good reason, to come to Acapulco. Now what does this tell us? It tells us that they were in a hurry—they drove all night. It tells us they wanted to be in a seaport. These two together tell us that they wanted to be in a seaport by a certain time which in turn tells us that they are here to meet a ship which is leaving." He smiled to himself in frank praise of his clear-cut logic, "So the next question is—which ship is leaving today and that is the one they are on?"

"None," Timberio said, one hand over his mouth as he wielded a toothpick with the other. "No ships due to leave for the next three days." Sones's smile vanished and the scowl returned.

"Enough theory," Goldstein said, rapping on the table as tin to bring them to order. "Grab them first, theorize afterward. Let us find the car and then we will find these crooks. Can you do this, Timberio?"

"Easily enough. Do I get the Cellini painting when we grab them?"

"Free and clear," Sones said, resigned now. "Though we would like a statement that it was returned with the aid of the American Government. The FBI should be mentioned."

"And the Treasury."

"That's fine by me, boys." He sent a cold glance in Tony's direction. "There is also the matter of some thousand pesos that Hawkin owes me."

"That is between you two," Sones said. "This operation is way over budget already."

"You'll get it," Tony said. "I promise, cross my heart."

"You had better." Timberio looked skeptically at Goldstein. "And are you doing all this out of kind generosity, Jacob?"

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"Hardly. I am very interested in Kurt Robl and his associates. I am looking forward to a good chat with him."

"As far as I am concerned he is all yours. If the others agree?"

Sones waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Just thu money/" Stocker said.

"Then we are agreed. My men will leave. There is the Lambretta agency next door, we operate from there. If you will excuse me."

As he turned to issue his orders there was a scuffle at the door and at least twenty revolvers sprang into sight upon the instant, trained upon the opening. A tall, leathery man in a slightly askew black wig was pushed through the door, arms pinioned behind him by Billy Schultz.

"Snooping around outside," Billy said.

"Tell this fool to let me go—oww!" He writhed as Billy gave a twitch at his imprisoned arms. Sones looked at him distastefully and shook his head in apparent disgust.

"We do not need you here, Higginson. Let him go, Schultz. He wants to leave."

"No, I don't, Sones, not on your life." He brushed his crumpled sleeves and straightened his tie. "This is a CIA job, out of the country, not FBI. Your jurisdiction ends at the border."

"My jurisdiction ends where I say it does. Out. That is the door behind you."

There was the sharp cascading roar of motors from beyond this mentioned door and an instant later a small fleet of

Lambretta motor scooters zipped by, the wasplike buzz of their engines drowning all conversation until they had passed.

"There is nothing you can do to stop me, Sones. You may not remember, but this is a joint operation. We work together. You can use my help."

"The kind of help you gave *me*?" Tony asked, quite bitter.

"Accidents happen, Hawkin, you can't blame me."

"I certainly can . . ."

"Gentlemen," Goldstein interrupted. "There is room enough for everyone in this game. Sit, Higginson, sit. You wouldn't mind if I asked you how you got here?"

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"Followed you. Been onto you ever since you knocked Hawkin on the head outside my place."

"A regrettable error over which I have lost sleep . . ."

The phone rang, long and stridently and the room fell every eye on Timberio as he hurried over and lifted the receiver.

"*Pronto*" He listened briefly, dropped it back into place and turned about, smiling quietly. "That was one of my men. He has seen the car. Going past the bull ring."

"Where is that?" more than one voice asked.

Timberio issued more shouted orders, then dug thtered sideboard until he found a map of the city, rattled it open and jabbed his finger on the northern end.

"The bull ring is here. You will notice that this city is spread along the shores of a fish-hook-shaped bay, the point of wiiich curls up to the right in the form of a peninsula. If the car continues onto the point of the hook it is trapped, for there is no way out. Except by sea, of course there are numerous private docks along the harbor side. If they do not go onto the peninsula there are only two other roads they can take. This one here that continues on a few miles to the small resort of Pie de la Cuesta, but it ends at the Army air base there so they can go no farther. But *here*, at this turnoff, begins the road to Zihuatanejo and the north."

"Do you have a man at this junction?" Higginson asked.

"But of course. Yesterday I was born not."

"What if they change cars?" Tony asked, and instantly regretted it as he received a number of cold looks. Timberio shrugged broadly.

"We must hope they do not. In any case I have my men | to auto rental agencies and monitoring the police frequencies to note stolen cars. We are doing all that we can. I have men also here on the docks to observe any attempt to leave by sea." Tony followed the pointing finger and had an instant vision of those docks, of embarking there for his scuba diving tour, of later swimming among the moored boats.

"These power boats that are moored here. What do they do?" lie asked.

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"Fishing, deep-sea fishing for the tourists, and after sailfish for the most part."

"How far out do they go?"

"Fifty, a hundred miles, depends where the fish are."

Then, in that moment, it all became very clear to Tony. The parts fell into place with a sharp click and he knew exactly what the fleeing confidence men had in mind.

"Look, listen," he said with rising excitement, pulling the map to him. "Let us just try to think like these crooks we are after. They pull a con deal and race away, in a big rush so we can't grab them and get our money back. But once they are in the clear they are in no hurry, or they should be in no hurry. They could just go into hiding and we would never be able to find them. But they keep driving, all night, in a country where night driving is very dangerous. We have ruled a plane out, there is no particular need to go to Acapulco to find an airport. But they do come here, moving very fast, although up until the time they arrive they have no idea they are being followed. Acapulco is a dead end as far as roads go, you have to leave by either air or sea unless you retrace your steps. Air is out—"

"And so is the sea," Sones said. "There are no ships leaving."

"Just a moment, hear me out. Look, here is the city and here is the entire Pacific Ocean, filled with ships for all we know. What is to prevent a freighter from stopping outside the territorial limit here and picking up people from a boat? International waters, no laws broken. And these big fishing boats can get out there and back without trouble."

"It is possible but . . ."

"It's the only thing possible. But listen, plans must change, there is an alarm, they find the radio, they know they are being followed. But they are pros, they don't panic. They change cars. They do not board the boat in the harbor because they do not know how many eyes are watching, but arrange to be picked up away from the city. To the north perhaps?"

"No," Timberio said, "wrong kind of coast."

"Then to the south. A secluded inlet, a quick boarding, off to

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sea, no witnesses, no one the wiser. They get clear away. What do you think?"

"Hogwash," Sones grunted, in a hoggish manner. "Just empty theory."

"But if it's true we have to move fast. If we don't act now and head south and search the coast it may just be too late."

"We cannot scatter our forces. We hold here until we have further information."

"Makes sense to me," Higginson said, tugging contemplatively at his wattled neck. "I think your contract man may be right, Sones."

"I did *not* kill . . ."

"We hold here."

"Your choice. But I don't see why I can't just mosey along up there and see what is going on."

"I'll go with you," Tony said, instantly.

"Me too," Stocker added.

Sones looked back and forth from one of them to the other, eyes red with suspicion. "This is a combined operation and leave us not forget that. Schultz, you go with them as well."

"Take one of these," Timberio said, digging two civilian band handy-talky radios out of the cupboard. "Let us know if you find anything. We will call you about developments at this end."

"What is happening?" Lizveta Zlotnikova called out from the Cadillac as they passed. "I am told nothing."

"No time," Tony called back. "In the restaurant, ask them."

The bright red Lincoln Continental was parked around the ner. It had a portrait of a bearded octogenarian painted on the door and was labeled in gold leaf coronel glanders Mississippi fried chicken. The engine surged to life under Higginson's touch when they climbed in, then squealed about in a sharp turn and headed north.

"There's the sign," Tony called out, "to highway 200."

They climbed up out of the port and through the reside areas on the hillside; children looking up from their play at the roadside and gaping at the great red form that hurtled through

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their midst. They bobbed through the craterlike potholes and veered onto the better paved highway, then picked up speed.

"Slow down when we get back to the shore again," Tony called out.

Higginson nodded, eyes on the road, the car a carmine thunderbolt hissing around the bends, narrowly missing bullock carts and burro riders. A flicker of emerald blue was visible through the trees off to the left, then a tiny bay with jutting headlands opened up to view.

"This place looks ideal," Tony said. "And that looks like a road leading down to the water." He pointed to the dusty track among the trees.

"But no boats here," Billy piped.

"We'll go on," Higginson decided and stamped on the accelerator.

Tony looked back regretfully as they rushed away. If his theory were true this was the ideal spot. Close to the city, yet isolated enough for clandestine arrival and departures. They should have looked closer, but there was not much time. They turned a bend and he had a last fleeting glimpse of the bay before it vanished behind the screen of trees again.

"Stop the car!" he shouted.

Higginson hit the brakes and, being power brakes, they locked and the car skidded wildly across the road, spinning uncontrollably under the cruel corrections of the power steering. Higginson fought the careening red whale every foot of the way until it ended up on the far side, its nose buried in the red earth and rich mosses of the embankment there. Higginson turned about slowly, unclamping his fingers from the wheel, and glared coldly at Tony.

"And why did you say that?"

"Just before we turned, I had a glimpse of something coming into the bay, a bow, a boat of some kind."

With the rear wheels spinning and smoking on the tar, Tony, Billy Schultz and Stocker braced and, pushing the bumper, the Lincoln managed to pull itself back on the road. They hurtled off on the return leg and, once over the rise, saw that indeed a boat had entered the bay. A high-powered, high-bridged, pole-be-

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decked sports fishing boat with its name, *Tiburón*, prominent on its wide stern when it spun about and dropped anchor. Then the trees intervened again. Billy shouted into the handy-talky. This time they turned off onto the unpaved track through the trees, bobbing and thudding over the spring-destroying uneven surface. As they drove down, the long car scraping the brush on both sides as they negotiated the sharp turns, they had tantalizing glances of the water below.

Man climbing down from boat into dinghy.

Dinghy pushed off.

Dinghy proceeding toward shore.

Then the road emerged from the trees onto the summit of a vine-covered bluff that ran down to the beach. There, waiting on the shore for the rapidly approaching rowboat, were three men standing next to a small pile of luggage.

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Until they were clear of the trees the dense tropical jungle had swallowed the sound of the engine, but when they reached the bluff the rumble of the exhaust sounded clearly on the beach. As though pulled by the same string the three heads turned about as one, staring up at the sudden apparition. Then one of the men began waving to the

dinghy, a second scrambled at the luggage, the third, who supported himself on two canes, began to hobble to the water's edge.

"Get down there!" Tony shouted. "We have them."

The CIA man needed no urging. The big car flew down the slope, hurling itself around the sandy curves, negotiating with a great grinding sound the last turn that brought it back in the direction of the beach below. A pink jeep was parked where the road debauched onto the beach and there was no way around it. Scarcely slowing, the Colonel Glanders Chicken wagon smashed into it with a great crashing of glass and screech of torn metal. The jeep bounced forward, its rear wheels locked by the handbrake, skidding in the sand but urged on by the churning horsepower behind it. Once it had been pushed out onto the beach, Higginson spun the wheel and shot around it.

Other than a few discarded suitcases, the shore was empty. The dinghy was halfway back to the boat, low in the water with its heavy load, paddles flashing brightly in the sun.

"We must stop that boat!" Tony shouted.

"If y'U let me out ah'U be glad to," Stocker said. He had dug a long-barreled revolver from an inside pocket and was now remov-

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ing a plastic stock from a sling under his arm. This clicked into a slot in the revolver's butt to make a short but sinister-looking rifle.

Stocker jumped from the car, cracking open the revolver as he went, jamming in a long-nosed bullet. "Armor piercing," he said as he leaned his elbows on the hood. Someone in the dinghy was firing a pistol at them now but the aim was erratic, though one bullet hit the sand close by and screamed away. Stocker ignored this completely, letting his breath out, sighting, squeezing off a round.

It had no apparent effect. The dinghy was almost to the fishing boat now, waiting hands reaching down, when he fired again. And again.

Angry shouts could be heard as the thudding of the engine slowed and grated into silence. Stocker was not through, however. From another of his lumpy pockets he extracted a canister the size of a beer can which slipped over the muzzle of the gun. This time he dug the butt into the sand and, estimating the distance, aimed the gun barrel into the air almost vertically. There was a dull bang and the canister shot into the sky in a high arc to splash into the water beyond the boat. There was a much louder explosion and a geyser of water shot into the air; the boat rocked dangerously.

"A mite over. Just correct by a hair."

"You're not going to blow them up?" Tony asked, wide-eyed.

"First shake em up. Now some tear gas to quiet em down."

"But how do we get them back. Look—they're beginning to row."

"That headland, those rocks," Billy called out, pointing, "They're beyond the boat. We can swim in from there, head them off."

"I don't swim," Higginson said.

"Tony and me will be enough," Billy said. "Let's go."

"Hand tuh hand," Stocker said. "Take this." He produced a combat knife which he handed to Tony, and a second for Billy Schultz. They were triangular bladed, very sharp, with knuckleduster hilts studded with sharp spikes.

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"Get that tear gas in and keep us covered," Higginson ordered, gunning the car to life.

"Clothes off," Billy ordered, and they did a struggling Laocoon disrobement in the back seat as the Lincoln bounced down the beach. Higginson did not spare the car, going at full speed over the gravel and boulders, dodging the largest so that the men in the back fell into each other, pants caught on feet, shirts flapping, revolvers tumbling. With a final last grinding thud the Lincoln impaled itself on a fang of rock and would go no further.

Billy led the way, bounding from rock to rock like a demented mountain goat, tastefully clad in orange undershorts and combat knife. Tony followed, wincing at the sharp ridges, peeling down to more proletarian white shorts as he went. There was much shouted activity from the boat as well as a number of shots, some of which came close. Another explosion showered water on the craft as well as engulfing it in a white cloud. Billy seized the knife between his teeth, pirate fashion, and dived into the water. There were rocks under the surface that he barely missed so Tony entered more hesitatingly, climbing in, then biting onto the knife which promptly cut the corner of his mouth, swimming after Billy's muscular back and thrashing arms.

A great deal of coughing and multilingual cursing could be heard from the boat as they came close, a metallic hammering followed by the sound of an electric starter. The engine gasped twice, then subsided. The high wooden side rose above them and Tony followed Billy around to where a ladder was built into the stern. Billy Schultz surged up it—then dropped quickly back as a bullet dug a chunk of wood out of the transom.

"Stay here for a diversion," he whispered to Tony. "I'll go around behind and over the side. If I can reach the rail I can pull myself up." He bulged a massive biceps to prove it, then churned away.

Diversion, what did he mean? Sitting duck would be more truthful. Tony shivered and looked up, expecting a gun to be pointed over the side to blow his brains out. A wisp of gas blew past and his eyes began to burn and tear. He dived under to wash them out

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then thought *What the hell!* and surged out of the water and up the ladder with a rush.

The cockpit was a shambles; his eyes took the whole scene in on instant. Floor boards up while a dark-skinned man in a striped shirt dug into the engine's innards. Beyond him Robl and D'Isernia huddled low, ugly-looking Lugers ready in their hands. Tony grabbed the knife and threw it, shouting wordlessly at the same time. The knife skidded across the deck and bumped harmlessly into Robl's leg. The German raised his gun, shouted an oath, leveled it at Tony, certain death this close. A muscular form rose over th beyond him, too far away to help.

D'Isernia raised his gun too, then shoved the barrel into the side of Robl's neck.

"Don't shoot or I will kill you. We are caught, no murders at least."

Robl shouted and swung the butt of the pistol at the Italian, but before it could hit, a powerful hand reached down and plucked it easily from his grasp and viced fingers clamped onto his neck. Tony climbed all the way into the boat, saw the crewman huddling in the other side of the cockpit and the closed doors to the cabin. Unthinking, carried away by excitement, he raced to the threw them open, and dived in.

Two shots sounded like cannon rounds in the cabin, the bullets tearing through the wood where he had been an instant sooner. Unplanned, he dived forward and crashed into the man sec the table, carrying him down with him. The gun went spinning, the old man cursed feebly in German and thrashed on the deck stood, blinking smoke and tear gas from his eyes, and retrieved the gun. A familiar-looking suitcase lay on the bunk to one side. It was unlocked and opened to his touch. Money, dollars, greenbacks, packed solid, and exuding the rich odor of wealth. One of the packs had been broken into, greedy, greedy, but the bills should n gone very far. Qosing the suitcase again he took it and the gun and went back on deck. Billy Schultz had organized everything swiftly; D'Isernia and Robl sat by the dead engine under die watchful barrel of his pistol while the two boatme craft toward shore.

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"The money's here," Tony said. "And Adolf is down there as well."

"Couldn't be better. Why don't you hold up the suitcase so they can see it on shore, before Stocker drops any more of those rifle grenades on top of us."

Tony raised the case over his head and there was a lusty cheer from the beach where the population had grown considerably. A number of Lambretta motor scooters were parked on the sand, with more arriving every moment, and the Cadillac was bumping down the road as well. Tony shouted and waved back and his stomach dropped as a thought finally penetrated the haze of excitement.

"Wait, I almost forgot, everything happening at once. Where is the Cellini painting?"

"Permit me," D'Isernia said, and his fingers twitched slowly toward his inner jacket pocket under the unwavering muzzle of Billy Schultz's gun. He withdrew a flat, wooden box and passed it over to Tony. "All is as it should be. It is a beautiful piece."

Tony looked inside and relaxed. "It's all right. Everything is all right I guess."

Willing hands pulled the boat in until it grated on the sand; many guns were leveled as the prisoners emerged. Adolf Hitler-Jakob Platz was carried ashore and his canes were restored to him. Stocker dived onto the suitcase like a hound dog on its prey and looked up coldly after a quick perusal.

"Some of the money's missing!"

"Relax," Tony said, mission accomplished, at peace with the world. "Search the prisoners, it must be on them. Nothing to worry about."

"A well-done FBI operation," Sones said.

"Impossible without the CIA," Higginson snapped in answer, which offended Timberio.

"You are not forgetting the Agenzia Terza to whom you came for aid when all was lost?"

"Please, gentlemen," Tony said. "There is glory enough for all. Let us not spoil this victory by squabbling. Look at Jacob Goldstein, his people deserve as much credit as any of you and he's

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making no claims." Goldstein was silent, his eyes fixed coldly on the prisoners. "All's well that ends well, as the quote goes. We've done it, tied this one up neatly, there's nothing more to worry about."

"Absolutely correct," a new voice said.

Detective Lieutenant Ricardo Gonzales y Alvarez emerged from the undergrowth followed by two sunglassesed policemen who carried drawn guns. "I shall now close the final curtain on this little drama by arresting you, Antonio Hawkin, for the murder of your FBI colleague Davidson."

He advanced, grimly, handcuffs ready.

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"Now wait a minute, just a minute, hold on," Tony said, backing away. "This is all a mistake."

"Drop the gun. Do not resist."

Tony became aware that he still held the captured Luger and he threw it hastily from him, suddenly feeling very naked and exposed in his sopping underwear. "I did not kill Davidson," he protested.

"We feel otherwise."

"But you have no evidence. However, the real killer is now among us and since you have the handcuffs ready I suggest you arrest him instead."

Gonzales halted, his eyes moving about the beach and the assembled men; weapons vanished as he looked around. "Indeed," he said. "You would not care to name this killer and give me evidence to support your contention?"

"I would. Very few people knew that Davidson had been stabbed, certainly not the general public because the papers mentioned only death by violence, without details. Is that true?"

"It is. We do our best not to supply future murderers with lessons on technique."

"Agreed. Yet there is one man here who knows all about this technique. Not too long ago he said something to me about not caring if I decimated the FBI ranks completely with my knife work." Tony stabbed an accusing finger in Carlo D'Isernia's direction. "You said that, didn't you?"

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D'Isernia looked very tired. "There is always the possibility," he sighed.

"Sounds logical," Sones said. "The knife, a traditional Italian weapon."

"No ethnic insults," Timberio shouted. "The knife is an intentional weapon, you cannot calumnify Italians in that manner!"

"Please," D'Isernia said. "I wish to make a statement." He was not only tired, but seeming very old. "Though I did not kill Davidson I know who did. And, in a way I feel responsible for that man's death. The murderer is . . ."

"*Schwein!*"

Robl shouted the word as his hand whipped the knife from his pocket, the great blade springing out, striking instantly to sink it up to the hilt in D'Isernia's back. It happened in less than a second, the knife slamming home, D'Isernia's eyes going wide with shock, the shouted word still in the air.

Gonzales was moving at the same time, but he was yards away and could not stop the blow. But he did seize Robl an instant after it had been struck and with sudden twists and rapid motions of his hands had him in the air, on the ground, pinned solidly with his arms locked behind his back.

"Karate shotokan at least," Sones said, nodding appreciatively.

D'Isernia was lying on his side on the sand looking suddenly shrunken, the wicked handle of the knife protruding from his back. He smiled crookedly when Tony bent over him, he spoke his voice was weak but clear.

"You see how he condemns himself? If not out of his mouth at least out of his own hand. But he struck too quickly this time, not true—though true enough. I do not mind. *No!* Do not touch the knife. Listen to me instead, while I can still talk. man, can you hear me?"

"I can," Gonzales said, kneeling close while Robl was held securely by his patrolmen. The others gathered around, whole plan, all of it, it is my doing, my creature. And the too, although indirectly. We were watching at the airport and I, when the airplane arrived with Hawkins here and the other FBI agent, Davidson. I recognized him. He used to wo

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ruins of the museum. And the fragment from the corner of the Da Vinci, all that was left after the raid. I bought them and paid him well. But I could do nothing with the paintings, other than to admire them, they were too well known to sell. The Cellini has helped me during some very bad times. But they did serve a purpose when I sought out Robl and told him the plan. A fake Da Vinci was painted, done by Elmyr, a very good man though quite expensive, and the real fragment of painting integrated into the corner. The rest you know. I have failed. You have Robl, a simple murderous type, and you have his fake Hitler accomplice, Jakob Platz, for all he is worth. But I have failed in the bigger thing. All of this was meant to smoke out Hochhande, but it has not succeeded. I have failed."

"On the contrary, my good friend, you have succeeded admirably, your plan worked to perfection." Jacob Goldstein sir down at the dying man.

"What . . . what do you mean? Do not torture me at this last hour."

"I speak only the truth. You have smoked him out and he is here." Goldstein spun about to face the silent watchers. "Come now, Hochhande, speak up. I know who you are. Your fingerprints will prove it. Step forward and admit your existence—or must I drag it from you?"

There was utter silence; no one moved. The sun shone warmly on the sand. Then the sand moved, whispered as a foot shu. forward, then another.

"I am tired of hiding," Jakob Platz-Adolf Hitler said, leaning on his canes and moving painfully. "It took you many years to find me. Fools. That Italian thief is smarter than you all. I never suspected him, never." He drew himself up, as

well as he could, coming to attention. "I am Kapitan Hippolyt Hochhande, My disability prevents me from clicking my heels."

"At last . . ." Carlo D'Isernia said, smiling, and died.

"Would someone be so kind as to explain?" Lieutenant Gonzales said.

"Permit me," Jacob Goldstein said. "A tale of murder and greed now comes to an end. This Hochhande ran a prison camp in Italy

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where, apparently, D'Isernia's family was killed. D'Isernia concocted a plan to unearth Hochhande using these works of art. The Americans were blamed for destroying the museum that housed them, and he played on this guilt by asking a large sum of money for their return. Unhappily, they must continue to bear this guilt, only partly alleviated by the return of one of the paintings to Italy. So the pieces fall into place. Italy has the painting."

"Safely," Timberio said. "It will be returned and the Americans will get full credit for their part in this matter."

"Davidson was murdered, and the police now have the killer in their hands."

"We do," Gonzales said, smiling at the unhappy Robl. "Justice will be done."

"The ransom money has been returned, the United States Treasury will be satisfied."

"No one leave till ah count it."

"So it ends. D'Isernia died happy, if anyone can be said to die happy. All the pieces fall into place."

"What about this one?" Gonzales asked, pointing at Hochhande.

"What about me?" Hochhande shouted, spitting the words at them. "You can do nothing to me, my papers are in order, I have committed no crimes in Mexico except to file under a false name. That was done to protect myself, a matter of survival, no crime. I have a passport in my true name, issued legally by Argentina, so go ahead, export me there. You cannot touch me. You are all fools, never bright enough to see me although I was in full view all the time. A little surgery to resemble the Führer, needed to obtain the paintings, placed in the bank here by Robl in *his* name. It was done, and once done capitalized upon. How I have laughed at you! Who would have expected a double disguise? Once you had penetrated to the identity of Jakob Platz, dead many years ago on the Russian front if you want to know, you were instantly satisfied. I lived in your midst and laughed at you. I would still be laughing if that fool Italian had not tempted that idiot Robl with his grandiose plans."

He swayed and almost fell. Goldstein looked at him with eyes that brimmed with centuries of sorrow.

"A very good question, Lieutenant. What shall we do with this

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miserable old man? I am sure, as he says, that his papers are legal to remain in Mexico or his passport, a Peron one but still valid with doubt, will permit his exit to Argentina where he will once more vanish. So, what to do? To my knowledge he has committed no Mexican crimes. He means nothing to you, does he, Lieutenant? If you are concerned for his safety I will be glad to take care of him for you. When we leave here I will see that he goes where he belongs."

"Stop him, Lieutenant, you have a duty! He wishes to k me, take me to Germany the way he did with that Dummkopf Thasler, smuggle me out in an El Al airplane concealed in a case of kosher pickles. Nein! You must not let this happen."

Gonzales carefully turned his back on Hochhande and offered Goldstein a cigarette. "This man speaks atrocious English," he said. "I cannot understand a word of it. You had better see that he gets home safely. You do not seem a man of vengeance/5

"I don't think I am," Goldstein said, tiredly, drawing deeply on the cigarette. "Vengeance, revenge, they cannot be satisfied. Look at poor D'Isernia there. There must be an end to killing. But not to law. Millions were killed by these creatures, killing the surviving few will not restore the dead or exact any kind of vengeance. But each trial is a

victory for something, if only to remind us what some human beings did to others, and to prevent it from ever happening again. But I think this will be my last operation. The world is running out of live Nazis just as I am running out of energy. If we have not yet learned to live in peace we never will."

"Amen to that. We are both men of law and peace. You take care of your last Nazi and I'll take care of mine. The world will surely be a better place without either of them."

"All tied up then," Sones said, rubbing his hands together, "A successful operation."

"Ah ain't through counting yet."

"One little unfinished matter," Timberio said, drawing Tony aside. "Perhaps not important in the light of Cellini paintings, million-dollar ransoms, murderers and Nazi criminals. Our agency does not operate on your American budget, you can well understand that, so there is still the sum of a thousand pesos."

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"Many thanks for the loan. Let me see, a thousand pesos is about eighty dollars, so here is a hundred; you might say the extra twenty is interest and wear and tear on your motor scooters."

"Grazie tante. And here is your wallet, ticket, papers, all intact."

"Nobody leave. Even with the money from their pockets there is a *hundred dollars* still missing!"

"Come on, Stocker, let us not be petty," Sones said. "They probably spent it, hiring that boat, chalk it up to profit and loss."

"And what about my boat?" the striped-shirted man cried. "Who's going to pay for the damages?"

"You are," Lieutenant Gonzales said coldly. "Or would you rather I looked into your dealings with criminals, attempts to meet ships on the high seas outside territorial waters, attempts . . ."

"I relish the opportunity to repair it myself, *teniente*. Please excuse me."

"How did you track me down here?" Tony asked the policeman as they trudged back to the cars.

"An accident, I am forced to admit. We monitor the Agenzia Terza's CB wave length, just as they monitor ours. I came simply to see what the excitement was, it was a happy surprise to find you here. Now, much as I enjoy your company, I sincerely hope that you will be leaving Mexico soon. You seem to draw a good deal of trouble, Mr. Hawkin."

"Lieutenant, I swear, as much as I love Mexico I shall be on the next plane out of here."

As they reached the cars Sones drew Tony aside.

"Listen," he said, "what about the Russian girl? We cannot have word of this fiasco leaking back to Moscow."

"Don't worry about that, she's a double agent who reports to the Albanians and everything she knows goes right to Peking. You can use her to funnel any kind of information you want directly to China."

"How do you know?"

"I wormed it out of her!"

"You are going to be a good agent, even if you are not a killer, Hawkin." He hurried away.

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Tony squeezed in comfortably next to Lizveta Zlotnikova who was holding the forged painting.

"The Cellini is safe and on its way back to Italy. What you have there is all that is left of the Da Vinci. The rest really was destroyed in the bombing. No one else seems to care about it so why don't you keep it?"

"That is very kind of you, Tony. The fragment, analysis, most valuable. I am sorry I said unkind things about you. When you are in New York you must come see me at the museum."

"I'll do better. I'll take you out. Do you play ping-pong?"

"What . . . ?"

"Nothing. Dinner, a show, we'll eat together."

He squeezed her hand and she squeezed back, strongly. There was the roar as of many disturbed wasp nests around them as the ranked motor scooters backfired to life, drowning out the complaints of the men who were rowing the unwieldy fishing boat out to sea.

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"You will get a commendation," Sones said.

"I don't want a commendation," Tony answered. "I just want out. No, sonny, the big gold FBI badges are a dollar ninety-eight. For your two bits all you can get is a chocolate hand grenade."

"That is not an easy thing to do, Hawkin, you should realize that. You know a lot about the workings of the FBI, you are an experienced field agent, and besides that He thinks that you did a great job."

"Wonderful, then why can't *He* get me out."

"*Quiet!*" Sones hissed out of the corner of his mouth. "Don't let her hear you."

"And that's another reason I want out. Well, Sophie, a nice long lunch hour that runs fifteen minutes late?"

"Would you believe the service was so awful, I could hardly get waited on, you can't blame *me*, can you?"

"I don't blame anyone. Take over here, I'll be in my office." As they walked down the hall he shook his thumb back at the sturdy laboring figure of Sophie Feinberg now industriously selling tinted portraits, fingerprint kits, candy bullets, "Let her have my job so I can go back to the National Gallery. She knows as much about it as I do by now. More maybe, since she reads my mail even before I do."

"She cannot do it, Sophie is a plant, a double agent whom we are keeping an eye on."

"I knew it! I bet she works for the CIA?"

"She wants you to think that, but she reports to Treasury first."

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"They are still upset over that hundred dollars you know, I've seen their orders to her."

"I bet she's not even Jewish."

"You have an agent's eye, Hawkin. I told Him that. Her real name, we think, is Mary O'Brien, the other is a cover she took when she was penetrating the B'nai Brith."

"Where are we going? We just passed my office."

"Security. Impossible to tell you until we get to a secure part of the building."

"Can't you even hint? Am I going to be shot?"

"Usually a sense of humor is a handicap in an agent, but I do appreciate yours. I can tell you this much. Your civil service grade will be increased one rank . . ."

"With pay to match?"

"Naturally. And you are going to be *personally* congratulated for the work you did on Operation Buttercup. Even though we lost Davidson the operation is graded a success, his killer is in custody in Mexico and the CIA is still smarting over the way they bungled the disposal job on Davidson's body. Higginson has been transferred. He is opening a new branch of Coronel Glanders in Santiago, Chile. Very cold there."

"All of which is very nice, but what is so secret about that that you couldn't tell me downstairs?" They emerged from a top security elevator and walked swiftly down the sound-proofed hall.

"What I could not tell you there were all the details and, my boy, I do envy you. I said *personally* congratulated, did you hear that? *Personally*. You are really part of the family now."

They stopped before large, golden, double doors, which slowly opened before them, moved by unseen hands. A beam of golden light shone through and wrapped them in its radiance.

They stepped forward, heads high, to the sound of distant bugles.